David Fincher's *Zodiac* is a real-life 1970s police procedural that's about obsessive people and the uses of technologies old and new. **By Amy Taubin**

Nerds on a wire

Many Hollywood films contain metaphors for their own making – *Vertigo* and *Groundhog Day* are but two of the most obvious examples. Film historian Paul Arthur has even argued for *Terminator 2 Judgement Day* as an allegory of the struggle for power between the machine-age past (film) and the digital (CGI) future. In David Fincher's splendidly bleak and brainy *Zodiac*, based on the true crime saga of the serial killer who terrorised the San Francisco Bay area in the years immediately following the Summer of Love, the relationship between the analogue past and the digital future has to do with knowledge and its empirical basis and representation in codes and data.

On screen we have three obsessed nerds – two newspaper men and one policeman – who, beginning in 1969, spend many years combing through evidence that they hope will lead them to the killer who dubbed himself 'Zodiac'. The most tantalising material comes from Zodiac himself, in the form of letters sent to major San Francisco newspapers in which he takes responsibility for several brutal and seemingly random murders that mostly likely he actually committed, as well as for many more he may have claimed only after reading about them in the very newspapers to which he sent his missives. Some of the letters are written in code, and the first of them excites the interest of Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), who at the time of the initial communiqués is a cartoonist for the *San Francisco Examiner* and an amateur cryptologist. Graysmith pursued the case longer than his fellow obsessives, Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr), who worked the crime beat for the *Examiner* and burned out on drugs and alcohol, and Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo), the cop with most invested (at least in this movie's narrative) in bringing the killer to justice.

Toschi was the model for Steve McQueen in 1968's *Bullitt* and Clint Eastwood in 1971's *Dirty Harry* (whose Scorpio was a ringer for Zodiac). His reputation tarnished by baseless charges that he had written some of the letters himself in order to recapture the spotlight, he retired early from the force. At one point after the Zodiac investigation has gone cold, Graysmith and Toschi meet in a theatre where *Dirty Harry* is playing. Eastwood doesn't appear in the scene that we glimpse on the screen; instead he's represented as a cardboard cutout in the theatre lobby, one more element in a paper trail that leads to something less than the absolute truth.

Graysmith ended up writing two books, *Zodiac* and *Zodiac Unmasked*, on which James Vanderbilt based a screenplay that is remarkable for its combination of intricacy and clarity. Indeed, *Zodiac* is the first David Fincher film with a script worthy of the director's talent and skill. There is no contemporary US director who comes close to Fincher's sense of the kinetic possibilities of movement within a single shot or across a cut. Fincher could stage a reading of the proverbial telephone book that would make your heart race – and here he does the equivalent in scene after scene in which characters rummage through file boxes or recount to one another the details of a case that like a giant jigsaw puzzle stretches across three or four police jurisdictions in the course of more than 20 years.

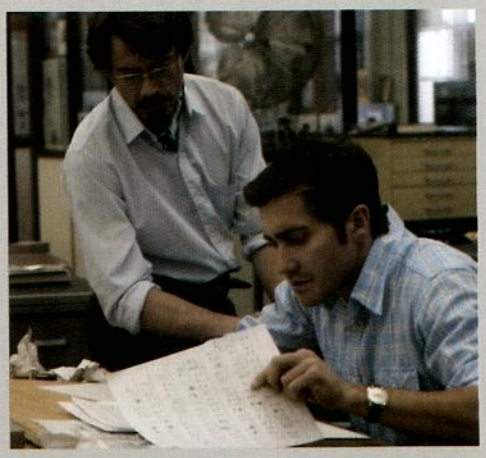
TRACK PACK
The pursuit of serial killer Zodiac brings together three obsessives: cartoonist Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), opposite, cop Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo), above left, and crime reporter Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr), above right

