Film Extra Day School
Gone Girl – the mystery of a marriage

National Media Museum

Introduction

David Fincher is one of the most celebrated *auteur* directors in contemporary Hollywood. His every film is an 'event' – something 'bigger' in scope than the usual mainstream film, whether in terms of style, theme or story treatment. '*Auteur*' here implies a consistent 'authorial voice' in the collective production of a film.

Fincher follows the tradition of the studio-based *auteurs* of the 1950s who often worked with the same creative teams on each film. Fincher's last four directorial jobs have been *The Social Network* (2010), the biopic of Mark Zuckerberg, the adaptation of the Swedish bestseller *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), the first two episodes of the inaugural Netflix production, *House of Cards* (2013) and now *Gone Girl*. Each of these productions has featured the cinematography of Jeff Cronenweth, music by Trent Reznor (not *House of Cards*), film editing by Kirk Baxter and production design by Donald Graham Burt. The only major creative role that changes across these four productions is the screenwriter.

Gone Girl has, unusually, been adapted by the original author Gillian Flynn. The book was a bestseller but Ms Flynn had not previous had a screenplay credit before beginning the adaptation. David Fincher had previously made two films featuring women in the lead role, *Alien 3* (Sigourney Weaver) and *Panic Room* (Jodie Foster). Both of these films are essentially 'action' thrillers rather than 'relationship films'. *Gone Girl* is more akin to a mystery thriller that combines elements of both action and melodrama. The reaction to the novel was very strong in terms of interest in the female characters. The interest in the film is therefore how the visions of Fincher and Flynn will mesh. Fincher does not make low budget films. *Gone Girl* reputedly cost $60 million (Fincher quoted in *Sight and Sound*) so we must conclude that Fincher had clear ideas about how he would spend the money. Fincher has a reputation for endless re-shoots and for carefully choreographed scenes involving matte work/CGI and crowds/complex actions.

Our strategy today will be to consider Fincher as a director of adaptations and first we'll study how he set about working on a previous adaptation of a big bestselling crime novel, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, using the script by one of his regular collaborators, Steven Zaillian. We'll do this by comparing three versions of the same narrative. The original novel (the first of a trilogy written by Stieg Larsson and known collectively as *Millennium*) was published in 2005. A Scandinavian film version was directed by Niels Anders Oplev from a script by Nikolaj Arcel and Rasmus Heisterberg in 2009. Fincher's film was released in 2011.

As an exercise, we will look at the first substantial sequence in the film narrative. Both films open with a brief sequence in which an elderly man opens a parcel containing a pressed flower in a framed presentation. The next sequence introduces the two central characters in the story. The journalist/publisher Mikael Blomkvist has just lost his legal battle against the financier Hans-Erik Wennerström. He leaves the court and meets his partner Erika Berger and the other staff of *Millennium* magazine. At roughly the same time that these events occur, Lisbeth Salander is gathering together all the data she has collected on Blomkvist and then taking it to the offices of Milton Security where she presents it to the lawyer Dirch Frode.

The book version

Larsson's book is very long (538 pages) and the two short 'events' noted above take up around 46 pages. This is mainly because Larsson gives the reader a great deal of background about both Mikael and Lisbeth and about the legal case. In this way we learn very early on what kinds of characters these are and also

something about the concerns of the author in terms of the issues that interest him.

Film versions of novels
There is now a considerable amount of academic scholarship in film studies looking at the issue of film adaptation. In an industrial sense it is important to note that a significant number of films in most major film industries worldwide are based on successful novels (as well as plays, operas, songs etc.). These 'properties' have a proven success with audiences and commercial filmmaking is expensive and therefore 'risk-aversive'. Adaptations make sense to studio accountants because the expenditure on 'rights' can be justified by the presence of the 'given' audience interest.

Both filmmakers and those audience members who have read the book are concerned with two main issues:

1. The 'interpretation' of the story by the screenwriter and whether any aspect of the story will be altered. This might be thought of as the 'fidelity' question.

2. The necessary compression of events in 'screen time'. The median length of a film is still around 100 minutes, possibly a little longer. The industry rule of thumb is that a film script (in the standard layout formula) represents 1 minute of screen time per page. There is no direct relationship between the number of pages in a book and the number of pages of a film script, but there is general agreement that the film scriptwriter will have to leave out significant parts of a novel to fit an acceptable length for a single film feature. Often this means losing characters and manipulating narrative events and the ways in which audiences discover narrative information. (On the other hand, there are also examples of short stories being expanded to make full length films, e.g. *Brokeback Mountain.*)

The Oplev version of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* ran to 152 mins (but was extended to 180 minutes in the version shown on TV). The Fincher version ran to 158 minutes. Both sets of filmmakers chose to include as much of the narrative detail of the book as possible. Even so, there are distinct differences between the two films and some of those differences are evident in the opening scenes.

Film and literature
Although the two narrative forms may present similar action and dialogue, there are important constraints as well as potential benefits affecting the filmmaker. Consider the introduction of the central characters in the story. A novelist can choose to tell us a great deal about a character before they act in any significant way. This is much more difficult for the filmmaker. The character in the novel can also remain 'undefined' for a long period – but in a film we will see and hear the actor speak and we will start to 'read' their costume, hairstyle, body movement etc. We will also pick up clues from the environment in which the action takes place.

In a mainstream feature, the central characters will usually be played by stars, or at least by recognisable actors. The major stars have developed a 'star persona' or 'star image' – a composite of the qualities associated with previous major roles as well as public appearances. In the case of Mikael Blomkvist in the David Fincher version, he appears in the guise of James Bond – Daniel Craig. An obvious question is to ask what Fincher and Craig do to try to stop us thinking about Bond? Or perhaps they don't mind if we do think of Bond and they'll try to use that knowledge? In the Swedish version, Blomkvist is played by Mikael Nykvist, an actor barely known in the US/UK, but very well-known in Sweden. How do we read his appearance?

The novel's description of characters
Larsson doesn't tell us what Mikael looks like. He gives us clues that suggest that he must be in his 40s. He also explains why a reporter calls him 'Kalle' – referring to a boy detective in the stories of Astrid Lindgren the famous Swedish children's author. Mikael spends time trying to fend off journalists and at one point leaps on a bus. He orders a latte in a café and goes back to his apartment in the old part of the city, an

apartment he has stripped down and decorated himself.

Larsson is much more specific about Lisbeth Salander:

> A pale, anorexic young woman who had hair as short as a fuse, and a pierced nose and eyebrows [long description of her tattoos]. She was a natural redhead, but she died her hair raven black. She looked as though she had just emerged from a week-long orgy with a gang of hard rockers.
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> . . . . born thin, with slender bones that made her look girlish and fine-limbed with small hands, narrow wrists and child-like breasts. She was twenty-four, but she sometimes looked fourteen.
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> She had a wide mouth, a small nose, and high cheekbones that gave her an almost Asian look. Her movements were quick and spidery . . . with the right make-up her face could have put her on any billboard in the world. Sometimes she wore black lipstick, and in spite of the tattoos and the pierced nose and eyebrows she was . . . well . . . attractive. [All this description comes from the thoughts of her boss Armansky.]
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> . . . Salander was dressed for the day in a black T-shirt with a picture on it of ET with fangs, and the words "I am also an alien". She had on a black skirt that was frayed at the hem, a worn-out, black, mid-length leather jacket, rivet belt, heavy Doc Marten boots, and horizontally striped, green and red knee-socks.

Exercise 1

Please watch first the Danish/Swedish film version of these events and then the Fincher version. In groups, please then discuss how the two films have adapted the original story. It would be useful if you focused on three aspects of the adaptation process:

- How are the two central characters visualised? How does casting and performance work out? How are the actors 'costumed' and made up?

- How is the *mise en scène* handled – lighting, décor, 'significant objects'? How is the camera used? Is there any music?

- Narration: How are the events shown in terms of narrative structure? Are they re-ordered? Are any events left out, changed?

(Both extracts are 6-7 mins long, so the differences between them are choices based on different emphases.)

