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The Phallus UnFetished

The End of Masculinity As We Know It in Late-1990s "Feminist" Cinema

Alexandra Juhasz

THE PHALLUS UNPLUGGED

The telling moments from my two favorite feminist films of 1999:

1. David Fincher's *Fight Club*. Marla and Tyler are about to rush out of her seedy flophouse, just steps ahead of the police. He's saved her from suicide. Sort of. He eyes a dildo on her dresser. "Don't worry, it's not a threat to you," she states impassively.
2. Trey Parker's *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*. Saddam Hussein and his lover, the Devil, are in bed, arguing once again about sex. Saddam wants to fuck all the time; the Devil would rather communicate, maybe cuddle. But this time, Saddam wants it so bad, he pulls his penis out from under the covers and waves it in the crisp night air. "I'm just fucking with you. It's not real," he snickers as he chucks aside what is, it turns out, a dildo.

DILDO TIME

Two telling dildo moments. That's what did it; that's what told me these films were *feminist*. These two free-floating phalluses (the unlikely possessions of a whacked-out girl and a tyrannical Arab fag) generated a space carved into their elegant late-1990s misogyny that was made especially for the likes of me: 1980s-style feminist film professor. A dildo

puts something close to a penis into the hands of anyone who desires one. Masculinity, revealed as an effect of signification, becomes available to all.¹

Academic feminism and its more sordid sister, queer theory, applaud all acts that unlink genitals from their gendered homes, that sever biology from destiny. They instruct us that a proactive political practice can occur whenever bodies (or body parts) are separated from their culturally determined duties. In these late-1990s movie manifestations of male gender angst, the sex/gender/sexuality system reaches a feminist apex, so fully destabilized that unanchored genitals are up for grabs. The films accomplish the complex theoretical/political project of detaching bodily organs from their host organisms and presenting them, instead, as fully dependent on discourse. Throughout *Fight Club* the narrator enjoys addressing the audience as his disembodied vitals: I am Jack's medulla, Jack's nipple, Jack's colon. "My father dumped me, Tyler dumped me, I am Jack's broken heart." Meanwhile, Stan, from *South Park*, spends most of his time in search of the clitoris, which finally does appear to save the day at movie's conclusion—this enormous, doughy, pink mound, fashioned after a men's bowler, who expounds moralistic half-truths: "Behold my glory. I am the clitoris. Have confidence in yourself. Chicks love confidence. The clitoris has spoken."

These films are decidedly feminist in the sense that they are aggressively self-conscious (and self-confident) about the mobility of gender. The super-wimpy protagonist of *Fight Club* (Edward Norton), the unnamed narrator who sometimes calls himself Jack, is so uncertain about his masculinity that he opts for schizophrenia to refashion himself as male through the hypermasculine Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). In *South Park*, so unformed, so emasculated are the film's ideas and desires that the protagonists could only be the presexual, homosocial little boys Kenny, Eric, Stan, and Kyle.

A PROSTATE CHECK AIN'T NO CURE FOR THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

The postmodern condition is, it turns out, fundamentally a *male* condition involving nothing more than the loss of masculinity. Both *Fight Club* and *South Park* center on worlds-of-men fully peopled by unmales, quasi-males, uncertain-males, males-in-waiting. "At least we're

still men," snivel the divorced, bankrupted, pathetic members of the testicular cancer survivors group—Remaining Men Together—who make up the community where Jack hopes to begin to eradicate the feminine within. "Yes, we're men. Men is what we are." But we all know they're not; they're hugging, crying, whining, and one even has breasts. ("Bob. Bob had bitch tits.") Sure, they don't have balls, but a deeper loss is indicated by their behavior. "Not just male hysteria in relation to sexual lack," write Arthur and Marilouise Kroker in their study of early-1990s male hysteria, "but as the emblematic sign of a more primordial lack in postmodern society."²

It turns out that most men are women in the current world order, not because of what they *have*—balls or breasts, no matter—but because of what they *lack*: immediate access to their own masculinity. In our contemporary consumer (multi)culture—increasingly dominated by women and gay men whom we are forced to tolerate according to the dictates of p.c. ideology—all roads lead to the feminine. While Jack may not have suffered the more obvious biological loss of his fellow support group members, he has suffered one even harder to rectify, a cultural one. Tyler exposes Jack to the deep reaches of this effeminization: he knows the meaning of the word *duvet*, he's never been in a car crash, and most significantly, and from whence *Fight Club* is born, he's never been in a fistfight either. Yet even after the establishment of *Fight Club*, Jack continues to disregard Marla as a sexual object. When she makes him fondle her breasts (a potential cancerous lump as excuse), he stays flaccid. "Do you feel anything?" she asks. "You feel nothing?" "No, nothing." "I'll check your prostate," she offers. He is unmoved: "I'm okay. Are we done now?"

