Image: Alejandro Bejarano

David Fincher and the serial killer as a celebrity.

David Fincher y el asesino en serie como celebridad.

Abstract:

Within the current saturated panorama of the film industry, one director stands out for his dense filmography largely dedicated to developing stories whose protagonists face the threat of the serial killer. David Fincher has been responsible for the construction of a contemporary imaginary about these infamous characters, excessively media-friendly, who have frightened the public and caused panic within American society. In this work we propose to dissect Fincher's works that are dedicated to delving into the phenomenon of serial killers, the role played by the media in creating their public image and the role of the security forces when it comes to hunting down these terrible murderers.

Keywords: Cinema; fame; mass media; psychopaths; thrillers.

Resumen:

Dentro del saturado panorama de la industria cinematográfica actual, un director sobresale por su densa filmografía dedicada en gran medida a desarrollar historias cuyos protagonistas se enfrentan a la amenaza del asesino en serie. David Fincher ha sido responsable de la construcción de un imaginario contemporáneo sobre estos infames personajes, excesivamente mediáticos, que han atemorizado al público y han causado pánico dentro de la sociedad americana. En este trabajo nos proponemos diseccionar las obras de Fincher que se dedican a profundizar sobre el fenómeno de los asesinos en serie, el rol que desempeñan los medios de comunicación en la creación de su imagen pública y el papel de las fuerzas de seguridad a la hora de dar caza a estos terribles homicidas.

Palabras clave: Cine; fama; medios de comunicación; psicópatas; thrillers.

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1. Introduction

American director David Fincher (Denver, 1966) has consistently explored the subject of serial killers from a deep and complex perspective, one that probes the underlying causes and motives behind the emergence of these terrifying criminals in contemporary societies. Films such as *Se7en* (1995), *Zodiac* (2007), and, more recently, the Netflix-produced series *Mindhunter* (2019) exemplify Fincher's interest in examining the particular conditions that give rise to these repeat murderers, the sinister and frightening strategies they deploy, and the role played by both the media and law enforcement agencies in profiling and capturing these multiple killers.

Through his cinema, Fincher confronts us with a central question: What defines a serial killer? According to the FBI, "a serial killer is someone who commits at least three murders over a period of more than a month, with an emotional cooling-off period between them. The main characteristic of this typology is the existence of a cooling-off period and the individualization of the crimes, in the sense that each victim can be considered separately in terms of time and place" (Jiménez Serrano, 2014, 5). The cooling-off period can be understood as a temporal interval during which the killer does not commit murders, although this does not mean that they are not planning to continue doing so. After committing the crime, the killer succeeds in satisfying the psychological needs he was seeking to fulfill, gaining a temporary sense of power, control, and revenge. In this state, the murderer does not immediately need to kill again, although he may feel compelled to recreate and relive the act, often keeping souvenirs or trophies taken from the crime scene. Serial killers fall within the broader classification of multiple murderers.

Drawing on the findings of criminologist Vicente Garrido, as presented in his book *El monstruo y el asesino en serie* (*The Monster and the Serial Killer*), we can identify certain common traits among individuals who exhibit a psychopathic disposition that may potentially incline them toward committing such criminal acts. These include, for example: "The ability to feign a friendly and honest personality; to manipulate and deceive; heightened narcissism, characterized by a sense of entitlement to feel superior and to enjoy more and better things than the rest of the world; and a profound difficulty in experiencing the emotions that bond us affectively to others, such as empathy, compassion, or love" (Garrido & Latorre, 2023, 20). While it is true that most serial killers demonstrate a psychopathic personality, not all psychopaths are killers. Nevertheless, it is quite likely that an individual with the characteristics mentioned above is well equipped to violate the law and commit crimes. Psychological profiles of serial killers often reveal feelings of dissatisfaction and marginalization that stem from their inability to integrate into the social fabric. Moreover, they exhibit a need to attract attention from the public, law enforcement, and the media to gain fame and recognition. Their crimes constitute an abject and perverse means of obtaining attention through newspaper and television headlines dedicated to condemning the atrocities perpetrated by subjects who, in some cases, regard their acts as meticulously planned and executed works of art.

One of the distinctive qualities of Fincher's approach to the phenomenon of serial killers is his emphasis on the role played by the media in creating the myths that shape and immortalize these terrifying criminals. It could be argued that a symbiotic, mutually dependent relationship exists between sensationalist journalism and the very existence of serial killers. They reinforce each other to such a degree that, in most cases, they maintain direct communication

through cryptic messages or riddles that must ultimately be deciphered by the police and law-enforcement agencies. By the late nineteenth century, a press that was increasingly swift in its distribution and capable of reaching a mass audience understood that nothing captured the public's attention more effectively than a horrifying murder. It is during this period that sensationalist journalism emerged.

> The case of Jack the Ripper is the paradigmatic example of the sensational crime as the epicenter of news: he is the first modern serial killer to achieve worldwide fame. Why would someone living in Paris or New York care that horrible crimes are being committed in London? Because it is in our nature to pay attention to phenomena that, were we to find ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time, might turn us into the next victims (Cancela, 2023).

The gratification derived from the crimes committed by serial killers becomes even more significant when others reveal the elaborate strategies required to carry them out. This process generates a simultaneous sense of fear and fascination, ultimately elevating the serial killer to the status of an evil genius, someone capable of killing at will without fear of punishment. The sensationalistic treatment of these reprehensible criminals also grants them a certain degree of celebrity, a clear symptom of the public's perverse admiration for the terrifying. Fincher's cinema underscores this unfortunate celebrity aura that accompanies infamous serial killers. It also illustrates the obstacles faced by police officers and detectives throughout the final decades of the twentieth century (the golden age of serial killers) in attempting to capture them, as well as how technological advancements and a deeper, more complex understanding of these criminals eventually helped curb this horrifying wave of crimes.

In this article, our primary objective will be to analyze the manner in which Fincher represents the phenomenon of serial killers, with the aim of identifying the fundamental features of this theme across his work and, above all, delineating clearly and directly the complex and complementary relationships established among serial killers, law-enforcement agencies, and the media—whose involvement contributes to constructing the figure of the serial killer as a criminal who evokes both fear and fascination, and who ultimately becomes mythologized by culture as celebrities.

2. Development

2.1 Seven

The feature film that launched David Fincher to fame is an aesthetically outstanding work that materializes a meticulously crafted screenplay written by Andrew Kevin Walker (a frequent Fincher collaborator), and is shot with the characteristic precision of a brilliant filmmaker. *Seven*, or *Se7en*, has over time become a contemporary classic that incorporates some of the stylistic tendencies of the late twentieth century (influenced by the rise of the music video clip format) and reveals the enormous artistic potential that Fincher would develop throughout his career. The opening credit sequence would become one of the hallmarks of the director's filmography, due to its capacity for both aesthetic and thematic synthesis. This feature film appears at a historical moment in which the subject of serial killers resurged forcefully in Hollywood following the resounding success of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), directed by Jonathan Demme and based on the eponymous best seller written by Thomas Harris.

The film follows the emergence of a serial killer with a clear mission: to cleanse the city's streets of the human filth that commits sins daily with impunity and corrupts society. The killer's plan consists of sacrificing seven people, each of whom will die because of one of the seven deadly sins (Gluttony, Greed, Pride, Sloth, Lust, Wrath, and Envy). According to Holmes and DeBurger in their study on serial killers, these criminals can be classified into various groups depending on their *Modus operandi*. One of these categories corresponds to serial killers classified as "Mission-oriented" who, according to the authors, "...do not suffer from hallucinations, but are capable of constructing a delusional idea that they have a mission to eliminate a particular group of people (prostitutes, drug addicts, vagrants, etc.) and believe themselves to be saviors, redeemers" (Jiménez Serrano, 2014, 9). John Doe, the serial killer in *Seven*, fits within this typology. Moreover, "John Doe, is a generic name used to refer to unidentified individuals, representing the anonymous man who could be anyone, demonstrating that the greatest threat may hide behind the seemingly most harmless person" (Gómez, 2015).

To stop him, two detectives with opposing profiles attempt to apprehend the criminal before he can complete his plan. Detectives Mills (Brad Pitt) and Somerset (Morgan Freeman) function as a binary pair, opposites that form a duality in perpetual conflict and tension, a small-scale representation of universal dynamics staged in conceptual terms. Early in the film, Somerset expresses some of the pessimistic reflections that John Doe will later elaborate upon, particularly the way he detests the lack of empathy and solidarity among the inhabitants of this bleak and desolate city (ravaged by incessant rain), while recalling and discussing with his police department superiors the horrifying atrocities recently committed by local criminals. In this sense, Somerset appears resigned to the destructive violence human beings can unleash and chooses to retire from his job, weighed down by a sense of weariness and resignation that prevents him from glimpsing even a ray of light in the dark and perverse world that surrounds him.

