

You better be f—ing serious: David Fincher on directing

"It was great. It's an adult movie, it's f—ing hard-R, and they were getting out of my way and let me do what I wanted to do," is what director David Fincher has to say of the experience of working on his new thriller, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. FincherFanatic caught up with him during the final days of editing.

First things first, David Fincher isn't one for vanity press. He didn't enter the movie business to become a celebrity. And that may be a reason why it is still rare and hard to get an interview with the man – particularly on camera – perhaps moreso if you are writing a blog about him. "You know, I don't even like looking at my driver's license," Fincher says. "If I had wanted to be a celebrity, I wouldn't have picked this lonely job, that requires you to stay in a room in the dark, watching TV all the time." The very reason he started out directing music videos and commercials was *because* there was no screen credit, just a convenient opportunity to learn the craft and get paid for it. In internet times, to see these

works from the past rear their heads is not much to Fincher's liking. Which is why our conversation begins with his blunt question: Why would anyone in their right mind write a blog about him?

Fincher doesn't like to read about himself, nor does he like to be recognized. A two-fold discomfort: For one, Fincher doesn't want to be made aware of expectations towards his work. And understandably so: "There are so many things I wouldn't have done, if I had listened to that," he says. And as for being recognized, he adds: "You know, I used to live next door to George Lucas. When I was ten years old, he was the guy who had done *THX 1138*. By the time I was twelve, he was the guy who did *American Graffiti*. By the time I was fifteen, he had done *Star Wars*. By the time *Star Wars* came out, this guy couldn't go anywhere in town. He couldn't walk into some place and not be the focus of it. One of the things I like about being a director is, when your plane is late, you are doing homework. Because you are sitting there in the lounge, listening to people talk. That's your job. When you become the focus, when people feel like 'I can't act like myself, because that's the guy who did whatever', all of a sudden you lose an advantage."

It's an intriguing motive for Fincher's publicity aversion. Yet each Oscar nomination and the anticipated roll-out of Sony's marketing campaign for *Dragon Tattoo* are not going to make that any easier – let alone Fincher's likely next, Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*; a 100+ million dollar CG family adventure.

Fincher feels awkward at the thought, that he himself could have become an icon for a young generation of

filmmakers. "Now, I understand Spielberg, Hitchcock, even to a certain extent George Lucas," he says – and thinks. But whether he likes it or not, 'Fincher' has long become a brand name. Still the director upholds his protest: "I don't want to be a Winchell's Donut. Even if my last name is 'Winchell'. I want to be able to make something like *Zodiac*. I mean, shouldn't your movies, if they are truly personal, change the way you change? Every seven years all of the cells in our bodies change, everything is in this process of evolution; so the notion that the director is a brand—?"

Well. Coincidentally, the theatrical trailer for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* reads, 'a David Fincher film', and 'directed by David Fincher'. Fincher's disapproval isn't very well hidden: "None of the trailers that I ever cut had my f—ing name on them. As I never tire of telling the marketing department, 'Remember, *Se7en* was from the director of *Se7en*, too, but it didn't say it on the poster.' So I work hard to fight against whatever my brand is. I would like my brand to stand for 'works really hard', 'tries to make it as good as he possibly can'. If the brand is, 'it's gonna be dark and grainy,' I have no interest in that. It's just too reductive. It's just too stupid."

On the other hand, no matter how 'reductive' and 'stupid' these branding activities may arguably be, they are a good share, as Fincher admits, of why – despite debates over running time, final cut and his infamously uncompromising nature – he keeps getting greenlights. "There is no doubt that that is part of why they put up with me. I am not easy to get along with. But I am saying to you, 100 million dollars, that's the pain threshold in Hollywood.

When you are talking about a 100 million dollars, you better be f—ing serious. When we're talking about 40 million dollars, that is a low to medium budget movie."

Yes, 40 million. That was last year's Oscar favorite *The Social Network*. Now, *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* is looking at an estimated budget of exactly that 100 million dollar Hollywood pain threshold. And you can rest assured: Fincher *is* 'f—ing serious'.