Exercise 2

Assuming we have time, we'll try to look at the opening to another Fincher film which also deals with a mystery. *Zodiac* (2007) is also an adaptation. This time it is based on a non-fiction book about a real-life hunt for a serial killer written by one of the people involved, the cartoonist Robert Graysmith, who worked for the *San Francisco Chronicle* when the killer's letters to the newspaper were received. Graysmith (played in the film by Jake Gyllenhaal) was intrigued by puzzles and became obsessed with trying to decode the letters. The adaptation was written by James Vanderbilt. The film begins with the shooting of a young couple on July 4. This is before the credits. We'll watch the credit sequence and the arrival of the first letter.

Try to watch this carefully and think about the techniques that Fincher uses to engage the audience with the elements of the story that interest him.

Ideas about genre

Genre as a concept associated with ways of thinking about classifying film narratives is now well-established in general public discourse. In one sense it has always been there, even if the specific term wasn't used. Comedies and thrillers have been the stuff of popular cinema since at least the 1910s. The difficulty is that film industry professionals, general audiences and film scholars don't use either 'genre' itself

or the specific designations of 'comedy', 'thriller' etc. in the same way.

Yet some form of genre recognition plays a role in how we read a film as the story unfolds before us. If we are conscious of familiar scenes or narrative sequences, our genre knowledge then tends to lead us to expect certain developments. We might start looking for narrative clues. Filmmakers hoping to encourage this kind of audience engagement might deliberately set such clues. *Gone Girl* is particularly interesting in this respect as the presentation deliberately mixes a number of different genre repertoires. It also depends on two central 'unreliable narrators'.

The promotional materials establish *Gone Girl* as both a 'thriller' and a 'mystery'. A man discovers that his wife is missing – has she been taken, is she dead? Is he a suspect? Will the film become a 'police procedural' in detailing the search for the woman and/or her abductor or killer? But at least one newspaper review has called the film a 'comedy', making references to *American Psycho*. Does this sense of comedy suggest a satire – a critique of aspects of American society? Or does it simply attempt to present a 'playful', 'knowing' narrative dealing with marriage?

The opening of the novel, *Gone Girl*
Gillian Flynn begins *Gone Girl* with two separate chapters, the first narrated by Nick and the second by Amy. This will be the pattern of the first part of the novel, but while Nick's opening chapter begins on 'The Day of . . .' [Amy's disappearance and their fifth wedding anniversary], Amy's chapter is dated 'January 8, 2005' (some seven years earlier) and tagged as a 'diary entry'. Thus we have two narrators and a narrative structure that juxtaposes different time periods. In 'Part Two' the alternating narration continues, but now Amy's narration has 'caught up' with Nick's and she is describing the days after her disappearance. (I won't spoil any more!)

Flynn gives us a brief description of each character – by the other – in these opening chapters. Nick, lying in bed, comments on looking at the back of Amy's 'finely shaped head'. When he goes downstairs and finds her in the kitchen. "Her yellow-butter hair was pulled up, the hank of ponytail swinging cheerful as a jump rope and she was sucking distractedly on a burnt fingertip . . ."

Amy describes her first meeting with Nick: "Distractingly gorgeous, the kind of looks which make your eyes pinwheel . . . I bet dudes hate him. He looks like the rich boy villain in an 80s teen movie."

Try to remember how Fincher visualises our first glimpses of Amy and Nick. Since the film investigates/challenges our attempts to identify with Amy and/or Nick, the casting decisions are particularly important. Ben Affleck is a Hollywood star and credited as both actor and director, his stock being very high after the success of *Argo* in 2012. Rosamund Pike was more of a left field casting decision since her career so far has seen relatively high profile roles in British productions, but only relatively minor roles in mainstream Hollywood until she played against Tom Cruise in *Jack Reacher* (2012). Pike is roughly the correct age for the book's Amy. Affleck is around six years older.

Reference
James, Nick (2014) Interview with David Fincher in *Sight and Sound*, October
(There are many other similar interviews online.)

David Fincher filmography (features only – he is also known for music videos and TV)
Alien 3 (1992)
Seven (1995)
The Game (1997)
Fight Club (1999)
Panic Room (2002)
Zodiac (2007)
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (2008)
The Social Network (2010)
The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (2011)
Gone Girl (2014)

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