On the other hand, Mills is portrayed as a young detective who longs to dispense justice and cleanse the streets of criminals, radiating energy and determination in a fierce, stubborn, and tireless effort. "In terms of point of view, *Seven* is recognizably aligned with the two police officers, who represent a dichotomy organized into Platonic binary pairs; not only veteran and rookie, but also black and white, cerebral and impulsive, and pragmatic and idealistic" (Nayman, 2021, 36). This contrast serves to illustrate the complexity of the universe and the constant tension that defines us as individuals; hence the film's appeal to the audience, which, to a certain extent, echoes the biblical phrase: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8: 1-7).

Without a doubt, the religious element within the film's formal proposal is fundamental and structures the entire narrative. Richard Dyer (2008) referred to the film as a "study of sin". The seven deadly sins organize the network of crimes committed by John Doe as a form of punishment directed at the sinners who make up a decadent and putrefying society. The film's stylistic traits accentuate these characteristics, depicting the city as a dehumanized, gray, filthy metropolis, immersed in a kind of universal flood where the loneliness of its inhabitants seems to be a common denominator (all the protagonists feel lonely and alienated in one way or another). According to Fincher, the number seven functions as a symbol deeply embedded in Western culture within the Christian tradition and is represented through various events.

> *Se7en* must be viewed in terms of sin. But in itself, the title is not indicative of this. The seven deadly sins are only one among the many sevens found in Western culture: days of creation, days of the week, cardinal virtues, Christian sacraments, wonders of the world, pillars of wisdom, colors of the rainbow; the Book of Revelation contains around fifty groups of seven (including churches, candlesticks, angels, trumpets) in its vision of the Apocalypse. Yet *Se7en* goes further: the seven terraces of Dante's Purgatory, a reference to something Detective Somerset reads about seven murdered children... Despite being such a stark title, *Se7en* evokes all these almost cosmic resonances (Navarro, 2016, 10).

Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* serves as a key reference for John Doe's project. In the Italian writer's theological poem, we read the following: "A mountain of seven circles rises on the horizon of Purgatory, and these seven levels correspond to each of the seven deadly sins: Lust, Gluttony, Pride, Sloth, Greed, Wrath, and Envy" (Clarín, 2024). Therefore, the serial killer functions as an inquisitor who strikes against the depravity embodied by ordinary individuals who have succumbed to their lowest passions and carnal weaknesses. John Doe acts from a position of moral superiority, placing himself above good and evil, an attribute common to psychopathic personalities. The aim of his murders is to carry out a form of social cleansing, eliminating the "trash" that inhabits the city. Within his psychopathy and narcissism, he perceives himself as God's chosen instrument tasked with executing this project, for which he believes he deserves public recognition, as it constitutes a contribution to the improvement of the human species. Doe also believes that the craftsmanship of his crimes reveals a talent and skill worthy of praise, elevating him to the status of an Artist with a capital A. The film's terrifying crime scenes testify to the boundless cruelty of human beings, sublimated by the complete lack of empathy of a psychopath with delusions of celebrity.

One of the elements of *Seven* that immediately captured the public's attention was the visual force of its images. Fincher aesthetically recreates the deterioration of the serial killer's psyche, who, in a final crusade, seeks to consecrate himself through his *Magnum Opus*: a terrible, macabre, and abject project that, although ostensibly conceived as a sermon addressed to the decadent societies of major metropolis (in this regard, the film adopts essential traits of Film Noir and presents itself as Neo-Noir), ultimately reveals itself as a succession of grotesque and abominable executions unlike anything the detectives have seen before. The horror of his enterprise is measured by the extraordinary preparation and anticipation required to execute it. Years of work carried out in the shadows begin to surface, astonishing the police forces by the perfection with which the horrific spectacle is unfolded. The unspeakable terror of these murders awakens a certain fascination that places the serial killer in the realm of the criminal genius, a sinister and malevolent mind capable of building dark and cruel masterpieces of torture. This fact appeals to the sensationalistic impulse that attracts people (and especially the media), as if they required a dose of fear to remind themselves that they are alive. This dread directed at the serial killer stands not far from a perverse veneration of an individual who acts as a kind of God. "Perhaps the most provocative and problematic aspect of *Seven* is the veneration of the serial killer figure as a modern guru with something to say about society" (Nayman, 2021, 34).

Mills and Somerset (Figures 1 and 2) construct a preliminary profile of the killer in which his plausible intellectualism stands out. The *Paradise Lost* quote by John Milton found at one of the crime scenes: "Long is the way and hard that out of Hell leads up to light", is evidence of this. Another key clue that leads them toward the killer emerges from the books John Doe checks out from the public library (among them, Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*).