At the time of our meeting, Fincher and his Academy Award winning editors, Angus Wall and Kirk Baxter, are working around the clock to get to that final cut – against a definitive deadline a mere two months away. "We gotta have a movie out in December! We're not making a movie, we're making a release date," Fincher says. And he's only half joking.

If you are familiar with Stieg Larsson's best-selling Millennium trilogy, it appears a perfect match of director and material. The first book, *Dragon Tattoo*, is a brutal thriller, centered around a murder mystery, riddled with themes of misogyny, rape, racism, serial killing – "...and ultimately it is a kind of love story," Fincher adds, "in some weird f—ed up way. It's not a serial killer movie. That is one of the elements of it, but it is really those two characters [Lisbeth Salander and Mikael Blomkvist]. What he and she have is really interesting. It cuts across generations, it's very non-conventional in Hollywood terms, of what gets them into the sack and, ultimately, what breaks them up."

The novels have sold in excess of 60 million copies, a graphic-novel adaptation is on the way, a Lisbeth Salander inspired H&M collection is due in December: The film is

riding a wave of mainstream attention, which almost should guarantee a box-office hit. Yet it is looking at a running time of just more than two and a half hours, an R-rating, and promises to be the 'feel bad movie of Christmas.' And whether that is good or bad or completely irrelevant for Fincher's release, there's already a series of Swedish-language films based on the same trilogy of novels.

"I know," Fincher says, "we are playing into the European, and certainly the Swedish, predisposition that this is just a gigantic, monetary landgrab. You're coopting a phenomenon. Now, there is plenty of reason to believe that we can make it equally entertaining of a movie. But the resentment is already engendered, in a weird way. It's bizarre. But then there are British television shows, like *The Office*, that are being remade as American television shows. And we speak the same f—ing language." This is just as true for another of Fincher's slated projects: a reimagining of BBC's *House of Cards*.

But Hollywood is a different ballgame, as Fincher insists. In Sweden you have highly educated people, guys with Master's Degrees, pulling focus, working multiple positions. In Hollywood you have highly skilled but highly specialized people. "The American film industry is like the American auto industry: You got people who do one thing, and they do it great, and you don't have to tell them how to do that one thing. But you need a lot of people, because everybody does one thing. One guy does this, the other guy does this, the next guy does this. On my movies, Dolly Grip is important. I mean: We will wait for Michael Brennan. We want to start shooting at the beginning of January. Brennan is not

available until February? So we'll start in February! He can save you three days of shooting over the course of the production, he's that good. When you are in sync with somebody like that, and they have your kind of aesthetic." Fincher spontaneously swings out of his chair and stages a scene. "I can say, 'I want the camera to start here and it's going to come around, and it's going to be over the shoulder.' And [Brennan] is watching, and he knows, that camera is 33 inches off the ground."

American films are more expensive, but they are (often) for a reason. "We shot 78 days in Sweden, and I believe by the end of it the Swedish crew saw the difference between take 6 and take 30. At the beginning they were definitely rolling their eyes. They were like, 'Hey, we made the first *Dragon Tattoo* for 15 million bucks', and I said, 'I realize that. But we're doing something different. It's going to be handled in a different way.' So at the beginning the Swedes were very much like, 'How could you possibly take this long to make a movie?' And by the middle of the shoot they were like, 'I get what the difference is. I get what it is to have these choices.'"

Nonetheless, the experience appears to inspire Fincher. He has talked about digital filmmaking on various occasions before; about the revolution in computer technology; about highly affordable post-production software. "I think the Swedish film industry is probably more like the future. The directors of the future are going to come from YouTube. I'm telling you, Steven Spielberg tells me, 'check this out!' – and he's watching YouTube. People are sending him links to stuff. Here's some dude in Argentina, who's made some

short, and he's watching it on Vimeo or whatever. It's totally decentralized."

