

## LGATs and Fight Club. Dissecting a Delusion



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November 26, 2019

**The Fincher Analyst**

<https://thefincheranalyst.com/articles/lgats-and-fight-club-dissecting-a-delusion/>



**John Hunter** was diagnosed with bipolar I disorder in 2003 and since then has been trying to understand the illness, and its impact on belief-formation. In 2017 John completed his PhD in psychology, contending that a brutal form of "personal development" training triggers a bipolar state (hypomania/mania), that this experience contributes to a kind of religious conversion... and that Chuck Palahniuk and David Fincher were satirising these trainings in *Fight Club*.  
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Based on Appendix 5 of the PhD thesis: "Stress-induced hypomania in healthy participants: the allostatic manic-defence hypothesis" (Hunter, 2017)

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# 1. Introduction to the LGAT industry



In 1989 Chuck Palahniuk participated in a controversial type of “personal development” seminar, known generically as a large group awareness training (LGAT) and, according to Palahniuk, this seminar inspired him to become a writer <sup>[1][2][3][4]</sup>. In the two decades since *Fight Club* was published <sup>[5]</sup> and released <sup>[6]</sup>, film reviewers, academics, journalists, and the public have largely agreed about Palahniuk’s commentary on consumerism and masculinity; however, just as Tyler Durden spliced single frames of pornography into family films, it will be argued that Chuck Palahniuk, and later David Fincher, spliced numerous references to the LGAT industry into *Fight Club*. It will be contended that, while *Fight Club* touches on multiple themes, a major metaphor relates to Palahniuk’s involvement with these organisations. Because Palahniuk and Fincher refer to various individuals, processes, criticisms, and critics associated with LGATs, this analysis will start with an overview of the LGAT industry. Evidence of Palahniuk’s participation in the most well-known LGAT of its time will then be provided, and the remainder of the paper will discuss the parallels between this industry and the book/film.

## 1.1. Overview of Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT)



*Large group awareness training* is the generic term for a type of “enlightenment training” that was popularised in San Francisco in the early 1970s. These trainings have some of their roots in Humanism, Zen, and Gestalt Therapy, and it is claimed by

reliable sources that the first major LGAT incorporated techniques from Scientology [7][8][9]. Three prominent early LGATs were: *Erhard Seminars Training, or “est”* (formed by Werner Erhard), *Lifespring* (formed by John Hanley), and *Actualizations* (formed by Stewart Emery) [10][8]. Werner Erhard (born “Jack” Rosenberg [8]) is widely considered “the Godfather” of these trainings and while *The est Training* no longer exists, it was replaced by *The Forum* in 1985 (this is the training that Palahniuk took in 1989), and *The Forum* was replaced by *The Landmark Forum* in 1991 [11][8] (see Figure 1 for details [33]). Of specific relevance to this article, Werner Erhard was very much the figurehead of the organisations which offered *The est Training* and *The Forum*, but in 1991 he sold his “technology” to his employees [11] and – while his brother (Harry Rosenberg) has been the CEO of Landmark Worldwide (formerly Landmark Education) since its inception – there is now a distinct effort to ensure that no single person is seen as the focal point of the organisation [33]. “Landmark” currently has offices in 125 cities [12], a presence in 21 countries [11], and claims more than 2.4 million graduates since its inception [11]. Because LGATs are highly scripted and structured [13][14], many spinoffs of est and Lifespring have occurred in the last half century, and it is estimated that Landmark is just one of hundreds of LGAT organisations worldwide [15].

	1971 - 1981	1981 - 1984	1985 - 1991	1991 - 2013	2013 - Present
<b>LGAT organisation</b>	Erhard Seminars Training (est)	Werner Erhard & Associates (WE&A)		Landmark Education (Landmark)	Landmark Worldwide (Landmark)
<b>Primary LGAT training</b>	The est Standard Training		The Forum	The Landmark Forum	
<b>Key figure</b>	Werner Erhard (Jack Rosenberg)			Harry Rosenberg	

**Figure 1:** Relationship between Erhard Seminars Training (est), Werner Erhard & Associates, and “Landmark”

At a high level, LGATs position themselves as group “personal development” programs. They typically run over three to five days and are made up of long lectures, guided visualisation exercises, New Age philosophy, and – significantly, for the purposes of this analysis – psychologically brutal interactions between participants and the trainer. Frequently, people will talk about problems in their lives and they will be mocked and harassed by the trainer until they “take responsibility” for these experiences:

“It’s your own fault. Gradually, Tony moved on to another mainstay in the est body of knowledge, the idea of ‘taking responsibility for your life.’ It is basically the perception that your problems aren’t caused by sickness or fate or other people, they are caused by you, and until you accept that, you’ll never solve any of them. Not surprisingly, almost everyone in the room had an example of some exception in his own case, but Tony would have none of it. He wouldn’t have cared if you’d been gang-raped or born with a brain defect, it was no goddamn excuse” [7].

Since their inception there have been claims of psychological harm resulting from participation [16][17][18][14], and the people who criticise LGATs are often those intimately familiar with indoctrination processes. Former “Moonie” Steven Hassan mentions them in his book *Combatting Cult Mind Control* [19], Dr Margaret Singer dedicates chapter eight of her book *Cults in Our Midst* [14] to LGATs, and a special task force, led by Dr Singer, was appointed by the American Psychological Association (APA) to investigate cults and LGATs in 1983 [20]. Dr Singer was sued by Landmark for including them in her book, and journalist Steven Pressman [8] was likewise sued by Landmark for his damning biography of Werner Erhard. Attorneys Peter Skolnick and Michael Norwick, while defending another critic of Landmark, stated:

“In an effort to suppress this unfavourable dialogue about the company, Landmark, like Erhard before it, has repeatedly used litigation and threats of litigation as an improper tool to silence its vocal public critics” [21].

The litigious nature of these organisations possibly explains why Palahniuk and Fincher commented on this industry through a veiled metaphor, and not more openly. In *Postcards from the future: The Chuck Palahniuk documentary*, Palahniuk notes how fiction can be used to remark on topics that cannot be spoken about freely. It is conceivable that, through *Fight Club*, he was saying something that it is difficult for society to talk out loud about:



“Horror is always creating a monster that stands for something that society can’t talk out loud about. The Frankenstein monster was about the industrial revolution...” – Chuck Palahniuk [22]

Given the psychological brutality of LGATs, one might ask why anyone would willingly participate. LGATs promise participants “transformation” (or “enlightenment”) and, as a result of significant stress, maintained for a few days and then abruptly removed, most participants experience a powerful transient state of confidence, euphoria, and of seeing the world in a new way [23].

“Afterwards, participants have attested to feeling ‘awesome’ and experiencing an emotional high that lasted for days. Some say they had to use special ‘grounding’ procedures just to carry on with normal life after this transcending experience” [14, p. 198].

Few participants understand that their state of mind is related to altered neurotransmitter levels and that the “one-size-fits-all” approach used by LGATs causes serious psychological harm to a (not insignificant) portion of the participants. In Dr Singer’s book, she provides evidence of psychotic breakdowns, suicides, PTSD, phobias, cognitive difficulties and stress-related illnesses experienced by some. Of relevance to this analysis, Singer [14], like Fisher [16], asserts that LGATs are well-aware that some participants react very badly to their processes, but that they choose to pay these people off in the event of a disaster, rather than adequately warning future participants of the risks:

“Although she had no history of psychiatric illness prior to the Lifespring training, afterward Jane underwent a period of growing depression that culminated in multiple suicide attempts. She was hospitalized for three years and remains on medication. Jane sued Lifespring and the case was settled for a large amount” [14, pp. 203-204].

## 1.2. Chuck Palahniuk’s participation in The Forum



In an interview with Sean O’Hagan of *The Guardian* in 2005, Palahniuk explains how he participated in “Landmark”, and how it gave him the confidence to quit his job and face his fear:

"A casual visit to a 'group awareness' seminar conducted by the Landmark Forum, an organisation that uses ideas based on controversial 'est' therapy, was, he says, his 'big epiphany moment'.

"I was 26 when I did the seminar, convinced the world was out to burn me at every turn. If it wasn't for that seminar, I wouldn't be a writer" [2].

Likewise, *Believer Magazine* insists that his decision to write was inspired by the Landmark Forum:

"In 1989, a man named Chuck Palahniuk enrolled in a Landmark Forum workshop [A]. He was twenty-six years old and, like many of his co-participants, struggling with his life and what to do with it. Despite his lack of vocational direction, Palahniuk had no problem navigating his way to the closest exit after the first forty-five minutes of the workshop, repelled by the program's cultiness and rigidity. Later that day, however, he returned to complete the training, and that night began writing what would become his best-selling book, *Fight Club...*" [3].

Vanessa Grigoriadis of *New York Magazine* quotes Palahniuk with regards to his participation:

"Then, when I was walking out, it struck me that I was 26 years old and I was never going to take another risk in my life. I was the one being an asshole! So I went back and said, 'Okay, I'd like to take a risk, where do I sign?' After that, I bought a word processor. That was my first step to being a writer" [1].

Notably, Palahniuk explains that his books typically reflect his own experiences:

"Oh, definitely. If they are satires, it is usually me satirising myself, the traps I fell into, the self-help groups I attended. It's all me. I'm the guy who had the Ikea catalogue in my drawer at work" [2].

It is contended that Palahniuk took part in *The Forum*, enjoyed the transformative state it provided, and worked as a volunteer for "Landmark" for some time but, being an independent thinker, he later read two key books, which compelled him to reconsider his support for this organisation:

1. *Outrageous Betrayal – The Dark Journey of Werner Erhard from est to Exile* by Steven Pressman (published in 1993).
2. *Cults in Our Midst* by Dr Margaret Singer (first edition published in March 1995).

In these books, he would have been confronted with a disturbing portrayal of Werner Erhard and evidence of those harmed by these trainings, and it is possible that this caused him conflict. On one hand, he had these courses which presumably worked for him – impressive-sounding philosophy and a no-holds-barred attitude to life – and on the other hand he had evidence that, while these trainings might benefit some, there are others who suffer enormously as a result of taking part:

"Importantly, a certain number of participants will be seriously harmed as these stresses precipitate a handful of psychological conditions, such as brief psychotic episodes, posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome, a variety of dissociative disorders, relaxation-induced anxiety, and other miscellaneous reactions including phobias, cognitive difficulties, and stress-related illnesses" [14, p. 208].

*Fight Club* was first published in August 1996, soon after these two books, yet seven years after the training that supposedly initiated Palahniuk's writing career [5]; the film, directed by David Fincher, and starring Edward Norton, Brad Pitt, and Helena Bonham Carter, was released in 1999 [6]. What follows are a number of observations about the LGAT industry and *Fight Club*. Why, you might ask, have you never heard about LGATs before? The answer is simple and at the same time revealing. For the first few hours of any LGAT participants will be put in their place and explained the rules they must agree to for the duration of the training. These rules are repeated over and over again – most of which effectively hand all authority over to the trainer – but the most crucial and emphasised of all the rules is that "You do not talk about what goes on in the LGAT".

## 2. Parallels between the LGAT industry and Fight Club



### 2.01. The rules



For the first few hours of an LGAT the trainer (or an assistant) goes through the all-important rules, which are repeated throughout the training:

“The leader starts with welcoming you by explaining the rules of the forum” [24].

“Werner has developed certain ground rules for the training which you have agreed to follow” [9, p. 5].

“The session begins with a re-reading of the ground rules...” [10, p. 519].

There is a major focus on the rules in *Fight Club* and the first and second rules are, “You do not talk about fight club”. LGATs do exactly the same thing, heavily stressing and enforcing rules – the most emphasised of which is that you do not reveal any detail about what goes on in the LGAT:



“Moreover, it is a crucial and well-respected tenet of est that graduates will not discuss the content of the training with the uninitiated. This rule stems from the est maxim that the training cannot be explained or understood, but only experienced” [7].

“The program trainers and leaders typically get agreement from participants that they will not tell anyone about the processes that occur” [14, p. 193].

“We have all signed a confidentiality agreement as well as an agreement not to violate Landmark’s copyright claims” [25].

## 2.02. Sharing, crying, and visualisation exercises



The more benign elements of LGATs may be represented in *Fight Club* by the meetings initially attended by the narrator (“Jack”). These meetings allow him to cry, which allows him to sleep [6].



In LGATs, participants are similarly encouraged to share painful experiences with the group, and participants frequently break down crying during these processes:



"These opaque missives came to life, though, through 'sharing,' the testimonials that participants gave at the microphones. In our course, at least, this became a speed-walk through the awful things that people do to themselves and to each other – infidelity, incest, anorexia, abuse. Weeping at the mike was so common that one dry-eyed grandmother seemed compelled to explain, 'If I wasn't taking antidepressant pills, I'd be crying right now'" [26].



Guided visualisation also takes place during the early group meetings in *Fight Club*. In the film, Jack is encouraged to "go to his cave" to "find his power animal", for example [6].



Rhinehart describes a visualisation exercise used in est (which is similar to exercises used in other LGATs):

"First, I will instruct you to remove your glasses and contact lenses, place any article on your lap on to the floor beneath your chair, and sit comfortably with your arms and legs uncrossed. I will ask you to place your hands on your thighs and to close your eyes. Then I will instruct you to 'enter your space'..." [9, p. 32].

### 2.03. Brutality and "enlightenment"



While the initial meetings attended by Jack represent the nonthreatening elements of LGATs, the fight clubs may represent the more confrontational elements. Much of an LGAT involves psychologically brutal interactions between the trainer and individual participants:

"The socially anxious trainee, looking for approval and validation from others rather than from himself, comes face to face in the training with a punitive, authoritarian, invulnerable trainer who ridicules, abuses, and shouts at him in front of 250 people, demolishing his feeble counterattacks and reducing him to a state of apparent foolishness" [10, p. 532].





