Journal of American Studies of Turkey
41 (2015): 163-187

Film Reviews

Gone Girl. Dir. David Fincher. Perf. Ben Affleck, Rosamund Pike, Neil Patrick Harris. Twentieth Century Fox, 2014. Bluray.

As much lauded as it has been decried, Grant Wood's iconic painting "American Gothic" has come to represent a certain view of America. On one hand, the painting is a celebration of the stoicism of small-town America, with old-fashioned family values and a work ethic to match. This is the true beating heart of America. On the other hand, it portrays a glum couple looking almost impatiently at the artist. Their gaze, at once unimpressed and bored, seems to caricature that same, stoic attitude to life. The painting's color palette is dull, too, with a grey, green, grimy sheen that washes out whatever vibrant colors might have emerged. The painting is dark, its subjects peering through the artist, to the viewer, with ire. The painting *American Gothic* is the perfect analogue for the narrative, themes, and visual style of David Fincher's *Gone Girl*. The visual style of Fincher's film echoes the gritty, dull aesthetic of Wood's artwork. But even more so, just as Wood's painting possibly captures the dark heart of America, so too does *Gone Girl* give the audience a horrifying glimpse at the seething, tumultuous underbelly of a seemingly perfect relationship.

The edits during the title sequence of Fincher's film are too fast. The viewer expects them to hold just a few milliseconds longer before shifting to the next shot. But these opening static shots are not languorous. They are not placed to aid the viewer, nor to give them any sense of ease, or place, or to anchor them in a familiar, small-town America. Certainly, the setting of *Gone Girl* may be a small town, but the outside world is only ever a sideshow to the drama of the two central characters: Nick and Amy Dunne (Ben Affleck, Rosamund Pike). In this way, the inter-personal, and horrifying, relationship of these two characters becomes the microcosm of a hypermodern and uniquely American sensibility. To briefly summarize, *Gone Girl* is a mystery film. On their fifth wedding anniversary, Amy Dunne disappears, and Nick is a natural suspect. Nick's attempts to find his wife and clear his name form the plot of the film, but, much more than

that, the film mimics the novel's employment of red herrings and unreliable narration to truly unsettle the audience.

The editing of *Gone Girl* does not hold with what viewers have come to expect from David Fincher. The painfully slow build-up of tension in his earlier works *Se7en* (1995) and *Zodiac* (2007) is replaced here by a logic that perfectly matches the source material, Gillian Flynn's enormously successful novel of the same name. Flynn herself took on the role of adapting her work for the screen, and the resulting screenplay is surprisingly deft and economical. It retains the flow of the novel - its tone, its character - while eschewing many of the extraneous scenes. Flynn clearly has no problem trimming the fat of the literary version, and the resulting film is clipped and taut; the audience is shown just as much of the characters as the novel reveals. Rather than stretch cinematic time to build suspense, here Fincher is letting the characters do the work for him.

The darkness at the heart of the story extends from the central couple to surrounding characters and themes. Amy's parents move from concern for Nick to sharing the suspicion held by the general public. This suspicion is fuelled by the media, portrayed warily (and through the directorial equivalent of gritted teeth) by Fincher as fear-mongering, intrigue-baiting, and largely malevolent. The critique of technology and media culture runs throughout the film: indeed, Nick Dunne is nearly undone when a search volunteer snaps a 'selfie' with him. This photo is shared and immediately goes viral. When combined with Nick's awkward grin at the press conference to announce the search for Amy, things do not look good. Viral media and the propagation of images and words are crucial to the misdirection employed by Fincher's direction, Jeff Cronenweth's cinematography, and Flynn's script. Despite Flynn's involvement, however, the film feels very different to the novel. The intricacies of language - and the characterization *through text* - that make the novel so thrilling, cannot easily be translated to film. What Fincher and his team have succeeded in doing is neatly interpreting the characters, tone, and themes of the novel.

Within Fincher's oeuvre, *Gone Girl* is an aberration. It is an adaptation, and Fincher has not had the best luck with these. The lack of success of *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, for instance, has nearly negated the production of an English-language sequel. *Gone Girl* is also a character study. While Fincher is notable for working with his production personnel to

frame, light, and 'perform' characters in a certain way, this is usually best achieved within the context of a police procedural or tense thriller. *Gone Girl* certainly utilizes conventions from both of these genres, but the mystery becomes much more about the characters, rather than Amy's disappearance. How can human beings become so dispassionate? So uncaring? The audience is left with no definitive answers after viewing *Gone Girl,* but after witnessing such an evolution in Fincher's ability to develop characters, such a neat, economical, and taut domestic thriller, followers of Fincher will be eagerly awaiting whatever he attempts next.

Works Cited

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Daniel Binns
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia