It Could Be Otherwise

Conceptions of Masculinity Within and Beyond the Framework of Traditional Masculinity Studies

[MASTER THESIS]

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Introduction

When I recently opened my email inbox (18th March 2010), I found a message that deeply disturbed me. Written by a member of Berlin-based Humboldt University's sociology department, Andreas Heilmann, and addressed to all bigger German gender studies-related email-distribution lists, this correspondence warns explicitly not to join the so-called *Netzwerkprojekt Bundesforum Männer* (an online networking project for men). As I learned from the email, a representative from this forum has contacted most of Germany's influential scholars in the field of masculinity studies in order to make them join this network. On its homepage,[1] the project claims that its goals are to

> overcome restricted and dominant structures of masculinity and role models […], to contribute to the development of prejudice-free, reflective, solidly and freeing role perspectives […], to connect experiences of practical men's, boys' and fathers' research, as well as politics (author unknown, my translation).

What may sound as a welcome approach to re-think traditional constructs of masculinity and to unify masculinity studies' thinkers in order to enable fruitful exchange, is in reality a hidden approach to intervene or even to hijack the field of masculinity studies by conservative, anti-feminist, right-wing or right extremist groupings: In his email, Heilmann points to the connections the forum has to convicted groups and their representatives. One may think that occurrences like this one are singular cases. But as Heilmann furthermore elaborates:

> Already in 2002 I had to witness how […] in the framework of a symposium of masculinity and fatherhood, [someone] was able to spread his misogynist and homophobic theses as 'science', without getting contradicted (Heilmann 2010, quoted in Zentrum News 2010, my translation).

Additionally, he points to another men's congress that he was attending recently, where he also observed that a clear delimitation to right wing tendencies was missing. Concluding, he argues that he clearly sees the risk given that "right wing conservative and right extremist 'men's rights activists', family fundamentalists, 'homosexuality healers' and evangelical Christians" (ibid., my translation) frequently use platforms like this one in order to articulate reactionary gender politics.

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[1]   http://www.bundesforum-maenner.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2,   last accessed 18th March 2010

Rosi Braidotti would probably describe incidents like these ones as symptoms of the 'new master narratives', by which she means narratives in a postmodern era that return to 'old' deterministic values and that defend, among other aspects, the belief in sex difference theories unconditionally. Contemporary neo-liberalism, as she argues for example, for Europe's right-wing associations is a "differential ideology" that stresses notions of difference rather than scrutinizing them: "differences of identity, culture, religion, abilities and opportunities", she argues, are here defined in a deterministic manner (2005: 1).

Referring to masculinity, nothing marks this cultural climate better than discussions in the media around the so-called 'masculinity in crisis'. Popular topics here are, for instance, the missing male teacher as a role model, the absent father, the violent football fan or the underachieving male student (cf. Haywood/Mac an Ghaill 2003). Although I do not wish to deny the necessity of social research in these areas of investigation, I would argue that there are worrisome tendencies that need to be observed in terms of the 'new master narratives' Braidotti talks about. When one of Germany's most established news magazines writes in its science section about a stigmatization of 'male values' through feminist movements, which supposedly causes a "more feminine world" in which "the masculine counts as pathologic" and "women write the scripts and distribute the roles" (Hollstein, quoted in Lubbadeh 2010, my translation), I would argue that caution is required. This kind of popular media coverage about masculinities and masculinity studies often offer "a lot of information but little explanation" (Haywood/Mac an Ghaill 2003: 7), put the masculinity in crisis discourse in the center of public attention and build up a hierarchy of oppression which, to say the least, has the potential to depict a distorted reality.

The examples I mentioned above seem to be indicators for the vulnerability of this young discipline. To me, it seems as if the field is unsettled and therefore appears as if it was vacant to attempts of deterministic powers, which try to locate within this field and to politicize it according to reactionary ideologies. As a result, the idea of masculinity studies on the one hand is struggling with a bad reputation and on the other hand often evokes a feeling of irritation amongst (feminist) thinkers and scholars.

After all, a masculinist science has been one of feminist theory's biggest concerns. Donna Haraway, for example, describes one of the mechanisms that were used to justify the

systematic exclusion of women[2] from universities, laboratories and therefore knowledge production at the beginning of modern science (Haraway 1997): the construction of the elitist white male as a 'modest witness'. Unlike women, men were not "polluted by the body" (ibid.: 32) and hence associated with the mind, which enabled them to occupy the position of the modest witness and therefore of the only legitimate bearer and producer of knowledge.

From a present-day view, it is hence clearly visible that previous scientific theories adopted the judgments and prejudices of their epochs, as Haraway and others have shown. Having this fundamental feminist critique of a masculinist, 'bad' science in mind, one has to ask oneself: If knowledge is and has been made and controlled by men, why do we need a specific discipline that engages only with masculinities? Does this not, again, contribute to a construction of masculinity in which women are always depicted and received as 'the other' (Beauvoir 1989)? Are not most studies, let it be political science, psychology or sociology, already dominated and shaped by masculine theories and texts? When Gail Bederman, for example, argues from a feminist historian's perspective that "[t]o study the history of manhood […] is to study the historical ways different ideologies about manhood develop, change, are combined, amended, contested – and gain the status of truth" (Bederman 1995: 7, quoted in Traister 2000: 274), it becomes obvious why the idea of masculinity studies is controversial in itself. The reason I chose to investigate this field therefore stems precisely from the diffuse, irritating feeling that these questions evoke in me.

I am aware of the fact that the two examples mentioned above (the email that warns of the networking project and the news article that reports about the crisis in masculinity's symptoms) are rather extreme examples from the crossing point of an academic discipline and popular culture than typical for this field. They do not cope with most of its theorizing, as I will explain in Chapter One of the present thesis. Nevertheless, the question remains: Is there really a need for masculinity studies as an independent discipline, should it not rather be a part of the bigger framework of gender studies? Is this division not just enforcing the gender binary?

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[2] For the sake of the arguments I am going to make in the course of this thesis, please read woman/women as 'woman'/'women' and man/men as 'man'/'men', if not indicated otherwise.

Overview/Outline

In order to answer these questions, I will deliver a cartography of the field in the first part of this thesis. By using the term 'cartography', I aim to indicate towards my situatedness. The critical-feminist method of 'situated knowledges' was introduced by Haraway in 1988 and argues for "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (1988: 191). This feminist answer to the question of objectivity, which privileges "contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing" (ibid.) serves as a valuable tool to find new critical approaches for the field of masculinity studies, as I want to show. In order to mark my situatedness, the following definition of cartographies by Braidotti is used:

> I think that many things I write are cartographies, that is to say a sort of intellectual landscape gardening that gives me a horizon, a frame of reference within I can take my bearing, move about, and set up my own theoretical tent. […] The frequency of the spatial metaphor expresses the simultaneity of the nomadic status and of the need to draw maps; each text is like a camping site: it traces places where I have been, in the shifting landscape of my singularity" (Braidotti 1994:17, quoted in Schleicher et al. 2002: 6).

It is this idea of finding 'a frame of reference' and 'tracing places where I have been' that I want to apply while finding my standpoint towards the field of masculinity studies, to criticize it fruitfully and last but not least to narrow the broadness of the topic down.

The underlying assumption of my research is the hypothesis that prominent concepts in the field of masculinity studies inhabit an essentialist reminiscence. Key concepts like 'hegemonic masculinity', as coined by Raewyn Connell (1995), grasp masculinity in terms of hierarchy and refer exclusively to male-bodied[3] persons. Numerous feminist scholars have pointed to the dangers of essentializing identity, and poststructuralist thinkers suggest drawing attention to an individual's differentiated subject position. It was Judith Halberstam who shifted the idea that masculinity is unique to male-bodied persons in her book *Female Masculinity* (2006), by pointing out that masculinity can be understood to be a subjectivity through which one can form identities.

Furthermore, I want to employ Judith Butler's work that allows for a liberating consideration of the formulation of gender by foregrounding its socially constructed nature, its historical

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[3] With the term 'male-bodied', I am indicating to male persons whose sex has been naturalized. I am indicating towards Butler's notion that sex is as constructed as gender is (1990).

specificity, and by articulating the performative notion of gender. In the Second Chapter of my thesis, I will fathom how poststructural approaches, as Butler's and Halberstam's, intervene into the field of masculinity studies and possibly change the perception of masculinity within it. The overall goal is to find out how and to what extend deconstructionist and interdisciplinary approaches can make a valuable contribution to the discipline of masculinity studies.

Finally, I will try to make such a contribution myself in Chapter Three through an analysis of the movie *Fight Club* (1999). Ten years after its cinematic release, this film directed by David Fincher still has not lost its fascination and for many remains the movie par excellence to talk about masculinities in a postmodern era. While drawing on Butler's notions of the performativity of gender (1990) I will deliver an 'against the grain' reading of the movie and thereby firstly debunk its potential for the subversion of a stringent gender order and secondly attempt to show how this kind of analysis allows to draw conclusions for social practices.

The aim of this analysis is to expose how the predominantly sociological oriented field of masculinity studies could benefit from interdisciplinary analysis. To my knowledge, a bringing forward of poststructural approaches within the traditional field of masculinity studies (as I will define it in Chapter One) so far has only happened hesitantly and, contrariwise, often has been approached with big unease. The relevance of the present thesis thus lies in the demonstration of ways in which novel approaches can ultimately benefit a theorizing of masculinities – beyond unitary concepts of what masculine identity is.

Chapter One: Masculinity Studies and its Struggles

In his photo exhibition *masculinities*[4] the artist Chad States tries to capture what masculinity can mean to different people. In an interview, he states that his motivation stems from the desire to define himself "in some kind of spectrum from masculine to feminine", while always being "tripped up by the question of what masculinity is in the first place" (States 2010, in Samadzadeh 2010). In order to find new insights into diverse constructions of masculinity, he therefore placed an ad on the internet: "Are you masculine? I am doing a photography project on masculinity. If you identify as being masculine, please get back to me" (ibid.). By keeping this ad relatively gender-neutral (through stressing the idea of identifying as masculine in opposite to being male), he reached males, females and transpeople as well and took pictures of how these persons chose to present their masculinity to the lens.

The result is a body of 21 pictures, of which each is subtitled with a quote that the author extracted from the previous e-mail conversation and which are supposed to mark out the photographed person's individual definition of masculinity even more. But what is masculinity according to this set of pictures? What is it that made these people think 'yes' when they read States' question if they 'identify as being masculine'?

