

David Fincher's *The Killer*: Why this film? Why now?

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Veteran US film director David Fincher's *The Killer*, with Michael Fassbender in the lead role, was released last year. Based on the French graphic novel series by Matz (Alexis Nolent) and Luc Jacamon and with a screenplay by Andrew Kevin Walker, the film has been available on Netflix since November.

The Killer follows an unnamed paid assassin (Fassbender). In the opening sequence, set in Paris, he awaits the opportunity to dispatch a man in a hotel room across the street from his temporary quarters. When the moment comes, however, he misses his target, killing a woman instead. This sets in motion a dramatic chain of events, as it seems to follow that having botched the job, he must be eliminated.

On returning to his refuge in the Dominican Republic, the hired killer discovers his home has been broken into and his girlfriend attacked. He sets about tracking down her assailants. In the process, he kills a taxi driver and his own "handler," who has betrayed him, and the latter's secretary.

In Florida, the assassin has a fierce fight with the first of his girlfriend's attackers, "The Brute," guarded by a pit bull, but he eventually prevails. Under very different circumstances, in a fashionable dining spot in Beacon, New York, he encounters and also defeats in the end the second of the aggressors, "The Expert." He then confronts the daunting task of coming face to face with the original client, who has paid to have "the trail ... scrubbed," a billionaire venture capitalist.

The Killer is not a good film, it is misguided from beginning to end. Why should anyone care about the central character or most of the others?

Fassbender's killer is not an exceptional individual, according to his own narration. To avoid being seen is "impossible in the 21st century," so at least he strives to "avoid being memorable." He dresses in the blandest possible fashion, eats in fast-food restaurants and so forth. His various aliases are all the names of characters from popular television series. To break into a high-security building, he orders a few items from Amazon, collecting them at one of the company's pickup locations.

He explains his selfish, misanthropic outlook early on:

Of those who like to put their faith in mankind's inherent goodness, I have to ask, based on what, exactly?

From the beginning of history, the few have always exploited the many. This is the cornerstone of civilization. The blood in the mortar that binds all bricks. Whatever it takes, make sure you're one of the few, not one of the many.

My process is purely logistical, narrowly focused by design. I'm not here to take sides. It's not my place to formulate any opinion. ... No one who can afford me needs to waste time winning me to some cause. I serve no God or country. I fly no flag. I go about things the wrong way? If I'm effective, it's because of one simple fact. I don't give a fuck.

Stick to your plan. Anticipate, don't improvise. Trust no one. Never yield an advantage. Fight only the battle you're paid to fight. Forbid empathy. Empathy is weakness. Weakness is vulnerability. Each and every step of the way, ask yourself, "What's in it for me?"

In typical contemporary fashion, *The Killer* does not judge or criticize this cynicism, it merely passes it on. Unhappily, the film's general approach itself owes a little bit to the same type of coldness and estrangement.

Presumably, in responding to his girlfriend's suffering, the killer deviates from his principles, but not by very much. He concludes by the end, in fact, that he is "one of the many." He moves laterally a few inches, but not enough to make him complex or interesting as a human being.

Hired killers like these are fantasies, with their automaton-like precision and fanatical attention to detail, so impressive to a certain social type. Petty bourgeois intellectuals tend to identify this sort of figure and condition with "lack of constraint," something they feel strongly, and even genuine "freedom."

Fincher, born in 1962, grew up in Marin County, California, north of San Francisco. From 1981 to 1984, he worked for George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic. From 1984 to 1991, he directed many music videos. His first feature film

was *Alien*³ (1992), part of the successful science fiction franchise. He earned a reputation for violence and a fascination with anti-social behavior, with *The Game* (1997), *Fight Club* (1999), *Panic Room* (2002) and *Zodiac* (2007).

The director suffers from some of the difficulties of his generation of artists and intellectuals, coming of age in the Reagan-Thatcher era and then the supposed “end of history” that followed the dissolution of the USSR. The blasts of bourgeois triumphalism did not eradicate radicalism and anti-establishment attitudes entirely, but they tended to intimidate the artists and block them from examining the social order with any degree of dedicated attention. The ideological bombast of the time encouraged a non-committal, socially indifferent kind of writer or director.

There are considerably more minuses than pluses in Fincher’s body of work. *The Social Network* (2010) and the episodes of the television series *House of Cards* Fincher directed demonstrate that he can offer social criticism and that he has eyes and a brain. Each of his films has intriguing and even insightful moments.

Mank (2020), about the production of Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941), was an opportunity for Fincher to apply critically his obviously strong opinions and feelings to the film industry and American culture in general. Instead, he chose to launch an attack on Welles, depicting him essentially and absurdly, as we wrote, as “an abrasive pest, an interloper in the creative process.”

It is difficult to discern an important recurring theme in Fincher’s work, aside from the predilection for brutal, irrational behavior, whose social sources, however, go largely unexplored. A volume of interviews (edited by Laurence F. Knapp) with the filmmaker reinforces that view.

Fincher is often described flatteringly as a “stylist.” What does that mean? He is also referred to as a “perfectionist” in many regards. But in what cause? The separation of form or style from significant substance leads to trivia or worse. No important artist has ever made “stylishness” a principal aim. Such concerns are the products of periods of intellectual decay.

Fincher has identified certain alienated moods, but, as noted, offered little insight into their origin or trajectory. Perhaps speaking for the director, actor Edward Norton referred to the state of mind of his character in *Fight Club*: “It isn’t just aimlessness we feel; it’s deep skepticism. It’s not slackerdom; it’s profound cynicism, even despair, even paralysis, in the face of an onslaught of information and technology.”

Knapp in the introduction to the collection of interviews, asserts that in *Fight Club*, “Fincher confronted the ontological legacy of postmodernism—the fragmented, alienated consumer/corporate drone lost in time, space, and his own consciousness—to bemoan the dehumanizing condition of late-stage capitalism imposed on any male born after 1962.” He may have “bemoaned,” but Fincher has so far contributed little understanding of the condition, merely registering, in his own

words, the “frustration,” the “inability to get an answer.”

In a review of *Gone Girl* (2014), a WSWS reviewer commented that

like most of his postmodern colleagues, Fincher’s style hides his shortsighted, limited vision of humanity and society; an outlook often confused with a criticism of capitalism, corporations, contemporary civilization and modern marriage. Beyond the issue of misogyny, what *Gone Girl* reveals once again is a general misanthropy, a vague contempt for the characters. The ability to generate a pervasive darkness and the desire to make people uncomfortable are not sufficient ingredients for a compelling work of art.

In regard to Fincher’s most recent film, a *Rolling Stone* critic suggests that the film is “a lean, mean throwback to the glory days of real pulp fiction. Because despite the A-list star, the A-plus soundtrack, and the ace supporting cast ... *The Killer* is really just a modern version of a vintage B movie. Mention this to Fincher and Walker, and both will agree that that’s exactly what they were going for.”

Fincher, according to *Rolling Stone*, “recalls going to Netflix before they began production and telling them, ‘I’m going to do it stripped-down. This is a Don Siegel movie. ... It’s *Charley Varrick*, *Get Carter*, *The Mechanic*. This is meant to be ballistic.’ Even the rapid-fire credits sequence that opens the film was meant to evoke the tough-guy procedurals of yesteryear. ‘The style can be described as: a Quinn-Martin production [famous for television series during the 1960s and 1970s],’ he says, bursting into laughter. ‘It’s *Mannix* chic.’”

But the “unpretentiousness” here is itself pretentious. American film directors who made B movies, like Siegel, did what they could within the studio system confines, with sincerity, often injecting elements of subversiveness and non-conformism into their films. Fincher, who has free rein to say what he likes, self-consciously and ostentatiously restricts himself to the chilly and banal.

Fincher is capable of serious things, but he has not done many of them yet.



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