David Fincher - "It Won't Be Cinematic"

Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963) is a cerebral exploration of the mental state of a well-known film director on retreat from his day job at a spa, where he tries to reconnect with the art he is so enamored by and in love with. Through this process, Guido Anselmi often recoils into his own thoughts, anxieties, memories, regrets, and fantasies as he tries to piece together a new film from seemingly nowhere—hounded by colleagues, fans, friends, and employees, Anselmi pulls himself out of a creative block. Fellini has famously touted this film as highly autobiographical, exploring his own confusions and hesitancy regarding where his career should lead. Fresh off the international success of *La Dolce Vita* (1960), Fellini redirects his creative attention inwards, focusing on himself as an artist. He uses the cinema as a means of rumination regarding the pressure he has both put on himself and that has been put onto him by others. He negotiates expectations of greatness that have far exceeded his creative capacity. *8½* is, for Fellini, the breaking-in of a new pair of shoes – the old ones work just fine, but they bore him. The highly personal and surreal nature of the film makes it a tremendously self-reflexive story about the very creation of the film itself. Through the character of Anselmi, brought to life by Marcello Mastroianni, Fellini turns the camera onto himself:

> *We must accept ourselves for what we are: this is what I am, and this is what I'm content to be. I want to stop building myths around myself, I want to see myself as I am: a liar, incoherent, hypocritical, cowardly…* (Fellini)

In this interview with journalist Oriana Fallaci, Fellini elucidates exactly what he tried to achieve with *8½* – or at least what he ended up achieving. Granting less attention to the phantasmagoria littered throughout the film, and more on what Fellini reflects on about himself,

the more *8½* can be read as more than just the reflections of an artist facing a block. *Is there something more antithetical at play?*

Six decades later, David Fincher does something similar. *The Killer* (2023) follows an assassin as he navigates the aftermath of a botched job. As the audience, we are subject to our nameless protagonist's paltry contemplations about his job, pseudophilosophical observations about life's monotony, and self-critiques. It seems as though many of these come off as Fincher using the entire runtime of the film to place his character in situations that can be considered allegorical to his own personality and way of performing his craft. He calls attention to his faults, his pretensions, his contradictions, and his rebuttals to criticism – a satirical take on his own filmmaking, *The Killer* stands as an outlier in his filmography, a film that goes against all of his own perfectionist sensibilities. After the critical and financial failure that was *Mank* (2020), Fincher is forced to return to what made him a household name – the stylistic slow-burn, a scrupulous action thriller, but this time, he is ostensibly self-aware. In this essay, I wish to at least pose, if not answer, questions about David Fincher's filmmaking in relation to his audience, his own sensibilities, and style that remains so esoteric yet instantly recognizable. His use of camera and staging lends to his films a certain "assaultive" property that keeps his style elusive and unpredictable. Additionally, I wish to explore Fincher's personality with relation to how his work is both perceived, and received. David Fincher thinks you're a pervert — and he loves it – but what does he think about himself?

David Fincher loves 'subtle assaults', on both his audiences and his characters. This philosophy, though, seems to be born out of a particular self-criticism and proclivity towards a destructive form of voyeurism. He seems to shine a mirror at the audience and guide their

attention to their own misdeeds, flaws, and overall objectionable qualities – in a way, Fincher uses his audiences' diffidence as a conduit for his own self-reflection.

> *I think people are perverts. I've maintained that – it's [certainly] the foundation of my career. – David Fincher*

Fincher's style opens up a conversation about various praxes in filmic art, but one thing that stands out is his perfectionism. Infamous is his capacity, or need, for precision. More specifically, Fincher's absolute insistence on getting *the* perfect take, no matter how long it takes or how much actors beg him to stop, informs both his style and our perception of it. After working with him on *Zodiac* (2007), Robert Downey Jr. lent his two cents on the matter in an interview with movie talk nation: "No matter how difficult something is, he's just patiently waiting because, ultimately, he's [just] an exacting director and makes great film" (2014). Various other such anecdotes from critically acclaimed and hugely successful actors come to light when examining David Fincher' style of both filmmaking, and *making* the film – a distinction that, conflictingly, eludes him. There exists a certain dissonance between Fincher's narrative sensibilities and his infinitely diverse formal style that drives his films. His dedication to realism, and the directorial restraint he showcases in the process, often conflicts with the puzzling artificiality and formal qualities of his style, particularly his approach to character. Fincher clearly recognizes the importance of character – his stories are often defined by his characters, who are often grounded and not-so-grandiose. They exist in a space that presents their actions and motivations verbatim – their behaviors serve as extensions of their states of mind. Fincher refuses to compromise narrative stability for violent outbursts or loud monologues when unnecessary. Stylistically, something that stands out about Fincher's direction is the synchronization of the camera and the movement. Every actor on screen is always perfectly in