This enables them to locate the killer's residence, although they fail in their attempt to apprehend him. However, John Doe unexpectedly turns himself in, acknowledging the detectives' cleverness in understanding the underlying logic that structures his plan. David Fincher explained the following to Amy Taubin:

> What captivated me in the script is the aspect of connecting the dots. It's a movie about connecting the dots that speaks about inhumanity. It is psychologically violent. It implies a lot, not about why he does it, but about how he does it. It has this element of evil that is realistic, but I did not want people to say: Isn't this the most horrendous thing you've ever seen in your life? What disgusts me is the violence you're supposed to applaud" (Taubin, 2017).

Figure 1. Morgan Freeman listing the 7 deadly sins.

Doe wishes to fulfill one final request before completing his work: to speak with Somerset and Mills, whom he admires and to whom he intends to reveal the reasons behind his atrocious acts. John Doe's admiration for the detectives also reveals the killer's need for attention. It demonstrates that his acts hold no meaning unless there is an audience observing his crimes in astonishment. It also exposes the narcissism that drives the psychopath, who prides himself on capturing the media spotlight, even if doing so requires committing the most reprehensible and monstrous actions. John Doe turns himself in as part of his scheme, which reaches its culmination with the final two victims. One of them falls prey to the killer's envy: Mills's wife (played by Gwyneth Paltrow). Upon this chilling revelation, her husband, Detective Mills, executes John Doe (the envious one) in a fit of wrath, the final deadly sin yet to appear in the narrative, thereby completing the serial killer's project. This ending underscores the killer's Machiavellian nature and provides a dark and pessimistic closure that offers no concessions to the viewer. Through this film, John Doe became one of the most iconic serial killers in the history of cinema.

Figure 2. *Seven*'s protagonists: Morgan Freeman, Brad Pitt and Kevin Spacey.

2.2 Zodiac

David Fincher's sixth feature film could be classified as a "cosmic drama", that is, a constant dialogue that may become eternal and irresolvable. From a metaphysical perspective, it could also approach what some art critics describe as works that pose unanswerable questions, and there is nothing more terrifying than a question without an answer. *Zodiac* offers a radically different representation of the serial-killer phenomenon from that seen in *Seven*. The shocking visceral impact of the meticulously crafted crime scenes in *Seven* gives way to a sparer visual economy in *Zodiac*, one that is more realistic, closer to documentary cinema, and stripped of sensationalism and graphic gore. "*Seven* is a movie about a serial killer with an idea, validated by the macabre aesthetic proper to Fincher's cinematic style. *Zodiac*, however, was conceived as a film about the idea of serial killers, or something even more abstract. The serial killer as idea" (Nayman, 2021, 55).

Zodiac focuses on a real case that terrified the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1970s and generated enormous media impact. Fincher experienced firsthand the fear instilled by the Zodiac Killer, as he lived as a child near the zone where the infamous criminal operated. Fincher told Shawn Levy:

> As a kid, I always thought the Zodiac had killed more people and that there was a massive manhunt underway to find him. It turns out it was just two guys making phone calls and taking notes with Bic pens. Even when television told us they were investigating through computer files and comparing fingerprints, the truth is the technology did not exist in any useful way until much later (Knapp, 2014, 118).

These statements confirm the director's mistaken conception of the case before researching it in depth, perhaps shaped by the hazy childhood memories lodged in his psyche, fed by an overrepresentation of sensationalist and tabloid news in the media and by a climate of latent national tension. Hence Fincher's emphasis on the newsroom of *The San Francisco Chronicle* as a generator of public opinion and a fundamental vehicle for the Zodiac's exposure. "Zodiac chose his own name in a series of letters which, until 1974, he sent to the newsrooms of *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The San Francisco Examiner*. In his messages he included four cryptograms, three of which remain unsolved, signed with a cross enclosed within a circle" (*Cineastas del Siglo XXI*, 2016, 34). This demonstrates the criminal's narcissistic nature, baptizing himself as a brand or fictional character looking for notoriety.

> The fear provoked by "Zodiac," the killer who is among us, fuels the paranoia surrounding the safety of a society—American society—hypersensitive to any violence that threatens the system yet indifferent to the violence the system itself produces and, at the same time, skeptical of the measures adopted by the authorities to safeguard their lives [...] The media, the film suggests, are those who feed that paranoia in collusion with the system (*Cineastas del Siglo XXI*, 2016, 39).

The motive behind Zodiac may well have been to appear in the media. This returns us to the idea of that perverse dependence between the mass media and monsters—here embodied by a serial killer, a figure enjoying unprecedented cultural prominence during this historical period. "Fincher is fascinated by the notion that the Zodiac's compulsion is not, ultimately, to kill but to communicate with the media. That became far more rewarding than what he had started doing in the first place... So, he was an attention seeker" (Knapp, 2014, 125).

