



AN OPEN-AND-SHUT CASE

WHY DAVID FINCHER'S *ZODIAC* IS THE FILM OF THE YEAR BY KENT JONES

LIKE ANOTHER FILM shot in San Francisco 50 years earlier, *Zodiac* wears its greatness lightly. Which is to say that neither the master of suspense in 1958 nor the digital-era genius of 2007 set out to create "art cinema," but arrived there through a sheer immersion in their immediate material and respective senses of craft. Something in these stories incited an unusual depth of response from both filmmakers, among the most obsessive ever to step behind a camera. Something mysterious and intangible.

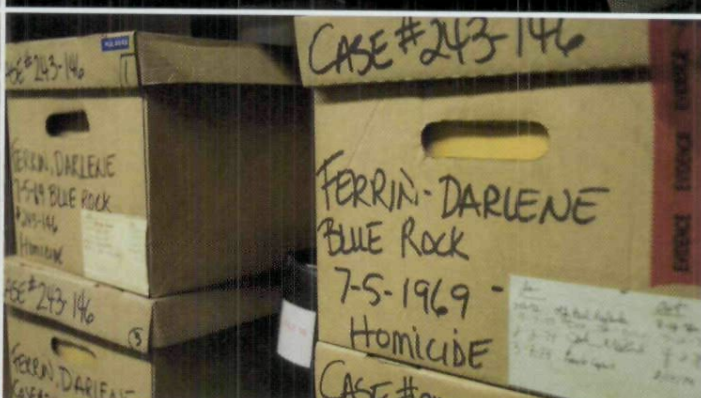
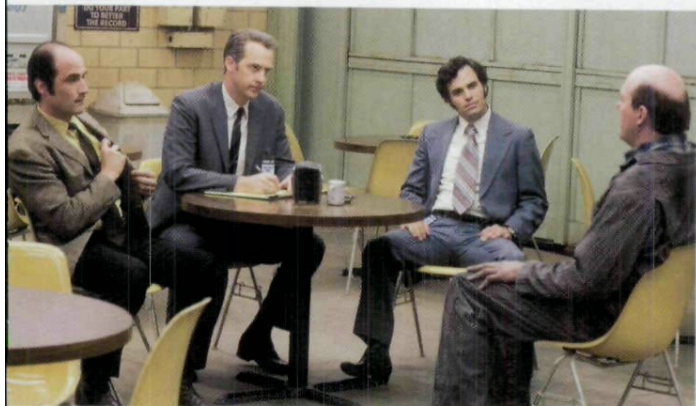
Fincher has never made another movie like *Zodiac*. In the past, he has sought out stories that seem to have roughly aligned with his temperament, technically and emotionally. Here, he appears to have shaped every square inch of his material, and he has taken it (or let it take him) to an extremely fine end point. Just as Hitchcock did with *Vertigo*, he soars well past the point of a "real movie," as currently defined. By the time you get to the final

moments of this "film that feels like being trapped inside a filing cabinet," any expectations developed by prolonged exposure to serial-killer narratives, police-procedural melodramas, or stories of amateur detectives will have been either annihilated or hammered into an unrecognizable shape.

The story of *Zodiac*, like that of *Vertigo*, is told in a very unusual tense. We begin, on the one hand, "then"—in northern California in 1969, when Fincher himself was coming of age in the Bay Area. But of course, it is also "now" for the characters caught in the momentum of pursuit. So far, so normal. But despite all the cars and the haircuts and the music, it's difficult to call this a "period film," since it so consistently refuses to fawn over its own re-creations. Fincher gives us just enough of any given setting, and the details are always overshadowed by the manner in which the characters move and interact within them. The viewer is placed in roughly the same position as the

women wandering into Rivette's house of fiction in *Céline and Julie*, in that the action seems both immediate and legendary, as if it *has* happened and *is* happening at the same time. Fincher's grasp of the world of his story is so firm that he does the one thing filmmakers never do with stories set in the past: he empties out the action and the frame, in order to concentrate on the essentials.

