FIGHT CLUB AND THE BASIC PERINATAL MATRICES:
A MOVIE ANALYSIS VIA A GROFIAN FRAME

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the film Fight Club (1999, directed by David Fincher, based on the novel by Chuk Palahniuk) via a Grofian frame. Grof’s (1975) cartography of the human unconscious consists of four levels or areas: the abstract and aesthetic, the psychodynamic-biographical, the perinatal, and the transpersonal. The focus of this article is the perinatal level which holds memories of womb-life and birth, and which is in itself divided by Grof into four experiential matrices (Basic Perinatal Matrices I–IV) each relating to a specific stage of clinical delivery. Grofian psychocriticism has been used as an approach for understanding the psychological aspects of everyday events and situations, as well as creative ideas and works of art. In a similar fashion, this article uses Grof’s four perinatal matrices to analyze the plot-line, actions, and events in the film Fight Club.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we analyze the movie Fight Club with the framework of the Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM I–IV) theorized by Stanislav Grof (1975). Specifically, we demonstrate how the experiences of the hero in the film correspond to the characteristics of each perinatal matrix. This article is not an analysis of the hero, the author, or the director, but of the plot-line, actions, and events.

In the late 1960’s, Grof was one of the founders of the then new movement of transpersonal psychology, served on the editorial board of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, was the first President of the International Transpersonal Association, and even coined the concept of “transpersonal” as embraced by the modern transpersonal movement (Grof, 2005a, p. 140).

We first present a brief summary of Stanislav Grof’s overall cartography of the human unconscious, with more specific emphasis on his perinatal level. Next, we analyze Fight Club with the BPM framework.

Stanislav Grof’s (1975) cartography of the human unconscious consists of four levels or areas, each with its own type of content. From the shallowest to the deepest they are:

- abstract and aesthetic—the “psychedelic” sights, sounds, and related ideas.
- psychodynamic-biographical—holds the memories and fantasies from birth till the present. These memories are clusters which share the same emotions and/or physical feelings.
perinatal—which is the focus of this analysis of *Fight Club*, holds memories of womb-life and birth.

- the transpersonal levels—which include Jungian archetypes and experiences beyond the usual limitations of time, space, and identity.

**What are the Basic Perinatal Matrices?**

In this paper, we focus on Grof’s work on the perinatal level which is associated with the experiences governing the period around childbirth. Henceforth, all references to page numbers in Grof are to his seminal book, *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (1975). According to Grof, perinatal experiences constitute a level of the unconscious deeper than that which is reachable by Freudian psychotherapy. He discovered this level of the human unconscious through his clinical research. During his LSD psychotherapy sessions with patients, individuals’ reports of what they emotionally experienced (e.g., feelings and visions of physical pain and agony, of dying and being reborn) and Grof’s own observations of their physical moves (e.g., assuming a fetal position) manifested a striking similarity to those of the child undergoing the birth process. These physical and emotional outbursts led him to conclude that in his psychotherapeutic sessions patients “relived their own birth trauma” (p. 101). Accordingly, Grof drew a parallel between the phenomenology of his patients’ experiences and those of the child during the consecutive stages of biological birth process, and divided these experiences into four categories as well, each relating to a specific stage of clinical delivery. Grof called these four experiential matrices the Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM I–IV). He proposed that

Each stage of biological birth appears to have a specific spiritual counterpart: for the undisturbed intrauterine existence it is the experience of cosmic unity [BPM I]; the onset of delivery is paralleled by feelings of universal engulfment; the first clinical stage of delivery, the contractions in a closed uterine system, corresponds with the experience of “no exit,” or hell [BPM II]; the propulsion through the birth canal in the second stage of the delivery has its spiritual analogue in the death-rebirth struggle [BPM III]; and the metaphysical equivalent of the termination of the birth process and of the events in the third clinical stage of the delivery is the experience of ego death and rebirth [BPM IV]. (p. 101)

**Psychocriticism as Informed by Grof**

Psychocriticism is the use of ideas from psychology to understand works of art and/or their creators. Grof’s four-level map of the human mind has given birth to two psychocritical approaches. The first uses Grof’s entire four-level map, and the second employs only Grof’s perinatal level, with its own 4-fold scheme, the Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPMs).

*Four-Level Psychocriticism*

In 1972, mythologist Joseph Campbell reported his “thinking about mythic forms freshly illuminated by” Grof’s manuscript draft of *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (p. 266). Roberts also used the four-level Grofian approach to interpret the movie

Perinatal Level Psychocriticism

In “The Perinatal Roots of Wars, Totalitarianism, and Revolutions: Observations from LSD Research” Grof (1977) employed perinatal ideas (i.e., perinatal psychocriticism) as an approach to psychohistory, a theme also embraced more recently by Ryan (2004) in his analysis of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Riedlinger (1982) further applied perinatal analysis to philosophy in “Sartre’s Rite of Passage,” which traced elements of Sartre’s philosophy to his mescaline experience. Updating perinatal analysis of films, in 2001, Boyd published “Uncovering Perinatal Fantasies in Hollywood Films” in Psychological Undercurrents of History, edited by Piven and Lawton. Using perinatal analysis in a forthcoming analysis of the work of H. R. Giger, Grof (2005b) claimed that no other artist “has captured with equal power the ills plaguing modern society” (p. 1). The analysis of Fight Club in this article employs perinatal psychocriticism, and we hope this article will encourage its readers to use Grofian psychocriticism as an approach to understanding the psychological aspects of other events, situations, ideas, and works of art.

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE FILM FIGHT CLUB AND BPMs?

Parallels can be drawn between the Basic Perinatal Matrices and the film Fight Club. As stated earlier, we do not analyze the hero, the author, or the director, but the plotline, actions, and events in the film. That being said, we turn to our Grofian analysis. In the opening scene of the film, which as we later learn is also the final scene, we are introduced to the main character—the Narrator—with a gun in his mouth. The story is told by the Narrator whose name we never learn; therefore, in this article we will refer to him as “N” (à la Kafka’s “K”). With flashbacks, the nameless Narrator goes on to explain how he got into this situation (i.e., being held at gunpoint) and how it all started. His lifeless, nihilistic, and monotonous tone of voice immediately gives away that he is in the grip of BPM II whose standard components are, in Grof’s words, “agonizing feelings of separation, alienation, metaphysical loneliness, inferiority, and guilt…” (p. 118–119).

Through his narrative, we learn that he perceives his job to be stable and very boring; he works as an investigator of car crashes for a large firm. He lives in a modernly furnished condo where he feels locked into his lonely existence to such an extent that the only company he has seems to be the furniture he owns. This experience is illustrated in one scene where his apartment becomes a living catalogue; prices and descriptions of items start appearing on the pieces of furniture in his house. Accordingly, N states that he has become a slave to IKEA, and asks himself “What kind of dining set defines me as a person?” We notice N’s sarcastic comments about contemporary life such as, “When deep space exploration ramps up it will be the corporations that name everything, the IBM stellar sphere, the Microsoft galaxy, planet Starbucks,” and realize he suffers from such alienation and isolation resulting from a lifestyle of materialism and consumerism. He is desperate
to put meaning into his life, and is undergoing an existentialist crisis which is a typical component of BPM II: “The individual trapped in the no-exit situation clearly sees the human existence is meaningless, yet feels a desperate need to find meaning in life” (p. 120). Similarly, N’s life, and therefore the rest of the movie, becomes a pursuit to discover his true self, and the meaning of his existence.

In addition to N’s inability to enjoy life, he suffers from chronic insomnia. He complains about feeling neither awake nor asleep, which continuously makes him question his mental state. In other words, due to insomnia, he develops a blurred or distorted vision of reality, and is confused about whether certain events are happening for real or only in his imagination. He says, “I wake up in strange places I have no idea how I got there,” and “With insomnia nothing is real. Everything is far away. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy.” N’s mental state, then, can be explained in terms of the feeling of pervading insanity that is a component of BPM II: “subjects feel that they have lost all mental control and become permanently psychotic . . .” (p. 119).

Another relevant theme in BPM II that illustrates N’s mental state is suicidal craving. Grof says

Suicidal craving is not uncommon in this situation; it usually has the form of a wish to fall asleep or be unconscious, forget everything and never wake up again. Persons in this state of mind have fantasies about taking an overdose of sleeping pills or narcotics, drinking themselves to death . . . (p. 151).

In N’s case we detect such yearning toward suicide when he admits that whenever he is on a plane and it is about to land he fantasizes it crashing.

Nevertheless, he is desperately seeking a way out of his BPM II situation of no-exit. To this end, he decides to join support groups for people with diseases like testicular cancer, bowel cancer, TB, and AIDS. These support group meetings provide him with temporary relief when he sees other people with much greater problems. He admits to sleeping like a baby after the meetings, and therefore becomes addicted to support groups to the extent that he says, “Every evening I died and every evening I was born again, resurrected.” This situation may seem like a death-rebirth experience (i.e., a characteristic of BPM IV); however, it should be noted that it does not constitute a real termination or resolution of his troubles since he does not really belong in the support groups. After all, he is faking illnesses and living a lie.

At this point, enters Marla into the picture who is the very person in the film that initiates N’s real “death-rebirth struggle,” a characteristic of BPM III. Like N, Marla has also joined the support groups, faking illnesses. As soon as he meets her, N loses his enthusiasm to continue in the groups because, “Her lie reflected my lie and suddenly I felt nothing, I couldn’t cry, I couldn’t sleep.” Thus, he is suddenly reminded of his existential crisis which, in turn, is rendered impossible to avoid, thanks to his attraction to Marla. He says, “If I had a tumor, I’d name it Marla. Marla, the little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if only you stopped tonguing it but you can’t.” Thus, as much as he wants to overlook her existence, he finds her too provocative and perhaps too attractive to avoid. The scene where the two of them exchange phone numbers is the first time the audience
realizes that he does not have a name. It is also the first time he is confronted with not having a name when Marla asks, “You didn’t write your name. Who are you?” This scene, then, marks the beginning of his self-quest.

The second person in the film who acts as an agent in N’s death-rebirth struggle is Tyler Durden, whom he meets on one of his plane trips. Tyler has an eccentric personality, appears as a personal guide to N and literally changes his life. Tyler is the embodiment of how N wants the outside world to perceive him; that is, he is N’s persona, the face he wants to present to the world. He is remarkably handsome, smart, spontaneous, flamboyant, and fearless. Indeed, Tyler has all the qualities that N wished he could have given his frustrations with his current lifestyle. [In fact, Tyler Durden is solely a product of N’s imagination and does not exist materially. Neither N, nor the audience, is made aware of this fact until the end of the film when Tyler confronts N and explains that N is in fact Tyler Durden. Tyler says, “You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own, all the ways you wish you could be, that’s me.” With this statement, the audience is led to understand that Tyler and N are one and the same person.]

To sum up: Until this point, in Grofian terms, N needed to accomplish his self-awareness, a progression which started with Marla and continued with Tyler. He was trapped in the no-exit situation of BPM II until he found a way out via the support groups. They brought him temporary relief; however, it was not a BPM IV feeling of spiritual relief since it was ruined when Marla came into the picture, and sent him back to the no-exit situation. Now, though N is still unaware he and Tyler are one, his mission is to integrate his two selves (i.e., N, as we know him, and Tyler Durden) in order to establish a healthy psychological existence and accomplish a BPM IV feeling of harmony and enjoyment. Accordingly, the whole movie transforms into a *titanic struggle*—a characteristic of BPM III—a fight between his two selves.

From this point on, the events follow each other like a chain reaction. N realizes how compulsively he is attached to his material belongings, and “Tyler” puts an end to it by burning down his apartment. Here, we observe N’s encounter with consuming fire, which is perceived as having a purifying quality in BPM III. Grof states, “The fire appears to destroy everything that is rotten and corrupt in the individual and prepares him for the renewing and rejuvenating experience of rebirth” (p. 131). As N destroys his slave-to-materialism self by burning his material belongings, the purging fire destroys another obstacle on the way toward his rebirth. After the fire, N moves into a messy place with Tyler and together they start the Fight Club.

Fight Club becomes an underground club where members can express their repressed angst with their boring, materialistic lifestyles by beating each other violently every night. These fights correspond to the *volcanic ecstasy* and the sadomasochistic element which are characteristics of BPM III. As Grof explains

> Pain and intense suffering cannot be differentiated from utmost pleasure. . . . The sadomasochistic element is a prominent and constant feature of experiences related to the third perinatal matrix. The sequences of scenes accompanied by enormous discharges of destructive and self-destructive impulses and energies can be so powerful that subjects refer to them as “sadomasochistic orgies” (p. 125–128).
Indeed, the fights disgust the eyes and the ears of the audience with their explicit violence. The members leave the club every single night with black eyes and bleeding gums, and yet they get some kind of pleasure and satisfaction out of these “rituals.”

Another parallel between BPM III and the film can be drawn when Tyler is portrayed as a Hitler-like dictator in charge of Fight Club. Similarly in BPM III, Grof explains that “… Individuals tend to identify with ruthless dictators, tyrants and cruel military leaders responsible for the death of thousands or millions of people” (p. 128). Tyler occasionally gives speeches to the members of Fight Club, at one of which he says, “Our great war is a spiritual war, our great depression is our lives.” The members of the club regard Tyler as a larger-than-life character, chanting slogans of trust and loyalty to him. He gives them homework assignments which require picking fights with innocent passers-by, robbing stores, setting off bombs, etc. Very rapidly, the Fight Club develops into a nation wide secret army called Project Mayhem and the members transform into soldiers wearing identical uniforms.

There is an even more overt analogy with Nazi Germany in the film which goes hand in hand with the scatological theme of BPM III. Grof says that an essential characteristic of BPM III is “… an intimate encounter with various kinds of biological material, identified as mucus, sweat, products of putrefaction, menstrual blood, urine and feces” (p. 130). We notice such an encounter in the scene where Tyler and N go to collect disposed fat from the liposuction clinic’s waste dumpsters. To the audience’s disbelief, they steal big plastic bags full of disposed body fat intermingled with blood, and use them to make pink bars of soap which they sell to exclusive boutiques where saleswomen say, “It’s the best soap!” In yet another scene that relates to this scatological aspect of BPM III, we see Tyler working as a waiter in a luxurious restaurant where he urinates into people’s soup in the kitchen before serving them.

With Tyler as the head of the Project Mayhem, and N completely unaware that Tyler Durden is in fact himself, things become even more dangerous. That is, the more N gets attached to Tyler (i.e., his persona of all the things he wished he could be), the more violent he becomes and the more dissociated from reality. In one scene while Tyler and N are driving in the car, they pick a fight and have an accident, and Tyler abruptly vanishes. [Once we learn the truth about Tyler we can retroactively speculate this is an early attempt by N to scrape Tyler off his mind.] Now that the Narrator appears to have lost Tyler, he feels desperate and lonely again, and starts searching for him. In his search he experiences elements of BPM II which are, in Grof’s words, “… memories of a helpless person’s psychological frustrations, such as abandonment, emotional rejection or deprivation, threatening events and constructing or oppressing situations in the nuclear family” (p. 122). Tyler’s leaving him reminds the Narrator of his father doing the same thing when he was a child; he says “I’m all alone, my father dumped me, Tyler dumped me.”

We learn that Tyler was not killed in the car crash (or, rather, erased from N’s mind), when he later appears again in a hotel room. In this stunning scene, N experiences ego death elements which are characteristic of BPM IV, although they still do not constitute the final resolution. Grof says that the ego death experience in BPM IV is
This is exactly how N feels when Tyler confronts him in the hotel room and explains that they are the same person. N cannot accept this and thinks he is going insane. We then watch a rapid sequence of flashback images, the cascading impact of which forces N to confront and integrate the fact that he and Tyler are the same person.

We know at this point that N has not yet experienced the final resolution of BPM IV because he still has not yet taken back full responsibility for his life. There is evidence for this when N warns Marla of his destructiveness, and begs her to stay away from him for fear that he might go into a delirium and hurt her. His fear of hurting Marla, in turn, corresponds to another element of BPM III which has to do with the time bomb analogy. In Grof’s words, individuals in the grip of BPM III “...frequently liken themselves to ‘time bombs’ ready to explode any minute. They oscillate between destructive and self-destructive impulses and are afraid of hurting other people or themselves” (p. 151).

Finally, the BPM IV resolution erupts when, still in the grip of his BPM III delirium, N puts a gun into his mouth and pulls the trigger. He does not die; however, the gunshot does put an end to Tyler Durden’s existence, and, unlike in the car crash scene, he is gone for good. In other words, the gunshot represents the symbolic death of Tyler Durden and thus N’s rebirth as a person whose two selves are reconciliated. Now that he acknowledges that Tyler has been a creation of his own mind all this time, N gains back full responsibility for his life. For the first time in the film we see him completely in charge of his life, as he says to Marla, “Trust me, everything’s going to be fine.” Right after he utters these words, the bombs they previously put into the buildings explode, bringing about the demolition of the skyscrapers, which is symbolic of N and Marla’s departure from this mayhem. As characteristic of BPM IV, N finally feels that he “has left the past behind and is capable of starting an entirely new chapter of his life” (p. 152).

CONCLUSION

From a Grofian perinatal point of view, N’s experiences in the film Fight Club oscillate mostly between BPM II, III and IV, with only a few BPM I instances. As we stated earlier, the film starts with N having been already trapped in a BPM II “no exit” situation, indicating that pleasant aspects of BPM I were nonexistent. Indeed, the scenes associated with his unhappy childhood memories suggest that he only experiences the unpleasant aspects of BPM I. As the events unravel, N undergoes several aspects of BPM II and III, which are terminated during the final scenes of the film through a “death, rebirth” struggle, a characteristic of BPM IV.

In sum, the plot-line of the film Fight Club revolves around N’s striving against alienation and confusion, or his ‘fight’ for a meaningful, satisfying, and tranquil life. Grofian perinatal level psychocriticism, in turn, renders a useful framework to
analyze the turmoil N has been through, and we hope that this article will further encourage analysis of other works of art within this approach.

REFERENCES


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