

Session Six Lecture Notes: White Masculinity at the End of the Century

Professor Eugenie Brinkema

21L.435/CMS.840 - At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation

Things to read for and think about: Chuck Palahniuk's spare, taut novel *Fight Club* and David Fincher's film version...

1. Language and truth in language. It may seem as though in all novels you should attend to language, but here I mean: how characters speak to each other; how speech relates to persuasion, seduction, argument, polemic, but also lies, also violence. Ditto in the film. Is language a bonding agent (we communicate with each other and understand each other better) or a separating/cleaving agent (we talk and with each word understand each other less)? How does violence relate to things like lies, deception, half-truths?
2. What's the status of embedded media in the novel and film (photographs, other films, other documents, Xeroxes, etc.) – pay attention to the circulation of media objects and when they appear in each work, ask what kind of work they're doing. In the film, for example, the figure of cutting/splicing is very important; when/how/why does it appear?
3. The Figure of Rules – what are the rules of Fight Club, and why does Fight Club take, require, order itself through rules? Are there also rules to "Fight Club" (the novel or film; i.e. formal rules)? How does the rule relate to violence – mitigate it? Amplify it?
4. Finally, keep in mind the subject titling this weeks' material: White Masculinity at the End of the Century. All of those things in the title matter, but especially the fourth to last word: End. What is ending or coming to a close in Fight Club (historically, nationally, ideologically) and how does violence relate to that end – does it bring it about or forestall it? Mirror it or disrupt it? Likewise, attend to ends formally in each work – and their difference from each other.

Term '*any-space-whatever*' (*l'espace-quelconque*) from Pascal Augé.

& "everything's a copy of a copy of a copy" (Fight Club)

An epigraphic framing concept – look at board: term '*any-space-whatever*' (*l'espace-quelconque*) from Pascal Augé.

Augé used the term to describe the effects of modern urban planning on the human psyche and interpersonal relations: "An 'any space whatsoever' is a space such as a metro stop, a doctor's waiting room, or an airport terminal. **It is an anonymous space people pass through**, ... a point of transit between places of 'importance', such as the metro, which is merely the space one passes through between home and work. Individuals become depersonalized....It is for this reason that Augé argued that the 'any space whatsoever' is a homogenous, de-singularizing space"

* **What does it mean for identity and a sense of self to experience space this way?**

p. 31, “hotel time, restaurant food” / “You wake up at O’Hare.”
non-differentiation of places; always passing through somewhere else
→ Insomnia as form: Never quite asleep; never quite awake.

This week, we turn to three weeks on identity and politics: white masculinity; gender; and both normative and queer sexualities— also start to turn towards a global thinking of violence (w/ films from France and Japan) and in some ways less “obvious” forms of violence (opaque violence; structural violence; even violence that does not reveal itself as violence, or is contested or denied as forms of violence). In many ways, in our weeks on the figure of the serial killer, violence had an **obviousness** about it: violence was murdering, or torturing, or wounding. Violence itself as a term will become complicated and contested in the next few weeks.

Even in today’s novel and film, violence appears as violence against the self, against property, as forms of mischief, mayhem, but also destruction, also historical annihilation, also domestic terrorism.

Last time we met, two weeks ago, we talked about “portraits” and “signs”. We talked about the typical, the average, the type, the banal, the ordinariness of the serial killer or avowals that the serial killer does not even exist, is nothing but his work (his life as form of art).

We talked about John Doe in *Se7en*: Making life into a work of art/using violence to self-actualize... Murder as self-improvement; Seltzer: Self-making = self-evacuating (which might be interesting in a different way in relation to today’s material).

And we ended class last time by considering the **Question of the witness**: John Doe requires a witness/archive/memory – for message to be remembered. Somerset functions as witness (ideal b/c does not act in proceedings/survives b/c he does not act and understands that one must sometimes not act)

NB Somerset’s view of police work: pick up the pieces, collect the evidence, note the time things happen, put things into neat little piles, file it away in case it’s needed (detection as archive/list-making/noting things down/assembling... *not* acting)/Somerset sees Doe as rational, methodical (correctly categorizes him) vs. danger of not correctly categorizing (Mills sees him as lunatic: files him incorrectly).

So, last time posed the figure of violence in relation to meaning: can we “read” meaning into Henry’s acts of violence or are they resistant to being read for depth and meaning; likewise, Doe stages his acts of violence as demanding they be read and interpreted (literal scenes of this in the library)—but is there a way Somerset resists that imperative, by refiguring detection not as detecting, but as listing, noting, assembling?

THIS WEEK: we also have figure of traces, memory, remembrance, legacy, archive, history. But it’s mediated through crisis of white masculinity at the end of the century. It’s not the trace of a specific act of staged violence as in *SE7en*: it’s the trace of one’s legacy on history;

being “the middle children” of history; the drive and desire to leave a legacy of destruction; to create a ground zero or to hit bottom; to start history over. It’s a personal trace of self-evacuation, esp. in ending (but very different from the serial killers’ relationship to emptying & anonymizing self).

Consumerism and Identity

Masculinity (and what “women” are to this text)

Creation and destruction (self-improvement vs. self-destruction)

Love; empathy

Reflexivity and textual self-awareness

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

CMS.840 / 21L.430 At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation
Fall 2013

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.