Talking about his Netflix mini-series *House of Cards*, naturally Fincher had more to say than mentioning it as just another example of a Hollywood makeover. The original was a 1990 BBC produced series about political power, ambition and corruption. "It was a brilliant TV show," Fincher says. "But today is a completely different universe. *House of Cards* was made during Thatcherism. It was a stiff-upper-lip look at parliamentary politics. Our thing is: Twitter, Newscorp, hacking – and the notion of politics when you stand for nothing. Politics above all. And that was the thing that was transposable, nothing about the actual plot. But the notion of a guy, who can be in the middle of a conversation, turn to the audience and go, 'This is what pisses me off about people like this guy.' – 'Watch. This is how politics works.' That's what it's designed to do. It's the notion of, let me show you why politics is necessary: because that's how you validate people within a bureaucracy. The collective confusion is so much more important than singular clarity."

David Fincher taking on an up-to-date, sharp-witted political drama? Sounds like an exciting prospect. It also sounds like a new artistic stance for Fincher, whose movies so far seem to have made a point of avoiding being overtly (or in any way, really) political. And certainly Fincher tackling politics will be anything but shiny propaganda. "There is nothing optimistic about it, not in the least," Fincher confirms. "But it's fun. It's very fun. It's interesting in a good way. It's the kind of shit we should be talking about, which is: Why are we pretending that there are these choices?"

Shooting for the series will kick off in March/April 2012, with an anticipated release some time next fall. "It's going to be on Netflix, so once we have five hours it's going to be on. So far the pilot is the only script we have, and it's great. It's by Beau Willimon, who wrote *The Ides of March*," Fincher says. (And this, listen, Fanatics:) "I don't know what my other responsibilities will be but I am going to do as many of them as I can."

In his recent Vanity Fair portrait of David Fincher, *The Social Network* screenwriter Aaron Sorkin had this to say: "The rumor about David is that he's gruff, harsh, and difficult to work with. The truth about David is that he's warm, honest, and an exceptionally generous collaborator. He's fine with the rumor." Going by every minute I was granted, I can only confirm Sorkin's positive observations. David Fincher is intriguingly easy to be around – for all I can truthfully say, this is true when you don't work with him –, and aside from him being a personal idol and favorite director of mine, he's a bundle of trenchant anecdotes and sharp-wit; dedicated to best-possible results and keenly enthusiastic about what he does. As much as Fincher hates branding and any kind of three-words-or-less approach, if I had to pick a label to describe my impression, I'd say 'Fincher loves movies'. Which can lead to curious conflicts.

"For the most part, people who are in the movie business don't go to movies," Fincher is ready to admit. "It's a pain in the ass. I have to be honest, I saw *Moneyball* for the first time last weekend. And I was like, 'How did this get to this point, where I am sitting in a theater, watching many friends of mine's movie, weeks after it opened?' – I just

don't have time! I didn't get into the movie-business not to appreciate movies, and yet I find myself in the position, where I literally don't have the extra time to go see a movie. I saw the trailer for *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* and I loved that trailer. I love David Dencik, love these actors, love the way it's photographed. But it's cut too fast. It's not appreciative enough of the hard work that's been put into it." It takes Fincher a second to realize that he got sidetracked. He wraps the thought up with a sigh: "So you find yourself in a situation where you haven't seen a movie in a year. It's weird."

But Fincher's love for cinema goes much deeper than consumption and enjoyment. In his own work, it's about making the most of every single frame. "I never fall in love with anything. I really don't, I am not joking. 'Do the best you can, try to live it down,' that's my motto. Just literally give it everything you got, and then know that it's never going to turn out the way you want it to, and let it go, and hope that it doesn't return. Because you want it to be better than it can ever turn out. Absolutely, 1000 percent, I believe this: Whenever a director friend of mine says, 'Man, the dailies look amazing!' ... I actually believe that anybody, who thinks that their dailies look amazing doesn't understand the power of cinema; doesn't understand what cinema is capable of."

Fincher has been hailed (and snubbed) for his visual virtuosity, his films have been recognized and awarded for their writing, editing, and cinematography – and of course I make use of my opportunity to compliment the director on behalf of countless fans on the extraordinary ambition

evident in his work. Yet surprisingly, Fincher feels tethered to it.

