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*David Fincher's Dark Thrillers as Palimpsests of Evil in the Modern World*

## **Abstract**

David Fincher was born August 28, 1962 and is undoubtedly one of the most respected directors of today's Hollywood. As stated on the website of the Polish TV station TVP Kultura: "His movies, every time, are a unique visual, narrative, acting and sound experience." In his book on the artist, Mark Browning wrote: "There is a groundbreaking element in every one of Fincher's films". In his artistic choices, the director most often uses the thriller genre. He navigates this category perfectly, bending it as far as possible, creating diversified movies, while keeping his personal touch. Fincher has not graduated from any film school. He learned mainly through practice, watching others at work and watching movies.

One of the main recurring themes in the work of David Fincher is evil. The goal of this paper was to demonstrate that the director's movies are like palimpsests which, under the top layer that provides mass entertainment (although they are not easy to watch – dark, gloomy, often pessimistic), hide a deeper philosophical, anthropological and ethical meaning. An attentive, inquisitive viewer can see deeper additional contents, as if written with invisible ink in ancient texts — tough, serious and complex considerations and questions about evil.

The first chapter shows what evil is. It also presents various philosophical, theological and anthropological theories of evil. The second chapter shows the problem of ambiguity of the thriller genre. There is an attempt to show it as a broad category with its own poetics, giving ample opportunities to filmmakers. The third chapter contains a detailed biography of David Fincher. The fourth and the longest chapter is a closer look at seven thrillers directed by David Fincher (his other three movies are not thrillers). Individual films are assigned to three different categories. These are: movies about psychopathic killers (*Seven, Zodiac, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), movies about the Western socio-political system (*The Game, Fight Club*), as well as films about strong women (*Panic Room, Gone Girl* and, once again, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*).

*Seven* tells a story of two cops chasing a psychopathic killer who murders people committing the seven deadly sins. This is a movie about the aberrations of the mind of modern man, lost in the network of misread meanings; the director asks what is the origin of evil, but finds no answer. In the fact-based *Zodiac*, policemen and journalists pursue another serial killer who kills for fame. For years, he is teasing the public opinion by sending letters and boasting about his actions. The investigation, despite the efforts of the police and the press, drags on for years and changes the lives of the main characters who cannot forget the case. Why does the *Zodiac* murder? Why people kill other people? Through a complex structure of the movie, Fincher suggests that there are people who are able to kill for fame. He also says that in society, there is a very small percentage of psychopathic killers who murder without any reason. This kind of evil is rooted in the social tissue and probably cannot be destroyed. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, there are two murderers: a father and his son. These degenerates are tracked by a brilliant and inquisitive journalist and an antisocial hacker. In addition, the hacker is chased by the demons of the past and bad people from the present. The movie tells a story of hate, crime and punishment. In this film, the external medium of communication about evil is a complex aberrant network of relationship between the characters, which shows that people can behave like the most aggressive predators, but there are also people capable of sacrifice, generosity, courage and resisting evil. The main character of *The Game*, Nicholas Van Orton, is so lost in the capitalist world and in multiplying fortune, which he already has, that he has completely stopped paying attention to other people. The situation changes when his free-spirited brother invites him to the *game* on the border of fiction and reality, which forces Van Orton to redefine his entire life. This game is both fun and conspiracy. Some of its aspects are negative, or evil, such as violence, fraud and theft, but its final is a positive purification. In the capitalist system focused on the multiplication of goods, man turns out to be a weak point – the character required a therapy. This kind of system, in principal, can lead to the degeneration of personality, including the emotional structure of man. We therefore must reject its most dangerous manifestations, such as dehumanization and choosing wealth over people. *Fight Club*, perhaps the most important movie directed by David Fincher, also shows the negative aspects of the capitalist “rat race”, which leads the main protagonist, Jack, to lose his mind. In this movie, society is absurd, ridiculous and cowardly. People work in jobs they hate to buy things they don’t need. They are slaves to boring habits and unnecessary items. Tyler Durden, the anarchist hero, seems to say “This is not the way”. He suggests sabotage and deconstruction which lead to the enlightenment of “white collars” and absolute freedom from the ruthless dictate of the system. *Panic Room*, on the other hand, presents the fight between two women

and three thieves. A big multilevel house becomes a maze and a trap from which the mother and her daughter are trying to get out. The movie retains the unity of time, place and action. It shows the dedication of Meg Altman, the main character, who will do anything to save her diabetic daughter and herself. This strong woman is in a labyrinth, maze, alone against the threat. It triggers her primal instinct to defend her nest and shows that it is always possible to overcome evil, but it always leaves us with scars that are an indelible trace, a living memory of evil. This evil is a constant threat to our identity and our existence in the natural world. *Gone Girl* is a movie about the agony and ecstasy of marriage. Nick Dunne neglects and betrays his wife, who suddenly disappears. One of the main questions the director asks through the film structure is: did Nick kill her? The film is a puzzle which is slowly solved by the viewer. *Gone Girl* shows the dangers of relationship between two people, in which the girl, Amy Dunne, although extremely intelligent and determined, also proves to be disturbed and psychotic. In this movie, Fincher through narrative structure draws attention to the potential evil hiding in close human relations that are neglected, dominated by the egoism of partners who focus exclusively on their own needs. If two people in a relationships do not try hard enough, they let evil to their lives that is rooted in boredom, monotony, trauma and bad life.

The fifth and final chapter contains a summary. I made a conceptualization of evil in the analysed movies of David Fincher, explained what it means that his films are palimpsests and how it is visible.

In the movies on serial killers, the artist shows evil resulting from the aberration of the mind of modern man. In *Seven*, we can see wrongly understood religious fanaticism. The killer, John Doe, in his psychopathy decides that he is the sword of Jesus Christ and will turn the sins of mortals against them. However, Christ's understanding of love was completely different. The Zodiac killer in the movie of the same title confides in encrypted letters to the press that murdering for him is a source of erotic fulfilment. It is not known what causes greater pleasure to the killer: murder or many years of correspondence and phone banter with the police, the press and public opinion. Finally, in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Gottfried Vagner justifies his murders with Christianity, specifically parts of the Old Testament concerning ritual killings. Gottfried's son, Martin, whose father brought him through rapes and taught him how to kill, rapes for pleasure, while killing is meant to silence the victims. In his movies about serial killers, Fincher reveals personal and moral evil. He does not answer the question why some people have a lust for murder because the answer does not exist. Psychologists, psychiatrists and criminologists have not found "the gene of a serial killer".

In *Fight Club*, David Fincher perceives the Western socio-political system, based on corporate capitalism, as pathological, as it leads to the destruction of social ties and personal identity of individuals, which is personified by the anarchist protagonist with split personality. Similarly, in *The Game*, Nicholas Van Orton, as a result of multiplying his capital, becomes more and more callous and isolated from the world in his solitary and self-centered existence. Both main characters as well as narrative structures are a vivisection of the problem of evil generated by social structures. As the stories progress and as the main characters develop, the viewer can see their personalities to a full extent. At the same time, we can gradually see the socio-structural sources of evil that affect individuals and multiply evil in the society, “infecting” other people and subsequent social organizations. In *The Game*, the diagnosis as to the origin of evil is similar to the one in *Fight Club*, but the overtone of the movie is not so pessimistic and anarchic in nature. The end of the *The Game* leads to a purification, the source of which is family and personal relationships.

In his films about strong female characters, Fincher shows evil from the female perspective. Meg Altman, the protagonist of *Panic Room*, must fight her own weakness (at one point, her daughter says that her mother is “mad”), her daughter’s illness (diabetes), and finally fights with three attackers determined to break into the safe inside the panic room of Meg’s new house. Here, we can see culpable evil that is present in the world — illness (physical and mental), as well as moral evil (burglars). Lisbeth Salander, the girl with the dragon tattoo, also clashes with immoral people. In childhood and in later life, she suffered many extreme forms of trauma. Salander responds to evil with evil and there is nothing noble about it. Her revenge, however, seems right and can be justified. The girl has her own morality and she is not interested in the opinion of others or the Commandments of God. Regardless of her actions, Lisbeth Salander is a positive character in the movie about the horrible and often incomprehensible world. Finally, in *Gone Girl*, Amy Dunne does not fight with evil, but multiplies it herself. Although her husband, Nick, is not without fault, her vengeance seems to be disproportionate. The main character is a very intelligent and incisive woman, yet she is also mentally ill and dangerous. Her plot is well-thought out and almost perfect. The public thinks Amy is not a scheming killer, but a victim and heroine. From the religious perspective, we could say that Amy is possessed, just like John Doe from *Seven*. Thus, it could be demonic evil which, as is apparent from the movie, can pour into ordinary life thanks to trivial, minor evil deeds in social relations, such as neglecting your wife, marital betrayal or bad intentions. Perhaps if Nick Dunne behaved with dignity, Amy’s psychosis would not be revealed.

The aim of this paper is to show that the message directed to the mass audience can carry a deeper meaning, and the commercial visibility of cultural works does not exclude the artistic or intellectual ambitions of the creator nor the complexity of the message itself. David Fincher once said that he would like to make films that he would like to watch. He once said, "I don't know how much movies should entertain. I'm always interested in movies that *scar*". With his dark films, Fincher wants to move, shock and intrigue to stimulate the viewer for insight. In the analysed movies, the tool of this reflection is the quasi-genre form of thriller, while the content is evil operating in the contemporary world of Western civilization. Fincher is a pessimist, he believes that evil is an inherent part of the world. Due to the prevalence of this theme it can be concluded that, in his opinion, there is simply more evil than good. Perhaps as an artist dealing with visual arts he has been dominated by the visual attractiveness of evil and that is why his movies prove that evil seems to be prevailing, as it is more visible and attracts the viewer's attention. However, at the end of the tunnel there is always light. This final hope is also visible in Fincher's works.