All of Fincher's suspicions are supported by the criminal's *Modus operandi*. The Zodiac Killer reported his crimes by telephone, providing the police with details of the homicides to prove his authorship. Zodiac would confess: "I have just committed a crime; this is what you will find at the crime scene". He later established an epistolary relationship with the media, specifically *The San Francisco Chronicle,* with the intention of amplifying and publicizing his atrocities. He also threatened to commit abominable crimes, such as murdering children on a school bus, if his letters were not published. The uproar caused by Zodiac was so great that Don Siegel's 1971 police thriller *Dirty Harry*, starring Clint Eastwood, is based on his figure, telling the story of a serial killer who terrorizes San Francisco and calls himself Scorpio. Fincher's film recreates the moment of the film's premiere and the reaction of *Chronicle* journalists to this unusual event. The issue of the excessive fame that Zodiac acquires as he appears in the media raises various questions among the public. During a radio interview, a woman argues that newspapers should not publish the Zodiac's letters, even if he had threatened to commit more murders. She points to the media's ambition to sell and profit by turning to sensationalism.

The police do not want information about the Zodiac's letters to be leaked, so as not to hinder the investigation or give the criminal too much power. But the media, eager to exploit the opportunity presented by publishing details about the killer, reveal information that provokes panic in the population. As Zodiac amasses headlines and becomes aware of his bargaining power, he requests to speak with a public figure on television. This demand reinforces the idea of the serial killer as a celebrity using his status to negotiate. Nev Pierce states: "Rarely has a multiple murderer with so few homicides been responsible for spilling so much ink in newsrooms. The Zodiac claimed around thirty murders, although only around five were confirmed. This demonstrates the killer's ability to publicize and market himself to the media" (Knapp, 2014, 120).

One of the key elements that have ensured that Zodiac remains as one of the most significant serial killers in history is directly related to his excessive exposure in the media. As Mark Browning explains in his extensive study of Fincher's filmography, *Films That Leave Scars*: "*Zodiac* is about writing. What distinguishes Zodiac from other killers is not the scale or brutality of his crimes but the relationship he established with the police and the press through his letters" (Browning, 2010, 80). His image was constructed by journalists and by the collective imagination that built a myth of epic proportions, one that still resonates in American memory. Journalist Paul Avery produced a superficial

profile of Zodiac in one of his *Chronicle* articles, describing him as a latent homosexual and deducing that "...he is a subject hungry for popularity who needs to appear in the media at all costs, even if that means claiming responsibility for other deaths with which he had nothing to do" (Gómez, 2015, 61).

Fincher sets up a triangle among the three main characters in the story (Figure 3): journalist Paul Avery, who embodies the visible face of the crucial work carried out by the press and mass media; detective David Toschi, who attempts to track down the serial killer but lacks the necessary resources to fulfill his mission; and Robert Graysmith, a cartoonist at *The San Francisco Chronicle* who, driven by curiosity and cleverness (and by his aptitude for deciphering cryptograms), collaborates with the investigation by connecting disparate clues and representing the citizens "obsession" with discovering the Zodiac's identity. His unusual ability to interpret the murderer's coded letters earns him praise and turns him into a decisive actor in understanding the killer's intentions. The fact that this illustrator became such a relevant figure in the case demonstrates both the insufficiency and inefficiency of police work regarding the Zodiac investigation and the public's fixation on this figure. Graysmith would later write *Zodiac: The Full Story of the Serial Killer's Reign of Terror in Northern California* (1986), the book on which the film's screenplay is based, and he participated actively in the complex production of Fincher's feature.

As Fincher's film progresses, we come to confirm that the protagonists' futile efforts to uncover the serial killer's identity emphasize the notion that "reality is not only deceitful but also tremendously encoded, hidden beneath the ciphers of a psychopathic killer, concealed behind thousands of false clues, genuine clues that are nonetheless impossible to prove, and an overdose of information that makes it impossible to orient oneself, reconstruct, and organize the narrative of what happened" (*Cineastas del Siglo XXI*, 2016, 40). The impunity enjoyed by Zodiac constitutes the essential core of the terror he instilled in American society, leaving an indelible scar on its culture and on an entire generation marked by a tumultuous historical period.

