A Corpus-Based Study of Masculinity in Crisis Portrayed in Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996)

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

This written report is merely a short summary of the final product. The aim of this essay is to explore the portrayal of masculinity in crisis in both Hollywood and British films. This is done via an examination of two landmark films of the 1990s, namely *Fight Club* (1999) and *Trainspotting* (1996). The analysis will be based on the postulation that "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (Mulvey, 1975) and hence an insight of society's undercurrents and perceptions of fin de millénaire masculine crisis may be gained via a study of these films.

Fight Club (1999) features a single male protagonist, the Narrator, and his alter ego, Tyler Durden. The film kicks off showing the jaded, white-collared Narrator being emasculated and oppressed by corporate culture. On a typical business trip, the narrator meets Tyler Durden and has a brief exchange with him. As their paths converge, they founded the fight club, an exclusive club for men to unleash their inner aggressiveness. However, the original fight club that they formed evolves into a global anarchic movement which aims to destroy corporate culture in a violent attempt to help men regain control and power over their own lives.

On the other hand, Trainspotting (1996) is set in a post-Thatcherist Scotland which was witnessing the erosion of the trade unions. In this

film, we follow Mark Renton, a drug junkie who attempts to get his life back on track. He is jobless and consumes an unhealthy amount of drugs on a daily basis, having no real purpose in life apart from seeking joy in his own destruction. With no real purpose or guiding light in life, he is perpetually wandering around aimlessly and uses drugs as a median to relieve the pain of reality.

Ultimately, it is undeniable that Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996) are closely related to the 1990s masculine crisis since they are filmed and produced during the same time period and will inevitably be inspired by certain social undercurrents. With regards to historical context, it is understood that "the core of the problem is that men have lost... a useful role in public life" (Faludi, 1999). Therefore, both films manifest and bring light to all the challenges that men faced in the 1990s regarding the issue of the masculine crisis.

1.2 Research Validity

Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996) are iconic films were produced and released at the turn of the century. Hence, it is likely that they are products formed from a hundred years' of cultural and societal development, as postulated by Neupert (1995), that a movie's discourse and story can be traced back to its socio-historical context. Quoting Grønstad (2003), "Fight Club may also be appreciated as the logical culmination and synopsis of a century-long discourse in American arts and letters on the meaning and substance of... masculinity." This is

proven true, especially when bringing in the notion of masculinity because it is based on society's perspective and is shaped by historical events.

Fight Club(1999) won a multitude of international film awards, such as the Jupiter Award for Best International Actor and the Awards Circuit Community Awards for Best Adapted Screenplay. Therefore, Fight Club(1999) can be deemed as films worthy of further analysis.

On the other hand, Trainspotting (1996) also received multitudinous accolades on its box office release, winning 23 awards and 34 nominations at multiple international film festivals, such as the prestigious BAFTA Film Award for Best Adapted Screenplay or the Boston Society of Film Critics Award for Best Film. Furthermore, Trainspotting was a box office hit, raking in £48 million despite only having a budget of £1.5 million, making it the most profitable UK movie in 1996, hence its success is the best testament to the movie's mainstream appeal.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996) can be considered landmark films which are representative of the American and British culture respectively, therefore they can be used as a foil against which larger social issues such as a masculine crisis can be pinned against.

1.3 Research Questions

How do the films Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996) contribute to the phenomenon of masculinity in crisis at the turn of the century? (Craine & Atiken, 2004; Izquierdo, 2017)

How do elements of the Abject creep into the portrayal of the Masculine Ideal Ego in films Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996)? (King, 2009; Harold, 2000)

How does the impact of American/Hollywood Film Fight Club (1999) and British film Trainspotting (1996) on the masculine crisis vary across the two cultures? (Grønstad, 2003)

1.4 Methodology

In conducting this research, the Abject-Ideal Theory was utilised in tandem with the Corpus Linguistics Method.

First, a complete corpus of the movie scripts of Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996) consisting of 17354 words and 28081 words respectively was collected. The corpora were separately run through WMatrix (Rayson, 2008), a comprehensive word processing tool. Then onwards, semantic tags with a log-likelihood value of above 6.63 would be considered for analysis.

Then, through selecting suitable semantic tags corresponding to our area of interests, masculinity in crisis, as well as abjection and the ideal-ego, we selected two core scenes to represent our analysis. By analysing these scenes through the abject-ideal-I lens, we determine where masculinity lies along a scale, with abjection, and the ideal-ego at the extreme ends. The diagram below is one such example.