I like the artist's idea and the 'randomness' of his approach. With randomness I mean that he only had limited influence on who his models would be and how they would choose to be photographed (or at least that is, what States claims, ibid.). I was attracted by the idea that his project could represent a cross-section of masculinities today. But of course it is not that simple. The shown masculinities can only illustrate some masculinities in a given, very specific historical, spatial and cultural context; and secondly, the author's artistic freedom and the fact that only a few people like to manifest in front of the camera's eye have to be considered. Nevertheless, some ideas about what masculinity can be appear to be more prominent that others, as the piece of art seems to argue. The first thing that grabs the viewer's attention is the fact that one third of the persons show partial or complete nudity, as if to argue that in their perception male-bodiedness and the body in general make a major contribution to their being masculine. This is, for example, emphasized when *Josh*[5] argues

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[4] http://www.chadstates.com/, last accessed 17th March 2010
[5] See appendix a.)

that his masculinity stems from the facts that he has tattoos, 'works out' and joined the Marine Corps. Or through the fact that *Chris*[6] chose to be depicted completely nude in front of a mirror. Masculinity hence is prominently and unsurprisingly signified through a male body for a big part of the shown persons – which they explain by pointing to activities such as sports and military, activities which emphasize physical strength and abilities, and supposed manly bodily aesthetics, as tattoos and the 'right' stature.

Besides this, two other patterns seem to be dominant in the understanding of masculinity in the present photo exposition: Firstly, a strong association with traditional masculine values and traits, as dominance, independence, the ability 'to care of women', possession of knowledge, sexual aggressiveness or emotional toughness. *Franco,*[7] for example, is posing in front of a classroom's blackboard and stating that "[t]o be masculine is to dominate in one's field of study." He defines masculinity as a mixture of dominance, knowledge and superiority and stresses this by his choice of location for the photography session. *Andrew,*[8] on the other hand, associates masculinity with a sexual-aggressive drive: "The first thing I do when I walk into a room is figure out which male could kick my ass and which female I would like to fuck. Sometimes this is so subconscious it is alarming." The fact that he points to the unconsciousness of his actions can be read as an understanding of his behavior as supposedly natural and rooted in male biology. I would classify these perceptions of masculinity in a more traditional, deterministic manner, or as (the attempt to live up to) a hegemonic masculinity, a concept that I will elaborate on later in this chapter.

Finally, the set of pictures introduces people who describe their masculinities in a more performative way, where masculinity is rather understood to be a subjectivity and as 'a feeling inside'. *Dwight,*[9] for example, thinks that "[m]asculinity is an attitude" and his wearing of an immaculate suit, that he may have put on especially for the photo session, seems like a prop used in order to underline this attitude. As a woman, *Liz*[10] argues that it is masculine clothes that make her "feel comfortable and confident in how I look on the outside which now matches the inside." With Liz' portrayal, States decouples masculinity from birth-sex and scrutinizes the idea of masculinity being an exclusive property of male-bodied persons.

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[6] See appendix b.)
[7] See appendix c.)
[8] See appendix d.)
[9] See appendix e.)
[10] See appendix f.)

At the end, one may ask oneself if the artist indeed got closer to his stated goal, to understand "what masculinity is in the first place" (ibid.). All in all, I would argue that States' work constitutes an interesting exploration of how diverse persons in a specific context feel about their masculinity. However, it seems to me that it does not bring the viewer closer to an answer of the question what masculinity is; it only shows what it can be to a handful of people.

Masculinity is something impalpable, although notions of male-bodiedness, some character traits (e.g. dominance, sexual drive) or a diffuse attitude of feeling masculine are consulted. These notions also build the nutrient solution for traditional masculinity studies, which Tim Edwards compares to "an array of Petri dishes growing cultures of masculinity" (2006: 1)*, hinting towards its steady and uncontrolled growing. In order to indicate what I define as the traditional masculinity studies,[11] in the following paragraphs I will map its grounds and exemplary introduce one of its most prominent key concepts, namely hegemonic masculinity.

A very short history of Masculinity Studies

The beginning of masculinity studies, or 'men's studies' as they are called sometimes as well, as a relatively independent discipline lies in the 1980s (c.f. Connell 1990; Pilcher/Whelehan 2008). Several more or less organized men's movements and men's rights groupings that had evolved as responses to feminist movements of the time (1968 in the USA, gradually followed by the other capitalistically advanced countries) and which developed independently into pro-/anti feminist, mythopoetic[12] and other directions, can be seen as the initializing forces behind masculinity studies' expansion. Simultaneously, an emerging gay liberation also distributed to

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[11]Although I am aware of the fact that the term 'masculinity studies' can have a wide range of meanings, I mean masculinity studies in the traditional sense (as will be defined in Chapter One) when I use the term in the course of this thesis.

[12] Mythopoetic men's movements are a loose collection of organizations active since the early 1980s. They share the idea that there is a need to search true masculinity and try to find it in masculinity therapies. These are built around populist writing about masculinity, which praise 'the hairy man' and his 'deep masculinity' that men are urged to re-discover. Robert Bly's work and especially his book *Iron John* (1991), which is based on Jungian archetypes of masculinity and re-told fairy tales that are supposed to depict real masculinity, is an example of this. Next to masculinity therapies, men-only retreats and bonding rituals are typical features of mythopoetic movements. I will come back to these movements in the framework of an analysis of the movie *Fight Club* in the third chapter.

the scrutinizing of what it means to be a man.[13] An academic field of masculinity studies eventually manifested in the social sciences. Although it "may seem strange to describe the study of men as a 'new area' […] in response to the fact that sociology had previously been concerned almost exclusively with men" (Maynard 1990, quoted in Haywood/Ghail 2003: 8), masculinity studies as a new discipline aims to fill in the blank of a critical study of men and masculinities; an approach that hitherto had been missing in mainstream sociology text books (ibid.), and that Connell calls theorizing the "*idea* of masculinity" (Connell 1990: 28, her emphasis) in contradiction to simply theorizing masculinity.

Edwards divides the field into three 'waves', a choice of terminology that points towards the strong influence of feminist theory and masculinity studies' intense embedding in it (Edwards 2006; Whitehead 2006). The first wave was acting within and reacting towards the sex role paradigm; its goal was, to summarize roughly, firstly to illustrate the socially constructed nature of masculinity and secondly to demonstrate how this socialization eventually limits or even harms men's lives (Edwards 2006: 2). The second wave of masculinity studies emerged in the 1980s as a critical response to the first wave: firstly, because of the rejection of the sex role paradigm and secondly out of the concern that aspects of power and power relations hitherto had not been taken into account sufficiently while theorizing masculinities (Edwards 2006: 2).

The writers of this wave are heavily influenced by second wave feminism and I would argue that they today represent what most people involved understand as masculinity studies, namely Raewyn Connell, Michael Kimmel and Jeff Hearn.[14] By developing pro-feminist and social constructionist theories of men and masculinities, their approaches delivered important contributions to our understanding of gender power relations. Most impact across the humanities and social sciences was acquired by Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, which I will therefore introduce and scrutinize in the following.

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[13] When I use the terms 'man/men' here, I mean male-bodied persons with a 'cis-gender' identity, which means that they feel and behave 'masculine'. I am aware of the fact that it is anything but clear what 'masculine' means; but I use the terms here in the same way they are used in the masculinity studies literature I consulted. which then means a masculinity that floats somewhere on a scale between non-femininity and hegemonic masculinity, which I will elaborate on later.

[14] For further reading: Connell, R. W. Masculinities. 2. ed. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005; Kimmel, Michael S. Manhood in America: A cultural history. 2. ed. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006; Hearn, Jeff. Men in the public eye: The construction and deconstruction of public men and public patriarchies. Critical studies on men and masculinities 4. London: Routledge, 1992; Brittan, Arthur. Masculinity and power. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989; Kimmel, Michael S.; Jeff Hearn, and Robert William Connell, eds. Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publ., 2005.

The Pro-feminist Second Wave and the Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity

One cannot talk about masculinity studies without paying special attention to Raewyn Connell's work and specifically her ground-breaking book *Masculinities* (1990). In this pioneer work, Connell delivers a social scientific analysis of masculinities, in which she asks for the practices that enable knowledge about masculinities to emerge (Connell 1990: 6). This work is embedded in a 'new sociology of masculinity', which, in opposition to first wave approaches, puts power relations in the middle of discussion, by focusing on "various projects of masculinity, the conditions under which they arise and the conditions they produce" (Connell *et al.* 1990: 39).

The goal is to overcome a positivist science of masculinity by understanding masculinities as products of their specific social contexts (as manifested in institutions as the family, the state, education or corporations) and by having the "essential feminist belief in the insight that the overall relationship between men and women is one involving domination or oppression" (Carrigan/Connell/Lee: 1985: 552) as one of its main principles. The focus on power relations inhabits furthermore a political dimension: clearly, these approaches aim to build a counterpart to reactionary forces within discussions around masculinities, as described above and as, for instance, manifested in the unconditional belief in sex difference.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is the most well-known and influential concept of masculinity studies. A lot of work of other masculinity scholars can be seen as a reaction or extension of this theory. Hegemonic masculinity was defined by Carrigan, Connell and Lee in 1985 as

> [t]he ability to impose a particular definition on other kinds of masculinity […]. Hegemonic masculinity is far more complex than the accounts of essences in the masculinity books would suggest. It is not a 'syndrome' of the kind produced when sexologists […] reify human behavior into a 'condition' or when clinicians reify homosexuality into a pathology. It is, rather, a question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance […]. To understand the different kinds of masculinity demands, above all, an examination of the practices in which hegemony is constituted and contested – in short, the political techniques of the patriarchal social order (ibid.: 592ff.).

The big impact of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, not only amongst masculinity scholars but also in feminist theory, can be explained through the fact that it, compared to the

hitherto relatively static term 'patriarchy', delivers a more nuanced approach to understand patriarchal power relations whilst not denying or downplaying the importance of the notions of gender, sexual ideology or male dominance (Whitehead 2006: 90). The underlying assumption here is an understanding of gender as the result of continuing interpretations of reproductive and sexual capacities. Masculinities and femininities then are effects of these interpretations, which are placed on bodies, on personalities, on cultures and social institutions.

