
Purification and the Other: Challenging Alterity in Two Movies

The theory of “othering” or alterity states that people attempt to define themselves not by who or what they are, but by who and what they are not. Defining oneself by means of othering, however, can be problematic as, by definition, doing so seems to limit organic individuality, only deriving meaning by establishing comparisons. In both *Fight Club* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the main characters are searching for a kind of healing or catharsis, and both of them find such relief in investigating the “other” and how alterity plays a role in self-identification. However, both texts treat the “other” slightly differently: in *Fight Club*, alterity as a coping mechanism is rejected completely and the “other” is embraced as the self, turning the concept of the “other” into a necessary means to an end, whereas in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the “other” is something to be avoided entirely because it disallows individuality.

Edward Norton’s character in *Fight Club*, hereafter referred to as simply the narrator, is in search of relief from his numbed, consumer-driven life, finally finding such reprieve when he embraces the “other” he created for himself. In Tyler Durden, the narrator personifies everything he is not. As the narrator begins to discover that Tyler is not a real person but rather a manifestation of his desires, Tyler informs the narrator of his composition: “All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me. I look like you want to look. I fuck like you want to fuck. I am smart, I am capable. And, most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not” (01:48:45-57). The pronouns in this passage make its alterity all the more apparent—Tyler and the narrator are still considered to be separate personas as evidenced by the opposition of the “you’s” and “me’s.” The sentence structure here also implies some sort of balance between the narrator and Tyler, situating them as perfect opposites and prime candidates for alterity. Tyler claims to outdo the narrator in the arena of looks, love, and even freedom; for everything that Tyler does well, the narrator is tragically incompetent.

While Tyler might originally function as the narrator’s “other,” embodying everything that the narrator desires to be but is not, the film’s final scenes show the narrator embracing the “other” as himself. That is, the narrator commits the ultimate act of rebellion against the “other” by becoming the “other.” In the movie’s penultimate scene, the narrator sees Tyler holding a gun and says, “I can beat this. This isn’t even real. The gun isn’t even in your hand. It’s in my hand” (02:04:46-56). The narrator looks down and the gun that was once in Tyler’s hand appears in his own. As the narrator discovers how to synthesize himself with the character of Tyler, he defies all convention and, instead of contrasting himself with an “other,” he assumes

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the persona of Tyler. The scene continues as the narrator shoves a pistol into his mouth, to the protest of Tyler, who asks “Now why would you want to go and blow your head off?” The narrator answers as someone who has rejected alterity as a self-identification method and embraced the “other” as himself: “Not my head, Tyler. Our head” (02:07:12-19). By contrasting the pronouns “my” and “our,” the narrator is confirming that there is no longer a distinction between himself and Tyler, but rather that they are the same person. The narrator’s decision to pull the trigger can be read not as an attempt to eradicate the “other,” but as an attempt to synthesize himself with the persona of Tyler Durden. After all, Tyler drops to the floor with a bullet wound protruding from the back of his skull, while the narrator ends the movie with a definitive change in character, responding to the name “Mr. Durden” and adopting Tyler’s leadership role—a position he had vehemently resisted for the majority of the film. In identifying with and essentially becoming his self-made “other” by the film’s close Fight Club’s narrator completely rejects conventional notions of alterity and, instead, becomes that which he is not supposed to be.

In the context of Fight Club, the “other” then becomes something to overcome, an obstacle to true catharsis. While creating Tyler Durden as his “other” was a necessary action for the narrator, his objective by the end of the film is to combine his own persona with that of Tyler’s because each the narrator and Tyler in themselves only represent half of what the narrator needs to be. By reconciling himself with his “other,” the narrator becomes full-functioning and capable of showing emotion, as evidenced by him reaching out to Marla as the buildings of credit card companies collapse before them. The narrator was incapable of showing Marla true affection until he reconciled his persona with that of his alter ego, suggesting that overcoming the “other” makes one more whole.

Alterity plays a slightly different role in Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Oskar, the nine-year old protagonist, is constantly battling with two “others” throughout the novel: his deceased father as well as his absent and mute grandfather. In an attempt to reclaim his own life and the possibility of a future after the untimely death of his father, Oskar resists the comparisons made to his father and grandfather because they are associated with abandonment and the past. Yet, time and time again, Oskar’s mother as well as his grandmother compare him to unavailable men:

“Mom?” “Yes?” “I doesn’t make me feel good when you say that something I do reminds you of Dad.” “Oh. I’m sorry. Do I do that a lot?” “You do it all the time.” “I can see why that wouldn’t feel good.” “And grandma always says that things I do remind her of Grandpa. It makes me feel weird, because they’re gone. And it also makes me feel unspecial.” (43)

The comparison to his father is painful for Oskar, making him feel “weird” and “unspecial,” though he does not actively seek to be unlike his father or his grandfather and, therefore, does

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not embrace the idea of the “other.” Instead, Oskar rejects alterity completely because he does not wish to define himself in relation to either his father or his grandfather. Rather Oskar tries to find catharsis by developing his identity unaffected by the influence of an outside comparison. Oskar, who is trying so fervently to push through the past into the future, finds the fact that he reminds others of the past not to be a source of solace, but rather of frustration and tension.

Oskar could rebel against this comparison, insisting he is not like his deceased father or his absent grandfather and, in doing so, invoking the identity of the “other.” However, he neither embraces nor rejects the comparison, but wants to define himself without the aid of alterity because with otherness comes expectations. Oskar’s main goal in the text is to overcome the tragedy that was his father’s death, and any type of comparison, whether it be one based in similarity or contrast, serves as a hindrance to his recovery. As Oskar roams the city searching for the “Black” that knew his father, he meets Ruth Black, who likens Oskar to her dead husband: “‘He loved the next thing that would change life. And he was always coming up with wonderful, crazy ideas. A bit like you,’ she said to me, which gave me heavy boots, because why couldn’t I remind people of me?” (252). Even though Ruth’s description of her husband is overwhelmingly positive, Oskar resists the comparison, feeling the proverbial “heavy boots” tugging at his feet. Being compared to other people establishes expectations—in comparing Oskar to her dead husband, Ruth Black inadvertently aligns Oskar to her husband in every way, disallowing his own individuality. The pressure of being like someone else is too much for Oskar; he simply wants his own identity, illustrated in his poignant question, “why couldn’t I remind people of me?” Oskar wants to rely on himself and himself alone for his identity; comparisons to other people simply hinder his own self-discovery because they establish precedents that he is uncomfortable or unwilling to satisfy.

The “other,” in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, then, occupies a far more threatening position than it does in *Fight Club*. In order to achieve some sort of catharsis and secure a sense of individuality, Oskar must reject alterity completely and develop organically. Comparisons to his father and grandfather establish a precedent that Oskar resents, since both men abandoned their family in some way. Instead of defying the comparison to others and embracing alterity—instead of defining who he is by proving who he is not—Oskar resists the entire concept of alterity, preferring his identity to be a self-administered and self-contained development. Whereas in *Fight Club* the “other” and the self synthesized into one, Oskar views the “other” as a threat to his individuality and resists comparison in order to avoid any type of derived or contrived identity.

Utilizing the “other” as a form of literary identification is both embraced and undermined in the texts *Fight Club* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Both texts explore concepts of identity and what, exactly, constitutes the individual and while they both arrive at different conclusions about the utility and purpose of the “other,” they recognize the complexity of identity and create

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within their respective frameworks the opportunity for alterity to affect catharsis in some way. Whether that effect is positive or negative seems to depend almost wholly on the character and how they view the development of their own identity.

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