

Dangerous Desire

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We see Robert Graysmith sitting at the kitchen table; his black notebook—full of leads on the mysterious Zodiac killer—is sprawled open on the wooden surface. A handwriting clue from a movie poster has brought Graysmith to a Mr. Vaughn’s doorstep. With a keenness, an earnestness that matches the ominous rainy night outside, Graysmith starts questioning Vaughn, hoping to gain new insight into the troubling murders. But in an instant, Vaughn’s words wipe the eager anticipation off Graysmith’s rain-soaked face: “Rick didn’t draw any movie posters, Mr. Graysmith. I do the posters myself. That’s my handwriting.”

A sudden dread fills the poorly lit room as the implications of Robert Graysmith’s previous declaration resounds in our heads: “The handwriting is the closest we’ve ever come to a match [to the killer].” The heavy rain pounding against the kitchen windows echoes the nervous beats of our hearts and cuts chillingly through the silence. Robert, with stiff, cautious movements, attempts to slip out the door to the safety of his car, parked just outside. But just as he’s about to depart, the creepily calm Vaughn—emotionless and unrevealing—softly suggests they take a look into the basement, where he promises to dig up film records to aid the investigation.

Now, on the edges of our seats and utterly terrified, we silently urge Robert not to heed this request, realizing the basement must be another link to the serial killer. Silent protest gets us nowhere, though, and so we witness Robert’s hesitant nod and creaky descent into the dusty, dank, dark basement. As Vaughn slips into the shadows, Robert anxiously waits alone, his whole body tense and quivering, a look of pure horror disfiguring his face. But just when we’re expecting the worst, Vaughn slinks back into the faint light, clutching a record book, his face distorted by the darkness. As he reads Robert the information he seeks, Robert nods nervously, barely registering the calm words. In a flash, Robert turns on his heel, sprints up the basement stairs, and reaches the front door, frantically shaking the doorknob. A teakettle wails

shrilly in the kitchen—a spine-tingling affirmation of our anxiety. The door-knob won't turn. He tries again and again to no avail. Robert's locked in.

What appears to be a scene plucked from a typical horror movie racks us with familiar suspense—fearing for Robert's safety, expecting his demise, we shake anxiously in our seats. But in fact, it's all a ruse designed to manipulate and subvert our dread—our knowledge of how this scene should go. Vaughn, seeming almost to mock our growing certainty that he is the killer, calmly unlocks the door, releasing Robert safely into the wet night. This sense of safety, though, is fleeting. Robert may have escaped Vaughn's home and immediate danger, but he remains consumed by something far more terrifying—the larger mystery of the Zodiac killer. The perplexing case renders Robert's skittish shuffle acutely unnerving, as it strikes a resonant chord with us. If Vaughn had attacked Robert, we would at least have been granted resolution, conclusive knowledge of the killer's identity, satisfaction in the puzzle solved. Instead, our uncertainty lingers, and that, perhaps, is more terrifying yet. It is precisely this sense of unsettlement that pervades and characterizes David Fincher's 2007 film *Zodiac*, a film that toys with our nerves as it drags us into a bone-chilling enigma.

Zodiac, based on a real-life series of unsolved crimes in the San Francisco Bay Area, follows the investigation of the infamous Zodiac killer, a self-titled, elusive sociopath who leaves behind threatening letters and cryptic ciphers after each brutal kill. Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), a cartoonist-turned-sleuth, becomes intrigued by the case when the puzzling letters start arriving at his workplace, *The San Francisco Chronicle*. He is not the only one consumed by the case. *Zodiac* also pursues two police partners, David Toschi (Mark Ruffalo) and William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards), as well as *Chronicle* crime reporter Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr.), dividing screen time between the *Chronicle* offices and promising police leads in the field. As the years pass in the film, from the late '60s to the early '70s, evidence becomes scarce and the case turns cold. Graysmith remains the sole dogged, unwearied pursuer. Through him, the search continues. And it is this emphasis on the search, rather than on the violent, gory aspects of the murders, that transforms *Zodiac* into more than a mere slasher film. The killer only becomes more distant and less important as the film proceeds; the agony of not solving the case, of perhaps never solving the case, never *knowing*, becomes a more terrifying threat than the murderer himself. *Zodiac*, as a result, morphs into a commentary on our most pressing fascinations, on the human inability to leave a question unanswered, and on the damage this obsession with finding an answer can do to our own lives. As he quivers in Vaughn's base-

ment, we recognize bits of ourselves in Graysmith's fear-stricken eyes. We recognize in him our need for stability and resolution, basic human desires *Zodiac* doesn't hesitate to exploit.