These effects furthermore lead to a hierarchy which has the hegemonic masculinity at the top and femininity at the bottom and places them thus as oppositions. The term 'hegemonic masculinity' stands for an ideal that hardly anyone can live up to, but which many try to achieve and that can look differently in diverse societies. However, for the Western world hegemonic masculinity can be described as being centered around authority, physical strength and economic success, whilst its "most important feature is, alongside its connection with dominance, […] that it is heterosexual (Carrigan/Connell/Lee: 1985: 539)." Therefore, 'other' masculinities are defined as gradations of 'a ladder to the ideal', namely 'complicit', 'marginalized' and 'subordinated' masculinities, of which the latter describes homosexual masculinities. This subordination executed by hegemonic masculinity manifests, according to Connell,

> by an array of quite material practices: from cultural abuse, over different forms of violence to personal boycotts or economical discriminations, and is legitimized from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity through a supposed equation of gayness and femininity (Connell 1990: 78).

Complicit masculinities are the majority of men who do not meet the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity; nevertheless, they benefit from the "patriarchal dividend" (ibid.: 79), which could be illustrated, for example, by a man who would not 'actively' bully a women out of a prestigious job position, but does take his privilege, that he usually is more likely to reach this position because of his sex and gender, for granted without scrutinizing it. He is, then, benefitting from hegemonic masculinity while not necessarily seeing himself as privileged.

Marginalized masculinities, finally, stand for the interplay of gender with other categories as class and race; Connell names 'the black man' and his discrimination by the 'white man' as an example here (ibid.). Importantly, it has to be mentioned that these hierarchical terms are

not meant to name fixed character types, but configured practices, generated in specific situations and in a changing structure of relationships (ibid.: 81).

However, according to Connell it is these internal relations between different forms of masculinities and femininities that fuel enduring gender inequality. It is this concept of hegemonic masculinity that – although most men do not live up to its standards, and, in turn, many live in tension with it and seek "exit politics" (ibid.: 220) – remains "the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (ibid.: 77).

I agree with Whitehead (2006: 90) when he argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity offers some advantages for theorizing masculinities. Firstly, it differs from the concept of patriarchy because it has a less essentialist assumption about its causes, and secondly, it opens up for ambiguity and social change, without downplaying the omnipresence of a 'hegemonic project' (Connell, 1995). This is, as Connell stresses, because hegemonic masculinity builds "a *current* accepted strategy" and therefore is a "historically mobile relation" (ibid.: 77, my emphasis). Another advantage is that it is connected to wider social and economic forces and therefore entangled with the feminist goal of reducing oppression.

Missing Masculine Subjectivities and an Awkward Waltz

Nevertheless, it was suggested that Connell's and other pro-feminist writers' accounts can be blamed for the tendency to marginalize men's subjectivities and thus to provide little insight into the identity dynamics of men and masculinities (cf. Haywood/Mac an Ghaill: 2003), or the "nitty gritty of negotiating masculine identities and men's identity strategies", as Wetherall and Edley (1999) put it. The point is – as they argue from a discursive-psychological perspective – that answers to the questions how different hierarchical forms of masculinity actually prescribe or regulate men's lives or what the conformity to these forms looks like in practice cannot be answered within this framework.

I would add that it also negates a performative character of identity work and is rather left to the notion of men "learning gender scripts appropriate to our culture" (Kimmel and Messner, 1989: 10, in Whitehead 2006: 90). But what about men who position themselves in various ways, in between the categories? Do they experience tensions when they move from one

category to the other? What about changing contexts? Can there be more than one hegemonic masculinity at a time? Questions like these point to the fact that the concept of hegemonic masculinity needs to be re-thought and that more emphasis needs to be put on the numerous and contradictory resources through which hegemonic gender identities are constructed (cf. Wetherall/Edley 1999: 352).

One could argue that masculinities within the concept of hegemonic masculinity are described as merely more than compilations of supposedly masculine qualities, such as aggressiveness, a competitive drive and toughness – qualities, which (as is implied) differ them from their feminine counterparts, which then consequently must be passive, cooperative and emotional (Peterson 2003: 35). Identities in this logic are understood as lists of various natural and socially constructed attributes or as "additive models of identity" as Peterson calls it (ibid.). Additionally, in this model identities are understood to be mutually exclusive and the idea that desire might be fluid is not taken into account, or to say it more clearly, a strict division of heterosexual/homosexual is presumed.

This seems to be a general problem in the field of masculinity studies as defined here. Bryce Traister in his article *Academic Viagra: the Rise of American Masculinity Studies* even goes as far as calling masculinity studies a "code term for 'heterosexual masculinity studies'" that engage in an "awkward waltz in which gay, queer, and heteromasculine studies are now somewhat clumsily engaged" (Traister 2000: 275). He traces back this 'awkwardness' to the homophobic structure of heterosexuality's construction[15] which ultimately marks difference and deposition rather than a shared interest in theorizing masculinities. Similar things could be said about ethnicity: the presupposed object of study in most writings about men and masculinities is white.

I was drawing on the famous example of hegemonic masculinity in order to give an example of how second wave masculinity studies can be seen to have failed to adequately develop a theory of masculinity as identity work. In the following, I will lay out how a potential (and rudimentary present) third wave and poststructural approaches benefit a theorizing of masculinities. The problem that I want to pay most attention to in the next chapter is the fact

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[15] I will come back to that in Chapter Two whilst drawing on Butler's concept of the 'heterosexual matrix' (1990).

that although in masculinity studies an anti-essentialist approach is aspired, men and women here still frequently are located as unitary identities.

Chapter Two: Poststructural Interventions or the Potential Third Wave of Masculinity Studies

> It's almost like now, that I have the taste, you know, that I do pass so often… And, passing always ends up in this very exactly the same experience every single time, when I'm approached with a handshake and a slap on the back, 'buddy', 'mister', 'sir', and then as soon as I open my mouth and they hear my voice, it's this big scene, this big apology, this big look of disgust, this big 'shove off!', this big, you know… [gasps], and I'm over it, you know what I mean? Like… I don't even know if it's that I'm so interested in having a deeper voice and passing as male, I'm just so not interested in living this experience any more, you know? (Keegan O'Brien 2006)

The quote above is taken from Samantha Feder and Julie Hollar's 2006 documentary *Boy I Am* that accompanies and portrays three young transitioning female to male transsexuals in New York. When Keegan argues that he is 'over it' –over "this big scene, this big apology, this big look of disgust, this big 'shove off!'" (ibid.) – in this documentary, he is pointing towards the fact that it is only one of many factors that keep him from 'passing': a higher, and thus in society understood as female, voice. It is only this 'small thing' that leads to a reappraisal of the hitherto addressing of Keegan as 'body, mister, sir'. I chose to quote this statement in order to stress this fact that it is only 'a small thing' that prevents from gaining or inhabiting masculinity. The voice, here a signifier of a female body, is used to exclude someone from 'masculinity'.

This is something, I want to argue, which is also a problem in masculinity studies: a fixation on male-bodiedness, the understanding of masculinity as an exclusive trait of men. This kind of essentialism has been addressed from different directions, predominantly from a transgender and queer theory angle. Eve Kosofsky-Sedgewick, for example, in the opening essay to the anthology *Constructing Masculinity* (1996) criticizes the very same book she is contributing to for resolving "to problematize every conceivable aspect of masculinity", but then finally not questioning the "distinctive linkage between masculinity and the male subject". She points to the fact that the book's editors argue that "[m]en of all ages and cultural backgrounds-straight, gay, and bisexual – are beginning to ask and explore key issues about the nature of masculinity", while Sedgewick suggests to update the anthology's range to "[m]en of all ages and cultural backgrounds –straight, gay, bisexual, and *female*" (ibid.: 12, my emphasis) .

This lack in theorizing masculinities – as also female – was then addressed in detail by Judith Halberstam (1998), who traces the varieties of *Female Masculinity* in her book of the same

name and thereby denaturalizes the identification of masculinity with male bodies. Methodologically, Halberstam locates her work within queer theory, a "scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (1998: 13). In this manner, she is combining methods that appear to be in conflict with each other; she is working in a truly interdisciplinary fashion, refusing "the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence" (ibid.).

With the help of detailed textual readings and empirical research, Halberstam advocates "two propositions that are utterly simple" (ibid.: 46). Firstly: Women have made their own, unique contributions to the construction of masculinity – as the story of Colonel Barker shows. Barker, born 1895, was raised a tomboy and joined the Canadian army as a young woman and there was "treated […] like a man and as one of themselves" (ibid.: 91). Eventually, Barker passed as man for over thirty years and got married to a woman, who also understood her to be male.

Cases like this one, Halberstam demonstrates, are more widespread than widely assumed but have been ignored while constructing and theorizing masculinities. Secondly, Halberstam argues that female masculinity actually is a multiplicity of masculinities that always is multiplying (ibid: 46), as for example, although not exclusively, in lesbian communities, as stone butches, female to male transsexuals or other subjectivities.

The point is that Halberstam emphasizes the insufficiency of many contemporary theories of masculinities to include female masculinities, a position that also John MacInnes (1998) integrated in his analysis of current masculinity studies, arguing that many writers 'smuggle in' the idea that masculinity only truly can be inhabited by male bodies into their otherwise social constructionist accounts.

But approaches like these seem not to be quite appreciated in the 'traditional' field of pro-feminist[16] masculinity studies; it seems that the advent of poststructural theory, particularly as

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[16] The term 'pro-feminist' is a point in case. Within the masculinity studies field there obviously has been a discussion which term is appropriate for male-bodied persons: 'Profeminist', in order to signify a feminist attitude, that cannot be simply feminist because of the male body that causes some kind of complicity in patriarchy, as I assume. The hyphen in 'Pro-feminist', on the other hand, is supposed to stress a certain distance: the assumed inability of men to be 'real feminists'. But this hyphen elsewhere was interpreted as a form of

it relates to gender in terms of normativity, performativity and sexuality as in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), only cautiously has been acknowledged. Tracing back to the feeling of irritation about masculinity studies as a discipline that I was mentioning in my introduction, I now can say that this confusion stems from the resistance to a more active merging of the different streams, or, in other words, to embrace interdisciplinarity.