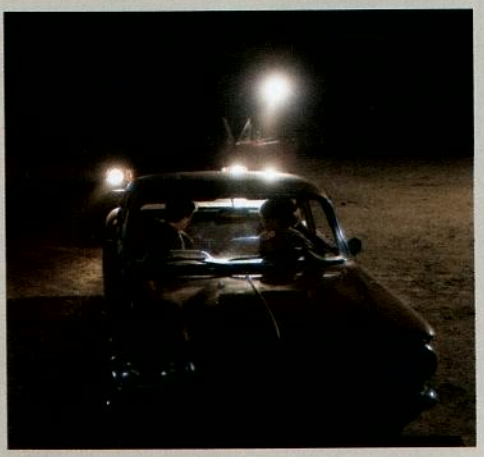
Fincher has explained that he kept the camera-work simple in order to get the audience to listen to the dialogue. In a pre-digital world of print, Polaroids and Xeroxes, not only Zodiac but the cops who pursue him communicate via snail mail because there are no faxes, cell phones or email. One of the film's most salient and evocative set pieces superimposes transparent blow-ups of Zodiac's letters and newspaper articles about him over the main scenes of the action: the newspaper's offices and the police station. *Zodiac* is less a film about characters than about process – the process of mining and arranging information in search of truth. The medium in which this information is represented and stored is print on paper. Viewed from the early years of the digital century, the world of the Zodiac investigation seems almost comically tactile and concrete.

It is not incidental, therefore, that *Zodiac* was shot with the Viper, currently the state-of-the-art digital camera, used in conjunction with digital magazines (hard drives) on which the images in the form of digital files were recorded, stored and edited. According to the Digital Content Producer website (www.digitalcontentproducer.com), it is the first studio movie shot and produced entirely as data from beginning to end. (Michael Mann used the Viper to shoot parts of 2004's *Collateral* and 2006's *Miami Vice* but combined it with video tape recorders.) The movie represents a technological revolution, albeit in its infancy, and as such has a historical significance that might not be evident to the casual moviegoer. For certain cinephiles and technology nerds, however, *Zodiac* is the disembodied object of an investigation every bit as obsessive as the one depicted in its narrative. If you Google '*Zodiac*, David Fincher' you will find as many sites and articles devoted to the processes involved in the making of the film as reviews or essays on its aesthetic value and meaning.

Fincher's staging of the murders is terrifyingly real, achieved through a mix of live action, CGI and matte work

Shaped to foil narrative expectations, *Zodiac* delivers three murders and a failed attempt at a fourth in its first 30 minutes, followed by two hours of an investigation that quickly turns into a series of breakdowns and dead ends. Fincher's staging of each murder is swift, brutal and terrifyingly real, an effect achieved through a seamless combination of live action, CGI and matte work. Theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Lev Manovich may find *Zodiac* a striking example of the death of photographic indexicality in the digital age. Their argument, however, will be complicated by Fincher's insistence on visual accuracy in the representation of crimes and crime scenes and his use of police photographs and descriptions as the basis





SIGNS AND MEANINGS
The cocky Avery starts to pay attention to nervy Graysmith when the cartoonist shows his skill at decoding Zodiac's letters, top; two of Zodiac's victims, above, wonder who's in the car behind

for the computer-generated imagery used in lieu of actual locations that today look nothing like they did in 1969.

In any event, the fact that the image throughout seems both hyper-real and as insubstantial as a Fata Morgana only makes it more fascinating. Similarly, the sound structure layers dialogue with concrete sounds edited to near abstraction, pop songs of the period (Donovan's scarily insinuating 'Hurdy Gurdy Man' frames the movie) and a haunting original score that echoes the shifting tonalities of Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question*. As close as *Zodiac* comes to solving its mystery is a simple shot/countershot sequence in which Graysmith goes eyeball to eyeball with his prime suspect, Arthur Leigh Allen (played with impassive menace by John Carroll Lynch). Soon after this scene, an end title explains that a DNA test on one of Zodiac's letters did not match up with Allen. So much for the truth of cutting-edge technology.

'Zodiac' opens on 18 May

Interview

DIRECTOR

David Fincher

Amy Taubin: Why did you decide to shoot 'Zodiac' digitally?

David Fincher: The thing that attracted me most to using the Viper was that for the first time in the history of movies, the make-up artist, the DP, the director and the actor are all looking at the same thing. So often communication issues on set are because people have differing ideas about everyone else's interpretation of something. But now, instead of that little NTSC monitor [the video tap used on set with film cameras] you can see everything immediately on a 23-inch hi-def monitor that is within 30 per cent of the final colour. You could see when things were too bright or too dark. I could see that little fly-away hair that's so distracting. I could see focus.

Dailies almost always end up being disappointing, like the veil is pierced and you look at it for the first time and you think, "Oh my god, this is what I really have to work with." But when you can see what you have as it's gathered, it can be a much less neurotic process. There are probably 30 shots in *Zodiac* where we had a take we really liked but it looked a little soft, and we'd say let's do another one and bring the focus forward an inch. And we'd do it and it would be just so much better. There are always eight or nine shots in a movie that I never would have used if I had something else. So that was a big thing for me.

What you're talking about is process – the ability to get closer to precisely what you want. But what about the image itself? Is there a big difference between an image that's digitally captured with the Viper and one that's captured on film?

When you get right down to it, I believe an audience may feel something different but I don't believe they actually see something different. In this case the anomalies of the Viper – being a CCD camera, having more threshold issues at the highlights – made it seem more like video, and I thought that as we're talking about something that's been in the nightly news, that's OK. I actually think it was as appropriate a matching of a piece of material to technology as one could find.

I would say that 80 per cent of the movies made in Hollywood could probably be shot digitally and the audience wouldn't care. And there'd be some cost savings and the technology would move forward. There are people – and my DP Harris Savides is one of them – who are going to get the most out of a piece of negative and there are 90 per cent of the DPs out there who aren't. So I think it's horses for courses. But having said that, when you see the digital projected – when it comes off an actual data file as opposed to coming off the film transfer or a laser or a tape – I like the almost unbearable sharpness of it. [No theatre in the US had the capacity to project *Zodiac* from an actual data file.]

I had certain expectations about a movie that stars three of the most attractive guys in Hollywood. But in this film, though everyone is acting well, they don't stand out. The movie isn't about them.

They're part of the whole. In *All the President's Men* you really didn't know Carl Bernstein was married to Nora Ephron. You only know what cigarettes he smokes and that they were just about to fire him. And you know even less about Bob Woodward except that he puts his foot in his mouth and steps in shit every once in a while. Both Harris and I, and to a lesser extent the actors, understood this.

Someone sent me a list of criticisms that I thought was amusing. Why don't you tell us why Graysmith is predisposed to becoming obsessed with Zodiac? Why don't those kids at the beginning drive away when that car pulls up to them? And why don't you catch the guy at the end of two and a half hours? OK: 1. When you're dealing with obsessive-compulsives I don't know if there's that one defining thing that tells you why they're that way. My father was like that and I know a few others. And there is no why. 2. If the people drove away at the beginning of the movie, the movie would be a lot shorter. It's based on police reports that say they didn't drive away. 3. I like the idea of a movie that's two and a half hours long and doesn't wrap it all up at the end. Those are the things that appealed to me, sick as it sounds.

It doesn't sound sick. But it doesn't sound like a big Hollywood movie.

I don't think it is a big Hollywood

movie. That was never our intention. But even now, even with the box office being what it is, I still think there's an audience out there for this movie. Everyone has a different idea about marketing, but my philosophy is that if you market a movie to 16-year-old boys and don't deliver *Saw* or *Se7en*, they're going to be the most vociferous ones coming out of the screening saying "this movie sucks." And you're also saying goodbye to the audience who would get it because they're going to look at the ads and say, "I don't want to see some slasher movie."

At one point you were developing a film about the Black Dahlia. Did you drop that for 'Zodiac'? They're both unsolved murder stories.

And tales of obsession. *The Dahlia* was a film I developed for seven years and then the deal fell apart. And then my agent called and said, "I know you don't want to do any more serial-killer movies but I'm going to send you this script." I grew up in the Bay area, so the title meant something to me.

It was fascinating to see San Francisco in 1969 looking just like it did in 'The Birds'. The hippie part of San Francisco was a ghetto and the rest was very conservative.

That was very simple for me, because I used to go down to visit my dad at the Time-Life building. He was a bureau chief for *Life* magazine. When I read the script I felt it was a newspaper story in that it's about all these bizarre sidelined characters insinuating themselves into something, making it a story about themselves. It was a cop movie for a while, but then it became a newspaper movie.

San Francisco was a very romantic place, a cosmopolitan jewel populated by lunatics, and Haight-Ashbury was the least of it. I lived in Marin where there were record-company lawyers driving Porsches, but in San Francisco it was old money and conservative. What I loved about the story was that two years after the Summer of Love you had a guy who looked like a postal worker shooting kids to snatch their sexual desires away from them, because people went indoors as a result.

Would you never go back to shooting film?

It's not about going back to shooting film. I would *choose* to shoot film in the same way as I would *choose* to shoot anamorphic. It would be based on its specific patina. We're shooting *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* now and it couldn't be more different from *Zodiac*. It starts in 1918. But we're shooting it on the Viper because there's so much effects work. We need to be able to lay it off quickly and deal with it. We have to be able to get shots into the pipeline very quickly.

CINEMATOGRAPHER

Harris Savides

Harris Savides was the DP for David Fincher's *The Game* (1997) as well as for *Zodiac*. A brilliant technician with a bent for experimental work, he also shot Gus Van Sant's moving-camera trilogy *Gerry*, *Elephant* and *Last Days*. He is outspoken about his ambivalent feelings about digital cinematography.

Harris Savides: The current situation is that I don't know what I'm shooting for any more. Unless you dumb things down and shoot in a way that works pretty well for everything, there's a problem. Am I shooting for the print or for the digital? Am I shooting for a photochemical finish or for the DVD?

I thought that as *Zodiac* was a period movie and movies of the 1970s looked a certain way, I didn't want the synthetic quality of digital cinematography to interfere. It's hard enough to present a period reality to an audience: why add this new texture? If we were shooting an alien movie or a movie about the future I think digital cinematography would be great because you're presenting something the audience doesn't know.

So I did everything I could to make this look like film. I did everything wrong, so to speak. The pixels on the chip weren't happy, but I knew how far I could go. I did it so that the blacks didn't have that anime look, that patina that digital wants. But in retrospec maybe I was wrong to try to make it look like film because the sharpness and hyper-realness of the digital gets under your skin and plays into the whole information thing that's going on. I saw *Zodiac* projected digitally off the data files in LA and I thought, "This is fantastic, you see every strand of hair. This is right because as a viewer you are an investigator just like the characters."

Amy Taubin: The stars of the film are all hot guys, but they don't pop on the screen. They just seem like ordinary people.

My approach now is to light the space and let people inhabit it rather than lighting the actor. So the lighting comes from reality rather than being movie lighting. But also, we weren't flashy on this movie – we were very simple in our coverage and just let people talk and present the information.

What did David Fincher say?

He loved the way it looked. But I feel we're just at the beginning of this, we're just making experiments for the studios. For me the benchmark is film, so why not shoot film? I'm very good at manipulating digital so it looks more like film, but why do it? I felt like the Wright brothers: we were trying out this plane and it kept taking off and crashing. There was a runway next to us where planes were taking off and flying, yet Fincher wanted us to use this technology. But it's going to go down this way, so I guess you have to start somewhere.