sync with the camera; when the character moves, so does the camera, often at the exact same pace and in the exact same direction. When an object in motion suddenly stops, his camera acquires a captivating stillness at the exact same time, with no minute discrepancies. This technique of his allows the spectator to always be locked in with the character, in both motivation and action. Direction, speed, and emotive gestures are captured with such precision that it can be hard to not create subconscious expectations about assessments of where the narrative may take us.

There exists prominent deceit, a paradoxical reflexivity, within his films that calls attention to itself. The specificity of Fincher's filmmaking boils down to the small details that we are not *supposed* to catch on to – just feel. His style relies heavily on subconscious conditioning that he reels you into throughout the course of his films – Fincher teaches you how to watch them. Within this illusory process, Fincher tricks us into his stylistic world and locks us in for the remainder of the runtime. Most of his films boast monochromatic color schemes, emphasizing deep shadows that complement the metallic grey-blacks he loves to use. Using these elements, Fincher creates moody atmospheres that often inform his characters; they are never distracting yet they subconsciously and ironically reflect his characters' moods, prominence, and philosophies. Paradoxically, though, we are never let into this process of meaning-creation. His balance of style and substance, all the while maintaining a rigid sense of realistic dread and moral bleakness that permeates through the screen. It's almost as if Fincher, perversely, wants us to observe things that seem discouraging. He cynically manipulates the very human desire to peer into something artificial, hoping it was real, all the while relieved that it isn't. We are ***not*** in on this intricate joke, but there Fincher is, chuckling at us from behind the camera.

It is interesting to note that Fincher's camera possesses an omniscient quality that he does not particularly shy away from reminding us of. The realism depicted in his films are often complemented by the ethereal quality that he lends to his camera. In *Panic Room* (2002), a dark and gritty thriller, Fincher amps up his signature mystical camera movement with a deceptively simple tracking shot. We track down the stairs from a bedroom, pan over to the window, then through a keyhole and then back out. Fincher then takes us through the kitchen, threading his camera through the handle of a coffee pot, ending up at the back door of the house. The camera, therefore, is *disembodied*.

The deliberately crafted spatio-temporalities of the spaces his characters occupy, and the actions they take within them, magnify the minutiae of what he exhibits. Fincher ascribes an otherworldly-observer quality to his camera, one that judges, ponders, and allows the audience to do the same. We are given the space and time to, in an illusory way, create our own understanding of what we are seeing. He possesses a style so grand, yet so unapologetically restrained in its delivery that it hypnotizes the eye and leaves the mind wondering what could be next, or what has already been – two very contradictory behaviors. We are given enough to feed our wishes to remain in the moment, but are also withheld information that leaves *just* enough to be desired. This enlargement of minutiae is what builds tension throughout *Panic Room* – Fincher does not allow the audience to take for granted information that he gives out. In *The Social Network* (2010), the unorthodox fast-paced editing (for Fincher, at least) – a function of Aaron Sorkin's beautifully combative dialogue – is counterweighted by significant breaks in momentum which are determined either by physical variation or characters learning new information about each other or the situations they find themselves in. Here, Fincher places his character before the cut – emphasizing their behaviors as an extension of their states of mind.