> The film operates simultaneously on both micro and macro levels. The depiction of the real events surrounding the hunt for one of the most enigmatic American serial killers of the twentieth century constantly alternates between intimacy and omnipresence; while it intentionally focuses on the microscopic details of forensic investigation, it also remains attuned to a fluid and expansive progression of fashion, technology, politics, and pop culture over a span of twenty-five years, from 1969 to 1991 (Nayman, 2021, 52).

James Vanderbilt, *Zodiac's* screenwriter, believed that the film was aesthetically closer to a documentary style and therefore more realistic, "focusing on telling the story without artifices and without depicting violence in a frontal manner, unlike *Se7en*, a film stylistically baroque and designed to shock audiences with horrific and jarring images" (Nayman, 2021, 54). Fincher told film critic Jonah Weiner the following: "We are trying to control where people look, so they don't end up looking at things that are going to confuse them. The simplest way to describe directing would be: how do I get them to look where I need them to look?" (Weiner, 2020).

Fincher achieves a level of narrative and stylistic precision in *Zodiac* that strips the film of any unnecessary artifice and transforms it into a chilling experience due to its realistic approach to the events. The openness of the film's ending is also devastating, different from that of *Se7en*, but leaving the audience with more questions than answers

and with an uncomfortable sense of unease. The Zodiac stopped killing and sending letters to the press, and his long shadow eventually disappeared from the headlines, causing the public to lose interest in his whereabouts. However, the impact of Fincher's film led to the reactivation of the Zodiac investigation, which had previously been dormant, as new clues and hypotheses emerged.

Figure 3. Robert Downey Jr., Jake Gyllenhaal, Mark Ruffalo and John Carroll Lynch, in *Zodíac*.

2.3 Mindhunter

A clear and faithful representation of the scientific methodologies used to build serial killer profiles is found in the series *Mindhunter* (Penhall & Fincher, 2017-2019), a Netflix production that ran for two seasons and unfortunately halted further development due to the high cost of each episode and its insufficient audience impact. Fincher directed a total of seven episodes across both seasons and was extensively involved in the show's production. *Mindhunter* plausibly depicts the early stages of the psychological investigations that established the foundations for the study of serial killers through in-depth interviews with real murderers such as Edmund Kemper, David Berkowitz (the Son of Sam), and other notorious criminals including Charles Manson and Wayne Williams, many of whom were active during the 1960s and 1970s. The FBI spearheaded this effort from what became known as the Behavioral Science Unit, with the goal of building standardized profiles of serial killers even before such a label or definition formally existed, ultimately to help solve open cases. Previously, a murderer responsible for a series of killings that shared similar characteristics and *Modus operandi* was simply considered a multiple murderer or an offender accountable for several homicides. Authorities lacked an understanding of the motives that drove these criminals to commit their abhorrent acts repeatedly. As a result of the Behavioral Science Unit's investigations, the study of common patterns and traits present in the personalities of serial killers was inaugurated, leading to the first psychological profiles describing these offenders.

Robert K. Ressler, one of the most prominent figures in developing psychological profiles of serial killers, with a career spanning more than twenty years in the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit, stated the following in his book *Inside the Monster*: "As part of my attempt to understand multiple murderers, in the mid-1970s I coined the term serial killer. Prior to me coining the expression serial killer in the mid-1970s, these crimes were referred to as killings by

strangers, to distinguish them from those in which victims died at the hands of someone known to them, usually a family member" (Ressler, 1998, 10).

Ressler is represented in the series through the character Bill Tench, one of the show's protagonists, who accompanies Holden Ford in the FBI's innovative project that would revolutionize the way serial murder investigations were approached. Ford embodies John Douglas, a professor of Behavioral Sciences at the FBI whom the series introduces from the outset as a hostage negotiator in extreme situations. Together, they embark on a mission to travel across the United States teaching criminal profiling techniques to local police departments and involving themselves in various investigations. John Douglas authored the book *Mindhunter* (with Mark Olshaker), which served as the basis for the series and recounts his experience conducting in-depth interviews with incarcerated serial killers. The third member of the team is Wendy Carr, a fictional counterpart to Dr. Ann Wolbert Burgess, whose academic perspective on psychology provides greater depth and theoretical grounding to the investigation (Figure 4).

The idea that agents from the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit should interview convicted murderers inside prison was, at the time, both revolutionary and transgressive. Although the proposal initially met with resistance within the Bureau, it had a clear justification: it sought to answer the question "How does a serial killer think?". To understand their inner logic, it was necessary to examine their behaviors, methods, and motivations. This was the reasoning that guided John Douglas. "Sometimes the only way to catch them is to learn to think like them. If you want to understand the artist, you must look at the painting. We've examined many paintings over the years, and we've talked at length with the most talented artists" (Douglas & Olshaker, 1995, 23). This method of in-depth interviewing facilitated the work of criminal profiling by revealing recurring behavioral patterns across numerous confessions, an advancement that significantly narrowed the search for serial offenders. It also helped distinguish conceptual categories such as *Modus Operandi* and the killer's signature.