THE DILDO AND THE DICK

Let's return again to the dildos and what they might signify. In *South Park*, after Saddam tosses off the first dildo, the Devil is disgusted. "That is not appropriate," he snaps. So Saddam pulls out his dick: "And this?" Is it less or more appropriate when this penis turns out to be another detachable dildo? Does he have two dildos because he lacks a dick or because he's been given permission to greedily grab extras?

Meanwhile, in *Fight Club*, before Jack has even begun his masculinity quest, he is held up by airport security as he tries to claim his lug-

gage. He has been delayed because something inside his bag vibrated. While security checks to see if it is a bomb, a guard informs Jack that they are on to him: "It's usually an electric razor but once in a while it's a dildo." "But I don't own a . . ." Dick? Dildo? Is it that clear that he's missing something?

It turns out that Marla is the one with the phallus at hand: "Don't worry, it's not a threat to you." She assures Jack that she uses *her* dildo for pleasure, not power. At the same time, even though Jack actually does have a penis (but not, however, a dildo), he doesn't use his for power either. This is what he's lost the ability to do; this is what *Fight Club* is organized to rectify; this is what *Fight Club* is about.

In "Phallus/Penis: Same Difference," Jane Gallop writes, "As long as the attribute of power is a phallus which can only have meaning by referring to and being confused with a penis, this confusion will support a structure in which men have power and women do not."³ In the late 1990s, straight white male filmmakers introduced a "new" kind of masculinity, one previously imagined by feminist and queer theorists. Imagine a phallus that does not refer back to a penis. Imagine a penis that does not refer back to a man.

PENILE ASSAULTS

Let's return to the dildos yet again. Let's say that for Marla, Saddam, the Devil, and Jack, they serve less as a phallus than as a fetish. For Freud, a fetish is an object that substitutes for the missing female penis. "The horror of castration," Freud writes, "has set up a memorial to itself."⁴ A fetish is always linked to the threat of castration, as embodied visually by the penis-less woman. As women (and gay men) move ever closer to the phallus (through ownership of dildos, for example), women no longer function as a signifier of penile loss.

In these two films, the dildo is a postmodern fetish that stands in for the missing *male* penis. Thus, the unplugging of (male) genitals from their rightful homes is made visible. Castration and other potential penile assaults abound: bigger, longer, and uncut. The joke is, of course, that by 1999 they've gotten smaller, shorter . . . shorn! Cut clean away. *Fight Club* organizes two of its more violent scenes around attempted castrations. In both, a pack of bloodthirsty men hold down their quarry and threaten him with a rubber band and shining steel

knife. The second potential victim of this inconceivable act is none other than our narrator. However, the film's narrative has gone to such great lengths to suggest that he lacks his balls already that this scene is played with much less horror and much more irony than the earlier scene it imitates. Meanwhile, *South Park* casts its leads as prepubescent boys whose penises are necessarily cut short—no need for the dreaded act—because the boys are still in the early throes of biological development.

Fight Club's most egregiously reflexive scene—showing us its inner workings—focuses on penis cuts of a slightly different sort. “Let me tell you about Tyler Durden,” says the narrator. There is an edit to a flash frame of a massive erect penis. Durden is directly linked to his privates; Tyler is the phallus. We then return to Jack, now looking directly at us in the foreground while Tyler busies himself with a film editing machine in the shot's background. The fourth wall completely broken down, Jack uses this portion of *Fight Club* to illustrate for us how his pal Tyler, while working his job as a film projectionist, cuts single frames of “a nice big cock” into family movies, “splices sex organs into Cinderella.” We see the disembodied member again, and lest we forget, again: first in Tyler's hand, then on/as our screen. We observe our doubles—the viewers of the movie he is projecting within our movie—appearing understandably shaken, but uncertain as to why, as the nasty frame is subliminally cut into their movie. Their faces of horror and disgust speak for the film: this severed member is disturbing beyond words. The film is organized around this crisis: the capacity to disengage and arbitrarily insert free-standing penises anywhere.