The spectators of Fincher's films are unwilling voyeurs yet, somehow, he brings us to the dark side. An example of this is present in the opening scene of the film, with a conversation between Mark Zuckerberg and his girlfriend (not for long) Erica at a table at a Harvard bar. We, the audience, are able to hear the conversation much before we can see it – it starts during the logos, almost as if Fincher cannot wait to push us into this situation. We begin the film with an assault on our senses, a conflict of fidelity among sound and image – something isn't, or at least, won't end up, right. A seemingly normal and innocent conversation between two ambitious college students turns into a vindictive, bitter, and hateful argument. As the tension escalates, Fincher pushes his relatively inert camera in closer to the faces of his characters – we are now intruding. *How is this scene more tense than some thrillers?* In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell, talking about cognitive spectatorial activities, denotes that "hypotheses arise in the course of time [and] may be held simultaneously and successively, as when one hypothesis simply replaces another" (Bordwell 37). What he is referring to here are the four stages of hypothesis formation devised by Meir Steinberg. The beginning of the conversation piques our ***curiosity***, involving us in this very personal interaction, but we cannot look away – not yet. Then, when tensions between the two subjects rises, when Mark continually corrects Erica on her description of the Harvard elite and ignores lines of questioning or jokes, we **anticipate** *something coming*. *Is she going to acknowledge what a dick he's being?* Now, we begin to assess the ***probability*** of either it going south, or ending up okay. Finally, we examine the ***exclusivity*** of what is happening in the scene – *is Mark seriously going to let this conversation get this bad?*

Examining this emblematic scene, we notice that all four of these stages are triggered in our heads chronologically. And so, here we are – on the dark side – as unapologetic voyeurs.

The Social Network exists as more than just a biopic – it is a deep look at morality in the modern day and the consequences that ambition and greed can have on actions of modest origins. More than that, though, this film performs a slow dissection of masculinity and is consistent with Fincher's longstanding tradition of interjecting style with his moral intentions as an artist. His films are commonly seen as containing themes of narcissism, obsession, anti-consumerism, notions of evil, and isolation. *The Social Network* explores these themes in a more subdued way than his other films. Fincher seems to be inspired by and tied to traditions of classical Hollywood filmmaking, with a pertinent and unique addition of digital filmmaking and emphasis on cinematic artifice as a substitute for hyper-realism. In *Realism and Realistic Representation in the Digital Age*, Gabriel F. Giralt mentions Fincher's work in the context of the challenges, advantages, and overall upshots of being a realist in the age of transition from analog film to digital. In an age where most of his contemporaries seem to be returning to more "traditional" mediums of producing cinematic art, or outright rejecting new ones, David Fincher's avid use and preference for digital film stands out. Giralt places him in the school of new age filmmakers for whom "reality is seen not as something to be captured in the purest way possible…but rather as something to be constructed" (Giralt 3). For Fincher, it seems, the realism in his films follow Sergei Eisenstein's hybrid approach, wherein recreation of reality lies in the way he can manipulate perceived reality for the most effective synthesis of meaning and the visual (Eisenstein).

In the case of this film, about a tech start-up, Fincher transfers the semantic and syntactic elements from these more stereotypical and intense thrillers into a story that doesn't really, at face value, appear as such (unapparent hybridity, maybe). Using film noir as a primary backdrop for most of his work allows for him to create such suspenseful and intense environments wherein

his narratives take place. Such a film does not prompt any noir-*like* expectations of generalizations, yet Fincher uses his expertise as a director to create the aura of one. We, as the audience, come in with certain expectations and are then subject to their subversion, establishing a completely novel set of hypotheses of what we are watching. Now granted, this is a fairly theoretical reading of what he's doing. If it is to be said more simply, Fincher performs an inalienable trick – by hilariously punishing us for caring this much about something seemingly so typical, he forces us to be perverts. We are enjoying something we shouldn't. Observing reality with such closeness, and then having the rug pulled out from underneath us is what Fincher enjoys about the process of filmmaking. He holds up a mirror to us, forcing us to discover, precisely, our darkest human flaws.

Fincher remains highly interested in studying human pathology and psychology in the contemporary age of technology, globalized society, and culture. He explores these notions in deeply bleak and sometimes satirical ways, hoping to strike chords of incongruence between what is shown and what is meant to be perceived. Unfortunately for Fincher, he often accomplishes the exact opposite. *Fight Club (1999)*, a film now infamous for its popularity amongst "film-bro" groups, serves as a critical representation of aggressive/toxic masculinity and its paradoxical resistance to modern-day consumerism – this is an important throughline that appears in most of Fincher's work. This film, and others in the modern day, have been misinterpreted as an example of the glorification of toxic masculinity and violent expressions of the male experience. Suzanne Clark attributes this film with "reasserting a masculine identity threatened by the feminization of American culture" in a tongue-in-cheek, satirical way. Fincher points the finger at his male dominated audience, criticizing their insecure gender identity and the apocryphal threat that is feminism during late-stage capitalism (Clark 413). Clark denotes

Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) as a “paragon of rage”, embodying misdirected male rage and inadequacy in modern society – someone that personifies anarchy that is so yearned for by the male race (Clarke 418). Fincher, undoubtedly, makes fun of these notions of the individualized man, the self-realized male adult, working towards a larger destructive cause in order to escape “oppression”. The characters in *Fight Club* strive for a ruinous future as part of a “cult” that promotes leaving the “cult” of the 9-to-5, but paradoxically, become a part of another one.