Referring to the “enlightenment”, confidence, and euphoria brought about by fighting, Jack says:

“After fight club, we all started seeing things differently” [6].

“After a fight, you could deal with anything” [6].

“Afterwards we all felt saved” [6].



The back cover of the DVD possibly makes the most explicit reference to fight-induced euphoria, stating, “Before long, Jack and Tyler are beating each other to a pulp in a bar parking lot, a cathartic slugfest that delivers the ultimate high” [6]. LGAT participants likewise claim to “see things differently”, and report sudden confidence and euphoria as a result of participation:

“The standard est training promises to transform the capacity to experience life so that one is more satisfied with life as it is (Sayre 1977). As such it promises a personal upheaval in consciousness which is meant to alter the very way in which the environment is known (epistemology) and being is experienced (ontology) (Lande 1976)” [10, p. 534].

“... participants walk away with a catharsis and an unholy confidence in what they can accomplish” [11].

"I was shaken by the power of the weekend. As I got the midnight train out of London, I realised that well over 100 people had experienced a transformation in three days. The sense of euphoria that such an experience of accelerated community brings was remarkable" [27].

## 2.04. Tyler Durden and Werner Erhard



The three main characters in *Fight Club* are the narrator (Jack), Tyler Durden, and Marla Singer. As has been suggested, Jack likely represents Palahniuk himself, or any person who gets involved in an LGAT and ends up volunteering for the organisation. It is contended that Tyler Durden represents Werner Erhard, who is portrayed by Pressman [8] as the charismatic, sociopathic leader of an unethical organisation. Numerous parallels between Tyler and Erhard support this assertion.

LGATs offer participants "transformation" [28][29][26] – a new and exciting way of seeing the world – much like Tyler offered Jack:

"You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you were – that's me. I look like you want to look, I fuck like you want to fuck, I am smart, I am capable and I am free in all of the ways that you are not" [6].





Describing the way that Landmark volunteers look up to the trainer, Hukill states:

“The volunteers, some of them Forum leader hopefuls, watch the way he sits in his director’s chair, relaxed but energized, the person everyone wants to be” [30].



Late in *Fight Club* it is revealed that Tyler is actually Jack’s creation – that Jack is psychotic and has effectively merged with a character that he has imagined. From a psychological perspective, this is not as radical an idea as you may think, as is explained in this academic paper on est:

“*Identification* refers to learning which occurs as the result of modeling behavior upon others. Glass and associates (1977) and Kirsch & Glass (1977), in reports of est casualties (described above), suggest that ‘identification with the aggressor’ is a central dynamic in all est outcomes. They argue that est trainees exposed to a regimen of sleep deprivation and an attacking charismatic leader attempt to master the situation by unconsciously identifying with, or merging with, the trainer” [10, p. 534].



Notably, Pressman quotes these authors, who say of est:

“... an authoritarian, confrontational, aggressive leadership style coupled with physiologic deprivation fosters an identification with the aggressor. The inability of this defense mechanism to contain overwhelming anxiety aroused by the process may lead to fusion with the leader, ego fragmentation and psychotic decompensation” [8, p. 193].



Just as Tyler Durden was created by Jack, Werner Erhard was created by Jack (Rosenberg):

“Nobody back in Philadelphia, he thought to himself, would ever imagine that Jack Rosenberg would change his name to Werner Hans Erhard” [8, p. 2].



In addition to the back cover of the DVD [6], on which the “nameless” narrator is explicitly referred to as Jack, the following extracts from the movie [6] also hint at this name:

TYLER: Hey man. What are you reading?

JACK: Listen to this. It's an article written by an organ in the first person. I am Jack's medulla oblongata. Without me Jack could not regulate his heat-rate, blood pressure, or breathing. There's a whole series of these... I am Jack's colon...

TYLER: Yeah... I get cancer. I kill Jack.



Throughout the movie [6] there are more “I am Jack’s...” comments such as:

I am Jack’s raging bile duct

I am Jack’s cold sweat

I am Jack’s complete lack of surprise

I am Jack’s wasted life

I am Jack’s inflamed sense of rejection

I am Jack’s broken heart

I am Jack’s smirking revenge

Werner Erhard was born as “Jack” Rosenberg, but he left his wife and four children, moved to a new city, changed his name and started a new family:

“On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1960, Rosenberg picked up June from her real estate office and drove to the Newark airport, where they left the car in the parking lot and boarded a flight to Indianapolis. More than a dozen years would pass before Rosenberg’s family would hear from him again. By the time they landed a few hours later, Jack Rosenberg and June Bryde were ready to begin new lives as Werner and Ellen Erhard” [8, p. 6].



This may have been hinted at during the scene in which Tyler is sitting in a bath, speaking to Jack. Responding to Tyler, Jack says:

“I don’t know my dad... I mean I know him but he left when I was like six years old... married this other woman, had some other kids... He did this every few years – he goes to a new city and starts a new family” [6].

While several sources refer to Palahniuk’s participation in “Landmark”, the only source prior to this analysis which compared a character from *Fight Club* to someone from the LGAT industry was the (unfavourable) review of the film by renowned critic, Roger Ebert. Suggesting astonishing insight, coincidence or, perhaps, that he was in on the joke, he described Tyler as:

“... a bully – Werner Erhard plus S&M, a leather club operator without the décor” [31].

Considering that LGATs have been associated with cults since their inception [20][32][14], Ebert’s description of those who follow Tyler is equally incisive:

“None of the fight club members grow stronger or freer because of their membership; they’re reduced to pathetic cultists” [31].



When you consider the three jobs that Tyler has, the metaphor gains clarity. Jack explains early on in the film that Tyler works as “a banquet waiter at the luxurious Pressman Hotel” [6]. Steven Pressman was the journalist who wrote the damning biography on Werner Erhard [8]. Later Jack comments, “Tyler was now involved in a class action lawsuit with the Pressman Hotel over the urine content of their soup” [6]. In 1998 Landmark sued Pressman and attempted to force him to reveal the sources he had used [21]. Since there was a reference to the Pressman Hotel, but not to a lawsuit, in the book (1996), it is telling that the movie (1999) makes reference to a lawsuit which took place after the book was published, but before the film was released.





Tyler's second job is as a projectionist. He takes this job, we are told, because it affords him the opportunity to splice single frames of pornography into family films. "Nobody knows that they saw it, but they have..." Jack explains [6]. LGATs have frequently been accused during the nearly half-century they have been around of using deceptive methods of indoctrination – of furtively manipulating participants to work as unpaid salesmen and "volunteers" (servants) through trainings which are marketed as transformative and empowering [33]. In 1983 Dr Singer led the DIMPAC committee, on behalf of the APA, to investigate whether LGATs and cults used "deceptive and indirect methods of persuasion and control" [20]. While the APA concluded that evidence of "brainwashing" in LGATs was lacking [20], a recent (transparent) analysis reveals that LGATs appear to incorporate all eight steps of *thought reform* [33][34] – an uncomfortable finding for those *committed* to these trainings.



Tyler's final job is making soap. "In order to make soap", Tyler tells Jack, "we need fat, and the best fat for making soap comes from humans" [6]. In addition to visualisation exercises and obscure philosophical lectures, LGATs get participants to reveal their deepest, darkest secrets – the problems, the concerns and the things which are troubling them. What they then do is they take what participants say and twist it around (so they can "take responsibility") and then they give it back to them. For this they charge hundreds of dollars. Fat may represent the bad/painful parts of people that are revealed, repackaged, and returned to participants. Jack comments while Tyler sells the soap, "It was beautiful – we were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them" [6].



A more obscure reference to Werner Erhard is made through his place of residence. While running est, Erhard's mansion in San Francisco was in Franklin Street. In *Outrageous Betrayal* Steven Pressman refers to it constantly and chapter eleven is entitled "Nightmare on Franklin Street":

"Inside the Franklin House, from which Erhard directed his minions, nothing escaped the attention and demands of the master" [8, p. 123].







Both the opening scene and the final scene in *Fight Club* occur in Franklin Street. This name comes up twice in the movie – firstly, when Jack checks a number that he called while “asleep” he is told that the address is “1888 Franklin Street” and later, after he escapes from the cops who are in on the plot (and runs down the street in his underwear), he reaches a road with a bus shelter on it. He briefly looks up to the name on the bus shelter and it says “FRANKLIN STREET” [6]. While the links between Tyler Durden and Werner Erhard require some understanding of the LGAT industry, the links between Marla Singer and Margaret Singer are somewhat less concealed.

## 2.05. Marla Singer and Margaret Singer



Marla Singer, as the final key character in *Fight Club*, represents a reality check to Jack, who cannot enjoy his groups with Marla “watching”. Marla is the counterpoint to Tyler’s reckless way of viewing the world and, while Jack initially resents her, she turns out to be the one person who really does care about him.



Margaret Singer's full name is Margaret Thaler ("Mar-ler") Singer <sup>[14]</sup>, and it is contended that the major conflict within *Fight Club* represents Palahniuk's struggle between a psychological attachment to these organisations, and the frustrating, conscience-invoking evidence presented by Pressman <sup>[8]</sup> and Singer <sup>[35]</sup>.



In the book, Tyler explains that he takes over whenever Jack "falls asleep", suggesting that Erhard (est/WE&A/Landmark) takes control as soon as participants stop questioning, and start trusting the LGAT trainers indiscriminately:

"We're not two separate men. Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden" <sup>[36, p. 167]</sup>.





Margaret Singer provides an uncomfortable reality check to LGAT proponents – anyone who reads, and honestly engages with, the information in her book would find it difficult to support the way that LGATs operate. In *Fight Club* Marla prevents Jack from enjoying his group and adopting the hedonistic, and “enlightened” perspective advocated by Tyler:

“I can’t cry with this woman watching me” [36, p. 22].

“Tyler just doesn’t come out when Marla’s around” [36, p. 65].



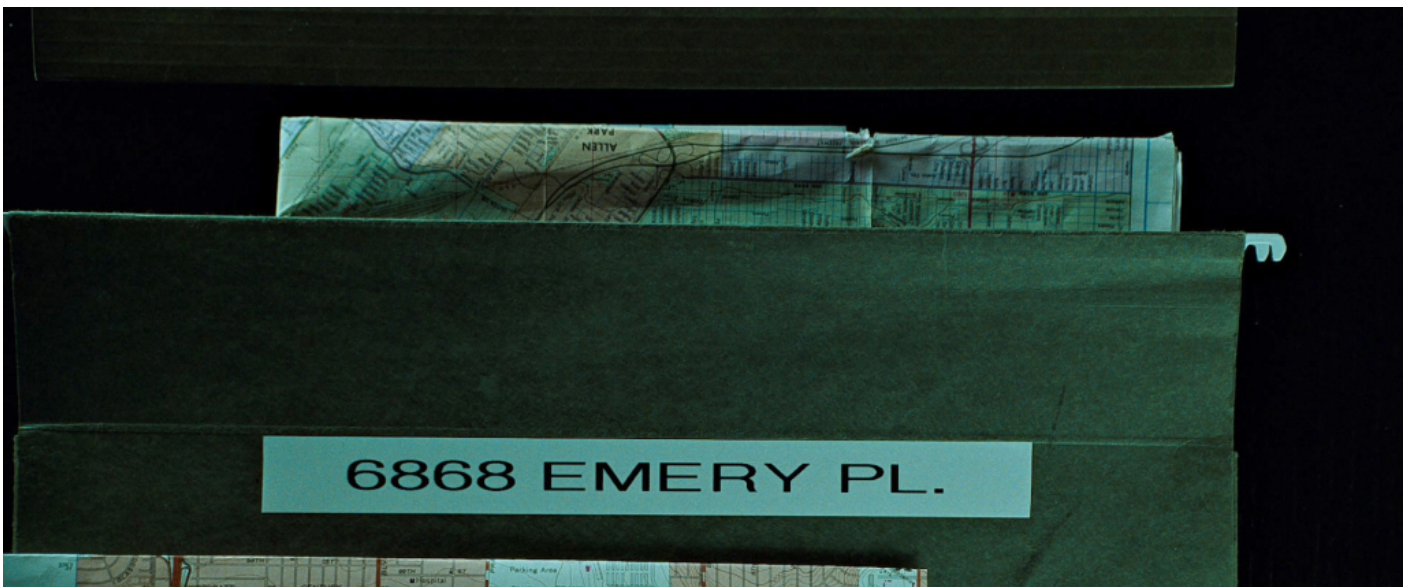
Palahniuk explains that the only way for Jack to “stay awake” is with Marla’s help – that only Marla’s influence could prevent Tyler from completely taking over:

“And if I went to bed earlier every night and I slept later every morning, eventually I’d be gone altogether. I’d just go to sleep and never wake up [...] I would never wake up and Tyler would take over [...] So Tyler can’t take complete control, I need Marla to keep me awake. All the time” [36, p. 174].



Similarly, when Jack “hears” Tyler and Marla having sex this causes him distress, and Tyler and Marla cannot be in the same room at the same time [6]. This may represent the cognitive dissonance experienced by Palahniuk as he tried to maintain his loyalty to “Landmark” and its ideas, while engaging with evidence of those harmed by these trainings. As Jack puts Marla on a bus, to protect her from Tyler, he exclaims, “They think you’re some kind of threat – I can’t explain it right now”. Margaret Singer, as the head of the DIMPAC committee, and author of *Cults in Our Midst*, was – like Pressman – sued by Landmark [21], and was certainly seen as a threat.

## 2.06. Stewart Emery: the first chief executive officer (CEO) of est



Having worked closely with Erhard at Mind Dynamics [8], Stewart Emery was appointed as the first CEO of est (although he later broke away to form his own LGAT, Actualizations [10][8]):

“That began to change in the summer of 1973 when Erhard conferred upon Stewart Emery the new title of chief executive officer...” [8, p. 85].

In line with Tyler’s splicing of single frames of pornography into family films, it appears that Fincher spliced a specific reference to Stewart Emery into *Fight Club*. When Jack realises that “Tyler” is a sociopath with bizarre plans to change the world, and that



Project Mayhem is likely to hurt many innocent people, he attempts to turn himself in to the police, confessing to being responsible for “numerous acts of vandalism...”. Before the film moves on to the next scene (the discussion with the police) there is a brief changeover where a couple of things flash on the screen. One of the things which flashes is a green folder with the words “6868 EMERY PL.” on it [6].

## 2.07. Casualties of participation



Singer comments on the harm, and the lawsuits, relating to LGATs:

“Also, a plethora of allegations has been raised, some in civil suits, pointing out that individuals have suffered mental breakdowns and psychological harm as a result of participating...” [14, p. 187].

She further asserts that psychological harm in LGATs is not uncommon, and describes some of the lawsuits she personally worked on as an expert witness:

“These damages ranged from death by drowning and suicide to both brief and prolonged stays in mental hospitals. I have kept track of the individuals involved in the nearly sixty legal cases in which I was a consultant. Some of them have got their lives going again, although with the fearful recall of what it was like to lose mental and emotional control. A few are still hospitalised as long as ten years after their breakdowns during or immediately after the training” [14, p. 192].

Stanford University researchers, Finkelstein, et al. [10] consolidated the findings on those harmed in LGATs up until the early 1980s in a section of their article entitled *Psychiatric Casualties Among est Trainees*. The first two studies referenced – by Glass, Kirsch and Parris [17], and Kirsch and Glass [18] – describe seven participants who developed psychiatric disturbances during or immediately after the est training. Six of the seven patients – who were diagnosed with schizophrenia, manic depression, paranoid symptomatology, and depressive neurosis – had *no history of psychiatric illness*, and three years after the training six of the seven patients were still suffering “marked psychological impairment” [10, p. 528]. According to these two studies, “mood swings, grandiose delusions, and delusional identification with Werner Erhart (sic) were prominent among the symptoms...” [10, p. 528]. While similar accounts can be found on discussion forums, there is no formal, large-scale longitudinal research on the relationship between LGAT participation and psychological casualties. While the case studies presented by these authors did not indicate the frequency of harm, the executive director of New York City’s Lincoln Institute for Psychotherapy intimated that est casualties were not uncommon:



“Most of the people I’ve seen at our clinic – and they come in after the training in fairly substantial numbers – have suffered reactions that range from moderately bad to dreadful,’ the executive director of New York City’s Lincoln Institute for Psychotherapy reported in 1978. ‘They are confused and jarred, and the same pattern – elation, depression, feelings of omnipotence followed by feelings of helplessness – is repeated over and over again’” [8, p. 194].

Marc Fisher of *The Washington Post* provided a similar report on Lifespring:

“There is another side to Lifespring, one of court battles about emotional trauma, psychotic episodes and even death. There are experts who believe that Lifespring is a dangerous company that uses psychological tricks to manipulate minds, a view Lifespring and its paid experts dispute. [...] And there are dozens of ‘casualties,’ the company’s name for people who leave the training with severe psychological problems. Casualties, Lifespring says, happen because people with psychological problems who are warned not to take the course take it anyway” [16].

In line with Finkelstein et al. [10], and conflicting with the common LGAT explanation for casualties, Dr Singer describes several cases where participants had no history of mental illness:

“He felt himself coming apart psychologically and asked to be excused, but the leaders of the program insisted he remain. By the fourth day, he was in a mental hospital experiencing a brief reactive psychosis. Gerald had no prior history of mental illness and nothing related to such illness in his family history” [14, p. 205].

“Joyce found the psychological and social coercion so intense that she has no remembrance of just when she deteriorated, but she was admitted to a psychiatric ward with almost continuous panic attacks. As time passed, she developed numerous incapacitating phobias and became house-bound and unemployed or underemployed for more than three years. She had no prior history of mental disorder nor was there any in her family” [14, p. 205].



Palahniuk’s commentary on the inevitable harm resulting from LGAT participation, and the attitude of LGAT proponents to these casualties, is seen when Bob is shot. The space monkeys bring Bob’s body back to the house and argue that, because he was killed serving Project Mayhem, they should just bury him in the garden (destroy the evidence). These followers of Tyler appear numb to the tragedy, concerned solely with protecting their group and its misguided revolution, while Jack – who is the only one connected with the reality of the situation – is disgusted with their denial, and for wanting to cover it up:



JACK: What are you talking about? This isn't a fucking piece of evidence! This is a person! He's a friend of mine, and you're not going to bury him in the fucking garden! [...] This is a man and he's dead now because of us, all right? Do you understand that? [6]



The attitude of LGAT proponents to those harmed – that they are acceptable collateral damage – is referred to again near the end of the film [6]. Jack arrives at the parking lot in Franklin Street to find the bomb, placed in the van by Tyler. Tyler stands casually outside the van while Jack frantically attempts to disarm it:

TYLER: We're not killing anyone. We're setting them free!

JACK: Bob is dead! They shot him in the head!

TYLER (shrugging): You want to make an omelette you gotta break some eggs...



## 2.08. "Applying the formula"



Pressman [8], Fisher [16], Singer [14], and others argue that LGAT casualties frequently occur, but that these organisations simply pay off the few who are able to take them to court. Referring to est and the Forum, Steven Pressman states:

"For years lawsuits had generated nothing but bad publicity for him and his work, even though no jury had ever found est or the Forum legally responsible for any injury. Courtroom fights just weren't good business when it came to selling the wonders of personal transformation [...] While disclaiming any legal responsibility for Janis Vivo's death, Erhard agreed to pay a small amount of money – no more than several thousand dollars – to Wachter. In exchange, Wachter promised never to file a lawsuit accusing Erhard or his company of any role in his wife's death" [8, p. xiv].

Referring to the practice of paying off those injured, rather than going to court, Marc Fisher states:

"At least five lawyers around the country specialize in suing Lifespring on behalf of trainees who have had psychotic episodes or other emotional strains they attribute to the training. Only two cases have reached a jury. Nearly all the others were settled, with Lifespring generally paying from \$150,000 to \$800,000 while admitting no fault, lawyers say" [16].

Because Singer was sued for including Landmark in the first edition of her book [37][21], in the second edition she describes payouts made by other LGAT organisations:

"She was hospitalized for three years and remains on medication. Jane sued Lifespring, and the case was settled for a large amount" [14, pp. 203-204].



In *Fight Club* <sup>[6]</sup>, Jack's profession hints at this major criticism of LGATs:

JACK: I'm a recall coordinator. My job was to apply the formula. It's simple arithmetic. It's a story problem. A new car built by my company leaves Boston traveling at 60 miles per hour. The rear differential locks up. The car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside. Now: do we initiate a recall? You take the number of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), multiply the result by the average out-of-court settlement (C). A times B times C equals X. If X is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one.



(Jack is explaining this to a woman next to him on a plane.)

WOMAN: Does this sort of accident happen often?

JACK: You wouldn't believe...

WOMAN: Which... car company do you work for?

JACK: A major one.





Palahniuk may have been alluding to the argument that LGATs are well aware that some participants are seriously harmed, but that they aren't willing to stop running the trainings because the revenue from satisfied participants exceeds their costs of out-of-court settlements. Like Jack's car company, LGATs may prefer to pay people off in the event of disaster, rather than warning people of the real risks, because from a business perspective this is a more profitable route to take. Few people who are psychologically harmed have the mental and financial resources to take on these organisations and, when settlements are reached, they are not able to discuss their experiences. If this analogy is valid, Palahniuk suggests that, as a volunteer, he witnessed numerous people being harmed, but noted that casualties were covered up and that the organisation accepted no responsibility:

"I know about the air-conditioning rheostat that gets so hot it sets fire to the maps in your glove compartment. I know how many people burn alive because of fuel-injector flashback. I've seen people's legs cut off at the knee when turbochargers start exploding and send their vanes through the firewall and into the passenger compartment. I've been out in the field and seen the burned-up cars and seen the reports where CAUSE OF FAILURE is recorded as 'unknown'" [36, p. 99].

"If you know where to look, there are bodies buried everywhere" [36, p. 126].

## 2.09. Joining Project Mayhem and becoming a Landmark "assistant" (volunteer)



As the film progresses the fight clubs develop into something that Tyler calls "Project Mayhem". Acceptance into Project Mayhem requires that recruits pass through a process that is curiously similar to Landmark's introductory program, the Landmark Forum, and the "leadership training" which follows. The Landmark Forum could plausibly be summarised as three days (Friday to Sunday) of being told that you are not good enough by the leader after which, if you do not leave, you are accepted as a graduate (and asked to volunteer). Amelia Hill of *The Guardian*, James O'Brien of *GQ Magazine*, and Roland Howard of the *Daily Mail* reveal how participants are treated by Landmark Forum trainers:

"We're still taking our seats when Jerry begins shouting: We're ugly people. Disgusting. Our behaviour is entirely governed by a need to look good which makes us liars, fakes and frauds. 'You're disgusting,' he shouts. 'You just don't realise quite how disgusting you are yet.' [...] He shouts, he mocks, he refuses to let us ask questions. He tells us we're liars and ridicules the stories we tell about our own lives" [38].

"I sit in anxious silence with a hundred other hopeful souls as the leader berates us for an impressive two hours straight" [39].

"A rape victim is sneered at. A senior surgeon breaks down. It's an extraordinary scene of humiliation and control" [27].



Describing how Project Mayhem recruits were treated, Palahniuk says:

"If the applicant is young, we tell him he's too young. If he's fat, he's too fat. If he's old, he's too old. Thin, he's too thin. White, he's too white. Black, he's too black [...] You tell the participant to go away, and if his resolve is so strong that he waits at the entrance without food or water or shelter or encouragement for three days, then and only then can he enter and begin the training" [36, pp. 128-129].

Referring to the tendency of most participants to stay for the whole training, Palahniuk states:

"... sometimes the applicants will leave, but most times the applicants stick it out until the third day..." [36, p. 130].



## 2.10. LGAT rules and Project Mayhem rules



Describing the rules of Project Mayhem, Palahniuk says:

"You don't ask questions is the first rule in Project Mayhem" [36, p. 122].

"... but the second rule of Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions" [36, p. 122].

"The third rule in Project Mayhem is no excuses" [36, p. 122].

"The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is that you have to trust Tyler" [36, p. 125].



Project Mayhem's rules closely mirror the rules in LGATs where, firstly, it is very difficult to *question* the trainer's authority:

"Chris mocked me, 'Oh, you have questions? You're questioning me? How long have you been leading the Forum? Do you think I know a thing or two more than you about it?' I could literally hear cackles from various parts of the audience. It was fucking Animal Farm in there" [40].

"It ought to be perfectly clear to everyone that you're all assholes and I'm God. Only an asshole would argue with God. I may let you be Gods too but that'll come later'" [9, p. 39].



James O'Brien of *GQ Magazine* and Vanessa Grigoriadis of *New York Magazine* reveal how "integrity" is emphasised in the Landmark Forum, and how it is used to ensure that graduates offer *no excuses*:

"'You are living lives of sham and illusion,' Condon assures us from his director's chair. 'Everything you do in life is meant to make you look good or to avoid looking bad. Everything. You are inauthentic. You have no integrity. Your word is worthless'" [39].

"Then I had a miscarriage. I missed a seminar because I was grieving for my baby. When I showed up the next week, the leader said, 'The good news is the loss of your baby doesn't mean shit. What does mean shit is that you have gone outside your integrity because you missed your seminar'" [1].



In the Landmark Forum, *indiscriminately trusting the trainer* is, stealthily, positioned as being "coachable" or "open-minded":

"The Forum, she said, is a game called transformation. Like every other game, it calls for sportsmanship. One should be 'coachable,' or open-minded about the Forum's concepts, and committed to 'forwarding the action'" [28].



"Eventually, I realise I'm breaking the promise I made to Jerry to be coachable. I decide to stop analysing, and simply give Jerry my trust" [38].

### 2.11. Project Mayhem and LGAT "assistants"



Roger Ebert stated that Tyler's followers do not become stronger or freer through their participation – that they are reduced to "pathetic cultists" [31]. This is precisely the charge that is levelled against LGAT "assistants", who volunteer much of their free time to work for these organisations, believing that they are receiving free training or "enlightenment" in return:

"Both in training sessions and for organizational purposes the est enterprise is heavily dependent on volunteer labor" [10, p. 522].

The bizarre dedication of unpaid LGAT volunteers has been observed in est, in Landmark – as revealed in the *suppressed* 2004 French documentary [41][42] – and in Lifespring:

"Thousands of Americans now call themselves Lifespringers and spend hundreds of hours recruiting new students with no compensation other than the belief that they are helping people revolutionize their lives. Graduates often get their whole families to sign up..." [16].

Pressman describes how this occurred at est:

"Around the country, a growing army of enthusiastic est volunteers (called 'assistants' in est jargon) contributed free labor – sometimes up to forty hours per week – to the organization, filling every conceivable task from handling the phones in est centers around the country to cleaning out the toilets and scrubbing the pots and pans at Franklin House" [8, p. 86].

"Within the est culture, enthusiastic staff members and volunteers cheerfully spent hours scrubbing toilets and windows until they shined, convinced that such mundane service was part of a Zen-like philosophy offering Erhard's version of the path toward enlightenment" [8, p. 136].



In *Fight Club* Jack and Tyler end up living in a house with scores of volunteers who – like LGAT volunteers – cook, clean, and perform every conceivable menial task that is requested of them. Jack notes the situation and questions what they think they are getting for their servitude:

“So what brainless little honor has Tyler assigned him, I ask. There are guys whose job it is to just boil rice all day or wash out eating bowls or clean the crapper. All day. Has Tyler promised Bob enlightenment if he spends sixteen hours a day wrapping bars of soap?” [36, p. 131].



There is also, perhaps, a hint at how many LGAT graduates are experienced by non-graduates. Numerous sources state that graduates unwittingly come across as overly-assertive about the training, and that their extreme openness, their drive to recruit others, and their newfound “enlightenment” can be disconcerting, and aggravating [33]. Palahniuk alludes to this as follows:





"Me, with my punched out eyes and dried blood in big black crusty stains on my pants, I'm saying HELLO to everybody at work. HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me" [36, p. 64].

## 2.12. Tuesday night meetings



LGATs tend to run for three to five days (*The Forum* and the *Landmark Forum* take place over three days), but the core of the training ends on a Sunday. On Tuesday evening – five days after starting the grueling program – there is a graduation-type evening, where participants invite family members, friends and colleagues to attend. These evenings serve as a recruitment tool for LGATs, who encourage graduates to testify about how their lives have “transformed”. LGAT volunteers (like Palahniuk), wearing name badges, are among those in the audience, greeting guests and hoping to encourage participation [33]. Jack’s description of his Tuesday night *Above and Beyond* “Catch-Up Rap” meetings in *Fight Club* bares a strong resemblance to these LGAT recruitment evenings:





"Everybody is always getting better. Oh, this new medication. Everyone's always just turned the corner. Still, everywhere, there's the squint of a five-day headache. A woman wipes at involuntary tears. Everyone gets a name tag, and people you've met every Tuesday night for a year, they come at you, handshake ready and their eyes on your name tag" [36, p. 34].

### 2.13. Raymond K. Hessel and the fear exercise



The basic process of LGATs is to generate significant stress for approximately the first 75% of the training, and then to remove this stress on the final day. The result, for most, is a period of euphoria/ "enlightenment", likely resulting from the manipulation of dopamine [23][8]. Within LGATs, however, there are also shorter exercises involving significant stress and stress removal. The *fear exercise*, used in the Standard est Training and the Landmark Forum, is a good example of this:

"The next exercise will get to me. Alain Roth asks us to close the eyes and imagine the two people on either side as being potentially dangerous. 'Let the fear enter your body, your breathing, your gut,' he orders. 'You are trying to escape, but there is nowhere to go.' Some people break. I hear tears and tremors around me" [49].

The exercise ends with the trainer abruptly removing the fear:



"The moaning gets louder, and more join in. Someone screams, 'I want my mommy'; another hollers, 'Leave me alone.' Richard's voice gets louder and more frantic as he describes the quality of the fear we're supposed to be feeling. Then Richard lets us in on the joke: People are just as afraid of us as we are of them" [37].



The *Fight Club* equivalent is the "human sacrifice" scene. Tyler pulls Raymond K. Hessel out from a convenience store, puts him on his knees and tells him, "Raymond! You are going to die!" (while pointing a gun at the back of his head). Raymond is beside himself with fear, shaking, begging and crying as Tyler taunts him about his sad life and how he needs to sort it out [6]. In the book, Tyler specifically mocks Raymond for his self-pity:

"Finally, you were listening and coming out of the little tragedy in your head" [36, p. 153].

Mocking participants for their self-pity is something that LGAT trainers frequently do:

"Sure. That's the game Marie's probably used to having people play when she creates a sickness: 'Poor Marie! Has to puke. Poor baby!'" [9, p. 17].

"... people had been raped, or abused, or one person had killed their father by mistake. And the leader would shout back at them, and ridicule them for their self-pity or hypocrisy or whatever, until eventually they accepted the leader's point of view, had a 'breakthrough', and converted to a new way of seeing reality" [50].



Eventually Tyler lets Raymond go and he sprints into the darkness, having just been “given back his life” (stress removal). Jack is exasperated stating, “What was the point of that?!... I feel sick...”, to which Tyler responds, “Imagine how he feels. Tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of Raymond K. Hessel’s life. His breakfast will taste better than any meal you or I have ever tasted...” Possibly referring to the screaming which occurs in the *fear exercise*, and the fact that “transformation” occurs (for most) on Sunday afternoon, Palahniuk says:

“There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” [36, p. 51].

## 2.14. Silencing critics



Another likely parallel is when the space monkeys infiltrate a dinner where a high-ranking official is promising to catch the underground group responsible for “many recent acts of vandalism” [6]. When this individual takes a bathroom break, he opens the door to find Tyler, who grabs him, throws him to the ground, and punches him in the face. The space monkeys then gather around him, place tape over his mouth, pull his trousers to his knees, and Tyler says:





"Hi. You're going to call off your rigorous investigation... you're going to *publicly state* that there is no underground group... or... these guys are going to take your balls" (one of the space monkeys flashes a knife at the frightened man) [6].

Tyler then leans in close to the man and says:



"Do not fuck with us!" [6].

Like est before it, Landmark has been accused of using its vast legal resources to intimidate those who question its processes and draw attention to the negative experiences of some participants. It was only because of a pro bono defence by New York legal firm *Lowenstein Sandler* that Rick Ross (founder of <http://www.culteducation.com>) was able to fight off a cynical Landmark lawsuit in 2004; Margaret Singer was one of many individuals and organisations who were less fortunate. As a result of the significant financial pressure created by Landmark's litigation, she was forced to remove references to Landmark from her book and *publicly state* that it was not a cult [37][21]:

"I do not believe that either Landmark Education or the Landmark Forum is a cult or sect or meets the definition of a cult or sect" – Dr Margaret Singer [51].

This scene in *Fight Club* may be referring to Singer's experience, to the experiences of critics in general, or perhaps to the former head of the APA, Dr Raymond Fowler. Fowler was the APA's treasurer (1982-1987), president (1988), and executive vice president and chief executive officer (1989-2003), and is frequently cited by Landmark as a supporter of their programs [52][42]. In spite of extensive evidence to the contrary, Fowler [32] described the Landmark Forum environment as "pleasant", the leader as "pleasant" and "sensitive", and participants as "relaxed". Again, in spite of significant evidence otherwise [33] – and no evidence that this is an area of expertise for him – Fowler [32] stated that, "the Landmark Forum does not place individuals at risk of any kind of 'mind control', 'brainwashing', or 'thought control'." Regardless of the (questionable) validity of Fowler's opinions about LGATs, and the Landmark Forum specifically, it is highly irregular for the head of such a prominent organisation – while still the head of this organisation – to personally endorse a controversial training (previously investigated by the APA) without mentioning the concerns of other academics, or making a declaration about whether or not he was financially compensated for this endorsement.

## 2.15. Facts vs. stories



If the LGAT metaphor is valid, then Palahniuk's view of Erhard is clear:

"... Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world" [36, p. 122].

LGATs preach a constructionist philosophy (applying a distorted, and arguably dangerous, version of cognitive therapy [33]), which encourages participants to reframe all life events in a way that is more appealing to them. Landmark Forum trainers spend a great deal of time convincing participants that the event (the fact) and their interpretation of this event (the story) must be separated:

"Willmore introduces the idea of separating 'what happened' from 'the story about what happened'" [1].