Essentially, criminal profiling consists of creating the most accurate possible physical and psychological sketch of the person being sought for a particular crime. Robert K. Ressler, considered the world's foremost expert in this technique, defines profiling as the process of constructing a map of the killer's mind. The idea is that if the investigator can manage to think like the offender and feel what the offender feels, they may be able to anticipate his next move and ultimately capture him. According to Ressler, entering the criminal's mind makes it possible to understand, and even predict, his subsequent actions.

> Profiling is particularly effective with serial killers due to the repetitive nature of their crimes. Repetition enables the identification of a pattern, what is commonly known as the *Modus Operandi* (the set of actions a criminal performs repeatedly to achieve his goal). Distinct from the *Modus Operandi* is the so-called "killer's signature", a series of actions intended to express the perpetrator's psychological identity. It is a kind of mark left to declare *"I did this"* (Rámila, 2010, 27).

The series depicts how the foundational concepts and methods that made a more accurate and effective approach to serial-killer investigations possible were gradually established. This effort, both necessary and timely, aimed to halt a worrying wave of crimes sweeping the nation. Through the protagonists' journey, Fincher once again immerses us in a historical period he previously explored in *Zodiac*, highlighting the crucial role played by the media in shaping public

opinion. "The rise of serial killers is connected to the growing complexity of our society, our interconnection through the media, and the alienation many of us feel" (Ressler, 1998, 49).

> These crimes, committed by unknown aggressors and lacking an apparent motive, were perceived as enigmas. This absence of a clear motive heightened public fear, leading citizens to suspect any stranger as a potential murderer. "The fact that we cannot truly understand—or even explain—the phenomenon of the serial killer turns him into a myth, and the stories we tell about him into a mythology (Danesi, 2016, 138).

Throughout the series, Holden Ford interviews a plethora of murderers; figures wrapped in a sinister aura whose notoriety elevates them to the status of celebrities, even within the correctional facilities where they remain incarcerated. Among the pathetically curious phenomena experienced by the criminals interviewed by Ford and Tench, we find a disturbing form of fan devotion: some admirers write letters and maintain regular correspondence with several of the serial killers featured in *Mindhunter*. This "fan phenomenon" illustrates once again the fascination and, at times, obsession these offenders evoke in the public, an obsession that gradually transfers to Ford himself. As his involvement in the Behavioral Science Unit deepens, he becomes increasingly fixated on his interview subjects, particularly Edmund Kemper, the co-ed killer, who during the first season becomes the central figure around which the team's most substantial discussions revolve.

Joe Penhall, the showrunner of *Mindhunter*, explained: "David and I were fascinated by psychopathy and narcissism, as well as personality disorders, because we felt that there were people out there, who were not serial killers, occupying high political positions... I think we were on a mission with *Mindhunter* to show that these people were, very sadly, ordinary" (Nayman, 2021, 75). The ultimate goal of these criminals is recognition, attention.

> Serial killers often seek fame and public visibility through their crimes; anonymity is not their objective, quite the opposite. They want to be known and perceived as superior beings. Hence their frequent communications with the media and the police, and sometimes even self-incrimination or voluntary surrender when a suspect is arrested for their crimes or when media coverage begins to fade (Jiménez Serrano, 2014).

Fincher's influence on *Mindhunter* grew steadily, eventually leading him to sideline Penhall and his writing team, rewriting the scripts of the second season and imprinting the project with a more personal tone and a style aligned with the distinctive traits of his filmography. One of the elements he emphasized most strongly was the theme of the serial killer as celebrity and media spectacle. In the second season, we follow the case of the Atlanta child murderer, the infamous Wayne Williams, who between 1979 and 1981 took the lives of between 20 and 30 children, although he was ultimately convicted of killing only two adults. "*Mindhunter* portrays the media circus surrounding the investigation into the Atlanta child murders and how it interfered with police efforts to apprehend Williams. It also highlights political interference in public debate and the pressures exerted by various activist groups seeking to protect the African American community directly affected by the homicides" (Nayman, 2021, 84).

Figure 4. Holt McCallany, Jonathan Groof, Anna Torv y Cameron Britton, in *Mindhunter*.