Far from a postmodern contemplation of information retrieval in a pre-digital age, this is a big-budget Hollywood project that has walked into greatness through the door of entertainment. There is, in James Vanderbilt's script, more than a little of the bantering and speechifying one finds on network TV. For instance, Bill Armstrong (Anthony Edwards) keeping his partner Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo) supplied with animal crackers is the stuff of buddy movies, but such moments stand out in a field that has been shorn of everything beyond the hard labor of information-



gathering and case-building, cross-hatched with the (mostly) extremely subtle acting of real-time exhaustion and frustration. This is a film of actions and reactions, occurrences and recurrences, the patterned and the random. Compared to *Zodiac*, *All the President's Men*, a key inspiration, is a parade of behaviorally glib character attractions bundled into a neat suspense package.

In Pakula's visually impressive film, there is a series of dissolves over the heads of Hoffman and Redford as they sift through thousands of White House library receipts, which reiterates their needle-in-a-haystack bewilderment. The high angle is revelatory in another sense: such drudgery, the substance of any real investigation, should only be viewed quickly and from a great height for fear of boring the audience. With an obsessiveness to match that of his heroes and an ironclad responsibility to the truth of his subject, and perhaps out of sheer mischievous delight, Fincher offers the reverse, a movie that places said drudgery front and center. His protagonists understand that payoffs don't come cheap and that guns are usually found long after they've stopped smoking, and a couple of quick speeches aside, their frustration isn't

imparted through amplification but concision. The acting is set to a rhythm that is far more like life than the usual boom-chicka-BOOM action beat. There's a powerful sense in *Zodiac* of individual existences being lived out.

The film's many locations, from its home environments to its murder sites to the *San Francisco Chronicle* office, appear both highly specific and haunting. Yet there are no time-stopping visions, as there are in *Se7en* and *Fight Club*. Just as in Hitchcock's San Francisco, Fincher's portraits of places—the corner of Washington and Cherry, Lake Berryessa, a deserted highway outside Modesto at night, a decrepit houseboat—are all the more powerful for appearing incidental. Fincher takes his ultra-responsive eye for scale, light, and color and his careful calibration of mood and sets himself the challenge of putting them at the service of a story in which tonal and visual impositions are beside the point.

July 4, 1969. Vallejo, California. We're looking at the Mare Island Causeway, gracefully described from above, as fireworks flower and wither in a beautifully rendered night sky (one among many in this film). Fincher cuts to a rhyming

ground-level motion from a moving car, as suburbanites idly twirl their sparklers and amble across their lawns. These are establishing shots, but they also initiate a recurring visual pattern, a contrast between God-like remove and eye-level proximity. Over this opening passage, so lovingly realized yet already so attuned to random beauty and behavior, Fincher lays the reverberating chords and plaintive vocals of the Three Dog Night version of "Easy to Be Hard." How the precise placement of this particular recording over these particular images will play for someone who did not grow up in the America of the late Sixties, I have no idea. As someone who did, I can say that this song seemed to have been designed to drift over the airwaves from AM transistor radios on just such summer nights. Right away, Fincher gives us an extremely vivid, class-specific impression of what it felt like to be alive in this time and place, something that will remain important throughout the film.

Most of the musical choices have the same devastating rightness: the buildup to Sly and the Family Stone's "I Wanna Take You Higher" over a spatially ingenious *Zodiac*-letter montage (with its digital positioning of letters and words across

three-dimensional space, it's even more exciting than *Fight Club*'s ingenious Ikea catalogue descriptions); the incantatory opening of Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues" over another digital tour-de-force, the fast-motion building of the TransAmerica Tower; and Donovan's "Hurdy Gurdy Man," finally given its creepy due by being married to the first murder in a deserted lovers' lane and reprised over the final credit roll.

The murder scenes are quite unlike anything else in the film. We are placed very, very close to Mike Mageau and Darlene Ferrin in their car, Bryan Hartnell and Cecilia Shepard at the lake, and Kathleen Johns on Highway 13, and freakish details are foregrounded—Mageau's thick lips, Ferrin's lipsticked mouth over a mass of braces, the starched Republican cleanliness of Hartnell and Shepard against the eerily pristine landscape around Lake Berryessa. Their faces partly obscured by shadow or angled into an insect-like oddness, these sitting targets are not exactly deprived of their humanity but they are objectified, made into objects of contemplation, perhaps echoing the removed viewpoint of the Zodiac himself. In a striking move, Fincher gives us the aftermaths of the attacks, in which the (male) survivors sit in a state of dazed awe, as if they'd returned from alien abductions. The victims are unwitting catalysts, allowing a story that's much bigger than them to begin. Yet during such moments, there's a strong sense of murder as a tear in the social fabric, an event both traumatizing and inexplicable.

Zodiac is not exactly the decentered film that some admirers have claimed it to be—it is not the big-budget equivalent of *I'm Not There*. It is, however, a movie in which absolutely *everyone* counts, from the always terrific Elias Koteas as Sgt. Jack Mulanax to the small army of Samaritans who come to the aid of the survivors and the cops. Whoever is on screen, Fincher is responsive to their shape, affect, posture, voice, the precise manner in which their character relates to the immediate environment. John Terry as Charles Theriot, the publisher of the *Chronicle*—elegant, stiff-backed, immaculately dressed, suggesting an entire world of late-Sixties California aristocracy beyond the frame in a minute or less of screen time. James Le Gros as Vallejo detective George Bawart—beefy, tanned, and brimming with confidence, inferring a whole other world a few rungs down the economic ladder, of

fishing trips and Sunday afternoon football, all in two quick scenes and about 40 words. Clea DuVall as Linda del Buono, giving her hundredth jailhouse interview to the latest Zodiac specialist, her smile bitter, loose, and haphazardly insinuating, her intelligence blunted by the tortuous daily routines of a prison stretch—again, the screen time is minimal but the impression is lasting, and it's more than a question of "good actors." Fincher's complete control and inside-out understanding of his material allows him to make a movie of large-scale excitements generated by small-scale events and activities. His well-known attention to detail rivals Visconti's, but it moves in multiple directions at once—an agile, creative, and logistical mind at work in the age of digital workflow.

Zodiac's most perfectly realized scene takes place in the film's one solidly industrial setting. The investigating officers, Toschi, Armstrong, and Mulanax, are led to a penned-off lunchroom in a factory. Their key suspect, Arthur Leigh Allen (John Carroll Lynch), shuffles into the room. The scene is reasonably well-written, but it's perfectly acted, paced, and spatially organized. The excitement is in the sense of expectation, carefully muted but running like an electrical current among three cops who think they've finally hit the investigative jackpot. The quadrangular conversation, the crisscrossing pathways of glances, reactions, and counter-reactions, every urge to emote tamped back down into blank-faced concentration, accumulates in detail and peaks with Lynch's deadpan reading of the line, "I'm *not* the Zodiac, and if I was I certainly wouldn't tell *you*." Fincher ends the scene with a mirror reversal of its beginning, a lateral tracking movement away from the cops behind the grating, underscored by a near-subliminal rhythmic pounding in the industrial distance.

Cat-and-mouse games between investigators and favorite suspects are nothing new, but what's notable here is the fine-tuning. The cops aren't studying Allen's personality but the array of possible evidence he's laying out as he speaks. There's no giveaway of abnormality (beyond a faintly unpleasant prissiness), no Lecterish mind-melding. The drama of the scene is in the intensity of studying, surveying, sizing up within the limits of the law. Fincher and Vanderbilt's thoroughness in this area is a reminder of how many

movies have been devoted to rogue cops and private eyes getting *around* the law, the better to get to the next action scene.

This is finally not a movie about a serial killer, but about the real-life exhaustion of trying to catch one—the monumental difficulty of sifting through evidence and building cases, the equally monumental disappointment of seeing your favorite suspect disqualified, the effort expended to go back to the drawing board. It's a movie about getting sucked into the vortex of obsession, as the expanding distance in time from the actual event makes an abstraction out of the investigation itself and turns the case into an urban legend—or in this case, fodder for a Nixon-era cop movie ("So much for due process," says a quietly disgusted Toschi at the premiere of *Dirty Harry*). In *Zodiac*, the weight of time presses in from all directions—the duration of the actual case, the crystalline representation of a world gone by as it might have filmed itself, and most of all via the quietly authoritative acting.

The best performance is the least assuming. Robert Downey Jr. as the flamboyant Paul Avery is the kind of acting that gets recognized, and not to slight his work or the extraordinary refinement of Ruffalo, Lynch, and Koteas, but Anthony Edwards's brilliant performance in a "thankless" role is at the heart of *Zodiac*. His Bill Armstrong is all business all the time, whether he's making sure his partner is well-fed or coordinating a murder investigation across three states. Despite the fact that he's been tempered by age, Edwards's Kewpie-doll features, saucer eyes, puckish mouth, and pleasantly nasal voice are largely unchanged from his *Top Gun* days. Which gives the heavily experienced Armstrong a nice hint of innocence preserved. Edwards's discipline here matches that of his director. No jumping at hidden emotions, no "eloquent silences." Everything is imparted through action, and there's a strong intimation of willpower, of psyching up for every occasion after reflexively displacing all disappointment and frustration. That's why his final scene, in which he suddenly tells Toschi that he's asked for a transfer, packs such a punch: this is a guy who wants to unburden himself of the colossal effort required to be a good cop.

If Edwards is *Zodiac*'s greatest success (and biggest surprise), its one failure belongs to Jake Gyllenhaal. His acting

rub hard against the grain of everything good about the movie. He's fine with the straight-arrow side of Graysmith, but the idea that he's an avid reader is almost as preposterous as the notion that he would have either the stamina or the obsessive intensity of focus needed to conduct a private murder investigation. Imagine *Zodiac* with another Graysmith—Ryan Gosling, for instance, or James McAvoy—and you'll see what I mean. However, Fincher's movie is so perfectly engineered that it can even carry a babyish actor who goes slack whenever he's outside his comfort zone.

Just as Hitchcock probably didn't go into *Vertigo* looking to create a grand meditation on time, I think Fincher wanted to make a movie "based on actual case files" and wound up with something much grander. In the end, he arrives at a fine philosophical point—he's gone so deep that he can't conceivably wind up anywhere else. As consumed as it is with failure, *Zodiac* does, of course, have its triumph, albeit a private one shared by Graysmith and Toschi. But well before then, we're presented with a troubling question. Why bother with the *Zodiac*? Why care about a few unsolved murders, when hundreds have been committed since in the immediate area? Why indeed? Graysmith's answer ("Somebody has to") seems perfunctory. And despite his tabletop indictment of Allen, and a permanently haunted Mageau making a positive identification in the film's stirring final scene, we're left with only 80 percent certainty that Allen was the murderer.

Not that we should want more after 22 years. *Zodiac* is one of the few films I've ever seen that is, finally, at peace with uncertainty. Fincher the fact-based realist has made a movie that ends, without any pretense or sentimentality, within the realm of probability, stubbornly if not valiantly refusing to soar off one more time into the infectious dream and immediate satisfaction of 100 percent metaphysical certainty. Of course, that lingering 20 percent is one of the elements that makes *Zodiac* such a haunting experience. Yet for all of its destruction, sadness, and failure, its ruined lives and depleted energies, *Zodiac* offers something rare: a just portrait of communal human effort across a believable expanse of time. It's one of the most hopeful films I've seen in years, and one of the most satisfying. □

providing the film with what appears to be its only certainty. The images seem suspended in time, self-reflexive, and with an overwhelmingly beautiful plasticity. They recall by turns the aesthetic and narrative origins of the Lumières and Griffith and the avant-garde principles of Warhol, ultimately tied together in a fable referencing Filipino mythology.—*Manuel Yáñez Murillo*

A SHORT FILM FOR LAOS (23)

ALLAN SEKULA, U.S.

A DELICATE 40-MINUTE TAPESTRY OF impressions and observations from a trip to Laos: the Plain of Jars; the ancient capital during a festival; a knife forge; a small brick factory; pebble sifting. Call it an essay on what the world's made of, i.e., iron and water and fire and earth. Wryly ironic, compassionate, and unprepossessingly simple.—*Olaf Möller*

THE SILENCE BEFORE BACH (18)

PERE PORTABELLA, SPAIN

THE RETURN OF PORTABELLA, AFTER A 17-year hiatus, was one of the year's major film events. The Catalan master hasn't lost his cutting-edge instincts or his command of the enigmatic meter that underlies his work. His depiction of musical performance is materialist to the point of abstraction, his writing like calligraphy, his treatment of space architectonic, and his narrative free-floating. Transcending its subject, Johann Sebastian Bach, this film positions itself as an essayistic meditation on art as a destructive vehicle of social prejudice and an incarnation of the contradictions of European history.—*Manuel Yáñez Murillo*

THE TRAP ADAM CURTIS, U.K.

NO LESS AMBITIOUS AND HOTLY TOPICAL

than his seminal *The Power of Nightmares* (05), the latest from British TV's foremost essayist is a three-part BBC series subtitled "What Happened to our Dream of Freedom?" Ranging across politics, philosophy, and economic theory, his thesis is that "freedom" today is conceived according to the narrow limitations of market calculations and an ideological perspective that views human beings as intrinsically selfish and isolated.—*Chris Darke*

UNITED RED ARMY

KOJI WAKAMATSU, JAPAN

A THREE-HOUR PORTRAIT OF AN ALL-OUT class-war-driven faction of Japan's ultra-left: the United Red Army's emergence from the political struggles of the Sixties, its innumerable political causes, and its long, terrible disintegration in the winter of 1971–2 when 14 members died during brutal terrorist actions, climaxing in a 10-day standoff with the police. Both understanding and critical, this radically detailed, unflinching docudrama epic also has a poetic aspect. A monument.—*Olaf Möller*

THE UNPOLISHED (24)

PIA MARAIS, GERMANY

IN HER SLOW-BURNING AND MOVING chamber piece, Marais stays close to her 14-year-old heroine, whose longing for the straight life puts her at odds with her addict mother and ex-con father. The terrific cast and fine ensemble acting supply vital emotional authenticity. *The Unpolished* also features one of the hallmarks of the German New Wave: an ability to make the featureless nowheres of suburbia glow with heightened atmospheric intensity. Marais is a talent to watch.—*Chris Darke*

BEST FILMS OF 2007 READERS' POLL

You've heard our take on this year's crop of films. Now it's your turn to give us your top picks and your takes on the movies of 2007. We'll print the results in our March/April issue and publish your comments on our website. **To enter:** Send your list of the year's 20 best films along with your name, address, and phone number, to fcpoll@filmcomment.com, by mail to Film Comment Readers' Poll, 70 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York NY 10023, or by fax to 212-875-5636. And feel free to send in any rants, raves, or insights on the movies of 2007. **Deadline:** FEBRUARY 18, 2008. **Prizes:** First Prize: your choice of Criterion Collection DVDs, up to \$200 in value. Second Prize: up to \$120. Third & Fourth prizes: up to \$80. The winners, who will be picked by random draw, can select prizes, subject to availability, from the Criterion Collection catalogue (www.criterionco.com).

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