2.0 Research Frameworks

2.1 Corpus Linguistics Method

Gries (2006) considers Corpus Linguistics a "major methodological paradigm in applied and theoretical linguistics". It came into being "relatively recently with its existence closely linked to developments in computing" (Mahlberg, 2010). Corpus Linguistics involves the annotation of a corpus, which Rayson (2008) defines as "manual or automatic analysis of the corpus", where a corpus can be defined as an "electronically stored, searchable collection of texts" (Jones & Waller 2015). It provides a "quantitative" method of linguistic analysis which identifies "repeated patterns" throughout a body of text (Mahlberg 2010). Svartvik (1992) states that Corpus Linguistics "focuses on the behavioural manifestation of language", from which we can deduce that Corpus Linguistics can assist us in identifying the movie's underlying notions pertaining to masculinity. These advantages make findings from Corpus Linguistics unbiased and complete and justify Corpus Linguistics as the primary method used for this project.

→ Image of corpus

2.2 Abject-Ideal Theory

Jacques Lacan birthed the notion of the Ideal Ego in his landmark paper, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (1949). Lacan proposes that the Ideal Ego, which is the "very first self-image" that a subject adopts during the mirror stage, which is 6 to 18 months will forever remain unfulfilled as it is formed in the mirror.

Without the possibility of fulfilling the Ideal Ego, there will be a void that the subject continually attempts to satisfy, via the "emulation" of "role models" in his adult life (Lacan 1977). As previously established in this paper, "film speaks the language of the unconscious" Gabbard (1997); thus the formation of the Ideal Ego in the film is largely influenced by societal undercurrents- what society deems to be masculine.

Julia Kristeva wrote about psychosexual development in her watershed paper *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). She posits that "the place of the abject is the place where meaning collapses, the place where I am not", where there is a breakdown of meaning, and the subversion of system and order. She states that "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them." As the ideal ego is the primordial construction of the I that gives the subject identity, the effects of the ideal ego will be unmade due to the presence

of abject. This is further supported by Kristeva's succinct expression, "The abject has only one quality of the object and that is being opposed to I." The abject disrupts this concept of order entailed by the Ideal Ego, essentially standing as an antithesis to the Ideal Ego.

The amalgamation of Corpus Linguistics, an empirical, quantitative framework, and The Abject-Ideal Framework, a qualitative, textual analysis method, allows for the attainment of a measured and balanced view.

2.3 Masculinity in Crisis

The 1990s paved the way for a series of "masculinity in crisis" films, the sudden outburst of these films surfaced a larger generational problem, raising the question. "Why is the masculine identity in crisis?" This generational phenomenon can be reduced to 3 root causes. The first being the unrealistic masculine expectations men had in the 1990s, which largely followed the traditional masculine model set by society in the past.

Men of the 1990s would find that the traditional model of masculinity was no longer reflective of masculinity in their current age. "The old model of masculinity showed men how to be part of a larger social system. It gave them a context and it promised them that their social contributions were the price of admission to the realm of adult manhood." (Faludi, 1996: 35) However, that "substance" and character based culture did not seem to hold true in the 1990s with the

rising trends of consumerism, and the image-based culture which followed.

Nonetheless, many still clung on to what-was, attempting to establish one's masculinity according to standards that were no longer relevant. They idolised their forefathers whose roles spanned from being war heroes, to providers and breadwinners, as well as frontiersmen. The reason being that each role their forefathers played embodied key masculine ideals such as silent stoicism, dutifulness, or bravery. Their forefathers had duties in society to fulfil, which partly granted them their manhood and societal importance, which the men of the 1990s never could attain through the same means. The times were different, and so were the circumstances for men. Hence, with a "lack of reference", "American men were confused about what it means to be a real man (in this new era" , and they were "unable to replace those archaic constructions (of masculinity) with coherent new models." (David & Brannon, 1978)

Men of the 1990s were imprisoned within an "ornamental culture", where one's manhood was defined by one's "style and appearance rather than his 'substance'" (Faludi, 1996: 35), his character and innate qualities. Now, since "manhood is displayed, not demonstrated. The internal qualities once said to embody manhood — sure-footedness, inner strength, (and) confidence of purpose", has lost its value. Ultimately replaced by a generational obsession with "appearance" ,"

youth(,) and attractiveness, by money and aggression, by posture and swagger and props, by the curled lip and flexed biceps, by the glamour of the cover boy and by the market-bartered individuality" (Faludi, 1996). "These are the same traits that have long been designated as the essence of feminine vanity--the objectification and mirror-gazing that women have denounced as trivializing and humiliating qualities imposed on them by a misogynist culture" (Faludi, 1996). Therefore, men find themselves victim to "the very gaze that women have been trying to escape" (Faludi, 1997 :37) and as such, feel emasculated.

Men have undoubtedly found themselves in "an unfamiliar world where male worth is measured only by participation in a celebrity-driven consumer culture and awarded by lady luck." (Faludi, 1996) Furthermore, the 1990s ushered in a new wave of post-industrialism which had caused a paradigm shift in the work landscape. The new economic wave had caused "old jobs (to be) lost; (and) masculine spaces' (which were) once filled with miners, dockers and engineers (to be) left barren or 'converted' to penthouse homes and middle management sites for the newly saturating white collar" (Faludi, 1996) Soon, hard labour workers were given the pink slip, and service related jobs became more prevalent. Jobs that were previously bastions of male employment due to the masculine qualities associated with the job, were being eradicated. Some men did not face this compromise well, and essentially chose to give up. Birthing generational phenomena such as the English "Lad Culture", where a population of young men

assumed an anti-intellectual position, and shunned sensitivity in favour of drinking, violence, and sexism, exemplifying the "broken man".
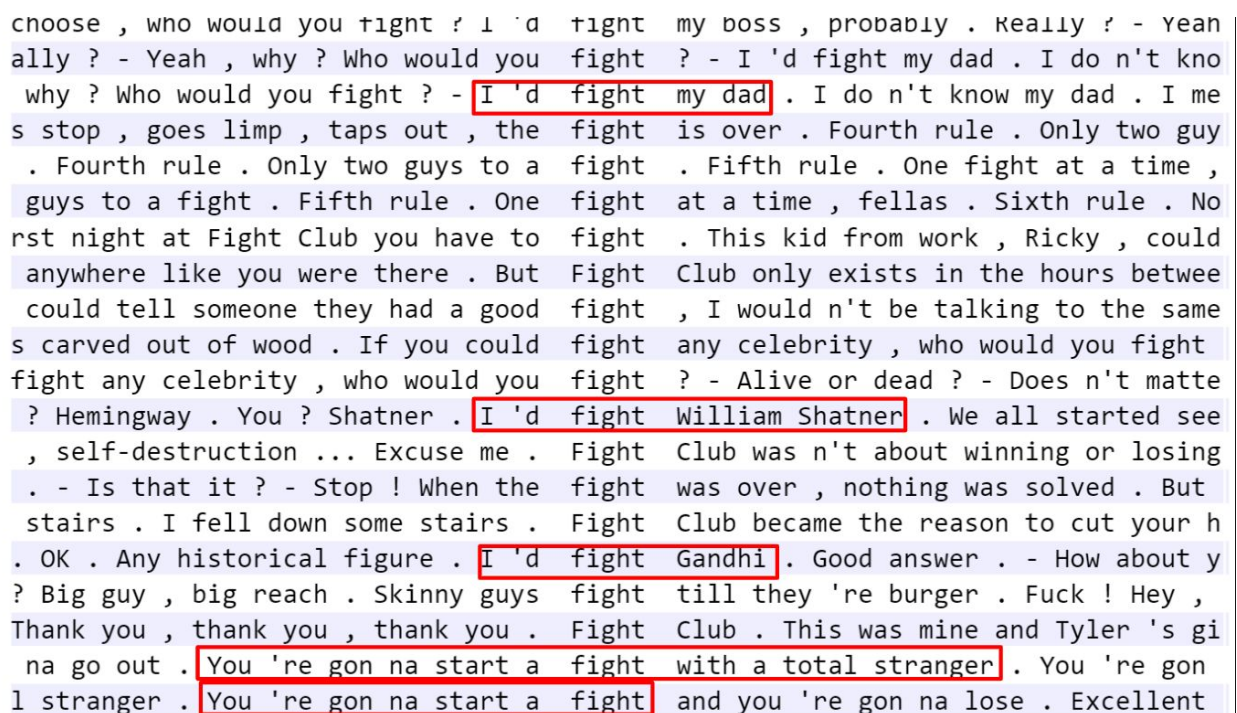
Ultimately, the masculine crisis can be simplified into "widespread confusion in the securing of masculine identity, either through traditional values or by the failure to negotiate new ones." (Usmar, 2015)