David Fincher develops in *Mindhunter* several concepts first outlined in *Seven* and later explored in greater depth in *Zodiac*. "The serial killer as a media rock star; religion as the point of departure for morality and the repression of contemporary society; the social fascination with acts that are as atrocious as they are alluring; and the complex mechanisms of law and the media that place sensationalist visual violence at the center of public attention" (Rodríguez Torres, 2019). *Mindhunter* can be understood as a fusion between *Seven* and *Zodiac*, and it has paved the way for a renewed interest in serial killers, fueled by the prolific production of documentaries and fictional works related to this topic in recent years. Cases such as Jeffrey Dahmer, the "Milwaukee Cannibal," or Ted Bundy have become widely popular narratives thanks to the success of audiovisual productions centered on their figures. In an interview, Fincher admitted:

> I think part of the fascination with serial killers is something we ourselves have helped promote. In cinematic or television storytelling we always need a boogeyman; from Michael Myers to Hannibal Lecter, we portray them as sophisticated geniuses of evil. But in real life they are not like that. They are sad individuals, often pathetic, who have endured terrible life experiences and committed horrific acts (Contreras, 2017).

Professor Nicola Nixon pointed out: "Serial killers have come to occupy the place of classic monsters such as Dracula, Frankenstein, or the Wolf Man" (Garrido & Latorre, 2023, 34). One could argue that they are their postmodern equivalents, comparable not only because of their monstrosity, which, in their case, resides not merely in their appearance but in their morally monstrous interiority, but also because of the fame or celebrity status they have achieved within our culture and the collective subconscious.

> Given that mass consumption is one of the defining traits of contemporary culture, this dynamic has extended to serial killers just as it has to any other celebrity. Hence, the proliferation of merchandising and murder memorabilia surrounding them: biographies, T-shirts, posters, collections of their artistic creations or personal belongings. Not to mention the many individuals (many of them women) who, as if they were courting rock stars, seek to correspond with them or get closer to them (Garrido & Latorre, 2023, 34).

3. Conclusions

The work of the media in relation to the phenomenon of serial killers has been decisive in propagating the myths that surround them. As a consequence of the sensationalist overexploitation of their crimes, public opinion has

become both scandalized and obsessed with these figures idealizing their power and reach, fearing and revering them in a dual movement of attraction and repulsion that reveals the perverse relationship established between killers and the public. Without this dependence between the media and the atrocious crimes committed by these infamous murderers, as prime generators of news, the scope and fame of serial killers would not be the same.

John Doe and Zodiac represent two paradigms of the serial killer. One is the absolute macabre genius who sacrifices himself to complete his grim project, driven by a divine mission; the other is the elusive, enigmatic criminal who outwits authorities and remains in the shadows until the end of his days. The precision with which they carry out their atrocities elevates them to an Olympus of criminals, one of them in the fictional realm and the other in reality as a part of American History. *Mindhunter* complements these two visions with the full range of serial killers who contributed to the understanding of such criminals. Together, they form a constellation of murderers who enjoy an unusual degree of popularity, one that reveals the audience's fanaticism for these monsters and demonstrates the fundamental role of the mass media in the creation of these infamous celebrities.

Fincher's filmography, from its beginnings to his most recent works, evolves toward a deeper and more complex understanding of serial killers. He moves from directing flashy, baroque products to crafting thoughtful and realistic reflections in which there are no definitive answers to the essential problems of human existence, particularly those arising from unpredictable bursts of gratuitous violence. Fincher transitions from the moralistic and critical attitude of *Seven* to a process of thoroughly examining the conditions under which serial killers emerge (*Zodiac*), identifying shared human traits that can develop into psychopathic behaviors. The categorical judgments of Mills and Somerset regarding John Doe's atrocities give way to Graysmith's obsession with understanding the criminal mind, which ultimately culminates in Holden Ford's sinister insight into the dark psyches of the serial killers he interviews.

Over the years, David Fincher has become *the* director par excellence when it comes to serial killer narratives. His concerns regarding the figure of the serial murderer have found in his cinema the most effective means of expression, allowing him to probe and excavate the minds of the most notorious criminals in History. In doing so, he transforms the public's perception of them, raising complex questions that often lack satisfactory answers and dismantling any edifice of certainty that might otherwise comfort the audience.

Within the dialectic generated by serial killers' pursuit of attention and the excessive media exposure of their crimes, the myths surrounding these monsters are constructed, elevating them to celebrity status. Fincher's cinema reveals this process in a profound and complex manner, reflecting on the underlying causes that give rise to the mythology surrounding these psychopaths.

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Curricular Overview

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Statements:

- The authors further declare that no artificial intelligence–based tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript.