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"First learn your craft; It won't stop you from being a genius" (Delacroix, via Jack Fincher)

Pressure and Obsession in the Films of David Fincher



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Summary

This dissertation aims to show the recurring themes of pressure and obsession in the work of film director **David Fincher**. Looking specifically at *Seven* (David Fincher, New Line Cinema, 1995), *Zodiac* (David Fincher, Paramount Pictures, 2007) and *The Social Network* (David Fincher, Columbia Pictures, 2010), I will show the gradual change in style and subject matter while still highlighting the resonance of the two themes under analysis. Furthermore, it will be shown how obsession and pressure link to Fincher's working method. I will be examining critical, journalistic and academic writings to assess the themes and Fincher's directorial position. Whereas *Seven* has had a great deal written about it, *Zodiac* and *The Social Network* are more recent films

and thus there is less literature on them. For this reason, study on both films should garner more original analysis.

The themes of pressure and obsession differ slightly in all three films, however, there is an overriding sense in each film that the workplace and environment has a pressurizing effect on the characters. What is more, pressure can at times define the notion of obsession. Obsession is mostly shown as a mutation of characters' personal drive, or an extension of their duties for work. The two themes can at times separate themselves in terms of aesthetic and narrative presentation yet they are mainly one and the same; at times they can even be analyzed in the context of Fincher's filmmaking practice.

Chapter one gives an overview of contemporary Hollywood, the role of the director, Fincher in relation to both of these, the two themes under analysis and deliberations on auteurist theory – this constitutes the literature review. The second chapter examines the impetus of investigative obsession, along with the presentation of morbidity and tension in *Seven*. Chapter three looks at the similarity in obsessive personalities along with suspense and drama in *Zodiac*. Chapter four focuses on *The Social Network* and obsession effecting status quo. The conclusion will draw on the comparisons and contrasts from chapters two to four. It will also give an overall account of how we may regard Fincher in contemporary Hollywood and in respect to auteur theory.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

Directors born during the 1970's – deemed "Generation X" – are, like their "movie brat" predecessors, constantly revising and challenging the medium of cinema. The mixture of blockbuster and cult releases has developed an interesting spectrum from the baby-boomer artists. **David Fincher** is one of these contemporary directors whose work includes a wide variety of indie and mainstream films; *The Game* (David Fincher, Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1997) and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (David Fincher, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008) being two examples. Often in the "X-ers'" filmography there is a prevalence of contemporary issues stated or symbolised within the narratives and/or aesthetics (for example, the growing media interest in sex shown in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (**Steven Soderbergh**, Outlaw Productions, 1989) and the capitalist state of the nation in *Fight Club* (Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999) . For Fincher, it is the recurrence of themes of pressure and obsession, thematically and aesthetically presented. The three films under inspection are examples of these thematic concerns and carry significance in terms of the director's maturation through Hollywood.

Fincher and his fellow Generation X directors are regularly associated with MTV; many of the directors worked for the channel and both are renowned for originality. Rarely do the directors mimic or indulge in superfluous pastiche in their work. On the contrary, there is a surplus of originality; **Bryan Singer's** *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1995) and **Quentin Tarantino's** *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, Live Entertainment, 1992) both offered retro-inspired, yet fresh takes on the crime movie – as much as Fincher's *Seven* did. The group of new-age filmmakers are often cited as independent, autonomous and estranged from the regularity of Hollywood production. In relation to these discussions, the question of authorship appears. I aim to show how discussions of Fincher as an auteur have developed through his continuing career and through auteurist aspects of his filmmaking. Furthermore, how knowledge of his working ethos and approach to projects becomes unveiled with every interview and scholarly analysis – the once rather elusive director garnering more analytical attention with each film (one case being the ever-changing evaluation of his own work through interviews: 'Fincher once referred to directing as "collecting moments". Now he refines that description to "collecting behaviour"').^[1] To do this, I will be

looking at various sources that define the Hollywood that David Fincher is part of, that outline the themes under analysis, the style of his directing, his filmography thus far, and the literature that can help with understanding these films.

Within the last two decades, through all the political and social catastrophes, from the end of the Gulf War to the beginning of the Iraq war, the troubled administrations of Bush, Blair and Brown, the horrific terror attacks around the world and several cataclysmic natural disasters, fragility has overcome the Western world. Uncertainty and fear have inspired many great artists to write, paint and compose art that reflects these feelings – some of whom belong to the filmmakers of Generation X. The literature concerning Generation X's Hollywood (late Eighties to today), such as **Peter Hanson's** *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study of Films and Directors*, provides an excellent review of what innovations the contemporary filmmakers have made, along with noting the growing importance of the director figure.

The films of David Fincher, Bryan Singer, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino and **Darren Aronofsky** (to name a few) all deal with sensitive issues of mortality, morality and innate behaviour; the apparent dread and interest of the late-20th to early 21st Century society illustrated clearly in many of their films. Their work tackles a range of topics and reflects the notion that there was an 'upsurge of more-complex-than-usual Hollywood filmmaking... noted by numerous commentators'.^[12] This is one way contemporary Hollywood is defined: filmmaking that explores the controversial and multifarious aspects of society, politics, and economics. The reason behind the Generation X directors' 'mixed messages' is put straightforwardly by Peter Hanson: 'Gen Xers grew up during one of the most tumultuous periods of American history, were inundated with popular culture to an unprecedented degree, suffered through social changes such as a rash of divorces, and then created a youth culture anchored in irony, apathy, and disenfranchisement'.^[13] There is the argument that contemporary Hollywood/"New Hollywood" is concentrated on budget and profits – manufacturing movies with filmmakers such as **Michael Bay, Jerry Bruckheimer** and **Tony Scott**. Nevertheless, studies show the balance within the system whereby 'less obviously commercial or more challenging material is determined to a significant extent by the success of the mainstream blockbuster. A period of sustained success creates more scope for such indulgences'.^[14] **Geoff King's** study of New Hollywood is paramount in placing David Fincher in the realm of modern filmmaking. The example that box-office gross takes precedence over seemingly less-commercial films can be easily attributed to the director of both *Zodiac* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

Hollywood is continually being written about – most studies providing a lucid overview of how it changes over time. In my study of David Fincher the books that look at the varying traits of Hollywood are very beneficial in defining the importance of Fincher's thematic focuses. The two books that have proved most useful are Geoff King's *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* and **Stephan Littyger's** *The Director's Cut: Picturing Hollywood in the 21st Century*. The latter not only focuses on Fincher, it also provides a comprehensive investigation into the careers of many other directors – several of whom are part of the Generation X clique. Littyger's book contains numerous interviews conducted with filmmakers, his purpose being to show how 'many of those [filmmakers] you find in here have only arrived on the lot over the course of the last five to ten years. They have brought along new approaches as part of an ongoing process that allows Hollywood to playfully interact with quickly changing realities while staying in touch with an audience that is literally as broad as the movie-going public'.^[15] In reading the personal accounts of those working within the system in Littyger's book and cross-referencing with the analysis of the system in King's, I am able to formulate a reading of Fincher's progressive reputation in New Hollywood. In *New Hollywood Cinema*, King writes of how the production-line essence of Hollywood filmmaking grows ever more noticeable with the system's integration 'within a broader media landscape ruled over by a small number of large media corporations'.^[16] This is something that reflects the early career of David Fincher and a substantial focal point for *Fight Club*. Littyger asks a series of questions to Fincher that delve into the director's beginnings and his status in the business; aspects of which illustrate an obsession (Fincher's own aspiration to achieve perfection and autonomy with his films) and a pressure (in terms of production difficulties). Applying the studies of Hollywood to Fincher is additionally aided by the analysis of genres (mostly the study of the detective noir thriller).

There is ample literature on the detective narrative, of which *Seven* and *Zodiac* can be categorised. As yet, there is very little scholarly writing that inspects the detective narrative of *Zodiac*; the majority of text is mostly in popular literature (magazine pieces and online articles). However, I have identified texts that will help with the analysis of *Zodiac* – those from the mass of detective/noir studies and from **Mark Browning's** comparative analysis of *Seven* and *Zodiac* in his book on the director, *David Fincher: Films that Scar*. As this is a book published in 2010, there is only the mention of Fincher moving on to the project of *The Social*

Network and therefore Browning has no capability of analysing the film; once more permitting popular literature, and related writing, as the basis of *The Social Network*'s analysis.

For examining the thematic presentation of obsession and pressure there are not only the genre-based literatures that support textual analysis but the accompanying books on film style. For example, *Suspense, Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Exploration* focus on the style and aesthetics of tension within a film. Without making explicit references to Fincher's films (the book published only a year after *Seven*'s release), points like, '[t]he dramaturgy of suspense refers to the activity of anticipating; it provides the material from which viewers can extrapolate future developments' can be attributed to Fincher's presentation of pressure in both the raid in the Sloth segment for *Seven* and the basement scene in *Zodiac*.^[7] Additionally, there are definitions of work-related pressure than link with my own analysis of the subject: 'work pressure has the expected effects of reducing environmental control and creating anxiety or threat with regard to productivity'.^[8]

For the analysis of obsession, the most important citations come from **Lennard J. Davis'** *Obsession: A History* and Andrew M. Colman's *A Dictionary of Psychology*. The latter provides a definition of obsession, stating how it is a 'recurrent and persistent thought, impulse, or idea that causes significant distress, is experienced as intrusive or inappropriate, is not merely an exaggerated worry about a genuine problem, and is recognized by the afflicted person as internally generated' – a characteristic in Fincher's films often noted by critics and scholars.^[9] *Seven* is largely referenced in horror/detective/thriller genre-specific research – the remaining two films of study have to be theorised either in relation to broad generic investigations, what is written about *Seven*, original thought, or popular literature. *The Social Network* is not a horror/thriller film and so very few allusions (only similarities in character and Fincher's style) can be made to the literature that corresponds with *Seven* and *Zodiac*. As yet, *The Social Network* is in a niche category. The overall melodrama, which has many branches of scholarly discussions, is not studied in conjunction with social networking. For this reason, analysing the pressure and obsession of the film relies on newspaper, magazine and online articles/reviews (which, like **Zadie Smith's** "Generation Why?" article, contain useful textual examinations). "Generation Why?" both reviews and dissects the film in a number of ways that enable the two themes under inspection to be understood further than would be possible with simple critical reviews. There is a lack of thoroughness with articles such as Smith's, yet for a contemporary film there is a great deal of information and opinion that can aid the dissertation study. Similarly, **Nev Pierce's** on-set interview for *Zodiac* may lack broad readings of the film yet there is still an abundance of considerations and attitudes toward the film from those that made it.

James Vanderbilt, the writer of *Zodiac*, is interviewed in Pierce's set-visit and recalls how Fincher, after reading the script and deciding to direct the film, asked to have the script put 'in a drawer' and have the current crew 'go up to the Bay area and meet every single person who was involved in this investigation'.^[10] This is one example of the obsession of characters correlating with the director. For the debate on Fincher as an auteur, I read his personality as intrinsically linked to his approach to projects. Even *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, a film that does not support the thematic study of this dissertation, was made partly due to Fincher's feelings about the passing of his father. In King's book, he defines auteurs as having a 'distinctive film style' following on with stating how, '[a] true auteur uses the medium in a manner that is identifiable from one work to another as his or her personal style'.^[11] This opinion can be credited to Fincher who has formed a personal style and chosen his projects carefully since *Seven*. Furthermore, King writes how 'thematic concerns have to be identified across a director's body of work. Particular issues or attitudes are detected'.^[12] Once again, throughout this dissertation and with reference to Browning, Littger's interview, Fincher's own commentary on his films, and several articles, this point shall be clarified in relation to the director. One counter-argument to Fincher as an auteur is the question of Fincher's control over his films. As King recognizes, 'the collaborative nature of the business has always put limits on the freedom of the director to claim the status of especially privileged author. This is true of almost all other than the most low-budget or "independent" feature production'.^[13] The production of *Alien3* (David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1992) was, in Fincher's own words: 'completely untenable, because the people that were paying it had no confidence in the person they had hired to execute it'.^[14] The **Hemingway** quote at the end of *Seven* was included by the studio to 'give some crumb of Hollywoodian comfort in a film so extraordinarily un-American in its pessimism', and not a decision of the director.^[15] These examples, along with Fincher including himself in the major mainstream scene with his recent adaptation of *The Girl With Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, MGM, 2011), show how guided he may be with his productions, and perhaps without complete autonomy over them.

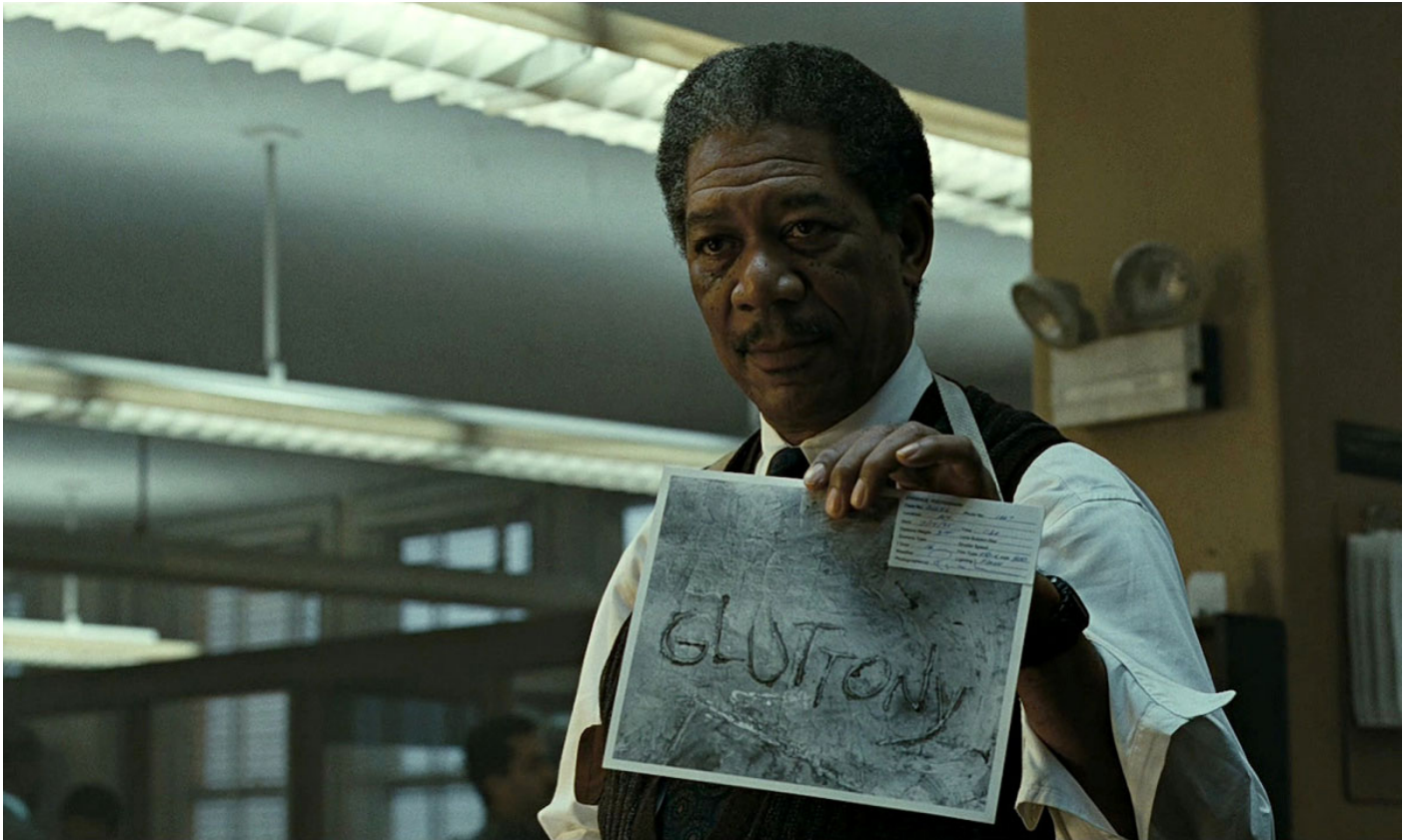
Films that Scar is the second book that studies the personality and filmography of Fincher (the other being **James Swallow's** *Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher*) and contains several useful chapters for this

dissertation including the *Seven/Zodiac* comparison and an overarching biography of the director which references the development and production of his work. For the three films, chronologically speaking, there is an obvious diminution in literature. Even so, the online writing and magazine articles are beneficial to my reading of the two contemporary films. Nev Pierce is a journalist who has had exclusive access to many of Fincher's productions, highlighting the choice and creation of certain Fincher projects. The interviews Pierce gathers are just as helpful as Littger's. In relation to this, it will be Browning, Pierce, Littger and **Richard Dyer** that will prove most valuable in the analysis of Fincher and the two themes. *The Social Network* and *Zodiac* have had little critical discussion and so, as I hope, the ruminations made on those films will be original and of merit. Very few writers define Fincher as an auteur and so there is still a lot of open ground for discussion on this subject; one with which I shall conclude.

Notes:

1. David Fincher quoted by Nev Pierce, "Geek Tragedy" in *Empire*, Issue 256, October 2010
2. Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2002) p.47
3. Peter Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study of Films and Directors* (North Carolina, USA: McFarland & Company Inc, 2002) p.1
4. King, *New Hollywood*, p.83
5. Stephan Littger, *The Director's Cut* (New York, USA: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2006) p.xvi
6. King, *New Hollywood*, p.79
7. Hans J. Wulff "Suspense and the Influences of Cataphora on Viewers' Expectations" in *Suspense, Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Exploration*, Peter Vorderer (ed) (New Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, 1996) p. 1
8. Stuart M. Klein, *Workers Under Stress* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971) p.31
9. Andrew M. Colman, *A Dictionary of Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
10. James Vanderbilt interviewed in Nev Pierce's, "The Devil is on the Detail" in *Total Film*, Issue 128, June 2007
11. King, *New Hollywood*, p.87
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Fincher interviewed by Stephan Littger, *The Director's Cut* (New York, USA: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2006) p.174
15. Richard Dyer, *Seven* (Norfolk: British Film Institute, 1999) p.77

Chapter 2: Seven



"This guy's methodical, exacting, and worst of all, patient"
William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) on John Doe (Kevin Spacey) in *Seven*

Seven revolves around two detectives: a soon-to-be-retired police officer, **William Somerset (Morgan Freeman)**, and recently transferred cop **David Mills (Brad Pitt)**. The two are partnered up to investigate a series of gruesome murders inspired by the seven deadly sins. As the investigation continues, the audience learn about Somerset's disdain for the society he inhabits, and the hardships Mills' wife **Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow)** faces in the same environment. The climatic ending involves the capture of the murderer, **John Doe (Kevin Spacey)**, and a battle of wits and gumption between the highly intelligent Doe and enraged Mills; an impartial Somerset having to witness a bizarre justice before his eyes.

Seven was the film that both reflected the demons of society and **Fincher's** cathartic release from a severe studio authority (his previous film being *Alien3*, a famously horrific shoot for Fincher – 'I had to work on it for two years, got fired off it three times and I had to fight for every single thing').^[1] *Seven* was a film Fincher could put his seal-of-approval on after walking away from the post-production edit of *Alien3* after showing 'no desire to assert any sense of authorship' over it.^[2] The darkness, so integral for *Alien3*, became the milieu for many of Fincher's films. As **Philip Kemp** states, 'David Fincher is a devotee of darkness. Scene after scene in his films takes place in cramped, sparsely lit rooms where malignancy seems to hang in the air like ineradicable damp' – the sense of gloom becoming one of the most striking features of *Seven*.^[3] The pressures of the working environment are not only a matter Fincher dealt with personally but it is something he seeks to explore in many of his films. In the likes of *Seven* and *Fight Club*, it is the most extreme working and living conditions that have the light (or lack of) shed on them. Like the characters of Mills and Somerset, Fincher has an impulse to search and survey the shadows of society, along with the misanthropes lurking within them.

The opening of the film focuses on Somerset starting his day and promptly illuminates many qualities of the character, beginning with his meticulous and composed approach to detective work. The montage of Somerset gearing up for a day of work is steadily captured in a way that mirrors the detective's slow dressing and accessorizing. The cut to the bloodied crime-scene that Somerset enters into shows to have no effect on the demeanour of him. He sardonically remarks about the blood ("passion on the walls") to demonstrate his indifference to the terror and gore of his job. Despite the pressure of a belligerent second officer and the sanguine surroundings, the obsession to fully comprehend the situation is immediately apparent. Upon

querying witnesses (the "kid"), the aggressive second officer snaps, "it's always these questions with you" – informing the viewer that (apparently) Somerset has a reputation as an annoyingly meticulous investigator. This idea is further reinforced later on by the captain's remark, "Don't even start that big brain of yours cooking". Somerset is always vigilant and occupied with thoughts concerning work (this type of character repeated in *Zodiac* and *The Social Network*). Despite some contrary remarks to wanting to stay on the case ("This can't be my last duty, it's just gonna go on and on") Somerset becomes intrigued by the case and even prefers it to have an older detective on it rather than Mills – "it's too soon for him" is Somerset's reasoning.

Somerset's decision to continue investigating the series of murders can be seen as both his obsessive ego (one that rejects failure and uncertain closure) and his inability to escape the world he so desperately attempts to break away from. Somerset is aware of the wretchedness of his city, yet feels so incapable of leaving it behind; instead, he prefers to try and fix it. Mills is similarly hoping to do some good; he is 'the young upstart, who wants to believe the world can be changed'.^[4] Even though Mills declares that his own aim is to "do some good", he is not as wise and knowing as Somerset who can completely involve himself in his work. Mills, on the other hand, has less patience for case inconsistencies and with retaining his hatred for Doe. Furthermore, Mills is at one point seen shutting himself off from the investigation by watching a baseball match. Somerset shows little in the way of relinquishing work and does not get aggressively agitated with the serial killer. Throughout the film he is not pressured by the 'overwhelming force of sin [:] he is doing the best he can, not shrugging his shoulders like the captain ("it's the way it's always been") or the sex club owner ("that's life, isn't it?) [:] setting his metronome to provide some sense of orderliness in a world wholly lacking in it'.^[5] When Somerset shows and voices concerns over the state of society, he never appears definite in his desire to distance himself from it. In one scene, Somerset enters a taxi and passes by an accident of an undisclosed nature. He rolls the eyes at the sight of the accident's random audience and the impression of increasing gloom. The taxi driver asks, "where you headin'?" to which Somerset replies, "Far from here". Nevertheless, "far from here" only relocates him to a library, to which he spends an evening glancing over the killer's most probable sources of inspiration. Fincher purports the idea that crime and misery have no limit and there is seldom chance to escape it. The library may be a tranquil setting yet it is filled with literature that has encouraged certain ideologies (in this case, those of Doe's).

The viewer's introduction to Mills, after he greets Somerset, is him out on the street. As he walks down the pavement, a man bumps into him and carries on walking; Mills looks at him for a brief few seconds as if waiting for confrontation, or hoping the citizen sees his unspoken demand for an apology. Somerset has long since given up attempting to gain apologies or feeling the need to lash out on the wrong-doers. The ultimate example of both characters showing their response to provocation is the finale in which Mills 'characteristically ignores Somerset's wisdom and turns an already horrible situation into a complete defeat'.^[6] In one way, Mills's obsession with defeating the killer and submitting to his own primal, stirred desires to kill Doe relates to 'competitive behaviour... [that is] associated with intragroup conflict' whereby Mills wants to prove Somerset wrong about the idea that he is not ready for the case; if he takes control he is therefore worthy of his position.^[7] Rather than acting in moderation like Somerset, he is impetuous and needs to please – this is his obsessive compulsion. He also has less intellect than Somerset and Doe, yet finds his resourcefulness with his agile physique. The irony is that in killing Doe his control gets him reprimanded and he becomes a ghost of his former self. The loss of his wife and job is captured in his doleful eyes as he sits in the car (interestingly similar to Somerset's appearance as he looks out of the taxi window in the "far from here" scene).



"Far from here"

Whereas Somerset and Doe have taken time to consider the society they live in, Mills never has chance to get to grips with it (neither does his wife Tracy, who finds no comfort in the new city). The over-arching misery and drizzle of the unnamed city is something Mills gets repeatedly angry over – in this respect he has his own link to Doe, who has similarly decided to act out violently against the society. Mills' similarity to Doe is far more harmful than Somerset's. The rage that often drives Mills' actions (like his break-in into Doe's home) is comparable to Doe's own fury (paralleled with Doe entering Mills' apartment to kill Tracy). As Mills and Doe sit in close proximity to one another nearing the end of the film we are given affirmation of these observations: 'he [Doe] admits that he enjoyed committing the murders just as Mills would enjoy "a time alone with me in a room without windows"', in other words, that Mills, like him, has a pleasure in violence put to righteous ends'.^[8] The obsession to catch Doe and Doe's own obsession to finish his criminal act by his own terms intensifies the already substantial friction. Somerset knows that at the end, "John Doe has the upper-hand" yet cannot walk away from the battle of detective and criminal. In the end, both detectives fail in their sustenance of authority and in achieving anything.

Crime and malice continue to be prolific aspects of popular culture and with Fincher making a successful film out such a story he is in turn showing the engrossing qualities of crime. *Seven* was made at a time where the serial killer fascination was becoming more and more evident. After the Oscar success of *The Silence of the Lambs* (**Jonathan Demme**, Orion Pictures, 1991) the "appeal" of serial killer stories was quickly endorsed by Hollywood writers and studios. *Seven* is illustriously different and original in comparison to *Lambs* that follows a linear structure of investigation and capture. Doe is a phantom throughout the first two-thirds of the film (in the vein of serial killers in other mystery/crime thrillers) although the major difference is 'the apprehension of [Doe]... is deliberately (and possibly uniquely in film history) brought forward with still a significant running time remaining, creating the highly unusual effect of disorientating an audience by a

narrative, that is clearly placed within the detective genre but denying us any generic markers around from which to generate expectations of impending direction'.^[9] Doe is in complete control of the narrative from the very first murder. His inimitable and deeply-puzzling crime spree is enough to warrant Somerset's continuation on the force (even to the end when he states, "I'll be around") and to have Mills fighting for his inclusion on the case – Doe completely inveigles Somerset and Mills into a cat and mouse chase that leads up to a trap. At the heart of Doe's playfulness is the question of power and masculinity. The detective genre is frequently looking at the 'obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity, desire and achievement'.^[10] Fincher's film shows how the two detectives are both fascinated and disgusted at this concept of alienation; it is the character of Doe that makes the detectives act against ethics when it comes to maintaining power.

As Doe plants Somerset and Mills in the seediest, rankest places imaginable, the viewer is left increasingly appalled at the society that houses such atrocious areas (such as Wild Bill's Leather Shop and the sex club). This is another element of *Seven* that critiques the state of contemporary culture. Fincher develops this critique by making the city 'representational of any city; its time, of any time: the film transcends specificities' – an indication that numerous Western cities are like this.^[11] Something that **Richard Dyer** fails to mention in his analysis of *Seven* is occasional glimpses of sunlight (just before the raid on **Victor's** house, Doe entering the police station, and on the way to the desert at the finale) both at times where the narrative appears to be moving to a point of closure.





It is interesting that the break in ambience – from murk to blinding light – is an attempt to propose change. It comes at dramatic sequences in the film and makes the audience believe there may be a semblance of hope, or that the two detectives have a chance at obtaining power. Much like the unpredictable nature of the film, this notion is fleeting and the audience is left with the proposal that the urban atmosphere and conceptions of anarchy are ever-present. Seven stresses the idea that 'one cannot help but feel that the city is inescapable [...]...the country road on which the final showdown takes place is riddled with wires and pylons, and still accessible by car and helicopter. The labyrinth of the city is characterized not only by maze-like alleys, but also by the feeling that there is no escape from it'.^[12]

The confining space of the city is something Fincher pays meticulous attention towards. As Dyer notes, the sound of the film is overwhelming distinct. Fincher's devotion to technology in his films means there is an accumulation of detail that would ordinarily be overlooked. For the sound, Fincher makes it obvious how 'we do not attend to the patina of noise around us, and most films minimise it down to a vague "ambient sound"'. In *Seven*, it is not minimised, it is insistently and remorselessly present'.^[13] The patter of rain, police sirens, alarms, yells from citizens and constant noise of traffic is rarely muted. Fincher emphasizes the sound as much as the darkened cityscape. As *Alien3* showed, Fincher is an aficionado for the dimmest lighting. *Seven*'s colour-scheme has been categorised as 'oligochromatic, that is, composed of a very limited, closely related range of colours: white, cream, grey, slate, ochre, beige, brown, black and dirty, acidic greens'; this can be attributed to his later films (even the recent *Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* is drenched in green, grey and black colour palettes).^[14] The sound and image combining to generate an overwhelmingly constrictive space that creates an arena for violence and constant interaction between citizens (dynamically presented with Mills chasing Doe through flats and crowds of frightened, angered and busy civilians).

Fincher's desolate conclusion to *Seven* shows the human spirit as unmanageable and deadly, highlighting the belief that evil is almost unstoppable and modernity limits freedom. As much as the case seems finished, there are multiple implications to Mills' actions, we see the 'desert as a metaphoric hell...a fitting backdrop to Mills's damnation' – Fincher's first filmic presentation of civilization's ruin.^[15] The pressure of work exhausts and endangers the two detectives whilst obsession fails to bring about justice – the treatment of the two themes re-emerging in 2007's *Zodiac*.

Notes:

1. David Fincher interviewed by Mark Salisbury in *The Guardian*, 18 January, 2009
2. Mark Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar* (California, USA: Praeger, 2010) p.39
3. Philip Kemp, FilmReference.com: David Fincher – Director
4. Nev Pierce, email correspondence with the author, 8 February, 2010, 17:50
5. Dyer, *Seven*, p.76
6. Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho Paths: Tracking The Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction* (Illinois, USA: Southern Illinois Press, 2000) p.199
7. Klein, *Workers Under Stress*, p.90
8. Dyer, *Seven*, p.26
9. Browning, *David Fincher: Films that Scar*, pp. 68-9

10. Frank Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street: Film noir, genre and masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991) Introduction xiii
11. Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (New York, USA: State University of New York Press, 2006) p.164
12. Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* p.266
13. Dyer, *Seven*, p.50
14. Ibid, p.62
15. Simpson, *Psycho Paths: Tracking The Serial Killer Through Contemporary American Film and Fiction* p.199

Chapter 3: Zodiac



"I NEED to know who he is... I need to look him in the eye and I need to know that it's him"
Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal) in *Zodiac*

Zodiac tells the true-life-story of one of the most famous unsolved crime cases in American history. The film begins with the devastating shooting of two teenagers and the killer's confession through a phone call with the police, coinciding with a letter to a newspaper. The infamous letter becomes one of many – holding within its text a series of puzzling clues to the identity of the serial killer, "**Zodiac**". Fincher focuses on the **San Francisco Chronicle** journalists, **Paul Avery** (**Robert Downey Jr**) and **Robert Graysmith** (**Jake Gyllenhaal**), and police investigator **Dave Toschi** (**Mark Ruffalo**). All three, and especially Graysmith, pursue the case with an obsessive interest; acquiring useful leads, red herrings and personal, social and institutional issues along their weary road of inquiry.

Much like the opening of every **Fincher** film, *Zodiac*'s pre-credit and title sequence sets the tone for the remainder of the movie. The first scene illustrates one aspect of the presentation of pressure – the menacing presence of Zodiac; exemplified by his brutal assault on **Mike Mageau** (**Lee Norris**) and the chilling murder of **Darlene Ferrin** (**Ciara Hughes**). The scene that follows represents the other notion of pressure that is pivoted around the 'productivity demands... [of] a work group'; focusing on the neurotic character Robert Graysmith and his position at the San Francisco Chronicle.^[1] The two scenes are tangentially linked with an aerial shot of **San Francisco** – demonstrating the evil force that lurks omnisciently within the area and that will soon envelop the entire city in dread and panic. The opening additionally reveals how time is precious and fleeting – a key thematic in channelling both pressure and obsession within the narrative. Fincher demonstrates this immediately by showing both the teenagers hastily driving toward "someplace quiet" and the sudden shooting of the pair. What is more, the credit sequence, with the rhythmic, energetic use of **Santana**'s "*Soul Sacrifice*" and the cross-cutting of Graysmith and the Zodiac letter travelling through the San Francisco Chronicle building, reflects a sense of action and eventfulness. Before the editorial meeting, we get one final glance at the letter snaking its way through the building and Graysmith's compulsive awareness to everything around him. With all this, Fincher expertly highlights the key figures and taut ambience of the world of *Zodiac*.



Whilst *Zodiac* contains an assortment of similarities to *Seven* (the themes, the content and the atmosphere) the detective and killer personas generally differ. Despite Graysmith and the *Zodiac* having a connection, it is not as evident as Somerset's and Doe's who are, as **Richard Dyer** writes, 'intellectual, painstaking, absorbed; and both have a consciousness of sin'.^[12] Graysmith is innocent and childlike (his naive answer to the sarcastic questioning of his "boy scout" qualities – "Eagle Scout, actually. First class" – reminds us of this) and miles apart from the nefarious, mature persona we perceive the *Zodiac* to have. The only divergence away from this depiction of *Zodiac* is his purposeful misspelling of words in his letters – yet these are considered elements of his messages, there to confuse and unsettle readers. What does link the two villains is their obsessive need to inform the public of their acts and to create a puzzle for people to solve and mull over. The two films play on the audience's desire 'to know the answer, the narrative to be completed... [and to] experience... [an] end' – yet both are indefinite about the closure of events, especially *Zodiac*.^[13]

Graysmith's obsession to discover the killer's identity is immensely greater than Mills and Somerset's, who are presented with the killer's identity by the person himself. The investigators and audience of *Zodiac* become arguably more frustrated by the lack of answers than that of *Seven*'s, and it is made obvious how 'obsession... [is] the only defence against a world that is beyond our full understanding, declaring that knowledge lies in the process, not in completion'.^[14] Procedure becomes the major vehicle for most of the film's drama and mystery. Understanding the elusive killer's proceedings barely develops a solution and the 'work pressure...[becomes] associated with low cohesive behaviour'.^[15] The killer's attacks are wrapped in a veil of enigma and conducted in a strange manner leaving Graysmith, Toschi and Avery stumped for hours, days, months and years on end.

The episodic form of *Zodiac* constantly reminds the audience of the extent of the investigation's duration – and the additional work done by Graysmith once the case loses precedence. It also serves as a reminder to the unpredictable nature of *Zodiac*. Once Toschi realises that the killer is "breaking the pattern", the painfully intense impression of foreboding manifests itself within the characters' and audience's minds. Furthermore, 'the bulk of the film is a procession of failures, frustrations, and dead ends' that, without having much consequence, lead to the feeling of anticipation and dread.^[16] This is reinforced by Graysmith's loyalty to the case and his questioning of dozens of people. Towards the end of the film, the lack of answers leads him to darker, more ominous realms of investigation. The tensest scene with Graysmith travelling to **Mr. Vaughn's (Charles Fleischer)** house is preceded by an argument with his wife over his motivation for involving himself so fervently within the investigation. "Why do you need to do this? Why?" asks **Melanie (Chloë Sevigny)**, "Because nobody else will" answers Graysmith. His obsession clearly stated by "I need to know" adds to the pressure of the Vaughn-household scene. The audience becomes aware of the more clichéd elements of the scene (the isolated location, the dark, rainy setting, the quietly menacing man, the thought of someone else in the "empty" house, and the near-pitch black basement) that Graysmith almost does not comprehend due to his diligence in discovering. The scarcity of the house with the Fincherian oligochromatic colour scheme, comes as a warning; reminiscent of 'the best horror cinema... [that] evokes terror from the audience through our identification with characters who have lost their bearings'.^[17] The moment where Graysmith is told by Vaughn that the handwriting, thought to be the closest to the *Zodiac*'s and believed to be **Rick Marshall's**, is in fact his own sends a chill down the spine of the audience and down Graysmith's (perfectly realised in Gyllenhaal's eyes). The foreboding is extended by the notion that Vaughn's house includes a basement – another clue to the identity of *Zodiac*. The scene then begins to

resemble a regular horror film, with Fincher pushing the camera closer and closer to the panicked face of Graysmith. As **Mark Browning** writes, 'We sense the dread as Graysmith follows Vaughn down into a shadowy basement, lit only by three 40-watt bulbs and low angles highlight *Alien*-style pipe-work behind him'.^[8] The scene epitomizes Fincher's expert handling of fear and horror, much like the claustrophobic pressure of *Panic Room*, the gloomy environment of *Seven* and the isolated space in *Alien 3*.



"Not many people have basements in California"

Aside from the terrifying scenes of *Zodiac*, there remain the slow yet fascinating scenes of dialogue and investigation. In these sequences, Fincher analyses the interesting interaction between Graysmith, Avery, Toschi and Melanie. Dave Toschi is the man in the position Graysmith would like to be; he has the access to files, crime scenes and correspondence with suspects. However, Toschi's obsession is far less pronounced than that of the eager *Chronicle* cartoonist and Toschi's years on the job and slight cynicism prevents the film from becoming centred on two conflicting obsessive investigators. With Graysmith providing alternate evidence and theories and Toschi discovering his own through his line of work, it leaves both characters exhausted by varieties of case deviations and decisions. Thus, leaving them in need of closing the case; 'After the raid of the trailer, Toschi declares, "You know what the worst part of this is? I can't tell if I wanted it to be Allen so bad because I actually thought it was him or I just want all this to be over." This is increasingly the motivation behind Graysmith's own sleuthing to the point where in visiting **Darlene Ferrin**... in prison, he screams "Just say it!" desperate for her to confirm that it was **Rock** at the painting party, almost bullying the name out of her'.^[9] Graysmith and Toschi do have some help with their investigation (Melanie being Graysmith's spouse and collaborator) and both lose that person's aid. On his own, Graysmith finally reaches out to Toschi, in an attempt to 'getting close... like an obsessive fan', wanting respect from the officer and seeking assistance with his research that is underway because, as Graysmith states, "I just want to help".^[10] The person that helps, comforts, and acts as a friend to Toschi is his police partner, **William "Bill" Armstrong (Anthony Edwards)**. Interestingly, like Melanie, Armstrong sees the obsessive nature of his partner taking over their personality and decides to transfer away. Singlehandedly searching, Graysmith and Toschi then decide to work together, although Graysmith badgering Toschi prevents the two becoming as close as with one another.

In the full scheme of events in *Zodiac*, nearly every character is possessed with an ability to alienate or contrastingly, become alienated from someone. As the details of the prime suspect **Arthur Leigh Allen (John Carroll Lynch)** emerge, the significance of the marginalised character trait highlights itself even more. Allen lives in a grubby, small trailer and comes from a "troubled" background – he has, over the years, separated himself from society. Avery, Toschi and Graysmith all inflict a pressure on themselves to do good in the investigation (Avery veering drastically off course) and in doing so, lose their jobs, companionship and sensibilities. Character estrangement in the film expands into the filmmaking process of *Zodiac* itself, with Fincher having mildly estranged himself during filming from cast members such as Downey Jr – 'Mr. Downey affectionately called him a disciplinarian, while Mr. Gyllenhaal, saying that as a director he "paints with people," added, "It's tough to be a color."'.^[11] The personalities of the film clash just as equally as the makers of it. As Browning writes, 'There is the sense that Fincher shares some of Graysmith's obsessive nature and the "need to know" is an important part of his nature and creative process too'.^[12] There are multiple examples referring to *Zodiac*'s actors having 'endured multiple takes of 70 shots and beyond' and Fincher

becoming infamous with his perfectionism.^[13] Whilst this was not dramatic and scathing to the crew, it does show process and creation conflicting fantastically within two realms of reality.

The entanglement of life and work is one more aspect of *Zodiac* to draw attention to a sense of pressure. In one stylistically-laden scene, Fincher shows the 'digitally generated symbols – from the killer's coded messages – hang in the air. A passing of time, growing obsession and a sense of panic are all deftly conveyed in a few seconds'.^[14] It is Graysmith who perceives the Zodiac's writings coating the walls and hovering through the building of the San Francisco Chronicle – leaving the audience anxious to the state of his mind and the growing succession of Zodiac incidents. Graysmith's fanatical involvement in the case then extends to contact with corroborating police departments and to working with "colleagues" who are in fact his children. Ignorant to the lives he jeopardises – those of his wife, children and Avery (supporting Avery's decision to try and track down Zodiac) – Graysmith is lucky to get out of harm's way and to have Melanie still helpful towards his cause.

Through the intermittent form and with time-lapse examples such as "... days later" subtitles and the construction of the **Transamerica** pyramid, the audience understands the monumental journey all the characters have been through. The penultimate scene validates this notion further by suggesting how, 'If the hardware scene does not take place until 1983, it suggests that Graysmith has been searching for Allen in all the intervening years. The fact that he has written two books on the subject and is still talking about the case nearly 40 years later suggests the continuation of a lifelong obsession'.^[15] Without a standard conclusion to the detective story, Graysmith's obsession seemingly pays off in narrative terms. He uncovers a piece of evidence that gives him another one on one with his model investigator, Toschi. Plus, he finds Toschi to be in agreement with him; accepting Graysmith's facts and deductions is the last of Toschi's role, almost announcing it to be Allen as much as the proceeding scenes do. The penultimate scene of the film shows Graysmith looking Allen in the eyes, nodding knowingly to himself that it was Allen all along. Fincher then finalises the movie with an aged **Mike Mageau (Jimmi Simpson)** giving "at least an eight [out of ten]" figure of positive identification to the man who shot him way back in 1969, pinpointing Allen as the man.



Ending the film with a couple of shots of Graysmith's book featured around the airport and in the investigator's briefcase, and with the final reporting credits, the film denotes the importation of text. As shown throughout the film, 'Fincher is fascinated by the idea that the Zodiac's compulsion, ultimately, wasn't killing, but communicating with the Chronicle. "That became far more gratifying and seductive than what he started out doing"'.^[16] Even with the pressure created from the gruesome, nerve-wracking and shadowy scenes of the Zodiac stalking and striking, it is the words of Zodiac, Avery and Graysmith that add drama to the film. As it was in *Seven*, the 'cerebral detective, looking to the resources of art and literature to understand human behaviour' is found in the narrative of *Zodiac* to an obsessive extent.^[17]

Notes:

1. Klein, *Workers Under Stress*, p.7
2. Dyer, *Seven*, p.11
3. Browning *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, p.85
4. Mike Miley, "Deciphering the Indecipherable: Procedure as Art in Fincher's *Zodiac*" in *Bright Lights*

5. Klein, *Workers Under Stress*, p.90

6. Browning *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, p.74

7. Tony Magistrale, *Abject Terrors: surveying the modern and postmodern horror film* (New York, USA: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc, 2005) p.xiv

8. Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, p.85

9. Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, p.84

10. Ibid, p.82

11. David M. Halbfinger, "Lights, Bogeyman, Action" in *The New York Times*, 18 February, 2007

12. Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, pp.150-1

13. Halbfinger, "Lights, Bogeyman, Action"

14. Pierce, "The Devil is on the Detail"

15. Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, p.59

16. Pierce, "The Devil is on the Detail"

17. Browning, *David Fincher: Films That Scar*, p.59

Chapter 4: The Social Network



"There's a difference between being obsessed and being motivated"
Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg)

"Yes, there *is*"
Erica Albright (Rooney Mara) in *The Social Network*

The Social Network aims to show the multifaceted influences and repercussions of the construction of social-networking website **Facebook**. The film focuses on **Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg)**, beginning in 2003 before Facebook was established continuing through to when it is a phenomenon and Mark is being sued by **Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss (Armie Hammer)**, their partner **Divya Narendra (Max Minghella)** and the co-founder of the company, **Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield)**.

The Social Network begins with a fiery conversation between Mark Zuckerberg and his girlfriend **Erica Albright (Rooney Mara)**, sitting together in a crowded **Boston** bar. The sense of pressure is immediately presented with the crowded, loud, and dark setting of the bar along with the sense of obsession developing from Mark's chatter about exclusive clubs that he is desperate to get in to. In his stream-of-consciousness prattling, he accidentally insults Erica's education and loses his relationship in a mere few seconds. The relationship Mark shared with Erica was a way to keep him connected and sociable – losing it prompts his desire to find an alternate means of interacting.

In many reviews and studies of the film, there are regularly two perspectives on Mark's character; many either see him as cruel or misunderstood. Both opinions are valid and the disparity in our perception of Mark endorses the film's investigation of complex emotions. **Aaron Sorkin's** taut script propels the audience into an environment of capricious and stressed young-adults where tuning into the conversations is just as difficult as assessing the characters' reasoning. **Fincher** 'is interested in obsessives and sociopaths who overpower normality, and, despite Sorkin's super-articulate, quickfire dialogue, it's pretty much one of Fincher's freaks that Zuckerberg ends up looking like'.^[1] Zuckerberg is not just seen as an outsider and the 'reoccurrence of the title track at certain points in the film, when you're seeing Zuckerberg reduced, and coming back in a diminished fashion... add[s] a level of humanity'.^[2] "*Hand Covers Bruise*", the film's main theme, is utilised frequently in the film to show that Zuckerberg's obsession has, to an extent, corrupted part of his soul – the scratchy effect of the score reflecting volatility. However, it also serves to remind us that he is still a young man and socially awkward, connotations of this are reflected by the light, solemn piano notes.

The use of the theme right at the beginning as Mark jogs back to his campus accommodation supports the notion that he is running away from his problems and aptly returning to a more comfortable environment. As well as showing Mark's cowardice, it also illuminates his unadorned sorrow that can at times eat away at him.

Unlike the remaining characters, once problems become too overwhelming or cause irritation, Mark completely closes in on himself. The hermit persona is both a result of his constant ruminations on Facebook and from a fear of failing in the real world. Zuckerberg lives in his own world, concerned with only his thoughts. Much like Graysmith in *Zodiac*, Fincher provides a great deal of close-ups in order to try and explore the mentality of the obsessive character (Gyllenhaal and Eisenberg's reflecting a lot of emotion in their eyes – both tired and wide-eyed a recurring result of the diligent attention to their work). Nevertheless, unlike *Zodiac*, Mark Zuckerberg is an enigmatic reflection of a human being. Fincher aims to show the young entrepreneur as determined and cut-off from the everyday aspects of life – the social networking enterprise often being cited as a virtual representation of the world and one in which Zuckerberg spends more time in than reality.



"You have part of my attention. You have the minimum amount. The rest of my attention is back at the offices of Facebook"

One comment from Andrew Garfield on the film's DVD commentary about the Phoenix club's party being something of Mark's imagination urges a different reading of Mark's "reality". Furthermore, Fincher notes how 'it was contextualized interestingly...that here is somebody hard at work fucking with the fabric of the outside world, and here's his fantasy of what the outside world is going through'.^[3] The idea of fantasy brings another element to Zuckerberg's often unaware persona. Zuckerberg is strikingly ignorant to social norms and institutional rule. As **David Cox** writes, '[h]e's wrapped up in his own grievances and ambitions. For him, other people are merely obstacles or stepping stones. The only world he's interested in is the one he's building himself'.^[4] In doing "something substantial" Mark completely alienates himself for entirely selfish reasons.

The only character to alter Mark's reclusiveness is **Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake)**. Sean becomes an important figure for change in the narrative and a catalyst for the dramatic disruption of Mark and Eduardo's principles and friendship. Sean's introduction to both characters takes place in an upmarket restaurant – an environment very different to the archaic **Harvard** campus. By the end of the dinner Mark is completely under the **Napster's** spell; or as Eduardo states, Sean "owned Mark after that dinner". As Mark becomes a commodity himself in a new world of trade, the pressure builds on how much money, fame and status will distort the status quo. Sean integrates himself within the Facebook hub and manipulates Mark, wrapping him around his finger and pushing Eduardo out of the circle. As Mark and his team of students working on Facebook move into a **Silicon Valley** condo so does Sean (much to Eduardo's initial unawareness and subsequent annoyance). Eduardo, being the most forthright and socially-smart one of the pair, notices Sean having a grievous impact on Mark and freezes the company's account. This is his first step in distancing himself from Mark and Sean. By the end of the film, Mark also realises the unpredictability of Sean (his illegal actions at a fraternity party illuminate his many flaws); Fincher shows their division by positioning them at opposite ends of the frame to each other. When **Marilyn Delpy (Rashida Jones)** asks, "What happened to Sean?" Mark gives a short response about Sean still owning 7% of the company, yet

does not elaborate on the relationship any further. Mark's final position, alone in the deposition room, is one that had been destined for him as soon as Erica left him; even Parker who once seemed to be able to drag Mark out of obscurity fails to change his fate.



"I will call someone and see what the next move is"



"It was just a party"

It is a common trope in Fincher's films that the world and relationships are seen as extremely unsound and, like the celluloid flashing abruptly at points in *Fight Club*, reality often appears unmanageable. **Devin Orgeron's** point that Fincher has an 'interest in the American family, its dissolution and decay', despite being focused on the familial circle, can be attributed equally to the director's interest in friendships corroding.^[5] Obsession in many of Fincher's films is focused on aspects of control and the understanding of vulnerable relationships, investigations and emotion. All of the quarrelling characters in *The Social Network* are attempting to maintain control over a situation yet are constantly facing hindrances. Despite the **Henley Regatta** scene being deemed by many critics as superfluous ('a sequence of [literal] showboating... a ravishing but quite unnecessary scene') I would argue that, with the scene coming after Mark and Sean's meeting in a club and prior to the Winklevoss' decision to sue, it epitomizes the growing tension in the narrative.^[6] The haunting, jagged rendition of "*In the Hall of the Mountain King*" creates a tremendously disconcerting feeling of pressure and rage building up within the litigants.

The latter half of the film becomes increasingly more kinetic in terms of cutting; Fincher reflecting 'the issue of being connected' and on the growing tension triggered from the mass of various characters' agendas.^[7] Much like *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Fincher notes on how a series of incidents can alter the way people think about themselves, and how it can often lead to an indefinite understanding of the person. *The Social Network* has been compared to **Orson Welles'** *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, 1941)

with both films dealing with issues of fame, betrayal, and as **James Berger** argues, 'the underlying catastrophe of American culture: the end of the possibility of social reform, its dissolution into greed, egotism, vested interests, celebrity culture – and the confusions of representation'.^[8] Berger's point about "confusion of representation" is certainly an aspect of *The Social Network*, and with the series of intertwined plot-points (concerning each character involved in the court case) that adds to the atmosphere of pressure. The film builds up to an irresolute ending where friendships remain broken and settlements are uneasily met (our brief knowledge of pay-offs coming in the form of subtitles that can only slightly inform of us the characters' futures).

As Eduardo and Mark's friendship has been focalised throughout most of the film, it becomes important to conclude on their relationship. From the moment Eduardo comes into the film, we acknowledge him as a caring and reputable character. He mistakes Mark's "I need you" as a heart-broken appeal when really Mark just "needs the algorithm". Immediately Mark sets him straight, avoiding any sense of platonic care. Eduardo questions the "**FaceMash**" idea yet his friendship overrules his worry and he helps Mark complete the programme. Whereas Eduardo regularly acts altruistically towards his friend, Zuckerberg continually uses his friend for his own benefit. The emotional impact comes from seeing, from a variety of perspectives, Zuckerberg's betrayal; 'It's in Eduardo—in the actor Andrew Garfield's animate, beautiful face—that all these betrayals seem to converge, and become personal, painful. The arbitration scenes—that should be dull, being so terribly static—get their power from the eerie opposition between Eisenberg's unmoving countenance (his eyebrows hardly ever move; the real Zuckerberg's eyebrows never move) and Garfield's imploring disbelief'.^[9] Zuckerberg's robotic, unemotional persona is juxtaposed with Eduardo's in such a way that Eduardo's break-downs (him smashing Mark's laptop and shedding a tear in the case hearings) appear overpoweringly poignant. By the end of the film, Mark sitting by himself is a deserving result of his obsession and his coldness towards a benevolent friend. Fincher is questioning the impassive personality in conjunction with the socially-orientated creation of Zuckerberg's (in that the two should not corroborate), as much as Eduardo should not realistically continue being friends with Mark.

The irony of the film's story – a 'social leper' creating a social networking website – is remarked upon by the use of **The Beatles'** "*Baby, You're a Rich Man*" at the end of the film.^[10] The lyrics sardonically critique Mark as the 'computer nerd... [and] social "autistic"' that he always has been.^[11] The song could also be seen as a track running through Mark's mind as he sits at his computer looking at his ex-girlfriend's Facebook page (a sign that even an enemy has come to endorse his creation); his work has in a sense corrupted his mind, creating a delusion of grandeur. The god-like paradigm of Zuckerberg's power elaborated on by **Zadie Smith** who sees Mark 'too hyped on the idea that he's in heaven to notice he's in hell'.^[12] Thinking he is above the testimonies and accusations does nothing to enable audience and characters' empathy for him. As **Lennard J. Davis** asserts in his book on obsession, 'obsessive comes with the labelling of those thoughts as repugnant and unacceptable' – which complements the outsider quality of Zuckerberg.^[13]

Fincher develops the topic of obsession and shows the corroding effects of friendships and trust due to an individual's unyielding devotion to an idea. The presentation of obsession is, as **Richard Corliss** writes, 'closest to the serial-killer docudrama *Zodiac*. The muted tones and prowling camera make *The Social Network* a neo-noir, stalking the truth. Make that *Rashômon* [**Akira Kurosawa**, Daiei Motion Picture Company, 1950] versions of various truths. Again, like films of the '70s, this one ends with a question mark. To the rapt viewer, Fincher and Sorkin say, "You finish the movie"'.^[14] The ending is similar to *Zodiac's*, *Seven's* and *Fight Club's* where not all the scenarios are concluded upon and the audience is left with a feeling of uncertainty. One thing that detaches *The Social Network* from his other films is the absence of death. Fincher said at the time of *Benjamin Button* that, 'Death is the core of everything... of all my movies'.^[15] This film is not a movie involved with death at all and Fincher is very reliant on the intertextual references to past work to highlight how much the film is observant of technology, law and friendship rather than anything else. The scene of Mark looking outside of the court room to a rainy cityscape is reminiscent of *12 Angry Men* (**Sidney Lumet**, Orion-Nova Productions, 1957), along with reference to the development of a business like that of *Citizen Kane* and explorations into friendship like teen-orientated film, *American Graffiti* (**George Lucas**, Universal Pictures, 1973). The absence of one of the director's key motives does cast doubt on Fincher's title as an auteur.

Notes:

1. David Sexton, "The Social Network is Must-See Story of Facebook Friends and Enemies", *London Evening Standard*, 15 October, 2010
2. Trent Reznor interviewed by Todd Martens, *Pop & Hiss: The L.A Times Music Blog*, 28 February, 2011
3. David Fincher interviewed by Lev Grossman, "The Making of the Facebook Movie: A TIME

Roundtable" in *Time Magazine*, 23 September, 2010

4. David Cox, "And Zuckerberg Created Man...and The Social Network", *The Guardian*, 18 October, 2010

5. Devin Orgeron in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, Yvonne Tasker (ed) (London: Routledge, 2002) p.157

6. Zadie Smith, "Generation Why?", *The New York Review of Books*, 25 November, 2010

7. Pierce, email correspondence with the author, 8 February, 2010, 17:50

8. James Berger, *After the End: representations of post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p.xi

9. Smith, "Generation Why?"

10. Michael Dalton, "Cinema: The Social Network" review on *Media Culture*, 1:11, 2010

11. Smith, "Generation Why?"

12. Ibid.

13. Davis, *Obsession: A History*, p.14

14. Richard Corliss, "The Social Network: A Pie in the Face for Zuckerberg", *Time Magazine*, 24 September, 2010

15. David Fincher interviewed by Nev Pierce, "History in the Making", *TotalFilm* Issue 149, December 2008

Conclusion



Jake Gyllenhaal and director David Fincher on the set of *Zodiac* (Merrick Morton)

The term “auteur” can often be seen as a term of endearment – a way to profess certain admiration for a filmmaker. As much as **Fincher** is a creative, stylish and intelligent director, his more commercial work prohibits us from thinking of him in auteurist terms. Even as the journalist **Nev Pierce** asserts, ‘[h]e chooses his pictures carefully and you can be in no doubt, watching them, of his personality’, over the years Fincher has arguably been drawn away from more niche productions and more personal projects.^[1] Looking at *Seven*, *Zodiac*, *Fight Club* and *The Game*, Fincher took great risks in making films that either had an ambiguous audience demographic or were not certifiably marketable. Compared to *Panic Room*, *The Social Network*, *Benjamin Button* and *Dragon Tattoo*, Fincher is working with a commercially viable set of productions, promotional effort and an educated audience (those interested in **Facebook** or the trials concerning it and **Stieg Larsson** fans, for example). To date, his fluctuating pattern of project choices disrupts any clear understanding of Fincher in auteurist means. As **Geoff King** notes in his *New Hollywood Cinema* book, for a director to be recognised as an auteur, ‘[t]he recurrence of similar themes is the first requirement if a director is to be considered more than just a hired hand working on material that has its essence elsewhere’.^[2] As the analysis has shown, in three films specifically, this is true of Fincher. However, in the broader spectrum of his filmography, the varying qualities of each film hinder us from labelling the director as being in some way akin to the likes of **Howard Hawks**, **Alfred Hitchcock** and **Orson Welles**.

Fincher's style often allows for the topic of auteur theory to be brought into evaluation. His keen eye for the two themes is regularly reflected in his films. As **Lennard J. Davis** writes, ‘obsession has a kind of poetic darkness written into its phonemes’ and this is heavily supported by Fincher's study of misanthropes, gloom and the maintenance of a status quo and/or power.^[3] In the three films analysed, there is a clear ‘sense that the protagonists of these films are not totally in control of their actions but are subject to darker, inner impulses’.^[4] Control bridges the subject of obsession with pressure and much like the investigation into darker recesses of human psyche, pressure is often represented by ‘imposed work demands’ (in reference to Klein) and an atmosphere of darkness.^[5] In technical terms, Fincher's films are ‘darkly oligochromatic’ and simulate a very disconcerting reflection of the world.^[6] Pierce argues that in terms of visual and stylistic virtue, Fincher is a perfectionist: ‘The other word I would use in relation to Fincher's films is control. This isn't just an offshoot of having seen the way he works on set, but really about how precise and seamlessly structured, visually, his films are’.^[7] What Pierce draws on here is the combination of content and context such that Fincher's films do, at times, reflect his own working method. It allows for further discussion of auteur theory

yet Fincher is not always so definite about the arc of his filmography. I have identified the presence of the themes of pressure and obsession within three of his films (with occasional reference to others) yet it may not be as determinate as that. As Fincher ponders, 'I find myself more interested in the world and where the characters came from, than I am interested in getting to the end in the most compelling way' – in this respect, the themes are bringing characters to an inconclusive end.^[8] Fincher's open-ended strand of narratives is not an auteurist quality; he is leaving the audience to judge for themselves and not emphatically delivering any kind of maxim.

Notes:

1. Pierce, email correspondence with the author, 8 February, 2010, 17:50
2. King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, p.87
3. Davis, *Obsession: A History*, p.3
4. Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street: Film noir, genre and masculinity*, p.47
5. Klein, *Workers Under Stress*, p.7
6. Dyer, *Seven*, p.70
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8. Fincher interviewed by Stephan Litterer, *The Director's Cut* p.176

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- Alien3 (David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1992)
- American Graffiti (George Lucas, Universal Pictures, 1973)
- Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, RKO Radio Pictures, 1941)
- Fight Club (David Fincher, 20th Century Fox, 1999)
- Rashômon (Akira Kurosawa, Daiei Motion Picture Company, 1950)
- Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, Live Entertainment, 1992)
- Seven (David Fincher, New Line Cinema, 1995)
- Sex, Lies, and Videotape (Steven Soderbergh, Outlaw Productions, 1989)
- The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (David Fincher, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2008)
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- The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, Orion Pictures, 1991)
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"First learn your craft; It won't stop you from being a genius" (Delacroix, via Jack Fincher)