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 sit 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 obsessions 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 conclusion. 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, by Ryan Hartnell and Cecilia Shepard at the lake, and Kathleen Johns on Highway 13, and freakish details are foregrounded—Mageau's thick lips, Ferrin's lipstick-stained mouth over a mass of braces, the starved 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 an 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 decerted 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 Therriot, 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 scene 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 torturous 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 excitement 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 nurtured 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 Rufalo, 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 intention 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
rubs 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 pri-
ivate 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 babysit actor who goes slack when-
ever he’s outside his comfort zone.

Just as Hitchcock probably didn’t go
into Vertigo looking to create a grand me-
ditation on time, I think Fincher wanted to
make a movie “based on actual case files”
and wound up with something much
greater. In the end, he arrives at a fine
philosophical point—he’s gone so deep
that he can’t conceivably wind up any-
where else. As consumed as it is with fail-
ure, Zodiac does, of course, have its tri-
umph, 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? Gray-
smith’s answer (“Somebody has to”) seems
perfunctory. And despite his tabletop
indictment of Allen, and a permanently
haunted Mageau making a positive identi-
fication 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 so 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 por-
trait 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 plas-
ticity. They recall by turns the aesthetic
and narrative origins of the Lumières
and Griffith and the avant-garde princi-
iples of Warhol, ultimately tied together
in a fable referencing Filipino mythol-
ogy.—Manuel Yañez Murillo

A SHORT FILM FOR LAOS (25)
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 cal-
ligraphy, his treatment of space architec-
tonic, and his narrative free-floating.
Transcending its subject, Johann Sebasti-
ian Bach, this film positions itself as an
essayistic meditation on art as a destruc-
tive vehicle of social prejudice and an
incarnation of the contradictions of Euro-
pean history.—Manuel Yañez Murillo

THE TRAP ADAM CURTIS, U.K.
NO LESS AMBITIOUS AND HOTLY TOPICAL
than his seminal The Power of Night-
mares (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 eco-

gonomic theory, his thesis is that “free-
dom” today is conceived according to
the narrow limitations of market calcu-
lations and an ideological perspective
that views human beings as intrinsi-
cally 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 under-
standing and critical, this radically
detailed, unflinching docudrama epic
also has a poetic aspect. A monu-
ment.—Olaf Möller

THE UNPOLISHED (34)
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 hall-
marks of the German New Wave: an
ability to make the featureless nowhere-
es 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@filmlinc.com; by mail to Film Comment Readers’ Poll, 70 Lin-
coln Center Plaza, New York NY 10023, or by fax to 212-875-5636. And feel free to send in any rants,
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 prices, subject to avail-
ability, from the Criterion Collection catalogue (www.criterion.com).