While we witness Graysmith fall victim to paranoid delusions, Fincher's expert craftsmanship offers a stark contrast in the form of unwaveringly stable, disciplined filmmaking. Shying away from the "escalating series of violent assaults" typical of a horror movie, Fincher authors only two brief murder scenes and then steps back, letting the violence fade—"following the ripples created by the initial bloodshed" (Orr). With this atypical emphasis, *Zodiac* becomes primarily dialogue-driven; Fincher's measured, methodical filmmaking allows the plot-heavy narrative to flow with ease. In a review of the film, Christopher Orr calls it a "media procedural" and says that "visually, the film is a pleasure," conjuring the era of the '70s "in a manner simultaneously precise and dreamlike." There is certainly a nostalgic ambience to *Zodiac*, brought on by the "golden hue" of the shots, the period-appropriate attire of the characters, and the "subtle nods" given to the decade, such as Toschi's presence at a screening of *Dirty Harry* (Orr). Such carefully crafted aesthetics create a sense of authenticity, both reminding us of a different time and incorporating us into the era. The "golden hue" lends the film the sepia look of a vintage photograph, and as Orr points out, calls attention to the social tensions of the time—"an America just beginning to lose its innocence."

As Orr hints in his review, the '70s marked a shift from the psychedelic movement of the '60s into a state of unrest brought on by the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and declining economic conditions. These factors, which engendered nationwide disillusionment and cynicism, also contributed to a surge in crime; serial killer cases alone exhibited "nearly a tenfold increase during this period" (Fox and Levin 411). As crime became more commonplace, it wormed its way into the public mind, a reality reinforced by Fincher's aesthetic choices. Even though *Zodiac's* storyline is rather anticlimactic, these delicate aesthetics, coupled with careful pacing, lend the film a "breathless momentum" (Orr). This momentum also arises from the dialogue itself; we watch the characters piece the clues together, one by one, in a slow progression that keeps us hooked, thinking always that the next clue will be the one to bring the mystery to a close. But the evidence never quite comes together.

Even with its golden aesthetics and focus on daytime activity, *Zodiac* still retains the signature dark moments that characterize a Fincher film, conveying themes of discontent, anonymity, and alienation. One such scene is the

first murder. A shroud of darkness consumes two teenagers in a car, a faint streetlight barely illuminating their faces in the night. Here, Fincher composes chilling crime-scene aesthetics that challenge our notions of security—these sparse but spine-tingling moments are his distinctive mark.

Another hallmark of his work (perhaps most explicitly seen in *Fight Club*) is that Fincher openly challenges contemporary culture and its prevailing desires for structure and stability. In *Zodiac*, we watch the characters fall victim to fervent obsession and paranoid delusions, chasing false leads that leave them increasingly frustrated and unhinged, grasping hopelessly for some sense of resolution. The case eats away at their psyches, disrupting any notions of stability or clarity, even as it exposes the psychological dangers that the search for that very clarity presents. In the basement scene, Fincher mocks us, toying with our angst as Robert's mind becomes fogged with paranoia. Robert's obsession develops into "an act of abandonment," destroying his relationship with his wife and children as the case consumes him (Tasker 174). Toschi, Armstrong, and Avery also fall apart, succumbing to substance abuse, haunting feelings of failure, and broken partnerships. It seems the Zodiac killer exemplifies the "obsession, routine, mechanization, and . . . need (seldom spoken and always perverted)" of a classic Fincher film, and inflicts much more damage than a mere trail of blood (Tasker 173).

It is this idea of an anonymous, absent villain, a lurking background entity, that incessantly torments both the characters and the viewer. With this taunting anonymity, the Zodiac killer takes on a much larger role: he becomes a reminder of an America on the brink of hysteria, an affirmation that our worst fears are always prowling the edges of our consciousness, threatening our safety. Whether caused by the unrest of the '70s or by more recent disturbances, these ever-present anxieties cause us to fixate on the lurking bogeymen of our time, products of a mass paranoia. Post-September 11th, we developed into an America almost too paranoid to fly, quivering collectively at the sight of an Arab man in an airport. *Zodiac* forces us to confront such paranoid delusions—the characters' increasing alienation and broken relationships reflect our own sense of isolation, engineering a removal "from the very characters and events the film purports to be about" (Tasker 174). If ever it seems we have even a semblance of control, Fincher makes sure we lose it, ridiculing our dwindling hope for resolution.

In what seems to be a turning point in the Zodiac investigation, Toschi and Armstrong sit down in an isolated, worn-down room at the workplace of Arthur Leigh Allen (John Carroll Lynch), a suspect they are there to question. During the interview, Allen seems calm and collected. But clever cam-

era work follows the gazes of the detectives, noting damning information, like the face of Allen's watch, which reads "Zodiac." No music plays; only the sound of machinery echoes in the background, giving the mundane workroom a haunting atmosphere. Fincher seems to frame Leigh Allen as the murderer, taunting us with what seems like a step nearer to the truth. In subsequent scenes, though, the evidence against him is duly and disappointingly thwarted. It is merely another instance of Fincher's trickery. This cruel mockery leads us to consider false hope: what may seem promising can be deceptive, leading us helplessly astray. It is a contorted reality—a reality we may not particularly enjoy, a reality in which truth, as film critic David Denby notes, may "never quite yield to our most ardent pursuit." We are taken repeatedly to the edge only to be continuously disappointed, tricked by some happy illusion that justice will be served and the mystery will be solved. We are duped by our own desperate desire for structure—our own controlling nature—even when "it becomes clear that no dénouement is possible" (Denby).