"With our interpretations, speculations, and opinions we invest 'what happened' with our emotions and come up with a story that has nothing to do with reality" [25].

"... facts have no meaning; it is the stories we concoct out of those facts that give them meaning" [28].

"We are constantly affixing 'stories' to events rather than seeing the separation between 'event' and 'interpretation,'..." [53].





The core LGAT philosophy – that everything is a “story” and that we need to free ourselves from our pasts – is mirrored in Tyler’s philosophy:

“Because everything up until now is a story,” Tyler says, “and everything after now is a story” [36, p. 75].

“What Tyler says about being the crap and the slaves of history, that’s how I felt” [36, p. 123].

“We wanted to blast the world free of history” [36, p. 124].

To many LGAT graduates, there is no absolute truth – only perceptions. They are, therefore, fully responsible for their experiences, and held accountable for “controlling” their pasts:

“A woman confesses her story about incest, and Richard says there is no right and wrong. In some cultures, even incest is not considered taboo. Anyone who argues is cut off with a thought-terminating cliché – ‘That’s your racket,’ ‘That’s why your life doesn’t work’” [37].

“But it is only on the second day when a young man comes to the microphone that my misgivings turn to anger. He tells us with tears streaming down his face that he had been raped by his brother for most of his childhood. He had taken David’s advice the day before and phoned his brother to create a breakthrough. [...] His brother had put down the phone. David urges him to phone again. ‘Rape is interpretation. Brutality is interpretation,’ he says. He had to forgive him. ‘Get off your guilt and grow up,’ he snaps” [27].

## 2.16. Homework



LGATs arguably use homework to generate stress, minimise sleep, and maximise the amount of time that participants are effectively in the LGAT environment [33]. The longer participants are thinking about the advocated doctrine, the less time they have for sleep, recovery, reflection, and influence from the outside world:

“Each night we are sent home at midnight with assignments. Today we’re supposed to have written a letter to someone we wanted to ‘complete’ with” [37].

“We have homework, which, since it’s already midnight and we start tomorrow at 9 A.M., we have to think about. The assignment: Write a letter to someone you haven’t been straight with, come clean” [54].



Similarly, there is an emphasis on homework in *Fight Club* [6]:

TYLER: Each one of you has a homework assignment...

JACK: Tyler dreamed up new homework assignments. He handed them out in sealed envelopes...



## 2.17. The expansion of LGATs, and Erhard's withdrawal from the centre of the organisation



Est was spread throughout the USA by Erhard, but very soon – because LGATs are highly scripted <sup>[13][14]</sup> – former est and Lifespring trainers and participants began starting their own LGATs under various different names. In the film this is represented as follows:

JACK: Did you know that there's a fight club up in Delaware City?

TYLER: Yeah, I heard...

JACK: There's one in Penns Grove too. Bob's even found one up in Newcastle...

TYLER: Yeah, did you start that one?

JACK: No, I thought you did...

TYLER: No...



In the book, Palahniuk states:

"And this is how Tyler was free to start a fight club every night of the week. After this there were seven fight clubs, and after that there were fifteen fight clubs, and after that there were twenty-three fight clubs, and Tyler wanted more. There was always money coming in" [36, p. 117].



Later in the book, Palahniuk explains that fight club went from being centred around Tyler to not having a central figure. Considering Palahniuk reportedly became involved with *Werner Erhard & Associates* in 1989 (when Erhard was at the centre of the organisation) and Landmark was formed in early 1991 (at which point Erhard was no longer officially at the centre of the organisation), this change would have occurred very near to the time of Palahniuk's participation:

"The new rule is that nobody should be the center of fight club..." [36, p. 142].

Commenting on how new leaders continued with Erhard's training, he states:

"In every new fight club, someone I've never met is standing under the one light in the center of the darkness, surrounded by men, and reading Tyler's words" [36, p. 134].





## Conclusion



*"For those who stubbornly seek freedom, there can be no more urgent task than to come to understand the mechanisms and practices of indoctrination" – Noam Chomsky [55, p. 212]*

The response by many LGAT proponents to assertions of unethical influence is certainty that they are rational thinkers and that they could not have been manipulated. Like this *Fight Club* metaphor, however, LGAT manipulation is invisible to those who do not know exactly what to look for. LGATs exert their influence by surreptitiously devaluing critical thinking, tiring participants over a number of days (to further minimise their ability to question), convincing them that "experience" is the most trustworthy "way of knowing", and then triggering a powerful emotional experience, which serves as a substitute for rationality and understanding. Many LGAT graduates are, in fact, convinced that the only way a person can understand these trainings is through personal experience [33].



The irony is that, in claiming to be invulnerable to these processes without intimately understanding them, LGAT proponents reveal their willingness to form beliefs without considering all of the evidence: Their certainty is not based on an in-depth comprehension of persuasion processes (the rational approach), but instead on an emotion-based heuristic (their “experience” and the deep-seated need to feel invulnerable to exploitation). Similarly, while LGAT proponents may believe that they are enlightened, it is a strange enlightenment that elicits a mentality of, “All that I care about is if this works for me”. If a personal development course makes a person less empathetic and more inwardly focused, then they have regressed, not grown, and anyone who callously discards those who will inevitably be harmed is one step further from Gandhi and one step closer to Bundy.

Through the book and the film, Palahniuk and Fincher appear to be commenting on the reckless way that LGATs go about providing “enlightenment”, while sweeping casualties of their processes indifferently under the rug. It is contended that *Fight Club* is about how Palahniuk became aware of this manipulation and harm, of the torment it caused him to acknowledge these uncomfortable facts, and of the intimidation he felt to speak openly about his concerns.



In order to finally escape from Tyler’s influence, Jack puts a gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger <sup>[C]</sup>. In doing so, it might be said that he had to let a part of himself die in order to be free. The film ends with The Pixies’ *Where is my Mind?* playing and Jack and Marla watching as buildings collapse all around them. They are holding hands as his world falls apart and this, possibly, represents a reconciliation with reality under difficult circumstances. Perhaps it was not easy for Palahniuk to accept



information that undermined his involvement with this organisation, but in the end his conscience prevailed and he chose evidence, rationality, and morality. I like to think that *Fight Club* is more than the story of men beating each other into submission, or – as other “experts” have suggested – a simple commentary on consumerism and masculinity. To me, it is primarily about experience-based beliefs, the worlds we build around those beliefs, and the courage it takes to dispassionately review them.



## Notes

- A.** Landmark was only formed in 1991. Palahniuk initially attended *the Forum* (offered by WE&A), and may have been involved until 1991, when *the Landmark Forum* was first offered. These LGATs are often considered synonymous.
- B:** An elevation in dopamine is associated with hypomania and mania <sup>[43][44][45]</sup> and psychosis <sup>[46]</sup>, while a depletion of dopamine is associated with depression <sup>[47][48]</sup>.
- C:** “My eyes are open...” <sup>[6]</sup>

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