Edwards, for example, points to the "excellent and exhaustive" *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (2004), a 500 pages thick 'bible' of the discipline written by its icons Connell, Kimmel and Hearn that "somehow […] curiously completely omits almost the entire canon of cultural, literary and media-driven analyses of masculinity" (Edwards 2006: 3). While, importantly, what unites the latter ones is their challenging of "the tendency to see masculinity as something that is, has always been, and always will be, coming from men's testicles" (ibid.). During the process of researching for this thesis I got a similar impression of most of the masculinity studies' canon that I got familiar with; the most elaborated exceptions from my point of view would be the work of Peterson (1998), MacInnes (1998), of Pease (1999), and, consequently, Edwards (2006).

As I have explained in my introduction, the aim of the present thesis is to make a contribution to a 'bringing forward' of third wave approaches in masculinity studies, which, − similar to the paradigmatic changes in feminist theory − also can be understood in terms of post-identity politics.[17] In the following, I will consequently focus on the work of Judith Butler in order to demonstrate how it allows a reappraisal of thinking about masculinities and to extract methodological strands that I will use for my analysis of *Fight Club* in Chapter Three.

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paying increased respect to feminist women. While the term feminist in this situation willingly leaves the term's user's gendered embodiment behind and can therefore in a sense been interpreted as a message in itself (de-emphasizing the body as condition for masculinity or for being feminist). Personally, I find this discussion around the terms relatively fruitless, especially because I want to plea for a study of masculinities that leaves the fixation on male-bodiedness behind. One has for example to look at Raewyn Connell. Before becoming the godmother of modern masculinity studies she has been its godfather; thousands of field-related books and texts introduced her as profeminist or pro-feminist man. Should now, after a men to female sex change, this terminology be changed, is she now a ('real') feminist? This question shows the nonsense of a specific terminology quite plainly, and this is why I reject the term 'pro(-)feminist': I think it creates an exclusion that is grounded in biology.

[17] Since the idea of identity as an essential unity is rejected in poststructural thinking, there cannot be politics for any grouping, be it men or women, because identity always has to be historically and culturally diverse; thus the prefix 'post-'.

The Terms 'Woman' and 'Man' as Obsolescent Models

Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) opens with the controversial plea to undermine the fundamental necessity of the category 'woman' and suggests instead that a feminist politics should produce a radical critique of its identity politics. By drawing on Foucault's notion of juridico-discursive systems of power (Foucault 1980) "that produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (Butler 1990: 2,), she points to the fact that this becomes problematic if the particular system produces "gendered subjects along a differential axis of domination" (ibid.). As a result, she concludes that "an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of 'women' will be clearly self-defeating" (ibid.: 2) in the sense that the subject is re-produced within oppressive structures. The political problem is that feminism – more or less implicit in its various streams – has inhabited the idea that the term 'woman' designates a common identity (ibid.: 3). This common identity is recognizable through the shared oppression by hegemonic structures – a conception of identity that additionally was criticized for not taking concrete cultural contexts such as class, race, ethnicity and sexuality sufficiently.

What for the emancipation of women here according to Butler is 'self-defeating' can also be transferred to the concept of 'man'. If men are reproduced as hegemonic on the other side of the 'differential axis of domination', this subjective position becomes reinforced and static as well. Although being reproduced as hegemonic is not necessarily 'self-defeating' for a masculine identity politics, but probably often rather empowering, a common and unified identity here is assumed that can be deconstructed.

One of the beneficial consequences of Butler's work is thus the fact that the deconstruction of the female gender also applies to the male, or at least has provided a similar basis for this. Central to the deconstruction of gender is the idea that gender for the most part exists on the level of discourse. Masculine subsequently is not mechanically connected to male, feminine not to female. A singular notion of (gendered) identities thus always has to be a 'misnomer' (ibid.: 4). Butler articulates a critique that scrutinizes the categories of identity that "contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize" (ibid.: 5). Part of this critique is the performative notion of gender.

First Strand: The Notion of Performativity

Butler suggests the collapse of the sex/gender distinction, of this hard-earned accomplishment of feminist theory and point of origin to a lot of its second wave's theorizing. She argues that gender is constructed and independent of sex: "a free floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one" (ibid.: 6): Gender, hence, is performative. This concept of performativity can be understood as a 'work in progress' and spans over several of her books, but prominently is addressed in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler draws on John Austin's work on performatives, which stands for the ideas that linguistic declarations perform actions and that they call things into being by naming them (Austin 1955, in Salih 2007:63). Similarly, Butler argues that "[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Butler 1990: 25)

A famous example for this is the nurse who looks at a newborn child and calls out "[I]t's a girl", which then becomes the "initiator of a process of 'girling'" (Butler 1993: 232). This is the start of a gendered process that, although there is no natural body that pre-exists its cultural inscription, is manifesting in an upcoming sequence of acts. Subsequently, gender is rather a 'doing' than a 'being'(ibid.: 25) which furthermore is shaped within a "highly rigid frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being"(ibid.: 33). The notion of a strict frame points to the fact that gendered identities firstly underlie particular historical discourses and secondly are constituted within the heterosexual matrix – two notions I will elaborate on in the following.

Second Strand: The Heterosexual Matrix or a Definition of Masculinity in Near-Algebraic Terms

The heterosexual matrix – as defined by Butler – is a concept that draws on Monique Wittig's notion of the 'heterosexual contract' and, to a lesser extent, Adrienne Rich's notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (ibid.: 151). It marks "that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (ibid.). This happens through the socialized premise that "for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender […] that is oppositional and hierarchically defined though

the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (ibid.). As well as the distinction between male and female, homo- and heterosexuality are thus social constructs that stand in hierarchical relations – in which compulsory heterosexuality is taken as a premise for naturalized gender performances.

But if homosexuality is prohibited, what does that mean for the construction of masculinity? In this respect, it is useful to engage the notion of melancholic heterosexuality. Through re-interpreting Freud's writings on the Oedipal dilemma, Butler argues that "[b]ecause identifications substitute for object relations, and identifications are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition" (ibid.: 63). In Opposition to Freud's argument that the melancholy comes into being because the infant has to submit the incest taboo and give up the desire for its parent, Buter argues that "the taboo against homosexuality must precede the heterosexual incest taboo" (ibid.: 55). The stability of the heterosexual matrix thus is enforced and guaranteed through socially internalized 'melancholic heterosexuality'.

If the heterosexual matrix requires bodies to "make sense" through "a stable sex expressed through a stable gender" (ibid.: 151), this evidently also counts for masculinities. A conforming masculinity consequently depends on a rejection of homosexuality, although, significantly, "homosexuality is not abolished, but preserved, and yet the site where homosexuality is preserved will be precisely in the prohibition on homosexuality" (Butler 1996: 30). This means that homosexuality not simply disappears but rather that it is cultivated in its prohibition. Masculinity therefore depends not only on the rejection of femininity as the 'other', but also on the rejection of homosexuality (ibid.: 26), or as Edwards puts it: "The problem then becomes a near algebraic one: masculinity as a positive identification depends on a double, not single, negative dissociation" (Edwards 2006: 94). A conforming (masculine) gender identity is hence formed in response to loss, lack, and prohibition.

Third Strand: Gender's Historical Specificity

Another methodological strand I want to extract is the historical specificity of gender construction as described in relation to performative acts. If identity, here, is "an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition* of acts" (Butler 1990b: 270, her emphasis), its social temporality – the repetition in time – enables a

reading of gender as historical construct, or as Butler puts it in tradition of Beauvoir: 'woman', and then, "by extension, any gender is an historical situation rather than a biological fact" (ibid. 271).

But because of the fact that culture and society are in constant flux, also discourses like gender discourses "present themselves in the plural, coexisting within temporal frames" (Butler 1990: 145). To be man or woman thus means to "conform to an historical idea", to conform "those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress" (1990b 273). A gendered identity is thus always depending on an identification process that is embedded within a historical particularity and at the same time always reflects specific cultural conditions and their power dynamics. These notions of gender as being shaped and reified by historical and cultural specificities, of the heterosexual matrix and of performativity in general open up space for subversion, a concept I will explain in the next section.

Subverting Masculinities

To understand gender as performative means that gender terms like man/woman are contingent, shaped by historical discourses and reliant on the heterosexual matrix. The good news is that these facts also allow their subversion; they enable to

> think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculinist hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble, not through the strategies that figure a utopian beyond, but through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity (Butler 1990, 33f.).

In other words, if the subject can be assumed not to be an essential, pre-existing unit, identities can be reconstructed in ways that challenge existing power structures through 'subversive confusion'. But what does 'subversive confusion' mean?

Butler argues that "multiple and coexisting identifications produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender configurations which contest the fixity of masculine and feminine placements" (Butler, 1990: 67). It is this "necessity to become chameleon-like" (Shail 2001: 98), the need to shift and transform one's gender identity in order to adjust to the given discourses, that opens up space for subversive confusion which ultimately leads to a dissociation with the hegemonic order.

This is achieved when subjects "repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion" (ibid.: 31) while doing gender, in order to "enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire" (ibid.: 139). As an example for such a destabilization, Butler points to drag performances: in their function to imitate the imitative structure of gender through hyperbole, they are revealing gender itself as an imitation (Butler 1995: 32). Subversive practices in this way – through the experimenting of the individual with alternative performances – cause these dissonances of gender configurations and a sense of alienation, which eventually can lead to the individual's personal empowerment.

Assuming that the coerced conformability for males, to align themselves with a normative model of a hegemonic and heterosexual masculine identity, is "every bit as problematic and subject to dysfunction as it is for anyone else" (Shail 2001: 99), opens up this norm to subversive practices. But what does all this mean for the discipline of masculinity studies?

Masculinity without Men: Implications for Masculinity Studies

> As a woman, I am a consumer of masculinities, but I am not more so than men are; and, like men, I as a woman am also a producer of masculinities and a performer of them (Kosofsky-Sedgewick 1995: 13).

I have discussed the performative notion of gender here briefly for two reasons: firstly, to show how this approach benefits the deconstruction of masculinity as exclusive trait of males. Coming back to the field of masculinity studies as described in the first chapter, it now becomes evident how discursive approaches might benefit this discipline in order to overcome a fixation on male bodies and purely additive models of identity: to the same extent as the subversion of the term 'woman' dissolves the core subject of feminist theory and women's studies, the subversion of the term 'man' dissolves masculinity studies' core subject.

