

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
October 2014

Gone Girl (dir. David Fincher, 2014)

On Camera

Nick: Ben Affleck: If you like him here, I'd recommend him in *Changing Lanes* (02)
Amy: Rosamund Pike: Bond Girl in *Die Another Day* (02), Jane Bennet in *Pride & Prejudice* (05), subtly brilliant as a dim bulb in *An Education* (09)
Det. Boney: Kim Dickens: Mostly known for TV: *Deadwood*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Treme*
Margo: Carrie Coon: Honey in Steppenwolf's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 2010
Tanner: Tyler Perry: Reliably good in "straight" roles, as in *The Family that Preys* (08)
Desi: Neil Patrick Harris: Often cast in film or TV comedies, Broadway musicals

Off Camera

Cinematography Jeff Cronenweth: Four with Fincher; creepy thriller *One Hour Photo* (02)
Editing Kirk Baxter: Five with Fincher, including his TV series *House of Cards* (13–)
Musical Score: Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross: Three with Fincher; Oscar for *Social Network*

Previous features from director David Fincher, and how they might relate to *Gone Girl*

*Alien*³ (1992) – A troubled, atmospheric sequel that complicated fans' attachment to the heroine
Seven (1995) – Broody story of a criminal mastermind pushing a cocky urban guy's every button
The Game (1997) – Thriller about cool blonde luring cocky urban guy into a dangerous puzzle
Fight Club (1999) – Apocalyptic social satire told from an extraordinarily unreliable perspective
Panic Room (2002) – Suspense thriller in which a domestic space becomes a claustrophobic trap
Zodiac (2007) – Fact-based serial-killer drama where only one man feels he has cracked the code
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (2008) – Broody romance told on two different timelines
The Social Network (2010) – Facebook's birth, told as megalomaniac's revenge on lesser beings
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2011) – Detective story with cryptic, hyper-competent heroine

If you enjoyed *Gone Girl*...

Laura (1944) – Swoony film-noir, halfway between *Rebecca* and *The Maltese Falcon*, in which a detective investigates a beautiful woman's murder, only to learn she may still be alive
Leave Her to Heaven (1945) – Technicolor landmark in which a woman's possessive love of her husband leads her to insane acts, including killing herself but framing him for the murder

Facts about *Gone Girl* you may appreciate...

Reese Witherspoon bought the rights to *Gone Girl* in hopes of playing Amy herself. She enticed David Fincher to the project, who confessed he had a different type of actress in mind. She stayed on as a lead producer, as she has done for several films lately, including *Wild*.

Novelists rarely get asked to adapt their own books to film, especially without prior experience.

The leads' casting purposefully took advantage of the actors' own personas: Affleck as a target of tabloid attention, and Pike's status as a vaguely familiar face unknown to most Americans.

Pike has cited the late Carolyn Bessette Kennedy as an influence on her performance as Amy.

For his part, Affleck studied men accused of killing their wives, focusing on Scott Peterson.

When asked by *Film Comment* to describe the tone of the film, Fincher characterized it as "high seriousness in little dishes of candy." The movie earned the biggest opening weekend of any of his films, almost doubling *The Social Network's* and more than tripling *Dragon Tattoo's*.

Broad conversation topics...

Perspective: The book alternates between chapters narrated by Nick and those narrated by Amy. To an extent, the movie mimics this tactic, but how else did you notice it luring you into the character's perspectives? How fully did you get inside them? Did lighting, music, sound, camerawork, or other elements shift in important ways between Amy's scenes and Nick's?

Genre: Linda Holmes at NPR describes the first half of *Gone Girl* as a mystery, the second half as a thriller, even though we tend to discuss these genres as though they are the same. Did your interest in *Gone Girl* slacken or deepen once you learned what happened to Amy?

Polarized Opinions: Fincher to *Film Comment*: "When the people I've shown the movie come out of it, they are either Team Amy or Team Nick. Team Amy doesn't have a single quibble about her behavior, and Team Nick doesn't have any problems with his." Admitting this may be a canny marketing mantra, did your response tilt one of these ways, or somewhere else?

The Misogyny Question: Flynn frequently creates abrasive female characters. Amy does some despicable things to others and herself. Some readers and viewers balk at the way *Gone Girl* repeatedly uses false allegations of rape and domestic violence as a plot point, in a culture already too prone to denying such traumas or blaming the victim when they are reported. For all these reasons, *Gone Girl* and Flynn's work in general have drawn charges of being anti-feminist or anti-woman. Flynn insists she wants to restore flawed, even villainous women to a popular culture that has overdosed on flat, innocent, idealized types. Where do you fall on these issues? Is there a better way of framing them than "Is *Gone Girl* misogynist?"

Control: David Fincher is a famously meticulous director, requiring dozens of takes of several shots, fetishizing each detail in his frames, gravitating to plots that often privilege obsessives or masterminds. Teo Bugbee has written that the film seems to favor Amy not just over Nick but over the "nicer" women like Margo and Det. Boney, possibly because Fincher relates to her drive, megalomania, and "stage managing" impulses. Did you feel the film admires Amy in this sense? Which characters did you feel goaded to sympathize with, and to what effect?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Start and Finish: After seeing *Gone Girl* the first time, I remembered the first and last shot of Amy's head from Nick's perspective as being the same image—but in fact her hair is shorter at the end, meaning Nick still has this "image" of her even after all that's happened. What do you think of these moments? What does it mean to start and end the film from Nick's POV?

Establishing Shots: The shots of Missouri underneath the opening credits are serene as shot but disconcerting as edited: they are cut together quickly and harshly, with the actors' and artists' names on screen for unusually brief instants. The sound contrasts between each shot are often quite sharp, even as a continuous score holds them uneasily together. In general, *Gone Girl* moves at a pretty breakneck pace. How did this help or hurt the film for you?

Motifs: One of our first shots of Nick has him carrying a board game called *Mastermind*. We also see games called *Emergency!* and *Life* in early shots. Games and contests litter the film: mini-golf, video games, pelting Nick with Gummi bears, even a character named "Go." What do you make of these visual and verbal motifs related to competition and strategizing?

Props: Hasbro® games are not the only name-brand props we see in *Gone Girl*. Films typically turn labels away from the camera, but this movie's shots often draw attention to specific logos and brand names: Mountain Dew, Sony, Dunkin Donuts, Aim, the St. Louis Cardinals, NBC News... How might such audacious product placement speak to the movie's themes?

Tone: Some readers have been surprised at how the movie heightens the comic, absurdist edges of *Gone Girl*; it may not be a coincidence that Fincher cast so many actors known primarily as comedians (Neil Patrick Harris as Desi, Tyler Perry as Tanner, Casey Wilson as Noelle). When did you first or most sense a comic tone within the storytelling? How did you react?

Genre: Stanley Cavell wrote a famous book about Hollywood's "comedies of remarriage" in the 1930s and 1940s—films like *His Girl Friday* or *The Awful Truth* or *The Philadelphia Story* where romantic couples are separated by conflict or misunderstandings, then renew their vows at the end, having understood themselves and their partners better. Cavell stresses that the heroines played in these films by Rosalind Russell, Katharine Hepburn, et al., were typically sharper than the men, who spent the movie learning to "deserve" their wives. What would it mean to consider *Gone Girl* as an extremely dark modern update of this genre?

Editing: Each of Amy's narrated flashbacks in the first half of the movie begins with an extreme close-up of her diary as she writes—an early tip-off that she is not just recording but *composing* these scenes. Did other factors cue you to doubt the reality of these "memories"?

Score: Especially in Amy's scenes, *Gone Girl* does something odd with its already-unusual, electronic-heavy score. The sounds, moods, and pitch of film music often go up and down in a scene, in sync with the rhythms, emotions, or conflicts in the events depicted. Here, though, the score is very static, almost never speeding up, slowing down, getting louder, or going silent in relation to anything Nick or Amy says or does, even when there are pregnant pauses or stark shifts in tone within their interactions. Why might this approach make sense?

Color Palette: Fincher has become known for a signature color palette of browns, greens, and yellows with heavy shadows—a color scheme that links the prison planet of *Alien*³ to the soul-sick New York City of *Seven* to Zuckerberg's lack of feeling in *The Social Network* to the political machinations of DC in *House of Cards*. Oddly, Fincher uses exactly this palette for the "meet cute" between Amy and Nick in *Gone Girl*, when all seems to be lovely. Later scenes, when sick truths are out, are much brighter and whiter, with more primary colors. What do you make of this reversal of the bright beginning and dark end we might expect?

Camera: *Gone Girl*'s very mobile camera often treats characters as objects. Note the shot where Nick discovers that Amy is missing: rather than film from his POV as he enters the room and finds the smashed table and upset furniture, the camera takes the POV of *the crime scene*, studying how Nick reacts to this spectacle *we* haven't seen yet. What sense does that make?

In-Joke: Nick and Amy having sex in a (creepily lit) bookstore after talking about Jane Austen is clearly a raunchy joke about how *Gone Girl* intends to free Pike from quiet period films—including *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), where she played the demure older sister, Jane Bennet.

Costumes: When we meet Amy's parents, they wear similar clothes in almost identical colors: his 'n' hers variations on a brown jacket over a collared, maize-colored shirt. This is one way the movie retains the book's more overt commentary on what an inseparable pair they are, even at the expense of shutting out their daughter. Incidentally, how do you see Amy's views on what "marriage" is as fitting with or departing from this backstory related to her parents?

Writing: The speech Amy's mother gives at the press conference ("she *forged* a career," "her *adopted* home") exemplifies the puns related to fakery or falsity that follow her in the script.

Lighting: When Nick first enters his father's house, the light has a murky, smoky quality as though something is burning. This is well before we know what's hiding in the furnace...

Lighting: As Nick and Amy's marriage disintegrates, they often look like they're in different worlds even when they share the same space. Look at the argument they have while he's playing video games: same room, but his shots are dark and full of dull blues, and hers are filled with bright, white light (which is to say, they are rarely in the same frame).

Sound Mix: Even when Nick and Andie pretend to be quiet as they make love in Margo's living room, the soundtrack belies their carelessness. The clothes rustle. The furniture groans.

Production Design: Amy and Nick haven't nested in their new house. Many rooms are underfurnished; framed pictures lean against walls, waiting to be hung. Then again, the police headquarters, Nick's office, the courtroom, etc., are also full of blank walls and bare spaces.

Score: *Gone Girl*'s score cites those of other movies, in ways that inform its themes. The scene where Nick shoves Amy to the ground quotes some bars from *Dead Ringers* (1988), a horror drama about codependent twins who try but fail to live apart. Amy's scenes often feature loud, percussive electronic beats similar to those in *Inception* (2010), a movie about nested layers of dream and reality, where nobody can trust the authenticity of their experiences.

Ironic Juxtaposition: *Gone Girl* lays Amy's oft-quoted "cool girl" speech over shots of her in a disgusting gas-station bathroom, frumping herself down—as stark a contrast as possible.

Costumes: In case Ellen Abbott, the Nancy Grace surrogate on cable TV, wasn't predatory enough, her on-camera outfit has a leopard-print detail around the collar. What does the film lose or gain by being so unsubtle in its demonizing of tabloid media—to include its ongoing assumption that viewers everywhere are falling for Nick's and Amy's routines?

Conspicuous Consumption: As soon as Amy is driving away from North Carthage, we see her chowing down on Kit Kats and other junk foods. Is she purposefully gaining weight as part of her disguise? Or does the film imply she feels liberated into not having to take such care of herself? Or both? She still eats two desserts with Desi, when there's less pressure to hide.

Medium Is the Message: *Gone Girl* omits filming Nick's interview with Sela Ward's character in real time, only depicting it in the televised broadcast; the *actual* exchange is immaterial, whereas the *image* of the conversation is everything. Note that Nick watches the broadcast with his feet on the coffee table, as though his own life is junk-food entertainment. We see how Amy almost literally gobbles up this broadcast, wide-eyed, as she scarfs down two crème brûlées. Do you think she's responding naïvely to what she sees as Nick's sincerity? Or is she responding cannily to how well he has learned to perform in the way she wants?

Score: The shots of the bright-colored subdivision when Amy arrives home and again when Nick and Amy return from the police station, include ambient, electronic music very close to David Lynch's scores in movies like *Blue Velvet* or shows like *Twin Peaks*—archetypal modern cases of "suburban" or "regional" America being exposed as corrupt and ghostly.

Peekaboo: Affleck's brief frontal nudity has drawn a crazy amount of media attention—possibly implying that we deserve *Gone Girl*'s depiction of the general population as a mass of dupes, easy to excite about fake or sensational stories. But that one moment belies how the rest of the shower scene is filmed, with Affleck framed only from the neck up ever afterward, and Pike's body scrupulously faced away from the camera and from Nick. This is *not* a scene of the characters baring themselves to each other or to us; they remain in many ways concealed.

Finale: Nick's giveaway "partners in crime" line, Amy's fashion-plate dress with French cuffs, the odd on-camera hug between Ellen and Amy after the pregnancy is revealed, the choice of Ellen over Sharon as their first interviewer... everything about the final scene is played to a facetious, improbable hilt. We can only understand it as (again) implying that American viewers can be suckered into anything *or* as the film not attempting anything like realism, but lampooning the typical "happy ending" of love, marriage, and children as a cheap sham.

Here's a final quote from Fincher to *Film Comment*: "Most interesting to me was the idea of our collective narcissism as it relates to coupling, or who we show to our would-be mates and who they show to us. It's the most absurdly honest part of the book and the newest thing in terms of what it illuminates about marriage." Do you share his take on what this story says about marriage or narcissism? Does it apply to bonds we form to public or tabloid figures?