3.0 Discussion, Interpretation & Analysis

3.1 Violence as a vessel of abject in Fight Club

The overarching definition of the abject would be as "that which disrupts identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." (Kristeva 1982). The abject violence in Fight Club (1999) can be deemed as the quintessential and central object of abject. Typically, femininity and masculinity are considered stand-alone themes that do not coexist within a single vessel. One can possess either masculinity or femininity, but never both at the same time. Yet the violence displayed in Fight Club (1999) allows the film to transgress the borders between these two mutually exclusive notions. The abject violence in Fight Club (1999) is mainly manifested through the brawls in the fight club, which reflects both masculine and feminine traits that dwell within the members of the fight club. Therefore, violence in Fight Club (1999) can be considered the abject as it threatens to break down the boundaries between these two separate concepts.

To define masculinity, it refers to playing the role of an aggressor, whose purpose is to inflict punishment upon others. On the other hand, to be feminine would be to the willing receiver of the punishment or even the voluntary destruction of one's male body. The fight club in itself is a tool which displays the synthesis of the themes of masculinity and femininity. It is replete with fluid, ambiguous, and transgressive bodies. A case in point would be Tyler Durden, one of the main protagonists in Fight Club (1999).


```
choose , who would you fight ? I 'd  fight  my boss , probably . Really ? - Yeah
ally ? - Yeah , why ? Who would you  fight  ? - I 'd fight my dad . I do n't kno
 why ? Who would you fight ? - I 'd   fight  my dad . I do n't know my dad . I me
s stop , goes limp , taps out , the  fight  is over . Fourth rule . Only two guy
 . Fourth rule . Only two guys to a  fight  . Fifth rule . One fight at a time ,
 guys to a fight . Fifth rule . One  fight  at a time , fellas . Sixth rule . No
rst night at Fight Club you have to  fight  . This kid from work , Ricky , could
 anywhere like you were there . But  Fight  Club only exists in the hours betwee
 could tell someone they had a good  fight  , I would n't be talking to the same
s carved out of wood . If you could  fight  any celebrity , who would you fight
fight any celebrity , who would you  fight  ? - Alive or dead ? - Does n't matte
 ? Hemingway . You ? Shatner . I 'd  fight  William Shatner . We all started see
 , self-destruction ... Excuse me .  Fight  Club was n't about winning or losing
 . - Is that it ? - Stop ! When the  fight  was over , nothing was solved . But
 stairs . I fell down some stairs .  Fight  Club became the reason to cut your h
 . OK . Any historical figure . I 'd fight  Gandhi . Good answer . - How about y
 ? Big guy , big reach . Skinny guys fight  till they 're burger . Fuck ! Hey ,
Thank you , thank you , thank you .  Fight  Club . This was mine and Tyler 's gi
 na go out . You 're gon na start a  fight  with a total stranger . You 're gon
l stranger . You 're gon na start a  fight  and you 're gon na lose . Excellent
```

Figure 1 Concordance of the "Fight" Semantic Domain

Tyler Durden, who is typically considered the most masculine in the movie due to his physical aggressiveness and exhibition of leadership traits, is also displayed to have a feminine side. From the above screenshot of the concordance of the semantic domain for "Fight", it is

evident that Tyler Durden often adopts the role of the aggressor and exhibits rather violent traits. He is also seen to coerce members of the fight to "start a fight with a total stranger" in an attempt to create a culture of violence and shape them into physically aggressive males. He is also typically the one who inflicts damage upon others and can hence be considered to be the aggressor, which places his masculine traits in the spotlight.

```
s a sign on the front that says   Lou   's Tavern . I 'm fucking Lou . W
ys Lou 's Tavern . I 'm fucking   Lou   . Who the fuck are you ? Tyler D
, I did n't quite catch that ,    Lou   . Still not getting it . OK , OK
l ofyou ! Everybody back ! Ah ,   Lou   ! Come on , man ! We really like
this place . - That 's right ,    Lou   . Get it out . - Shut the fuck u
do n't know where I 've been ,    Lou   . - Oh , my God ! You do n't kno
been ! Please let us keep it ,    Lou   ! Please , Lou ! Fucking use the
let us keep it , Lou ! Please ,   Lou   ! Fucking use the basement ! Chr
t ! Christ ! I want your word ,   Lou   ! I want your word ! On my mothe
On my mother 's eyes . Thanks ,   Lou   . You too , big guy . We 'll see
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Figure 2 Concordance for the Semantic Domain of "Lou"

From the above screenshot of the semantic domain for "Lou", we see that Tyler Durden continuously taunts Lou, saying in a mocking tone, "Sorry, I didn't quite catch that." or "That's right, Lou. Get it out". This angers Lou greatly, driving him to attack Tyler Durden repeatedly. Despite so, Tyler Durden still abandons all dignity and pride and continues begging Lou. In this scene, Tyler Durden has adopted the role

of the receiver of the punishment, which thus signifies he was more inclined towards the feminine nature in this scene. It is also noteworthy that Tyler Durden abandons the aggressor role and does not retaliate a single time despite receiving repeated blows from Lou. This implies that he is voluntarily receiving punishment from Lou at the expense of inflicting extensive damage upon his own male body. It is a conspicuous display of Tyler Durden's feminine side, which is in direct conflict with his masculine traits.

The breakdown of boundaries between masculinity and femininity clashes with the conventional view of masculinity that many men have adopted. As mentioned earlier, it is traditionally perceived that a single entity cannot allow both masculinity and femininity to coexist within itself. However, Fight Club (1999) revokes this assertion by using violence as a platform to prove that it is possible to be both masculine and feminine concurrently with no consequences. Thus, violence adopts the role of the abject and taints the concept of masculinity. This leaves many male viewers confused as their very own beliefs about masculinity are being challenged after viewing the movie. Since there is a misalignment of values conveyed by the movie and the values that male viewers hold, the element of male identification that males sought from the movie are no longer present. They will also begin to question the legitimacy of their own masculinity as they can no longer view masculinity as a single entity but as a blur of both masculinity and femininity. The lack of a clear distinction between these two notions

confuses many men since they are now unable to internalize what is now defined as the ideal masculine ego, engendering the fin de millénaire masculine crisis.

3.2 The overbearing abject in Trainspotting (1996)

```
 . He looks down between his   legs          . He drops to his knees in fr   28 More | Full
n his legs . He drops to his   knees         in front of the bowl and roll   29 More | Full
re hesitation he plunges his   arm           into the bowl and trawls for    30 More | Full
ot find them . He sticks his   arm           further and further into the    31 More | Full
he toilet , moving his whole   body          close . He strains to find it   32 More | Full
 He strains to find it . His   head          is over the bowl now . Gradua   33 More | Full
ches still further until his   head          is lowered into the bowl , fo   34 More | Full
o the bowl , followed by his   neck          , torso , other arm , and fin   35 More | Full
owl , followed by his neck ,   torso         , other arm , and finally his   36 More | Full
 by his neck , torso , other   arm           , and finally his legs , all    37 More | Full
 other arm , and finally his   legs          , all disappearing . The cubi   38 More | Full
 through the bowl , then his   arms          as he lifts himself out . Sti   39 More | Full
The suppositories are in his   hand          . He holds them up , and they   40 More | Full
```
Concordance for Semantic domain "Anatomy and Physiology"

During the film, the protagonist, Renton, tries to get off heroin, deciding to go cold turkey by going locking himself in a room with supplies and bolting himself in. However, his resolve to get off heroin quickly falters as he decides that he requires "one last hit" to soothe himself into the whole process. He obtains an opium suppository from his frequent supplier Mikey Forrester, uses it, which leads to his prior constipation due to heroin usage wearing off, forcing him into a toilet saturated with fecal matter, smeared on all walls, which is transpired to be the "worst toilet in Scotland". He relieves himself, but as expected, he excretes the

suppository he had just obtained, too. The following sequence of events are equally revolting as it is fascinating. As Renton lowers himself into the toilet bowl, part by part, till "all (of him) disappear(s)" into the septic mess, he is seen to enter a realm characteristic of a blue lagoon with clear waters, which hints a tint of magical realism. First, Renton affiliates himself with feces, an object of excrement, which we cast aside, to form the border between ourselves and the other, diving into it as if acknowledging his own bodily contamination and abjectness. He confronts these corporeal limits, transgressing them instead of recognising them as external borders against which he can identify himself as an autonomous subject. In doing so, he others himself, diving into and embracing the undesirable, and skews into abjection.

Next, the blue lagoon he finds himself in beneath the layers of fecal matter, represent cleanliness, a concept which is a polar opposite to the filth represented by feces. Furthermore, upon retrieving his suppositories, Renton emerges victorious, excited and gasping of air, much like a newborn emerging from his mother's womb, or a baby having undergone baptism. As such, Renton is both vitalised and baptised. This instance of vile-baptism pits seemingly opposing forces against one another, contamination with purity, causing the breakdown in meaning between the two making the scene all the more fragmented and incomprehensible and hence abject.

uld n't last two fucking days .	SICK	BOY There 's better things that	105	More | Full
programme , the state-sponsored	addiction	, three sickly sweet doses of me	106	More | Full
ate-sponsored addiction , three	sickly	sweet doses of methadone a day i	107	More | Full
NTON (V.O.) I do n't feel the	sickness	yet , but it 's in the post , th	108	More | Full
junky limbo at the moment , too	ill	to sleep , too tired to stay awa	109	More | Full
o tired to stay awake , but the	sickness	is on its way . Sweat , chills ,	110	More | Full
s on its way . Sweat , chills ,	nausea	, pain and craving . Need like n	111	More | Full
way . Sweat , chills , nausea ,	pain	and craving . Need like nothing	112	More | Full
ble slime . Renton looks down .	Sick	Boy sits on the end of the bed ,	113	More | Full
it . Mother stands behind him .	SICK	BOY It 's a mug 's game , Mrs Re	114	More | Full
that nonsense and just say no .	Sick	Boy takes a bit of his biscuit .	115	More | Full
. DOCTOR Question number two :	HIV	binds to which receptor on the h	116	More | Full
in the world . Several years of	addiction	right in the middle of an epidem	117	More | Full
ction right in the middle of an	epidemic	, surrounded by the living dead	118	More | Full
. It 's official . And once the	pain	goes away , that 's when the rea	119	More | Full
'plaguer' , 'HIV' , and 'junky	AIDS	scum' are daubed on the walls .	120	More | Full

Concordance for Semantic domain "Diseases"

Not only is the act of addiction a form of abjection, so are the objects of addiction, in this case -- drugs, specifically heroin. The use of heroin requires an external applicant in the form of a needle, for direct insertion into the bloodstream. The act of the needle pricking the skin suggests the opening of a wound, a rupture within the self, introducing foreign substances into the individual. This is especially true in the use of heroin, where in the movie, it can be seen that while heroin is injected, blood is drawn. Which suggests the replacement of corporeal fluids with that which is foreign, and the unconditional acceptance of that which is external to one's self. Through this, an addict adopts a different bodily configuration, one which is simultaneously host to foreign and local substances, effectively mutating him. The threatening of the internal-external barrier through the usage of heroin signifies the exposure of the self to the other, abjecting the user. Beyond the transgression of physical barriers, the abjection of heroin can be analysed through its psychological effects. When Renton is locked in a

room involuntarily by parents to receive the cold turkey treatment, he undergoes withdrawal. As such, his fevered mind conjures a multitude of images, most of which abject. First, he hallucinates a talk show about HIV, then Allison's dead baby, who died of neglect by her junkie mother. Most disturbing of all, the baby is seen to sprawl up the walls, contorting in a nightmarish, kafkaesque fashion, eliciting a horrific response from Renton. Examining the psychological response as brought about by the withdrawal from heroin, there is an evident breakdown between one's conscious and his subconscious, threatening the erosion of one's sanity. Renton, in a heroin-induced frenzy, subverts the boundaries of the conscious and the subconscious concurrently, allowing his conscious mind to be bombarded with subconscious projections and for these projections to probe the subconscious itself, eliciting further, more extreme projections, creating a feedback loop. By drawing links between drug use and drug-induced psychosis which threatens the breakdown of one's sanity and sense of self, abjection is portrayed. Furthermore, with the disturbing imagery used in the scene, some of which represent the abject themselves, the effect of abjection is effectively doubled.

From the two core scenes analysed above, the overbearing presence of the abject is illustrated. With this, male protagonists within the film are unidentified with, perpetuating the lack of identification and obscurity of the masculine identity.

4.0 Conclusion

Elements of the Abject creeping into the masculine Ideal Ego in landmark films Fight Club (1999) and Trainspotting (1996) played a role in perpetuating the fin de millenia masculine crisis, their effects similarly indifferent to the cultural disparity between both theatres.

Cinema, whose portrayal of Main Male Protagonists have traditionally been taken as the yardstick of ideal masculinity, has been shaken by the introduction of cinema featuring the idealistic manifestations of masculinity tainted by the abject. As films no longer featured a role model that spectators could emulate, spectators lost the ability to gain a masculine identity from identifying with the on-screen Main Male Protagonists, which confused their securing of masculine identity, a core symptom of masculinity in crisis.