However, it is the reintroduction of this frame-of-a-penis at film's end that is most significant. If you catch it (and it is easy to miss), it is there to behold yet again, spliced into the last seconds of our movie, now functioning as it did for our surrogate audience: leaving us vaguely, distastefully unsettled as we view our hero and his putative love interest, Marla, truly united for the first time. We feel there is something a little bit off as we watch the happy couple watch the destruction of the world—albeit chastely, hand in hand, bodies separated by an inexplicable gulf. This member-burst uses its brief moment of film time to stand erect as it perfectly inserts itself into the space left in the frame between the newly unified heterosexual couple. Although Jack has assassinated Tyler by a gunshot to (their) head only minutes earlier, the phallus/Tyler returns, demanding his birthright—all that Jack will never own, all that Jack can never be.

The impact of the briefly visible but unattainable phallus, recognizable solely as representation, is what divides the happy couple (along with Jack's virtually explicit homosexuality, of course). It speaks what the film really believes: that while Marla may have a dildo, and Jack never did actually lose his penis, neither lovebird ends the movie attaining what access to a penis really should promise. Now that the penis is fully ambulatory, it turns out to be unmoored from what it used to anchor and what it used to signify. In this late-1990s dystopia, having a penis does not insure masculinity or even what masculinity used to shore up: power.

A PHALLUS GRAFT

While the dread of castration has long organized male subjectivity, *Fight Club* and *South Park* attest to a world where castration is no longer an empty threat. We've returned to Freud's early phallic phase with a twist.⁵ We reside in a new kind of one-sex era where all are castrated. Thus, in *Fight Club* and *South Park*, the penis/dildo is as much the rightful property of women and gay men as it is of real men.

While the films contend that masculinity can be easily taken from a man, they suggest that it is not nearly so easy to get it back. When the boys' super-fey teacher, Mr. Garrison, enrolls in the army to fight Canadians—a sure route from penis to phallus throughout (modern) history—*South Park* knows he is no more manly for his costume. “This uniform makes me feel like a tough brute man,” he cockily assures his puppet-friend, Mr. Hand. “I can't wait for shore leave to get me some fucking Poontang.”

At the same time, the more contemporary (postmodern) male costume of washboard stomach and bulging biceps, easily bought at any gym (empty signified referring to no real signifier), is also not a route to masculinity. “Is this what a man looks like?” wonders Jack as he looks up to see a black and white photograph of one such torso, selling jeans or underwear on a bus. His is a rhetorical question. He has learned from his nights at *Fight Club* that a man need not look like anything: it's not the jeans he buys but the genes he owns that count.

Both films speak a need to regain a brute, violent, asocial (biologically male) body living outside (female) culture. One film advocates senseless, uncensored violence, the other, childish locker-room potty



"We're a generation of men raised by women. I wonder if another woman is what we need?" Apparently not. Brad Pitt and Edward Norton square off and then pair off in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999).

humor as solutions to an overly feminized postmodern culture. They accomplish their procedures in single-sex worlds where women are eradicated, absented, unnecessary. Marla is the only female who appears in *Fight Club* and she takes up surprisingly little screen space, given that she is assigned the narrative function of Jack/Tyler's love object. Rather, Jack first accesses his virility through his deep and destructive attachment, intimacy, and passion for Tyler (at this point in the movie, understood to be a distinct character). The two men set up house together; the movie's sexiest scenes occur between Jack and Tyler. After they fight for the first time—no rules, shirts off, a little drunk—the men enjoy a postcoital smoke. The parking lot is suddenly bathed in a soft yellow light, and wisps of smoke filter through the night air: "We should do that again sometime," Jack says longingly, as he reclines against the curb, their makeshift headboard. Cast as the true-woman to Tyler's real-man, it is Jack who is the film's heroine.

Of course, it is Jack's very femininity (and by association his homosexuality) that is the problem Jack and Tyler seek to cure through *Fight Club*, their roaringly homosocial invention built on the bodies of

sweaty, nearly naked men, touching, pummeling, rolling, and bleeding together in a dark basement. If you don't have a penis, and you want access to the phallus, you'll need to get close enough to another man to share his, to finger his entrails, to get inside him and find the primal traces of his maleness swimming within his blood and guts. The film's anxiety is rooted in the dilemma that its homophobic, biology-based mission is impossible to accomplish outside homosexuality.

MEN AGAINST FEMINISM

As uncertain as these two films may be about the relation between their homophobia and homosexuality, they are dead set in their interpretation of where women fit into the new world order. "If the *phallus* is distinct from the *penis*," writes Jane Gallop, "then feminism's battle against phallogentrism is not a battle against men."⁶ Our current situation begs one important turn on her 1970s equation: if the penis is not a phallus then men must be in a battle against feminism.

In *South Park* the object is always transgression: to shock by tearing down political correctness, to participate in aggressive antisociality where acceptance and tolerance have become the rule. No rarified, respected minority group is spared a joke: Jews, fags, African Americans, women, and feminists. These boys may not know how to find the phallus, but they do know that it's best to prohibit women's gaining of it through political action. "Was my mother careful when she stabbed me in the heart with a clothes hanger while I was still in the womb?" asks the Mole, the nihilistic child-spy who helps the boys in their effort to save the raunchy, wrongfully imprisoned Canadian movie idols, Terrance and Phillip.

The postmodern era disperses authority so that it is intangible, scattered, the possession of faceless multinational corporations. Without a clear enemy, male anxiety must re-roost locally, at home. For instance, *South Park* initially tries to remedy its postmodern anxiety by offing Bill Gates, the czar of the home computer. "Fucking Windows '98," sneers the army general who executes Bill point-blank in front of a crowd of cheering G.I.s. But this is not a final solution. The evil roosts deeper within. The solution: the boys must quiet their domineering mothers. Kyle's mother, the villainous Jewess, Sheila Brotslowski, subject of her own song, "Stupid Bitch: The Biggest Bitch in the Whole Wide World,"

is reassigned to the position of secretary of offense by Bill Clinton during the war on Canada, which she originated. But what exactly is her offense? Answers Kyle at *South Park's* finale, "You never take the time to talk to me. You keep going off and fighting all these causes. I don't want a fighter, I want my Mother." *South Park's* position against political women and the politics of women could not be made more clear. The only "political" message that is expressed clearly, and without humor or sarcasm, in the entire film is "Kyle, you have to stand up to your mother."

There's another kind of woman who also needs to be told what's what. Postmodern (multi)culture is rife with a new breed of females who have helped in raising these boys to be the girls that they are. The vast majority of male role models for the *South Park* boys are themselves most clearly modeled after gay men: from pansy-ass Mr. Garrison, to Big Gay Al, whose number "It's Super to Be Gay" is the tour de force of the G.I. Show, to homosexual Canadian figure skating champion Brian Boitano, who is himself the honored subject of a song where his virile heroism is presented as exemplar for the boys. Of course, homosexuals, Saddam and the Devil, take up a good deal of screen time with their relational bickering: "Let's fuck," says butch-top Saddam. "Is sex the only thing you think about?" whines the Devil in response. It is the film's martyrs, the Canadian comedy duo Terrance and Phillip, who most clearly model the dangers for boys who grow up in a society where feminists and fags have refashioned popular culture. "We want to be just like Terrance and Phillip," the boys whine. They are referring, of course, to the very Terrance and Phillip who have introduced our susceptible young friends to cool new playtime activities like ball sucking, rim jobs, and ass-ramming uncle-fucking.

THE NEW WOMEN

Whatever happened to the missionary position? Let's face it: masculinity as we knew and loved it is *over*. "I can't get married," explains Jack to Tyler in *Fight Club*. "I'm a thirty-year old boy. We're a generation of men raised by women. I wonder if another woman is what we need?" How closely linked is threatened heterosexuality to threatened masculinity?

In conclusion, I'd like to look briefly at one more gender-anxious,

same-sex dystopia, *The New Women* (2001), a film written and directed by Todd Hughes, a gay white male. Unfortunately (for my analysis), there are no dildos in *The New Women*, but this is because in this film men's penises *are* dildos. For the lucky new women in the film's title, the penis has become a dildo-plus. After a strange storm, all the men in the world have gone to sleep and women can access men's penises with complete abandon. It turns out that until the men die of dehydration or starvation, their penises continue to stiffen every forty-five minutes, these penises are not fully detachable, but completely available. They can be taken by women for stimulation and also impregnation (that's the plus).

Early in the film, Lisa La Strada (Mary Woronov), the film's heroine, returns home from a town meeting where the women have attempted to create a new social order. They decide that women will be given the public roles once held by their husbands. This means Lisa gets to be the law; her husband was sheriff. "I felt so alive, and I made sense," she explains, as she relays to her still snoozing spouse how she took control of the meeting. Before the meeting things had been rough. The post-male society looked like the all-male society, "with the same meanness and greed, but without the men to blame." At the meeting, Lisa suggests to the group that rather than continuing the current survival of the fittest model, every woman in town should share her food and other provisions, so that all might have a chance at survival. As the women drop their crackers and candles into cardboard boxes in the high school gymnasium, we see the one moment in the film when something other than a patriarchal (capitalist, violent) political vision organizes the world. Her husband responds to this vision with his on-the-hour erection. "Baby, I get it! You *want* me to be in charge," she croons, as she mounts and fucks him.