This impact of poststructuralist analysis which, by taking into account notions of class, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, nationality, religion and citizenship status, additionally has led to an advanced recognition of diversity not only between but also within genders, has finally led to the popularity of the term 'gender studies' as overall, interdisciplinary perspective (Whelehan/Pilcher 2004: xi). I am sidelining Whelehan and Pilcher's position when they

advocate that masculinity scholars better should step away from their separatist position, which eventually leads to a reinforcement of gender binary thinking. Masculinity studies instead should simply be embedded into gender studies (ibid.: xii) and consequently embrace interdisciplinarity.[18] In this way, issues of subjectivity, the body and gender/sexual identity formations could be captured more fruitfully than just with sociological approaches alone. Poststructuralism involves displacing hierarchies, destabilizing dominant meanings and deconstructing binary thinking, and masculinity scholars could use this to a bigger extent in order to disturb essentialist notions, as for example the idea that masculinity relies on male-bodiedness, in order to show that also female-bodied persons can be producer and performer of masculinities.

The second reason why I was drawing on Butler's work here is that I aimed to extract several methodological strands from it: firstly the notion of performative acts in general, secondly the historical specificity of gender construction and thirdly the heterosexual matrix/the notion of melancholic heterosexuality. In the following Chapter Three, I will first offer a reading of *Fight Club* through the lens of hegemonic masculinity in Connell's sense, and afterwards a subversive reading with the tools extracted from the performative notion of gender. The goal of this exercise is to show that a subversive reading, even of a fictional work as *Fight Club*, can deliver meaningful insights for studies of masculinity.

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[18] As a side note, I want to mention that there are some areas of research in which a 'strategic essentialism' as coined by Gayatri Spivak (1986) might be useful in researching masculinities. If 90% of all violence is committed by men, as some claim (Whitehead 2006: 35), it is crucial to have a framework in which questions for instance after the reliability of this number or the reasons for this monopoly of violence can be explored, without reifying the idea of 'natural' male behavior. Spivak's often-quoted notion of 'strategic essentialism' could be applied here: This strategy, originally expressed in relation to the self-representation of nationalities, ethnic groups or minorities, is a political tool that takes a temporary and partial essentialization into account in order to advocate towards a bigger goal. One could argue that strategic essentialism could be beneficial for a masculinity studies that looks at the highly problematical aspects of masculinity like violence, warfare, or high suicide rates among young men. But this is a question for further research and will not be elaborated on in the present thesis.

Chapter Three: Fight Club, the 'Crisis in Masculinity' Discourse and its Subversion

One of the most popular readings of David Fincher's 1999 blockbuster movie *Fight Club* is the one of it as a metaphor for the so called 'crisis in masculinity'. Stephen Whitehead is quoting an amateur review from a homepage called *Movie Review Query Engine* at length, in which *Fight Club* is described as

> an effective film that surrealistically describes the status of the American male at the end of the 20th century: disenchanted, unfulfilled, castrated and looking for a way out. […] It's the ultimate visual statement of the question: Are you working for your car or is your car working for you? A consumer society that emasculates men. No rite of passage to manhood, no lion or bear to kill. In an era where men do not have missions, in the urban wilderness, what is there to hunt? (Clifton 1999, in Whitehead 2006:49)

Whitehead points to the fact that statements like this do not prove that there is actually a crisis of masculinity: they only point to its alleged syndromes, which here are described in terms of emasculation, castration and missing 'masculine rites' (ibid.). This crisis of masculinity widely is understood as the idea that predominantly white, Western men are "facing some nihilistic future, degraded, threatened and marginalized by a combination of women's 'successful' liberation and wider social and economic transformations" (ibid.: 50f.). These transformations are supposed to effect their lives on all social and institutional levels, let it be family life, health or in the form of increased pressure and competition at the workplace.

This idea has, as I have indicated in my introduction as well, become an "almost common-sense […] understanding of men at this point in history" (ibid.). Therefore, I understand the crisis in masculinity as a discursive practice in the Foucauldian sense and described by Stuart Hall as

> a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment […]. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But […] since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect (Hall 1992: 291, his emphasis).

This conception of discourse as not only a linguistic concept but a concept of language *and* practice shows the inherent ability of discourses to manifest beliefs, rituals and truths, as for example gender, sexuality and race, in a given society. Through signaling what is possible to speak of in a particular time, moment and cultural setting, they are enabled to signal what is considered as 'truth' and 'knowledge' (Whitehead 2006: 103f.). Therefore it is exactly because the crisis in masculinity discourse has become 'common-sense', a catchword in

media reporting and object of investigation to countless masculinity studies-related examinations, that made it gain its status or 'truth'.

Fight Club as fragment of the Crisis in Masculinity discourse

Having this crisis in masculinity discourse and its accompanying notions of the threat of a nihilistic future, the fear of and resistance to a 'feminized' and economically changing society or the search for a ritualized, 'natural' masculinity in mind, an analysis of *Fight Club* as a fragment of this discourse seems reasonable. All of these aspects play crucial roles in the movie's plot and were – as indicated in the lay's movie review above – important features of the movie for many viewers.

The idea of masculinity in crisis is principally nothing new. Murat Goc points to the fact that for over a hundred years American literature has been dominated by white, male, middle-class writers who have made the loss of 'masculine authority' a topic (Goc 2008). Nonetheless has this discourse recently gained increased popularity, a development brilliantly satirized in the movie adaption of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. Considered to be one of the best movies of the 1990s by many critics, both – the crisis discourse and its cinematic persiflage – have not lost their brisance and currency.

Fight Club is a coming of age story for adults, embedded in the historical specificity of a masculinity in crisis discourse; ultimately, the viewer follows the nameless I-narrator (played by Edward Norton, and for reasons of convenience called 'Jack' in the movie's script, and also hereafter in this text) on his extreme journey out of his life in a high-gloss but numb consumerist world while being a part of a "generation of men raised by women" (Fincher 1999).

The following analysis, which also functions as a short summary of *Fight Club's* plot, will therefore focus on its aspects that can be related to this discourse and explore how *Fight Club* can be understood in terms of the hegemonic masculinity concept.

Fight Club Through the Lens of Hegemonic Masculinity

A central theme in *Fight Club* is the connection of masculinity and the consumerist society:

> You know what a duvet is? A blanket. Just a blanket. Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is it essential towards survival? In the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No. What are we then? (Fincher 1999)

An underlying assumption of *Fight Club* is that supposedly 'feminized' practices like consumerism and office work do not succeed to confer a successful and fulfilling masculine identity; therefore, Jack's crisis is indeed a crisis in identity (Edwards: 134). It is these economical and social changes that are experienced as disturbing and which dominate the masculinity in crisis discourse as well as Jack's personal quest for identity. Jack has to ask himself: If I am not merely a consumer, what is it that defines my (masculine) identity?

Jack's first approach to escape this identity crisis, which has manifested in a chronic insomnia, leads him, despite being a physically healthy person, to join several support groups for terminally ill people. Here Jack experiences that becoming a 'pain-tourist' manages to bring him relief. It is the pain of others that allows him to feel alive again and to express long oppressed emotions. As a participant of the testicular cancer group, Jack literally and metaphorically enters the world of 'men without balls'; a space where men are 'emasculated', weak, and full of emotion:

> Bob loved me because he thought my testicles were removed too. Being there, my face against his tits, ready to cry - this was my vacation (Fincher 1999).

The hints to 'feminization' are highly visible here: Jack affiliates with men without testicles, who cry and have 'tits'. This chapter of Jack's life serves as a metaphor for men's consciousness-raising groups as they were popular in the United States' 1970s (see Chapter One), 'new sensitive men' and other movements in search of 'alternative masculinities'. Fincher here satirizes these movements and it becomes obvious for the viewer that this cannot be the last step on Jack's search for a masculine identity. Additionally, a woman called Marla Singer (played by Helena Bonham Carter) disturbs Jack's peace within these groups by being a 'pain-tourist' herself: "Her lie reflected my lie" (Fincher 1999) – and in this manner destroys Jack's 'vacation'. Consequently, Jack turns towards another strategy to explore cultures of masculinity: he founds and enters the fight club, a place where men celebrate violence, brotherhood and a time-out of their monotonous lives.

In a way one could say that the fight club is similar to the support groups, but the whining and emotionality here is replaced by violence and secrecy – the 'feminized' strategy with the 'masculinized'. The initiative for the fight club comes from Jack's new friend, Tyler Durden, a most unconventional, rebellious man who represents everything that Jack would like to be:

> I look like you want to look. I fuck like you want to fuck. I'm smart and capable, and most importantly, I'm free in all the ways you're not (Fincher 1999).

Tyler clearly represents a type of masculinity that Jack desires. The twist and highlight of *Fight Club* is then when Jack, and with him the viewer, learns that Tyler and Jack are one and the same person. Tyler is a kind of Nietzschean Übermensch[19] that Jack imagined into his life as a way to change it drastically, but whose status he never will be able to achieve.

Tyler Durden and Hegemonic Masculinity

Although Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is a sociological one and is not thought of as being applicable to movie analysis, this thesis aims to work interdisciplinary and therefore I want to argue that the construct of Tyler Durden can be read through this particular lens, namely as a personification of hegemonic masculinity. I am sidelining Karen Lee Ashcraft and Lisa A. Flores position in their text *'Slaves With White Collars': Persistent Performances of Masculinity in Crisis* here, which argues that the movie opens up "space for criticizing hegemonic masculinity" (Ashcroft/Flores 2003: 23).

But I am extending this idea by suggesting that one can understand Tyler – who, towards the end of the movie, is becoming the leader of a terrorist organization and whose supporters worship him fanatically –, represents quite *literally* this hegemonic masculinity that never can be reached. As I explained in Chapter One, Connell understands hegemonic masculinity as a culturally dominant ideal which is marked through authority, physical strength, toughness, heterosexuality and economical independence (usually by means of a high-rank job position). But the latter one is not applicable to Tyler Durden; he depicts living as a 'slave with white collar' and the capitalist system all together.

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[19] Nietzsche uses the term Übermensch systematically in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). It points to the task of the human, which from Nietzsche's point of view is to create a human that is higher developed than oneself – on a biological as well as on a mental level.

Therefore it can be said that Tyler's hegemonic masculinity is one that "flirts with a new public home" (ibid.: 22), which means that it is a masculinity that rejects corporations and their capitalist powers. This is despite the fact that, ironically, exactly these have long supplied an institutional "anchor for white, middle-class masculinity" (ibid.). His hegemonic masculinity therefore is transformed, or maybe one could use the word 'updated', through his rejection of consumerism.

As Ashcroft and Flores argue, this may signify that hegemonic masculinity remains elastic, in the sense of Connell's "historically mobile relation" (Connell 2005: 77). His hegemonic masculinity thus may be updated, but nevertheless is marked through the signifiers that live up to a traditional 'macho' masculinity: a muscular, or 'hard' body; aggression; a vivid, and, according to some interpretations, violent heterosexuality (he starts to sleep with Marla); his rejection of 'femininity' (which in the movie is, as mentioned before, somehow connected to consumerism and office work); and whiteness (Ashcroft/Flores point exemplary to a scene where he degrades an Asian-American clerk by making him knee down and begging for his life, 2003: 18). As a consequence, it can be said that Tyler's character still fits into the concept of an unreachable, but for many desirable ideal of dominant masculinity.

This hypermasculinity also stays unreachable for Jack, which becomes plain when Tyler and his hegemonic masculinity slip out of Jack's control. When Jack realizes the mass destructive force behind Tyler's 'Project Mayhem', that at last aims to achieve a 'ground zero' in which men are enabled to stalk "elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center" (Fincher 1999), Jack bethinks himself and tries to stop the project in order to prevent the destruction. However, the project has already gone too far and Jack cannot stop Tyler form blowing up several bank and credit card company buildings.

I therefore want to argue that Jack, even if late, rejects hegemonic masculinity in the final scenes of the movie. In its showdown, when Jack and Tyler have their last fight and Jack tries to get rid of his alter ego by shooting into his own mouth, Jack on the search for 'his' masculine identity finally rejects a hegemonic masculinity by killing Tyler Durden. Tyler's death which leaves Jack back dazed and confused signifies Jacks rejection of the wish to identify with a dominant, hegemonic masculinity and leaves him instead at an personal and literal 'ground zero'.

Fight Club goes even a step further than just rejecting hegemonic masculinity by putting it in the context of fascist enterprises, as 'Project Mayhem' turns out to be with its submissive, de-individualized underground army. It is hence implied that an unleashed hegemonic masculinity might be potentially dangerous, or as Connell puts it:

> [F]ascism was a naked reassertion of male supremacy in societies that had been moving towards equality for women. To accomplish this, fascism promoted new images of hegemonic masculinity, glorifying irrationality" (Connell 2005: 193).

Tyler signifies this glorified but irrational hegemonic masculinity and therefore *Fight Club*, as an extremely satirical and self-reflexive movie, ridicules many facets of modern masculinity discourses: the yearning for hegemonic masculinity as well as the masculinity in crisis' discourse and ultimately their negative impacts on equality for women.

Tyler beyond the Notion of Hegemonic Masculinity

Although, as I argued above, seeing *Fight Club* through the lens of hegemonic masculinity opens up space to re-think and to update the concept, the problems of this theory that I elaborated on in the previous chapter still remain. It understands masculinities in terms of hierarchal power relations among men. In the case of Jack, one could say he is simply passing the diverse stations of marginal (e.g. as a supposedly emasculated man in the support groups), complicit (as Tyler's friend) and finally, through incarnating Tyler, hegemonic masculinity. Masculinity is additionally still defined as the opposite of femininity and as an exclusive trait of male-bodied persons. In this reading, *Fight Club* stays a movie 'for men and about men', and Ashcroft and Flores even go so far to understand *Fight Club* as to "use intensified – and, usually, misogynistic and homophobic – gender division to seduce a civilized/primitive brotherhood" (Ashcroft/Flores 2003: 22).

In the following, I want to offer an alternative reading of the film that understands gender as forms of negotiations which are fluctuating back and forth between masculinity and femininity; as performative identity work in the Butlerian sense. I am wondering how her writings on gender, performativity, and subversion allow a twisted reading of *Fight Club*. The underlying premise for my approach is that cinema's combination of visual, textual, and performance discourses allows for an effective analysis of gender patterns as well as their

subversion; and that the gained findings allow drawing inferences beyond the screen, as I will elaborate in the last part of this chapter.

Fight Club and Its Potentials for a Subversive Reading

> This ... chick ... Marla Singer ...did not have testicular cancer. She was a liar (Fincher 1999).

In a review of news magazine *Time* the movie *Fight Club* is blamed for its "failure to do anything interesting with the woman in the story" (Schickel 1999). It is certainly true that Marla's role is not central in the movie. She has far less appearances or speaking parts as Tyler or Jack. But *Fight Club* is a men's movie made for men, or isn't it?

Central to my reading is the idea that Marla Singer, who in a facile reading of the movie maybe understood as merely more that a side-kick of the storyline, who is mainly present to underline Tyler's hegemonic masculinity through emphasizing his heterosexuality – which, we must not forget, is hegemonic masculinity's "most important feature" (Carrigan/Connell/Lee: 1985: 539) – actually is another split character of Jack. In that case she would be much more central to the unfolding of the plot, or as Jack puts it in a crucial but easy to miss comment at the movie's very beginning: "Somehow, I realize all of this – the gun, the bombs, the revolution – is really about Marla Singer" (Fincher 1999).

The idea to read Marla as split character of Jack stems from an online review, but there it was only indicated and not elaborated upon (Kesler 2005). Furthermore it is a counter-intuitive reading, but nevertheless, hints towards the fact that Marla is indeed another part of Jack are manifold, as I experienced after re-viewing the movie. First of all, Marla is never interacting with anybody else but Jack/Tyler. No one is talking or really paying attention to her; something difficult to imagine considering her exceptional looks and the always burning cigarette between her lips (even in the rooms of a Methodist church). Other hints might be when she walks onto streets with very heavy traffic and manages to slide between the speeding cars like a ghost.

When one of the leaders of a self-help groups passes Jack and Marla and says "Share yourself… completely" (Fincher 1999) instead of "Share yourselves", one could argue that Jack is actually – or rather, to the eyes of others – standing alone. Another and almost

irrefutable hint is in addition a scene in which Jack stands in front of an apartment complex where his just blown-up condo used to be located in. Standing in front of the building and looking at the sad leftovers of his former home, that he affectionately had furnished in his, as it seems now, previous life as "a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct" (Fincher 1999), he out of all things finds a piece of paper with Marla's phone number at his feet. And this happens just in the very second a firefighter asks him if he had "someone to call" (Fincher 1999). I do not believe that this scene was acted out by the director to mark a very unlikely coincidence, but to hint towards the possibility of Marla being a split character.

This list of proofs that Marla Singer just as much as Tyler Durden is a part of Jack's identity could be extended; anyhow, I want to suggest that the movie leaves this possibility deliberately open. In any case, Marla's character is fluid and cannot be seen as entirely distinct from Jack. Consequentially this means that Jack's particular representation of masculinity is not as stringent as most interpretations of *Fight Club* – and also the one through the lens of hegemonic masculinity – have suggested.

Fight Club *in the Light of Performative Acts*

Going back to Butler's notions on performativity, several aspects come to mind in relation to the movie. If gender indeed can be understood to be independent of sex and rather as "a free floating artifice" (Butler 1990: 25), Jack's character, in his trinity of 'doing Jack', 'doing Marla' and 'doing Tyler' can be understood in terms of performative acts.

Other aspects are supporting this idea: firstly, the fact that Jack, if you want to see him as some kind of host or origin character, remains rather blank. What is it that the viewer learns about Jack himself? Hardly anything more than that he is defining himself in terms of consumerism: "I would flip through catalogs and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'" (Fincher 1999) – a question, to which an attempt of answering necessarily has to fail – and that he vaguely assumes that there must be another way to define oneself (it is only after he 'meets' Tyler that this vague idea is expressed in a radical form).

Butler argues that there is 'no doer behind the deed', but that there are only performative acts. Also Jack can possibly be understood as some kind of non-identity that does not get to chose between performing Tyler, Marla or Jack. "This is how I met Tyler Durden. […] This is how I

met Marla Singer" (Fincher 1999), Jack explains to the viewer with an undertone that suggests that they were not invited into his life but suddenly just appeared. In this schizophrenic situation, it is unclear if Jack is a 'doer' at all:

> You wake up at O'Hare. You wake up at SeaTac. Pacific, Mountain, Central. Lose an hour, gain an hour. This is your life, and it's ending one minute at a time. You wake up at Air Harbor International. If you wake up at a different time and in a different place, could you wake up as a different person? (Fincher 1999)

Here it becomes obvious that Jack's life can be captured in what Butler calls the "highly rigid frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (ibid.: 33). The notion of repetition ('You wake up at…') seems to point to a self-understanding or a 'appearance of substance' manifested through stylized repetitions: 'This is your life.' While the question if he could wake up as a different person at a different place and time could be understood as hinting to the specific historical and cultural framework that shapes the way in which beings are produced as 'natural'. Waking up as a different person at a different time and space would mean to perform differently. Therefore Jack can be understood through performative acts that have no doer behind the deed. But what does performing differently, namely performing Marla, mean for Jack's masculinity?

Fight Club *and the Subversion of Normative Gender Order*

In one of *Fight Club*'s scenes, Jack and Marla fight over distributing the support groups among them. When it comes to the testicular cancer group that both want to have for their own, the following dialogue takes place:

> Marla: Well, technically, I have more of a right to be there than you. You still have your balls.
> Jack: You're kidding.
> Marla: I don't know - am I? (Fincher 1999)

Marla here scrutinizes the idea what it means to be a man. If an 'emasculated' man in a testicular cancer group still is a man, as the group's credo on a sign in their meeting venue ("Remaining Men Together") suggests, what does it mean to be a man? If *not* having testicles is the criterion here, Marla then really 'technically' has more a right to be there than Jack has.

Going back to the idea that Marla might be a split character of Jack, this becomes more complicated. When Butler argues that "multiple and coexisting identifications produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender configurations which contest the fixity of masculine and feminine placements" (Butler 1990: 67), she alleges that

the shifts and transformations of one's gender identity open up space for subversive confusion which ultimately can lead to a dissociation of the hegemonic order. One could say that in a situation where Jack is 'doing Marla' and in this performance is passing as legitimate participant in a support group for testicular cancer patients, this situation enacts and reveals the performativity of gender and points out the constructedness of naturalized gender categories. In this situation, Jack's performative acts ultimately trouble gender.

