

Lift up the carpet at any sixth form college and students will scuttle out from under it, ready to tell you how deep *Fight Club* is. Since its release in 1999, David Fincher's film about two disillusioned men who meet and start an underground fight club has become a cult touchstone, particularly for angsty teenage boys, spawning countless Reddit threads and bad Halloween costumes. For years I knew that I didn't want to see *Fight Club*, for this very reason. Unfortunately, the same thing happened for me with Marxism: too many hours of my youth slid away listening to male acquaintances bore on about books they probably hadn't read, and I switched off. I eventually came back to left-wing political theory, but not to *Fight Club*. Until this month, that is, in order to review two new books: Anna Kornbluh's *Marxist Film Theory and 'Fight Club'* and Richard Ayoade's *Ayoade on Top*.

It may seem incongruous to be thinking about these two books together, given that one is a serious and accomplished work of scholarship about an acclaimed film, and one is a self-confessed toilet book about a "film no one has seen": the Gwyneth Paltrow vehicle *A View from the Top* (2003). But in their different ways, both of these books have a lot to say about capitalism, and none of it is good. Although they come up with very different answers, the two books are asking the same questions about what film analysis can do. For Ayoade, film analysis can be used for satirical purposes; for Kornbluh, it has the potential to change how we look at the world, if we do it right.

Both *Fight Club* and Marxism have become oversimplified in the public consciousness, and Kornbluh's book ultimately seeks to re-complicate both, by means of each other. Marxism helps us understand why *Fight Club* is much more than a film about men using physical violence as an antidote to feeling spiritually alienated, and analysing *Fight Club* helps us understand Marxist ideas about the violent, spiritually alienating world we live in.

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Brad Pitt in *Fight Club*, 1999

## Hollywood thinking

Marx, Pitt, Paltrow and the dialectic

### IMOGEN WEST-KNIGHTS

Anna Kornbluh

MARXIST FILM THEORY AND  
'FIGHT CLUB'

200pp. Bloomsbury. Paperback, £14.99.  
978 1 5013 4730 6

Richard Ayoade

AYOADE ON TOP  
229pp. Faber. £12.99.  
978 0 571 33913 6

"rebel through the macho means of boxing". But the domestic component to life in this, the "Project Mayhem" collective invites another meaning: "in order to transform the mode of production, it is necessary to undo the gendered division of labour – to further feminize the work that men do". Whether or not you buy this interpretation is not the point; indeed, "buying" a single interpretation is not the point at all. "Marxism does not commend both-sides-ism", Kornbluh clarifies, but it models "the ability to grasp contradictions". *Fight*

necessary collective labour such a work of art entails. She also argues that we need Marxist film theory because, in accordance with Marxism's general focus on unsolvable contradictions in capitalist society, we need a film criticism that is looking more for questions than for answers, that we ought to be trying to draw out and not to square off contradictory elements in a film. For Kornbluh, Marxist film analysis ultimately has the power to change the way we look at the world.

So, if that is what thoughtful analysis of a celebrated, complex film can do, what can be achieved if we apply close critical analysis to a film that is terrible? Richard Ayoade's new book certainly proves that it can make us laugh. Partly a memoir of his own weird suburban childhood and partly an extended analysis of a widely (and rightly) forgotten romantic comedy, here Ayoade makes the very idea of auteurist film criticism seem ridiculous. *A View from the Top* (directed by Bruno Baretto) follows Donna, Gwyneth Paltrow's provincial ingénue, as she pursues her dreams of becoming a stewardess on the luxury airline Royal Airlines (and, naturally, finding love and friendship along the way). It is, by critical consensus, a very bad film. *The New York Post* called it "the movie equivalent of airline food". It is the antithesis of the lauded *Fight Club*. Ayoade calls it "a film that celebrates capitalism in all its victimless glory, and one I can imagine Donald Trump himself half watching on his private jet's gold-plated flat screen".

*A View from the Top* is full of ridiculously contrived set-ups. Donna is dumped by birthday card, and her world is one of astonishingly bad lines of dialogue such as "I can't believe your boyfriend owns this whole houseboat". Yet, *Ayoade on Top* treats it with all the trappings of a serious academic work, down to the exhaustive index, including an entry for "quads, meaty". Ayoade's shot-by-shot analysis of the movements of "Baretto's camera", his praise of "the unvaried repetition of familiar motifs" in which Baretto's "genius" lies, sends up the dominant mode of film criticism that

# Marx, Pitt, Paltrow and the dialectic

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The label "Marxist" gets banded about a lot, usually without a definition of what it means. The *New York Times*, Kornbluh reckons, propagates a view that Marxism wants to "wage psychological warfare against America". Or on the right-wing side of the internet, you find Marxism invoked as a kind of boiler-suited bogeyman waiting to sell your secrets to the Soviets. And in a lot of feminist film theory, Marxism is regarded with suspicion as a "total bummer" because it promotes an overly negative view of art that might otherwise empower a female viewer. Kornbluh describes these viewpoints as poor readings of Marx. She stresses that Marx viewed creativity as "an essential component of human labour", and was far from being solely interested in the destruction of existing social structures. So, she begins, helpfully, by going back to basics: what is Marxism, and what is Marxist film theory?