Audience reception to *Fight Club* has always been positive, and film discourse touts it as powerful commentary on modern society and masculinity in an age of technology and social provocation. Yet, something keeps Fincher up at night. There has been such contradictory readings of his film, a tendency for the self-prescribed “down-trodden” to identify with the destructive tendencies of its characters and to ignore the critical satire present at the helm of the narrative. People idolize Tyler Durden, taking his philosophy at face value and placing him above the average male in society – treated as an idol. Some people incorrectly interpret *Fight Club* as a sort of reflection on the perils of a declining patriarchy in the presence of increased feminization of media, culture, and politics. Fincher’s film spawned a whole new breed of so-called “alpha males” that have been disempowered by a capitalist society. The mirror Fincher attempts to hold up, as a result, breaks and is rendered irrelevant. “It’s impossible for me to imagine that people don’t understand Tyler Durden is a negative influence,” Fincher says, “I don’t know how to respond and I don’t know how to help them” (Collider). Since this infamy propagated itself among film circles, Fincher has developed a slight contempt for his audience – his satirical depiction of the “inadequate male” spawned so much irreverent idolization, it’s impossible to wipe that stain off. Fincher hid it well here, but he has a sort of amusing contempt for his audience.

Fight Club is undeniable in its impact on the industry and Fincher's career itself, but it also served as a cautionary tale about the fragility of his audiences, and himself. The Narrator in the film can be seen as a self-insert by Fincher, a ruminous manifestation of all the least favorite parts of himself – he projects these attributes on screen and his audience butchers them in reception. The diegses of Fincher's films contain some form of self-awareness and self-referentiality, and since the misdirected love for *Fight Club*, they also exemplify a crisis of representation in his work and philosophy. Coming back to *The Killer*, we notice how Fincher returns to his most well-known and appreciated stylistic signatures. This film, as mentioned at the start of this essay, comes off the back of *Mank*, a passion project for Fincher which was received rather poorly – both critically and by audiences. Surface layer readings of *The Killer* leave something important out of them, *how did Fincher get here*? For almost two hours, we are subject to Fincher's own rants as The Killer, another nameless self-insert much like *Fight Club*, and how he goes about his work. He did something wrong, and now he must fix it – but that doesn't stop him from throwing the criticism back in our faces. For the Killer, it is shooting people in the face, and for Fincher, it's making a drolly, slow, methodical thriller that promised more than Fincher just returning to his signature style within a small, contained, unfeeling atmosphere.

Did *8½* manifest with such reflexivity? It seems as though Fellini used the film as a pure exercise in creativity rather than a fully comprehensive exertion of self-reflexivity – Fincher, in *The Killer*, does a lot more than self-criticism. He performs a commentary on his own audience, on the filmgoing populace in general. He lambasts, specifically, the tendency for male audiences to idolize his characters, disregarding the irony that arises there. Fincher's cinematic assaults are being taken too literally, so he doubles down on this, by making something boring. *The Killer* is

boring, but it's meant to be. To quote Patsy Parisi from *The Sopranos*, another piece of media infamous for its audience's glorification of problematic characters – "it won't be cinematic". True self-reflection rarely is, and for Fincher, nothing is. That is precisely why, also, his style works so well. Fincher's themes complement his characters and visual style very subtly. His camera is restrained and deliberate, which is not the same as 'static'; the camera is used economically and efficiently, rather than ceremoniously. Fincher's assaults on his audience are born out of certain inherent principles of filmmaking, but he magnifies these to such a degree by emphasizing the minutiae of life. His editing is not imposing and his MO, overall, is not ceremonious. The engagement we experience when watching a Fincher film is born out of observing what is forbidden – even when it really isn't, he makes it feel as such. We feel uneasy and uncomfortable watching his movies, because we are supposed to – and he loves it, now more so than ever.

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