"Look, it's sweet," he says. "I am happy that people look at the way things go together or how they fit, because I look at that as my fundamental responsibility. I don't pride myself in technical virtuosity or finesse. I'm crippled by it. Brad Pitt said a funny thing. He said, he watches me watch the monitor, and 'I can actually see you flinch, when something...' – Because I find myself, I'm watching and I'm in the moment, and I am watching her... and I am watching her eyes... and she looks over to him... and then all of a sudden this thing happens, and you go: 'Oh God! If I could just get rid of this distraction.'"

"I picked everything in that room, I picked the chairs, I picked the wall-color, I put the lights where they are, I was here yesterday, making sure that everything balances. I have done all these things in my head, and then when you can actually do that and loose yourself in what's going on, and be concentrating on how one person is telling this story, and they are giving this moment, and the other person is picking it up at exactly the right place, and you are lost in it, and all of a sudden – doink! – this thing happens. You cut to camera and the shot should be three millimeters wider or something. And you go, 'God, if I could just carry the energy of that thing into the next shot.' So I appreciate that people don't have to go through that. They can see the final thing for what the intent is. They can be lost in it. But I'd be lying if I said it turned out exactly the way I imagined."

Which of course reminds me of an infamous Fincher quote, that has come to be one of my favorites over the

years. As I come to find out, it holds just as much truth as it doesn't: "People will say, 'There are a million ways to shoot a scene,' but I don't think so. I think there're two, maybe. And the other one is wrong."

"Yeah, well the context for this was – and I was being funny – I kind of don't know how not to do it the way that I would do it," Fincher says. Within a second, he is up, staging another scene, making his point. "You watch what is happening here, then this person comes in, they do this, they say this, then she has to enter, and they have already talked about this. So we are seeing this from their point of view, so we need to be over them, certainly for a lot of it, and then we need to figure out a way to keep her at a distance." Fincher sits back down, retracing his argument. "So, yeah, I think that was in response to somebody saying, 'Don't you think there are a lot of different ways to do this?' And I was like, 'I don't know of them.' It's the horrible thing: You get into the interpersonal side of making movies, and the movie studio says, 'I don't know how to see your point of view'." Fincher chuckles. "I get paid to see my point of view, I get paid to see it one way. And I get paid to be able to elucidate what that perspective is. I am fundamentally against this notion of auteurism. I think it worked for those guys. I think the Yippiekayee guys from the 1960s got a lot of mileage out of it. But your point of view is all you've got. Your take on things. And so I was saying that, no, you cannot do anything other than what you do. Martin Scorsese once said an interesting thing to me, 'The things you do badly are as much part of your style as the things you do well.' And I can look at stuff that's been done by other filmmakers, and I

go, 'Why are they doing it this way? Why is it so simplistic?' And that may be the thing that this filmmaker looks at and goes, 'I have to, at this moment, be so blunt and so simple in the presentation, so this is what I am going to do.' And that may be the thing that rubs me raw: That I may look at it and go, 'Ugh, why do you have to be so close? Why wouldn't this shot include another person? Why wouldn't there be a move to it?' But they may go, 'Look, I can do all this stuff around it, and in the end what I really want is to not have anything embroidered or filigreed around this moment.' So that's a choice that they make. That's their thing. I may look at that and go, well, that's that storyteller's shortcomings, is they don't chose to make this moment, or juice this moment, or pull this moment – but that's what it is."

"Anyway, I think it was something I said about an idea of perspective. And I was basically trying to say, 'I don't think you cannot have a perspective.' You answer 3000 questions a day, all about, what do you want? What do you want to see? Where do you want to see it from? Where should we put the money? Should we paint this with nine layers of fucking lackeur, or should we...? – And that's what you get paid to do. You get paid to say, 'This is where we are going to spend the money, and this is where we are not.' Because we don't get to build the whole f—ing world, we only get to build the pieces of it that we see. So, no I don't think there's a thousand ways to skin a cat – I think there is a couple. And most of the time you shoot for two or three different ways, and you go, 'Duh!, here's the one. This is how it shakes out'."

We already know that for David Fincher directing is more than drawing neat little pictures and showing them to the

camera man. Directing means painting a picture with a walkie-talkie and a crew of 80 people holding the brush. Directing means total control over everything the audience sees and hears for two hours; forging their experience of the story. And this requires the filmmaker's attention to the whole and to detail in every department and along every step of the process.

"There are a lot of people, who don't understand what staging is. It's the most important thing directors do, and not a lot of people realize that. Not a lot of people know why they like Steven Spielberg. They don't know the difference between having their eye directed, and having coverage edited for them. But the truth is," Fincher continues, "film is too expensive to teach. You can't teach how to make Hollywood movies. What you can do is make people look at the language of cinema. Why do we need a close-up? I got a master, I got an over, I got close-up – what's the best, what's the most effective way to move people who are watching it, who don't know what this person is or don't know what the circumstances are; how do I engage them? And you can do that anywhere. You don't have to go to London, you don't have to go to Pinewood, you don't have to go to SC. Creativity happens on the fringe. It does. It's too bad. But you can get there. Start in the fringe, meet those people, write your scripts. I always wanted to give a lecture at filmschools. You go in and you see all these fresh faces, and you say: 'You! Stand up, tell me your story. Tell me what your film is going to be about.' And they start, and you go: 'Shut up and sit the fuck down!' And if they do, you go: 'You're not ready.' Because the film business is filled with

shut-up and sit-the-fuck-down. You got to be able to tell your story in spite of sit-down and shut-the-fuck-up. If you are going to let something like that derail you, what hope do you have against transportation department? What hope do you have against development executives?"

To me, that is the essential Fincher: Trust yourself, trust your perspective on your story. Fincher has no qualms to admit there are commercials he has done for the paycheck. Nowadays, however, he signs on only if there is a high enough concept, something in it he wants to do – and he's ready to walk away if there's not.

"I am nothing if I am not honest to people," Fincher says. "We are meeting with commercial clients here and I will say, 'Here's what I am going to do, and I am not joking, and I am not teasing, I am not just backing you off to be incendiary. This is what I know how to do, this is what I want to do with this. And if you don't want to do it, don't hire me.'"

It's true for his commercial work, yet you can easily see this is true for his films as well. *Zodiac* was a passion project. *Fight Club*, as Fincher says, was 'the giant movie studio version of a movie that should never be made by a movie studio'. And as for *Se7en*, producer Arnold Kopelson thought Fincher took 'a perfectly good genre movie and turned it into a foreign film'.

"I know that I am true to the things I am interested in," Fincher says. "I like stories to unfold in certain kinds of ways, and I don't like shorthand, and I don't like to be told who's evil. I don't want to know who the villain is, I don't want to know who the hero is. If it happens over time that's great. You know the thing is, with Robert McKee and these people,

who go, let's distill it down. The thing is: Let's not distill storytelling down. That's what makes it so interesting. I'm telling you, I'm reading *Se7en*, and about thirty pages in I'm going, 'What the fuck? The old cop, the young cop...' I throw it across the room and call my agent, I go, 'Why would you send me this shit?' He goes, 'No, no, no, no! Read through to the end.' So I read it, ...and all of a sudden John Doe gives himself up. And I know there's f—ing twenty pages left. But I'm going: 'How do you...? You can't do this here! This can't be done.' That was fun! To be in that place, to be sitting in the theater and going: 'He's covered in blood, he walks into the police station? That's crazy! This movie could be starting, it could certainly start over, but it could be going for another two hours. Where are we in this?' That was Andy's [*Se7en* scribe Andrew Kevin Walker's] creation. It's not the seven deadly sins; that's easy. It was that! And all of a sudden, once you realize there's the head in the box, you go, 'Oh my God, this is not going to be one of those movies. It's a totally different thing.' It's like, now this guy has to deal with evil. He's no longer dealing with plot devices – he's dealing with pure evil."

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo opens December 21.