There is an immediate cut to a series of extreme close-ups of parts of her body as she dons his sheriff outfit to the sound of a military march: holster, gun, mirrored glasses, big smile. Unlike Mr. Garrison, who was no more a man for wearing military fatigues, Lisa is the only lead character across these three films who accesses the phallus as it should rightfully be done: by enacting a powerful political deed. *The New Women* imagines its post-male world, at this one moment, as a meritocracy. Any person can have the phallus when she does something that deserves it, when she wields power through principle. In all the films, it is only Lisa who for the briefest of moments lets us see that the

phallus is attainable for anyone who deserves and earns it through actions of power enacted outside the aggression, violence, and bigotry that have always cemented dominant, patriarchal power.

All these films imagine dystopias where men's intrinsic hold on the phallus has ceased. This is as it should be. But our straight boys can't imagine how to get back the phallus outside the traditional (messed up and anachronistic) ways that always worked before: violence, cruelty, hatred, scorn, biology. They loathe politics, and would rather fuck things up than figure out how to make them work. "Nothing was solved, but nothing mattered," explains Jack about the successes of Fight Club. The political philosophy of Fight Club—anarchy and situationist pranks—results in a totaled, not a better, world. *South Park* is even more uncertain as to a solution to the loss of male power—outside mother-bashing—and until the bitter end, merely mocks those who might imagine a better world. The movie ends by placing our heroes into a satiric utopia. As flowers, rainbows, doves, and luv return after the devastation wrought upon the earth by the Devil and his lover, the boys' friend, the African American Chef, speaks the film's final parodic sentiments: "Let's all join hands and knock oppression down."

Of course, given the mood of our era, *The New Women* is as dark, self-reflexive, and cynical a comedy as are either of the straight boy flicks. It pretends it believes in nothing, too. It mocks all that it champions. That said, Lisa's attempted socialism is rewarded with the phallus. And later, at the all-women's Goddess-worshiping Camp Gaia, the tambourine-pounding, hippie-girl campers circle a bonfire and sing to the sounds of pipes and an acoustic guitar:

*We are the New Women, working together, Goddess meant it that way.
When the rain came and washed the world for us, no more fighting, and no
more fuss. Females from far and wide realized they could work together,
side by side.*

*We are the New Women, loving together. Finally we're having our say.
Through clarity, hard work and common sense, we've aligned together in our
own defense. We are the New Women.*

NOTES

1. Male anxiety in 1990s cinema has a history. Several academic studies of the early 1990s set about theorizing what were even earlier, "new" kinds of

male trouble. For instance, in the introduction to *Male Trouble* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) editors Constance Penley and Sharon Willis look to *Pee-wee's Playhouse* as an example of new possibilities for men in feminism: a place of "male subjectivity as nonmonolithic and even capable of positive or utopian moments" (vii). Pee-wee belongs in a long line of men who work through masculine anxiety through wimpdom: from Jerry Lewis to Jim Carrey to *Blue's Clues'* Steve. But what makes Pee-wee special is exactly what Tyler and the *South Park* boys can't abide. Penley and Willis explain that Pee-wee "puts camp to work arguing for an ethics of tolerance for all differences by making fun of the standard categories governing what counts as sexual identity—especially straight masculinity—and 'normal' family relations" (xiii).

Meanwhile, in her book *Spectacular Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), Yvonne Tasker seeks to understand the antithesis of Pee-wee's breed of "new man." She studies the hypermuscular action heroes of the late 1980s and early 1990s who "reassert, mourn or hysterically state a lost male power" (109) through what she terms "musculinity." Unlike the wimps, these action heroes exhibit "a fascist idealization of the white male body" (1). In the late 1990s, Tyler Durden proves that such a fully masculine figure can register only in the imaginary, and Jack and Tyler's dual personality creates one body in which to work through the contradictions between these two models (as does both Jerry Lewis's and Eddie Murphy's body in *The Nutty Professor*).

2. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, "The Hysterical Male: One Libido?" in Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, eds., *The Hysterical Male: New Feminist Theory* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), xi.

3. Jane Gallop, "Phallus/Penis: Same Difference," in Janet Todd, ed., *Men by Women* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 246–47.

4. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism" (1927), in *On Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 353.

5. Gallop, 244–45. According to Gallop, Freud theorized that the phallic phase was based on a monosexual logic, and a child recognized people by the opposition phallic/castrated (as opposed to masculine/feminine).

6. Gallop, 244.