This said, I want to explore in the following section if also the heterosexual matrix is troubled in *Fight Club.*

Disrupting the Heterosexual Matrix – or Not

> You called me cause you need a place to stay. […] Why don't you cut the foreplay and just ask, man? (Tyler to Jack, in Fincher 1999)

The homoerotic subtext of *Fight Club* is difficult to miss and deliberately stressed, as Chuck Palahniuk explained in an interview:

> He [Fincher, H.S.]told me The Fight Club was going to be the most homo-erotic mainstream American film ever made. He said it's all part of the plan to make the audience as uncomfortable as possible so that all the shocks and twists-and-turns of the movie will take them by surprise (Palahniuk 1999, in Hobson 1999).

Examples for this homoeroticism are scenes in which Tyler bathes next to Jack, when Jack describes their relationship as being like 'Ozzie and Harriet' (the stars of an American sitcom that pictured the ideal American family life in perfect heteronormativity), or a scene at the very beginning in which Tyler puts a gun barrel down Jack's mouth. And of course there are numerous fight scenes in which the camera slowly and pleasurably glances over the fighting men's muscles while they are in their violent embraces.

In their article *At the Unlikely Confluence of Conservative Religion and Popular Culture: Fight Club as Heteronormative Ritual* (2004), Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Alan Brookey point to the oedipal structure of *Fight Club*'s plot. Tyler Durden becomes Jack's father/god/teacher figure, who needs to be killed (ibid.: 309).

As Westafelhaus and Brookey argue further on, Tyler Durden fulfills two functions at the same time: He represents the power of the father and "Jack's double, a narcissistic projection of homoerotic desire" (Westafelhaus/Brookey: 315). In this sense, Butler's notion that 'the

taboo against homosexuality must precede the heterosexual incest taboo' (Butler 1990: 55) is quite literally embedded in *Fight Clu*b's plot, a notion that Westafelhaus and Brookey missed to implement in their essay.

For Jack, one could say, homosexuality is "not abolished, but preserved […] in the prohibition on homosexuality" (Butler 1996: 30). He desires Tyler but this desire stays unsatisfied, which results in heterosexual melancholy, the 'never-never' of never having loved and never having grieved (ibid.:34). Coming back to the notion that masculinity depends on the dissociation of femininity – as the 'other', and in Fight Club somehow connected to feminized work places and consumerism – and the dissociation with homosexuality (cf. Edwards 2006: 94), it now becomes even more evident why Jack's character seems so strangely blank, as I indicated before. He indeed is signified through this 'negative dissociation' and his character is hence formed in response to loss, lack, and prohibition.

If, as Butler argues, a stable heterosexuality functions as a precondition for gender categories' coherence (the heterosexual matrix), and homosexuality can trouble this coherence, is *Fight Club* then a movie that is subversive also in this aspect? If the construction of (hegemonic) masculinity relies on the exclusion and prohibition of homosexuality, is *Fight Club* disturbing this notion also in relation to sexual preferences? The answer to these questions is yes and no, as I will elaborate in the following.

The problem which disallows a subversive reading in this aspect is the matter of fact that Fight Club concludes with compulsory heterosexuality. After killing Tyler Durden, Jack in the final scene grabs Marla's hand, stating "You met me at a very strange time of my life" (Fincher 1999), as if he wanted to confirm the starting point of their heterosexual relationship and discount his previous phase, which also contained homoeroticism. The homoerotic aspects of the movie in this case clearly were used, as Palahniuk's quote above indicates, in order to make the viewer feel 'uncomfortable' in the sense of a venturous play with the forbidden. I assume that as the viewer a white heterosexual male is preconditioned here, because he in this case is the one most likely to actually feel uncomfortable and threatened in his heteronormative masculinity.

However, this feeling 'uncomfortable' could be interpreted as a disruption of the heterosexual matrix and therefore as a "possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and

reified notions of gender that support masculinist hegemony and heterosexist power" that Butler talks about (1990: 33f.). On the other hand, the problem of the ending's compulsory heterosexuality remains.

Westafelhaus and Brookey understand the cult over *Fight Club* (measurable, for instance, by the large amount of fan homepages) as a syndrome of the masculinity in crisis discourse. To them, the crisis is sidelined by the absence of "truly transitional rituals for today's adolescent males" (ibid.: 307). They argue that *Fight Club* has become a substitute experience for them which "provides ritual and rhetorical support for mainstream heteronormativity" (ibid.: 307) and in this function is "supporting what amounts to an extremely conservative sociosexual ideology" (ibid.: 319). To put it in other words: *Fight Club* flirts with the homoerotic, but at the end it remains forbidden land, a message that possibly is adopted by those young men who experience *Fight Club* indeed as a substitute ritual.

In spite of this, I see subversive potential in *Fight Club*'s homoerotic subtext. After all, "the site where homosexuality is preserved will be precisely in the prohibition on homosexuality" according to Butler (1996: 30). The flirting with and the final negation of homosexuality in *Fight Club* at least marks it as something that cannot be missed or ignored.

But how does the idea that Marla might be a split character of Jack fit into these observations? Is she, as Westafelhaus and Brookey argue, still Jack's "heteronormative reintegration" (ibid.: 315)? I want to challenge this idea, simply by pointing to the facts that in my reading Marla can be understood as signifying the fluidity of gender, a swinging between masculinity and femininity. If you understand Marla as performative act, and as someone who is not neatly fitting into the form – rather as a female masculinity or a masculine femininity – the question who is whose object of desire cannot be answered in one or the other way and makes all of *Fight Club*'s desires fluid.

So what do we know about Jack and his quest for a (masculine) identity so far? I have elaborated how it depends on a double negative dissociation; how he can be understood through the notion of performative acts and how this leads to the subversion of a static masculine identity. As a next step, I want to engage Butler's claim that "any gender is an historical situation rather than a biological fact" (1990b: 273).

Fightclub's *Constructions of Masculinity in a Historical Framework*

Genders as social phenomena can be examined as symptomatic for wider historical processes (Shail 2001: 101). Under this aspect, it is very interesting that *Fight Club* is satirizing several men's movements, as consciousness-raising and new-age inspired groups from the 1970s or the mythopoetic men's movements which center their ideology around a notion of 'Ur'-masculinity (see Chapter One, footnote 12). The satirizing of these in *Fight Club* is achieved by marking them as unfulfilling and somehow absurd (the consciousness-raising/support groups) or potentially dangerous through a fascist nature (mythopoetic men's movements/Project Mayhem's underground army).

What these movements have in common is that they all are searching for some kind of masculinity: be it an 'alternative' (e.g. 'new sensitive man') or a 'traditional' (as Tyler would call it, 'in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word') one. The masculinity in crisis discourse can be understood as a current version of this search (and *Fight Club* as a fragment of it, as was argued before), which is depending on historical ideas of masculinity, as I will explain in the following.

In his article *'A Generation of Men Without History': Fight Club, Masculinity and the Historical Symptom* Krister Friday points to the fact that the necessity for the fight clubs, as well as later for Project Mayhem, are explained in

> conspicuously historical terms: it is not simply that contemporary consumer culture has emasculated men, but rather, the identity crisis afflicting the (white) male subject should be read as the result of a postmodern 'present' bereft of historical distinctiveness or identity (Friday 2003: 12).

What Friday is talking about when he refers to 'conspicuously historical terms' are Tyler Durden's manifesto-like speeches that are delivered several times in the course of the movie:

> I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived – an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables; or they're slaves with white collars. We are the middle children of history, with no purpose or place; we have no great war, no great depression; our great war is a spirit war, our great depression's our lives (Fincher 1999).

Krister unerringly attests "an anxiety over the absence of periodization, that could serve as the proper context/support for identity" (2003: 12), an anxiety that does not only drive *Fight Club*'s protagonists but also builds an engine for the masculinity in crisis discourse. Tyler's speeches suggest that the identification with a historical period, and, implicitly, the advantages which these historical forms of masculinity brought for men, is crucial for a successful construction of masculine identity. Historical periodization then becomes a

'screen' against which masculinity is hoped to become more concrete and tangible – even if this screen "is constitutive of identity rather than reflective." (ibid.) In other words, here the wish is expressed to understand masculinity as a historical particularity with its specific cultural conditions and their power dynamics, as a counter-measurement to the constant flux of a postmodern area with all its social and economical changes and their subverting tendencies.

I have argued that I understand the masculinity in crisis discourse to be the historical setting in which *Fight Club* is located, enabled, and received. But the problem remains that it is still unclear what this crisis is at all. Edwards for example finds 'little support for any *overall* crisis of masculinity thesis" (2006: 16, his emphasis), although, as I have argued before, it definitively exists on a discursive level. Therefore a poststructural approach might be useful here and is offered by John MacInnes in his book *The End of Masculinity*, which I am quoting at length:

> It has become a cliché to argue that masculinity is in crisis. But although men's privilege is under unprecedented material and ideological challenge, the briefest historical survey will show that masculinity has always been in one crisis or another. […] This is because the whole idea that men's natures can be understood in terms of their 'masculinity' arose out of a 'crisis' for all men: the fundamental incompatibility between the core principles of modernity that all human beings are essentially equal (regardless of their sex) and the core tenet of patriarchy that men are naturally superior to women and thus destined to rule over them. (MacInnes 1998: 11)

Several observations can be made from this quote: Firstly, that the masculinity in crisis discourse seems to be rather a permanent condition than just a current phenomenon, and secondly, that these discourses, and consequently also the current one, are old patriarchal tools in modern disguise.

To MacInnes, the construct of masculinity all together is a historical invention to legitimate patriarchy, manifested, as he argued, for example in the work of social contract theorists as Hobbes and Rousseau. In this sense masculinity (as well as femininity, one might add) does not exist as a property, character trait or aspect of identity of individuals. Therefore, he concludes, "trying to define masculinity, or masculinities, is a fruitless task" in the first place. To him, masculinity can only exist as various ideologies or fantasies, about "what men *should* be like" (MacInnes 1998: 2, his emphasis). The crisis discourse then is nurtured by the fact that these fantasies and ideologies are becoming more and more obsolete in a postmodern society. Hence it is not men who are in crisis, it is the *concept* of masculinity.

This is what also Jack/Tyler has to learn: that just like his "masculine revolution is always to come, the identity of postmodernity […] is similarly deferred and unavailable" (Friday 2003: 22). Jack's quest for a masculine identity, at least at the point when hijacked by Tyler's ideology, is subsequently firstly a hunt for a re-installment of historical ideas of masculinity; and secondly, a 'fruitless task' because masculinity does not exist besides an ideological framework. A masculine (or other) identity in postmodernity has to stay 'always deferred and unavailable'.

This notion is visualized in *Fight Club*'s very last scene when Jack is watching the collapsing buildings and the viewer learns that also personally Jack has arrived 'ground zero'. What is thus illustrated here is the idea that the desire to gain a historically specific form of masculine identity has to fail because it demonstrates its own historical constructedness and therefore leads to its own subversion.

By suggesting that Jack's and also the crisis discourse's quest for masculinity can never be successful and a true masculine identity never can be found, I have ripped 'masculinity' off the 'crisis'. And if this crisis, as *Fight Club* and masculinity scholars as Whitehead (2006) suggest, is heavily influenced by the dullness that living in a consumerist world and being forced to handle drab office work bring with them, I am wondering why this should be a specifically male problem.

After all, it is women who are more likely to work in the low-wage sector, where repetitive tasks have to be executed. And it is women who are the main target group of a wide range of consumer's items. But a crisis here is not assumed because women, in opposite to men, are depicted as occupying the 'Ikea nesting instinct' that Jack so necessarily wants to get rid of; and to say it boldly, as made for dull office jobs by 'nature', with the implication that they should rather be grateful for being enabled to enter the world of employment at all. The crisis in masculinity as satirized in *Fight Club* from my point of view is therefore actually a crisis of consumerism, that effects any gender; but because there is no 'hegemonic femininity', it is assumed that this crisis is not effecting women.

Putting it All Together: Conclusion

In the process of writing this thesis I got tipped about an article by one of my professors, which discusses the advent of the discipline of 'male studies' at Wagner College (New York). As I learn from this article, these male studies are being initiated precisely in contrast to the traditional field of masculinity studies because their predominantly feminist approach is rejected. Male studies' premise, in turn, is the idea that men are an "underrepresented minority" (Epstein 2010) and the notion "that male and female organisms really are different" (ibid.), but that the "enormous relation between […] a person's biology and their behavior" is not taken into account appropriately by masculinity studies, gender studies and feminist theory. On the first view, this development seems like an anti-feminist backlash and, in the light of what I have argued in this thesis, as a worrisome development in the sense of Braidotti's 'new master narratives': as a return to deterministic values that celebrate differences rather than denying them (2005: 1). But how this specific new development fits into the picture has to remain a question for further research. It is certain, however, that there are deferrals and passionate discussions about theorizing masculinities.

The question I was asking myself thus was about the status quo of masculinity studies. I was tracing back its evolution out of several men's movements and men's rights dynamics into an academic field with a predominantly feminist alignment and most popular for its concept of hegemonic masculinity. I was pointing to the weaknesses of this concept and thereby to more general points of critique against this masculinity studies' second wave theorizing: namely that men's individual subjectivities are being marginalized and essentialist notions of masculinity 'smuggled' in, predominantly the notion that masculinity necessarily is relying on male-bodiedness.

I have then traced back queer theorist's critiques of these notions and advocated the, so far only rudimentary present, implementation of poststructural theory and interdisciplinary approaches into the field of masculinity studies. In order to emphasize the utility of these approaches, I extracted three tools out of Butler's writings on performativity, namely the performative notion of gender, the heterosexual matrix and the historical specificity of gender. I then offered a twisted reading in the spirit of *it could be otherwise* of David Fincher's movie

Fight Club, a reading that was preferred over a reading of it through the lens of hegemonic masculinity because of the aforementioned limitations of this approach.

In my subversive reading, I was working out that its main characters, Jack, Tyler and Marla, can be understood as performative acts who swing between masculinity and femininity; that a reading of the movie which disturbs the heterosexual matrix is restrictedly possible; and that a quest for masculinity, which in *Fight Club* in an ironic way is advocated through Tyler Durden's mantra-like speeches, cannot be successful because masculinity only exists as an historical and ideological idea and therefore cannot constitute identities. The question that is now left to be answered is how the traditional, rather sociologically oriented masculinity studies could benefit from this kind of analysis. Or, more specifically, how can these findings be connected to social practices?

For the 10th anniversary of *Fight Club's* release (November 2009) and the launch of its Blue-Ray DVD with new special features I was recently approached by the huge PR campaign of this event via an online social network. *Fight Club* fans in this online forum are able to 'follow their leader', which means they are updated with (or rather reminded of) Tyler Durden's wisdoms through 'his' postings that take place in regular intervals. The forum's homepage invites the readers furthermore to join discussions about the movie with the sentence "See what other Space Monkeys are saying"[20] The term 'Space Monkeys' here refers to Tyler's addressing of the members of his underground army ("A monkey, ready to be shot into space. A Space Monkey, ready to sacrifice himself for Project Mayhem", Fincher 1999). An appellation of the fans like this equates them with the followers of Tyler's cult. It seeks to change the fan's status from purely being a viewer to a follower and thereby blurs the boundaries of *Fight Club* as just a fictional piece of art and social practices.

Other hints to the blurring of the boundary of fiction and social practice were diverse media reports about teenagers who actually founded fight clubs in honor of the movie (USA Today 2006); about discussions that *Fight Club* could evoke the so-called *Clockwork Orange* effect (that it would inspire teenagers to commit violent acts, Gritten 1999); about the fact that *Fight Club*'s release in 1999 probably was deferred because of the previous Columbine high school

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[20] http://www.welcometofc.com/facebook/FC_FB_Aggregator.jpg, last accessed 16th June 2010

massacre school shootings (Goodwin 1999) and Westafelhaus and Brookey's argument that the movie builds a substitute ritual of passing to manhood for young men (2004).

These events point to a misreading of the movie's messages. *Fight Club*'s ironic and subversive notions here have not been acknowledged comprehensively. By pointing to a subversive analysis of the movie, as I have offered above, studies of masculinity could emphasize the fact that *things could be otherwise*; that the masculinity in crisis discourse indeed is a crisis of postmodernity, which consumerist culture is affecting all genders alike.

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Appendices

a.) Josh
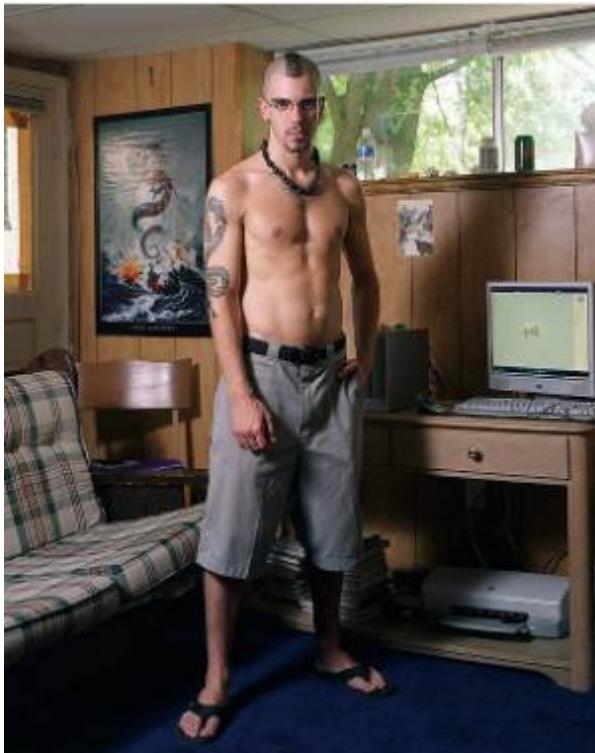
"I consider myself to be masculine because I spent time in the Marine Corps, I work out, I have a mohawk, I have tattoos, I'm a tattoo artist, I cuss a lot, and that's all I can think of right now."

b.) Chris

"I am finally happy with my body, my maleness and masculinity. Boy, it took a long time. I even revel in the little bit of extra weight. I've gained...it seems like I've overcome a hurdle that dogged me for so long; ie. I've overcome that thinness that made me feel less male."

c.) Franco
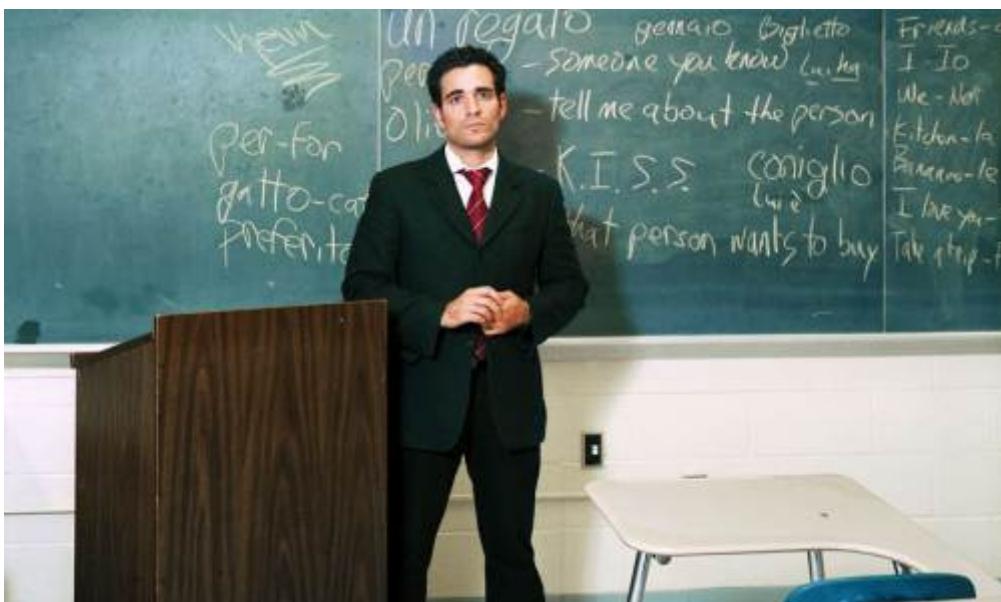
"To be masculine is to dominate in one's field of study."

d.) Andrew

„The first thing I do when I walk into a room is figure out which male could kick my ass and which female I would like to fuck. Sometimes this is so subconscious it is alarming."

e.) Dwight

"Masculinity is an attitude. I feel that I'm masculine because I carry myself as such. It doesn't have anything to do with what you drive or how many women or kids you have."

f.) Liz

"When I wear men's clothes I feel comfortable and confident in how I look on the outside which now matches the inside."