Fincher's film *The Game* hosts similarly tantalizing trickery and ever-present questions of what's real and what's illusion. *The Game* centers on wealthy, arrogant businessman Nicholas Van Orton (Michael Douglas), who becomes trapped within a live-action game, a birthday present from his wayward younger brother (Sean Penn). Violent and chaotic events push Nicholas literally to the edge, forcing him to confront the haunting images of his father's suicide that have plagued his life. The point of the game is con and deception, concepts that gradually build as we witness Nicholas's descent into a dangerous, obsessive hopelessness and a drive for revenge and clarity. In both *The Game* and *Zodiac*, the characters' sense of security is invaded by an overpowering paranoia and profound uncertainty, which drives them into isolation. But while *Zodiac* concludes with an anticlimactic ambiguity, *The Game* gives the audience what we desperately desire: a clear resolution—and not just that, in fact, but a highly suspenseful, smoke-and-mirrors climax that humanizes the pretentious Nicholas. After his dramatic descent, Nicholas believes he has lost everything; we find him slinking toward the edge of a skyscraper, defeat in his eyes and faded images of his father's tragic suicide flashing through his mind. He takes his final step. In his slow free-fall, we hysterically hope that this is still only a part of the game, some elaborate ruse, even though we are sickeningly certain that our hope is in vain. But Fincher subverts our expectations once again: Nicholas hits a large cushion. Fincher brings us to the point where we—and Nicholas—abandon the idea of a happy ending and succumb to hopelessness; only then, when we have given up, does he step in with salvation, with reassurance.

Zodiac is much less fulfilling. Like *The Game*, it plays on our desire for resolution, but unlike *The Game*, it refuses to satisfy that desire. The most we obtain is a curious scene in which Robert silently stares down Leigh Allen, on whom the film has cast suspicion, a moment both chilling and perplexing. It is remarkably subtle and ambiguous. While Robert may find solace in finally looking the man he believes to be the killer squarely in the eyes, we as viewers can't help but wonder if this moment is merely the result of fervent obsession, Robert's need for an answer, distorting logic and evidence. Only for Robert is the case closed; we are left wishing for a conclusion even as the credits roll—left condemned never to know.

Denby gripes that Robert “comes off as a selfish nut” as he “brings his kids into the investigation and breaks up his marriage.” He concludes that Robert's real desire does not lie in reaching an answer—“attaining some longed-for goal”—but, rather, in “the obsession itself, which fulfills certain needs.” What Denby fails to recognize is that while obsession may have driven him forward, resolution is Robert's prevailing need. If the Leigh Allen stare-down isn't evidence enough, the closing credits assure us that he once again enjoys a comfortable relationship with his children, signifying that the obsession has lifted now that Robert has achieved a resolution that satisfies him, if not us; Robert has found vindication. And obsession certainly didn't fulfill any needs for Avery or Toschi, who remain ravaged by substance abuse, paranoia, and broken relationships at movie's end. It is only the frustrated audience, not Robert, who is left hanging—the identity of the killer never to be affirmed, our desperate hopes shattered. At the conclusion of *Zodiac*, the faceless, elusive Zodiac killer—the taunting bogeyman—still lurks unsettlingly in the shadows, leaving us with the same burden—the same tormenting fears—that we've developed over the past two and a half hours. Hard work, intelligence, and dedication were all in vain, and the deal was never quite closed. We are forced to confront one of our own worst fears—the impossibility of certainty, even after every angle has been explored. As Matt Zoller Seitz remarks, our most antagonizing torments emerge out of “fearing the dark even when you can see, or think you can see, every detail.”

Frustrating though it is, this lack of clear resolution leaves a lasting impression, allows the film to shed the historical backdrop of the '70s and reveal something fundamental and timeless about the very core of human nature. For a brief, tantalizing moment, we are compelled to step back from our controlled, routine lives to view the world as it truly is: chaotic, isolating, unexplainable, and unyielding to the order we attempt to force upon it. While watching *Zodiac*, we are sentenced to participate in our own humanization, to

confront our own paranoid delusions and haunting fears, the bogeymen of our time. And while the Zodiac killer laughs at our futile pursuit—our need for resolution—we can laugh too, at our own fears, now that we sit comfortably in the light, pretending that we don't really need to know the outcome. Pretending that we aren't really afraid.

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