This entails a first chapter (on Marxism) that is harder work than the second one (on how that applies to *Fight Club*), but that's because understanding Marxist theory is hard work. There is the occasional phrase that causes undue brain-ache, such as "Critique, the critique of critical criticism", but in general Kornbluh's crash course in Marxism is admirably clear without being reductive. Among other things, she notes that Marxism involves the study of the contradictions inherent in the diverse social relations that make up a capitalist society. Kornbluh gives an example that helps

to connect Marxism and film theory: how is it that mass culture can both pacify the masses and express the necessity for their liberation? Or, how can a Hollywood film like *Fight Club*, produced for profit but anti-capitalist in its themes, both extend and challenge capitalism?

In Kornbluh's view, *Fight Club* – an ideal case study – can be read as reinforcing Marxist ideas about power and class in its story about two white-collar professionals who engage in political projects to sabotage the bourgeoisie. At the same time, Fincher's film seems to engage actively in Marxist theorizing about film production itself. Some viewers regard *Fight Club* as fascist, because it depicts "a populist insurgency with intense libidinal investment in a charismatic leader". Some think it supports a toxic, violent kind of masculinity – others that it is a critique of that kind of masculinity. Or that it is about either the impossibility or necessity of a successful communist state.

Kornbluh encourages us to accept all of these possibilities. *Fight Club* depicts fascist politics, but that doesn't mean it is a fascist film. Similarly, some people think the film is misogynist. Kornbluh writes that it is possible to read the film as a "reactionary response to the feminization of labour: through the rise of the service economy" – the club's members

"rebel through the macho means of boxing". But the domestic component to life in this, the "Project Mayhem" collective invites another meaning: "in order to transform the mode of production, it is necessary to undo the gendered division of labour – to further feminize the work that men do". Whether or not you buy this interpretation is not the point; indeed, "buying" a single interpretation is not the point at all. "Marxism does not commend both sides-ism", Kornbluh clarifies, but it models "the ability to grasp contradictions". *Fight Club* is neither misogynist nor feminist; neither advocating nor condemning violence, but shining a light on the relationship between those positions by constantly subverting its own apparent messages.

That is an easy claim to make, but Kornbluh uses analysis of different aspects of filmmaking to back it up. Lighting, for example: "the overall darkness confounds any simple reading of the film as promoting the political tactics represented, since everything is cast in a sinister dim". Tyler Durden is a projectionist, and through the inserted frames of Tyler, *Fight Club* asks us to be critical of film itself as a mode: do not trust what you see. It is possible to watch *Fight Club* and come away feeling as if underground fight clubs were being condemned, and also that they were being lauded. And it says more about our society than it does about the film that *Fight Club* inspired men to set up copycat boxing clubs, but did not inspire collective housing or coordinated anti-corporate activity.

Kornbluh also identifies what she sees as a fundamental problem with film criticism and fan culture in the present day: "auteurism", a focus on the individual genius of a director and a film's single unifying meaning, at the expense of a film's collective of workers and the social contexts in which it was produced. Marxist analysis of film reminds us of the

ism in all its victimless glory, and one I can imagine Donald Trump himself half watching on his private jet's gold-plated flat screen".

*A View from the Top* is full of ridiculously contrived set-ups. Donna is dumped by birthday card, and her world is one of astonishingly bad lines of dialogue such as "I can't believe your boyfriend owns this whole houseboat". Yet, *Ayoade on Top* treats it with all the trappings of a serious academic work, down to the exhaustive index, including an entry for "quads, meaty". Ayoade's shot-by-shot analysis of the movements of "Baretto's camera", his praise of "the unvaried repetition of familiar motifs" in which Baretto's "genius" lies, sends up the dominant mode of film criticism that Kornbluh wants us to see as so lacking. This satire is amplified by the intentionally tenuous links between what Ayoade sees in *A View from the Top*, and reflections on events in his own life: a scene showing a young Donna having a bad birthday party allows him to access feelings about his own bad birthday parties: "Donna Jensen, c'est moi".

Ayoade is making a joke of the idea that writing about *A View from the Top* helps him to understand his life experience, and that his "modest aim" is that his book "reconfigures the relationship between you and the universe". But Kornbluh makes a similar claim in all seriousness about the world-altering potential of a Marxist analysis of *Fight Club*. And, in all sincerity, some weeks after having finished her book and still turning it over in my mind, claim doesn't seem so outlandish. Marxist theory is "the best", she argues, and the only way to understand the world in which we live. In the summer of 2018, the moment in which she was writing her book, she looks around her and sees a world in which "the richest man steals his wealth from the 2.3 million employees driven under extreme productivity mandates to urinate in bottles". In this hideously unfair economic climate, films such as *Fight Club*, that may "spark imaginative projections of different imaginary relations" to the real capitalist world, have never been more important.