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## Analysis of David Fincher as an Auteur

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### ABSTRACT

*Director David Fincher is an acclaimed director and is one of the most sought after directors presently working in Hollywood. His films have elements which set him apart from other filmmakers. His choices of shots in his films and camera work in his film qualify him as an auteur of his films. This paper will closely examine all of his ten feature films which show his style of film making over the years. The films that will be taken under observation are Alien 3 (1992), Se7en (1995), The Game (1997), Fight Club (1999), Panic Room (2002), Zodiac (2007), The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button (2008), The Social Network (2010), The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo (2011) and Gone Girl (2014). This paper will examine the idiosyncrasies observed over the years in his films during different narrative plot points. Using the variation of auteur theory as laid out by American film theorist Andrew Sarris, this thesis will explore the signature elements of Fincher's camera positioning, camera motion, and camera angling in order to qualify Fincher as an auteur. Their usage will help us understand the narrative function that these shots play in his films.*

**Keywords**—Auteur Theory, Camera Angle, Camera Movement, Camera Positioning, David Fincher, Alien 3, Se7en, Fight Club, Panic Room, Zodiac, Gone Girl

### 1. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is done in this paper. The analysis of camera angles, camera movements and camera positioning are the main focus. Narrative analysis and contextual analysis is also done to better suit the paper.

### 2. THESIS

David Fincher is an auteur whose style of film making is unique and can be found in the evolution of his camera motion, camera positioning and camera angling over the years.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF THE FILMS

#### 3.1 Alien 3, 1992

The opening shot is a slow zoom onto the protagonist in her pod. Use of cuts between the credits and a recap of what has happened in the previous parts of the Alien franchise. The co-protagonist is being shown to increase in length by walking in a single shot from a long distance (so that the audience sees the character growing, establishing the importance of the character in the story). The camera movement only involves stable tripod wide shots and a few controlled tilts where the character doesn't go out of the frame. Fincher here uses shots where the protagonists increase in size in a frame like when he dolly ins on the protagonist from the opening shots. By these two shots, we establish that these two characters have a relationship in the film either friendly or of enmity.

Protagonists and antagonists in a scene (not particularly in the entire film but the scene) have the treatment of being dolly ins into close-ups and from a wide shot to a mid shot. The shots are mostly low angle too. Where the audience is looking up to the protagonists. Any important clue or a piece of information brought in the light of the characters is done with a dolly in or a zoom in and a crescendo of music. The camera never loses the protagonist in the scenes. The protagonist and the camera move at the same speed and in the same direction. The mirroring of the camera with the protagonist is very smooth visually and almost looks like is always at a 180 or a 90 degree.

Use of quick shots of things required in the procedure of autopsy to bring a sense of urgency in the following scenes (autopsy). Use of classical pieces of music and slow pans give a larger than life feels to the picture. The scenes filled with anticipation have cameras moving constantly only exceptions are when there are close-ups. Symbolism is also used in the sequence of the end of life (cremation of a character in the storyline) and a cross-cutting to the birth of the creature.

Confrontational scenes between two characters use a simple two-person shot and use of over the shoulder shot where the character has an important plot point to deliver. A few shots in the mid-term (middle of the second act) of the film have the protagonist out of focus in shots. It could have been done to show the out of focus nature or mindset of the protagonist, it makes the audience uneasy and thus makes a direct connection with the protagonist.

During the accidental fire scene, use of the handheld camera is done to show the action of the scene more intimately. When the action dies down, the scenes of triumph are shown with upbeat classical music and slow-motion shots of the survivors.

The alien point of view uses an ultra-wide lens. Just so that the audience feels uneasy being in the POV of the antagonist.

The protagonist's death scene is again shot in slow motion to give the scene an emotional touch.

### **3.2 SE7EN, 1995**

The opening shot is a fade into the main protagonist with his back turned. The camera is kept stable and in the same frame, the character is preparing and getting dressed. A really slow pan to show the murder victim in the scene. The co-protagonist enters the film and the scene by climbing up the stairs into the shot. The shot is uninterrupted and the co-protagonist introduces himself to the protagonist. The use of low angle shots is again prominent for the main characters (protagonists and antagonists).

Fincher during conversation uses a camera to show the power struggle of the scene. There is a struggle between the protagonist and the co-protagonist of the film. When a character gets an upper hand during the conversation the camera is panned around the actors so that there is a change in position (power is transferred to the position in the frame is also transferred).

A major change in the colour palette of Fincher from the previous film is that the colours are more dark and muted. The lighting is limited to show the darkness of the subject of the film. Fincher seems to use shadows to tell the story. A sense of grittiness is felt in this film. Again the character and the camera move at the same pace. The camera is sensed as an ominous entity. A character trait is established with the camera doing a dolly in or a slight slow zoom. The music is electronic in the scenes. A mirror scene in the film has a shot which brings about a unique story element. Even during a pan, we don't lose sight of the character, we keep on seeing the character either directly in the frame or through the reflection from the mirror and the co-protagonist heads towards his wife. This shot tells us that the film is about them. This also establishes their love which is played on by the antagonist later in the film. Use of foreshadowing by Fincher in the film.

Any discovery in the crime scene uses the POV of the characters to show what they have seen. These shots are mostly tilted and at timespans. The message from the killer (GREED) is shown using a crane and which is called a high moon crane shot with the message not being in the centre of the frame (unsettling the audience). The co-protagonist in the film is shown to have been thrown right in the middle of it. Fincher is using crescendo in music and slow pan to grab the audience's attention yet again. The next message from the killer (GLUTTONY) is again shown at an angle. The camera does not have the entire word in focus. Fincher uses a unique way to track the character, as the character enters the building the camera pan is slower in pace and as he enters the pan becomes fast. Thus grabbing the attention of the audience in such a way that the audience needs to be ready for what comes next.

The 3rd message (SLOTH) is different from the previous two and the audience immediately notices this feels wrong in some way and as the camera movement in the previous scene has grabbed the audience attention, the audience gets uneasy. And the supposedly dead victim starts to heavily breathe. Horrifying sequence excelled even more by the crescendo in music. The difference between the two previous messages, this victim is alive. The two protagonists have a montage sequence to figure out what the killer wants. As the two protagonists figure out what the killer is aiming for (The Seven Deadly Sins) we see the paper which mentions these sins in the centre of the frame with a slow dolly in. This sets up what the film is entirely about. After tracking down the killer unethically, they reach the killer's apartment. This sequence involves a gun chase and is shot with a handheld. First time in the film. There is constant use of pans while investigating.

The 4th message (LUST) is shown in passing. Again not shown with as much importance the same as the first two messages.

The 5th message (PRIDE) is shown with prominence in the middle of the frame. This is an important shot for the film and Fincher at the same time. As we know there needs to be a clash between the director's personality and the film, this shot brings that theory back into the circle. Because of his previous failure in the film (Alien 3 was a failure among the critics), this film became a matter of pride. And for the film, the use of pride also brings home the fact that the killer also carries a lot of pride in the work he does. He is being a hypocrite. The killer then reveals himself in the police station grabbing the detective's attention. It is done masterfully keeping the killer in the centre of the frame and a slow dolly in cutting between the detectives reacting. The surrender halts the entire investigation but keeps the protagonists and the audience guessing why he surrendered. The void of the remains two deadly sins keeps the audience gripped to what happens next. Fincher uses aerial shots to track the three main characters in the car. Again the use of the mirror in the car sequence gives the audience a minor call back to when it was last used. The shots in the desert land of the detectives are shot with a handheld camera and of the killer on a tripod. Thus marking the mindsets of the two parties.

The remaining two sins (ENVY and WRATH) is played out the final scenes. The killer is envious of the co-protagonists life so he takes that away from the detective. He is shot by the co-protagonist thus fulfilling the sin's punishment (ENVY). For killing the killer, the co-protagonist is tried and will be given a death penalty and so the last sin's punishment will be fulfilled.

This last scene had set up the kind of films that Fincher will get recognised for.

### **3.3 The Game, 1997**

Opening shots are entirely made up of flashback videos. Has a lot of jump cuts almost to show the jump cuts when a person remembers something. Not everything is remembered in its entirety. A cut occurs from the child's face to a man's face as he washes his face in the mirror. This is our protagonist as he is in the centre of the frame and the child was his former self.

Quick shots of the things he uses to get ready. Similar to SE7EN. The camera is at a lower angle as the protagonist enters the building. Done in the previous films. A dolly in from a wide shot to a close up for the main character as he goes about his daily business. The conversation between the two characters uses a simple OTS technique but when the most important piece of information needs to be told the instead of an its the camera shot uses a mid shot. Making the audience think that this is important information and demands your attention. The music used is electronic.

The flashback sequences are shot with an older video camera and with a warm tint to the colour. The camera movement in these sequences uses the same pans and tilts as done in the film. This is to suggest that the way the audience is seeing the film, the protagonist is seeing life the same way. We uncover the story from his point of view. The camera and the actor are moving at the same pace, highly choreographed.

The camera always makes a character the hero of the frame meaning that the camera moves as per that character. If the character even moves his head a little, the camera will move with him/her. This is a staple in Fincher's film making. As the waitress (co-protagonist) walks away, the camera moves away from the protagonist, again establishing that this is an important plot point and the audience needs to pay attention because up till now the camera is always near the protagonist in some way or the other.

The camera switches its hero in the frame when the two characters are running. First following the person(co-protagonist) leading and when they stop the camera switches its hero and then moves according to the second character (the protagonist).

Again a crane high noon shot as the two characters enter the protagonist's home.

Fincher uses the mirror again to show how the character was the previous night. He sees some cocaine on a mirror kept on the table and as he looks at it the reflection of the character implies he was involved in it somehow. Fincher uses a mirror for self-reflection here.

The colours are consistently on the colder side and the flashback sequences use a warmer tone. When the protagonist is talking about his father, the camera uses a close up of him and the person he is talking at most gets a mid shot. This shows that the protagonist is carrying the emotional baggage in this scene.

Fincher is using a lot of ultra wide shots to show the smallness of the protagonist in the scenes where he is transported to Mexico. Fincher in a simple tilt and panning around the protagonist scans him to show his emotional distress and the present state. The suicide scenes include slow motion with the swell in music.

The film ends with the close-ups from the past.

### **3.4 Fight Club, 1999**

Hard rock music in the introduction. The start of the film is when we see through special effect dolly shot that there is a gun in the mouth of the protagonist. And now the story starts with the protagonist narrating. The colours are again cold in this film. The transitions between the activities are brought on by CG. The use of the camera as an ominous entity is done with the help of CGI. The film is inter-spliced with a frame of the antagonist making the audience question the existence of that frame or just a projection from their minds.

The protagonist is centred in most of the scenes involving him. The internal thoughts of the protagonist are narrated during the gaps in dialogue. Again the characters /actors and the camera move at the same speed. The scenes are highly choreographed.

Fincher uses a dolly out to show the character in their location. Establishes the place where the action is taking place. Fincher is using a montage like an edit for when the protagonist is attending different meetings. This is strung together by the use of narration.

Character introduction (the supporting protagonist) uses the same method as used in Se7en to introduce the protagonist by her climbing the stairs and walking into the frame. The camera is playing with at times slow pans and immediately doing a fast tilt to one side. Damaging the flow of shots to show the damaged mind of the protagonist. The antagonist introduction right after the montage is done simply with a slight pan from behind the protagonist and goes sideways to reveal the antagonist sitting on the of the protagonist.

Their conversation is with the same technique as done in The Game where the OTS shots turn into close-ups or mid shot if the information becomes important to the story. Aswell in music and a dolly in used when the protagonist decides to call the antagonist. Revealing that it is an important plot point.

The Fincher idea of making the audience self reflect along with the protagonist again plays its part by using a mirror to show the disturbed mind of the protagonist and the unclear mirror also makes the audience think that something is not clear with the entire situation between the protagonist and the antagonist. Like Se7en, a pan is used to interchange the position of the protagonist and antagonist. It's to show the power of the character in the scene changing.

High noon crane shots are again used to show where the characters are heading.

Fincher uses opposing conflicting sides facing each other with mid shots from the side. The bombing scenes are all done in slow motion. A close up of the antagonist is done very shakily to scare the audience or increase their anxiety. Fincher then starts to fill the frame with faces looking directly into the camera. Again playing with the audience to increase the anxiety.

A slow-motion fight takes place, showing that this fight has a different kind of significance. And it does, the protagonist annihilates the opponent out of jealousy and it forms an important plot point. Car scenes in *Se7en* and *Fight Club* have this similarity that they occur at an angle of 45 degrees from their respective sides and then get wider to a 60 degree. This does the same job as the OTS to mid shot edit, emphasis on the dialogue increases. And to increase the intensity even further, the angle goes into 135 degrees. Almost the opposite of 45 degree and this demands the audience attention. Again the use of montages and narration to carry the story forward. These montages used a lot of fast pans and tilts, so Fincher again grabbed the attention of the audience by all of a sudden bringing the movement to a still and proper one on one conversation that reveals the antagonist to the protagonist happens with a slight dolly in and then the sequence entirely ends.

Fincher uses the security CCTV cameras intercut with the on spot cameras to break the monotony of the fight scenes. The edit treads back to how the film started and the film resolves. The ending uses a swell in music and a slow dolly in from an ultra-wide shot to a wide shot to a full shot. The blasts are CGI and contrast the mood of the characters.

### **3.5 Panic Room, 2002**

Character introduction is through a pan down to the protagonists walking towards the camera. The importance of the protagonist is shown when the camera Dolly Ins on her. The colours outside the house are warm and show the film's mood before the story actually starts. (ACT 1 is much warmer in tone) The house tour is shot with simple pans and tilts. Again the camera feels like an ominous presence in the scenes. The panic room shots always have the Protagonist in the frame establishing that the panic room and the protagonist will share a special relationship in the film. Fincher uses mirror yet again for self reflection for the audience and the protagonist.

The ghost-like the movement of the camera in the film is felt throughout the film. The scenes CGI to get that kind of a look. The camera plays the third main protagonist which is only witnessing the events without affecting the story. We are more intimate with the characters on screen because of these movements. Fincher uses mirror again but this time it's for the antagonist and the mirror has shattered, so whatever self-reflection the antagonist has will be shattered. His stance in this situation is wrong and so it will be shattered. The movements of the antagonists in the film are seen by a pan across the tv monitors in the panic room. A lot of action is covered this way.

A lot of action is in the background of the characters. Important for the plot but they don't receive the attention from the audience. Fincher plays with what is expected of him. The end of the film uses symbolism to show the loss of the secret protagonist-antagonist.

### **3.6 Zodiac, 2007**

The first shot is an aerial shot of San Francisco. A shot is taken by putting the camera on a tripod inside the car and is looking out the window. On a straight road, it looks like a pan from inside the car and it is used as a way to show a tour of the city on that night. Fincher uses slow motion and CGI with a swell in music when showing the killings of the characters in that scene. Fincher uses a mirror with the protagonist when he is introduced in the film. The office (where most of the story takes place in the film) is shown through two different perspectives. A mail received by the office (its journey inside the office) and the main protagonist reaching the office. When these two things will cross path, it will be the inciting incident which will carry the film into the first act and. The two journeys are simple tracking shots, pans and tilts. These shots are edited using crosscutting.

Fincher blocks the characters in the scene in ways where every character's expression tells us what is going on. The feel of the room is reflected in these kinds of blocking and when the main character enters the room, he is immediately thrown into a situation along with the audience. A slow dolly in is used to show the cipher which is an important inciting incident in the film. Similar to *Se7en* it's a message and the camera/Fincher show the importance of this slow dolly in and the camera lingering.

The killings in film contrary to other film makers when they shoot such scenes are shot with a stable camera and an emotionally detached camera. Fincher's aim doesn't seem to push the audience into the action but to make them witness it so he can bring the audience into a more important action when it is really important.

Fincher again using high noon crane shot to establish where the character and the audience will go in the story. Fincher used a video game like a shot when following a car from above with a drone. He moved the car on right angles and he keeps the car in the centre of the frame and so the drone also moves on the right angle. The choreography of Fincher is clearly seen in this scene.

Fincher uses his montage technique for the letters coming in the newspaper headquarters. Fincher shot the conversation between the three investigators and the possible antagonist with every investigator getting an OTS and the possible antagonist getting a personal OTS with each one of them. Whenever an important revelation is about to happen, Fincher replaces it with a mid shot. It peaks the audience interest and makes them focus on the picture on that occasion more.

Evidence check by the protagonist uses the montage method of keeping the pace of the film intact. Another scene where there might be potential danger from a character in the film, as he moves away from the danger the camera also dolly outs from the dangerous character. Music is elevated when the possible antagonist and the protagonist meet, music is elevated and the characters are shot with a mid shot and are at the centre of the frame.



### **3.7 The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, 2008**

Fincher uses the flashback sequence in the film the same way as by showing the scenes in warmer tones and with an old film style camera with the cigarette burns. Fincher uses tilts when he is shooting the conversation between the mother and the daughter. The most common thread in all of the Fincher films is that Fincher will always tilt the camera in such a way (when a character is running) that the character occupies a certain frame in a side (right for instance), the character will move till he reaches the centre of the frame and then Fincher tilts the camera to keep the character in the centre until the character diminishes.

Fight Club and the sequence of the maid finding the protagonist on the stairs is that it is lit the same way but carries two very separate but strong emotions. Choreography between the camera and the characters is maintained in this film too. Lighting issues in the green lit screen. Maybe the technology needed to be improved for a few scenes. Silhouette shots are used to show the sadness of the protagonist. Mirror use with the protagonist is seen here again. It's almost safe to say that mirrors are an important part of Fincher's film making. The protagonist properly realises that he is getting younger in the film's timeline. Mirror usage as a romantic prop between the two protagonists is seen in the film.

Fincher is using shots which look like paintings for romantic sequences. Montage editing is used for the lifestyle of the couple. Handheld shots are all the shots shot in India. Fincher has the habit of not making a big deal out of death in films. Simple camera movements are used with very little elevation in music.

### **3.8 The Social Network, 2010**

A two-shot opening sequence intercut with three other shots to shoot a conversation. Use of OTS when the conversation isn't bearing any importance to the story, wide shot to show the position of the characters, mid shots when the conversation takes an important turn and close-ups when crucial decisions are made. Mid shots are also used when the characters are talking about the same thing, thus showing they are on the same page.

David Fincher uses wide shot and high noon crane shot in almost all of his projects. The character-running sequence is shot with the tilt and follows through the method as observed before. Fincher also does this pan across rooms to show the fast movements of the characters. It's a faster version of what he did in Panic Room and the pans he did during the characters touring the house but this is for a shorter interval.

The party sequence which is going on while the protagonist is narrating is shot in slow motion with Dolly Ins and little pans. Fincher likes to exchange the position of the protagonist and the secondary protagonist with a pan from one angle of the protagonist till he reaches the mirror opposite and then the secondary protagonist maintains the same position while moving. This is just to show the power positions of the characters in that scene.

An important plot point in the film is when the co-protagonist helps the protagonist with an equation and that equation is shot as it is written from the outside and keeps the co-protagonist and the equation in focus and the protagonist out of focus and when the protagonist starts to speak the focus shifts from the equation to the protagonist and then a slow zoom in to the equation. The blocking of actors to show their mindset where there are more than 3 characters in the scene (just like in Zodiac) is done here again expertly.

Zodiac and The Social Network have one more thing in common that the interrogation scene between the characters using a mixture of mid shots and OTS. Mid shot for more important aspects of the conversation. The use of light sources inside the frame is what Fincher uses repeatedly in his films. It's mostly when the important characters come to a conclusion or just before a very important plot point.

Over time Fincher develops a new way to shoot conversation in the same frame by changing the focus from the one speaking the dialogue to the other when the other starts speaking. Advancement in technology helped him get there. The end of the film is using a slow dolly in for when the protagonist self reflects.

### **3.9 The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo, 2011**

Character introduction of the protagonist is similar to previous films with the usage of stairs to show the protagonist. High noon crane shot for to show where the character is heading in the film like his previous instalments. Use of a reflective surface to show the protagonist like his previous films is done in here when the protagonist is in the cafe and here's about his failure on television. A fast pan for when the character is moving fast between the rooms similar to the Social Network. The flashback sequence is again in a really warm tone.

The conversation is shot with the same way as in the previous films by using the change in focus in conjuncture with the dialogue. Usage of explicit nudity in the film is the first time for Fincher in all of his instalments. Previously when nudity was used it was done through CGI in Fight Club. The suffocation of the protagonist is shot in slow motion to make the look for painful for the audience and this is inter-spliced with handheld shots of the co-protagonist looking for the antagonist. The final shots in the film are shot in such a way that the co-protagonist feels abandoned as the camera moves away from her but when she gets on the motorcycle and starts to leave, the camera seems to change its mind and Dollys in towards her.

### **3.10 Gone Girl, 2014**

The opening shot of the protagonist of her and the co-protagonist stroking her head and the narration of the protagonist telling us what the film will be about. The setting is established by Fincher with simple wide shots and the protagonist moving in these shots. A wide shot pan for the protagonist as he moves into the frame.

Fincher uses his method of showing what place the character is entering by showing the character and then an upwards tilt to show the name of the building. To shoot a conversation from a simple character movement shot Fincher brings the camera nearer to draw the audience into the scene and to establish that it is an important development in the scene. High angle noon shots seem to make the camera as an ominous being in hiding.

Fincher has the blocking of the actors (if more than three) in a frame so that the character's motivations and mindsets tell a story in that frame itself. Fincher is really good at keeping the character motivations in the foreground of the scene through his blocking.

Fincher in all of his films has the ability to make the camera move or tilt even the slightest if the character moves the slightest. The frame is always in conjuncture. Choreography between the cameras and is really important in his films and is always a common thread in them.

Fincher is using a technique in his films where he lights the actors to a bare minimum only so much so that the main features of the actors and the expressions are discernible. Even in direct sunlights the light is diffused so that the light is really soft. This makes us believe that Fincher considers shadows to be as much as important as the light.

Fincher uses explicit nudity here (only the second time in his feature films). Can be considered a new chapter in his evolution as a director. Fincher uses a mirror when the co-protagonist in the film is telling her backstory during the sex scene and she is looking at herself as a mark of self-reflection. Fincher is really good at toying with the expectations of the audience places where other directors would use a close up (an important dialogue of the protagonist or antagonist) and replace it with a mid-shot or a wide shot and it throws them off course and they are further dragged into the story.

Fincher readily uses crosscutting to increase the tension in his films. The investigation by the protagonist and the co-protagonist's explanation both have explosive and important conclusions. This is helped by cross-cutting in this case. Montages here for when the co-protagonist explains her plan and the narration is the one thing that makes the sequence comprehensible for the audience just like in Fight Club.

Fincher uses ambient sound to increase the audience's attention. The sound of the shower between the protagonist and the antagonist is increased and so we pay more attention to what they have to say. This is also done in the party scene in the Social Network. To bring the entire film to a round the opening scene is again repeated in the last scene. And the opening scene where the wide shot established the main protagonist's introduction is again repeated to show its all back to what it was before all of the situations started.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

David Fincher is one of the most influential directors working today because there is a David Fincher style that stands out and makes the audience realise they are watching a David Fincher film. Elements like the dimly lit scenes help the audience understand the character motivations.

The colour palette of David Fincher always uses muted tones and the colour temperature in his films is always in the warm or cold side. Happiness in his film or flashbacks mostly use warm tones and the gritty realtime portions of the film are blue and muted. The camera angles in his films are that he has three axes on which he places the camera and points at the actors. One, in conjuncture with the actor where the middle of the actor is the middle of the lens. Second, a low angle and third high noon shot where the camera is looking down at the characters.

His camera movement in the film is always in conjuncture with how the character (the most important character in that scene) is moving I.e the speed of the camera tilts and the speed of the pans is the same as the speed of the character moving. He moves the camera as per how the audience is feeling in the film. He uses close-ups for intimacy and very rarely will he use a handheld camera but he does to increase tension. Music is always according to the tone which he is aiming for in the film.

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