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Failing to Move Forward: Journalism, Media, and Affect in David Fincher's

Nicholas Orlando

University of South Florida, njorlando@mail.usf.edu

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Failing to Move Forward: Journalism, Media, and Affect in David Fincher's *Zodiac*

by

Nicholas Orlando

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the degrees of
Master of Arts in Humanities
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Amy Rust, Ph.D.
Scott Ferguson, Ph.D.
Todd Jurgess, Ph.D.
Dan Belgrad, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

Zodiac (David Fincher, 2007) offers a critique of the mass media's efforts to restore American valiance with heroic narratives of ordinary people in the aftermath of 9/11. Amending prior scholarly readings of *Zodiac* as a serial killer narrative, I reconfigure my analysis by taking Fincher at his word and treating it as a journalism film. Borrowing a term from political theorist Elisabeth Anker, I argue that, unlike other contemporary journalism films, *Zodiac* is constructed as a "melodrama of failure" that, rather than seeking mastery, unveils the instability of evidence and the obsessive uncertainty of procedure.

With his film sitting between both the failures of journalism surrounding 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis, Fincher harkens back to the 1970s to unmask the malignancy of failures past. Manifesting low-level anxiety and doubt within the public, I contend that Fincher presents media as at once looming and intrusive, present and absent, and detached yet affective, privileging fragmentation over unity to put us in touch with temporal potentialities, to what Homay King attributes to the virtual. Fincher's return to an era of malaise and an apparent obsession with indexicality underscores our unstable epistemological and phenomenological relationships to old and new media.

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

During the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, mass media outlets attempted to restore national unity by either broadcasting or publishing stories detailing the heroic acts performed by ordinary Americans on that catastrophic day. Various journalism outlets worked to heal the American national body, penetrated by a foreign enemy, using their respective mediums to plug epistemological absences left in the trauma's wake. Paralleling the release of these affirmations of American identity after a physical attack was the rise of a reflective discourse of failure. The discourse, which began with the failure of American intelligence, moved towards the failure of American journalism in the following years. Journalists reflected on the news coverage of the terrorist attacks and acknowledged that they were more concerned with developing sensational narratives than providing an objective account of already ambiguous information.

Within this historical context, David Fincher released *Zodiac* (2007). Although not overtly political, *Zodiac* is positioned between two sociohistorical failures: the failure of journalism after 9/11, for which there was an absence of *a posteriori* epistemological certainty, and the failure of journalism to provide *a priori* knowledge for the economic crisis of 2007/08. Here, I am not suggesting that *Zodiac* could have predicted the future. Instead, I am suggesting that looking back to the film in our contemporary moment, a moment after 9/11 and 2007/08 economic crisis, is instructive making sense of these cultural failures. By presenting media as at once looming yet intrusive, present yet absent, and detached yet affective, *Zodiac* reflects upon the instability of

evidence and the obsessive uncertainty of procedure. In doing so, the film addresses our conception of the 1970s as a decade obsessed with material evidence, and the promises and failures of journalism it implied.

Reading *Zodiac* as a melodrama of failure, I argue that it reveals the malignancy and recursiveness of failures past, which undercut calls for national unity by way of mastery emitted by mass media during the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. David Fincher dredges up past failures and opens old wounds, recalling the malfunctions of the New Left, the Watergate scandal, and the New Hollywood American auteur, putting us in touch with spatiotemporal uncertainties rather than providing us an opportunity to master a mediated past in and for the present. As a result, Fincher reveals the aporias introduced by failure's interjection into our relationships with media, binding the evidentiary with opacity rather than clarity, disrupting mastery, and revealing failure as productive rather than regressive.

Although *Zodiac* is situated historically within two moments of journalistic failure, the prevailing scholarship overlooks Fincher's interest in journalism, focusing instead on his obsessions with crime. The academic discourse surrounding *Zodiac* has developed into two camps. On one hand, the scholarship is interested in Fincher's depictions of crime, including killers and terrorists; on the other hand, scholars focus their attention on Fincher's preoccupation with procedure. Though both paths align with my interests, I deviate from these dominant discussions and instead take Fincher at his word to situate *Zodiac* as a journalism film that critiques the affective force of media in a post-9/11 cultural climate.¹ In the aftermath of 9/11, terrorists thought to be linked to Al Qaeda dominated the news. This ubiquity resulted in Al

¹ During an interview with Nev Pierce, screenwriter James Vanderbilt recalls a conversation he had with Fincher before filming *Zodiac* in which the director stated this film was to be a journalism film rather than a serial killer film. Fincher considers *Seven* to be his serial killer film.

Qaeda's looming mediated presence, marking a failure of journalism to inform the public, and served to only fuel Americans' anxieties concerning safety (Bonner, "The Media and 9/11"). This theme of failure continued into the years following the 2007/08 economic crisis, which, according to Dean Starkman, was a crisis for the journalist-as-watchdog ("The Great Story"). I argue that *Zodiac* is constructed as a melodrama of failure that, in place of mastery, seeks to unveil the instability of evidence and the obsessive uncertainty of procedure. In so doing, it allows for a reconfiguration of our conception of uncertainty as productive for procedure, rather than as detrimental.

In this light, *Zodiac* explores the malignancy and recursiveness of past failures through media. To do so, Fincher references our nostalgia for the materiality of evidence and media we attribute to the 1970s, revealing our contemporary obsession with a time presumed to be more grounded in materiality. Evidence was gleaned for the film's production, for which Fincher excavated police case files and newspaper stories, and interviewed the living detectives and reporters involved with the event. This process was then mirrored within the film's narrative, as it follows investigative procedures to unmask the Zodiac killer and ease the anxiety held by the public. Further, Fincher nods to analog cinema, which, according to the conventional view of the index, media thought to have material traces to a past referent, creates a stable relationship between past and present, and the mastery that stability implies. Yet, Fincher disrupts these apparent cohesive relationships and reconstructs what was once stable as unstable. Failure interjects in the reach for mastery, and from this failure, media's affective force surfaces.

The concept of indexicality has a long history in photography and film studies, and continues to be debated among contemporary film scholars. The index was first alluded to by André Bazin, and then more explicitly discussed by Charles Sanders Peirce. For Bazin,

photographic media, including analog cinema, has an objective relationship with the real, as the latter is physically inscribed on analog film stock. Likewise, for Peirce, this material trace is part of what defines an index. However, indices are not necessarily material objects, and can instead be vocal exclamations. Because of Peirce's semiotic understanding of the index, indices are inherently indeterminate and unstable as they depend on a receiver, or individual, to interpret their significance. Recently, film theorists such as Tom Gunning and Mary Anne Doane have offered reconfigured understandings of indexicality. Gunning, in "Moving Away from the Index," argues for a shift away from indexicality in our understanding of cinematic realism and moves instead to consider how cinematic movement conveys a stronger sense of realism to the viewer. In Doane's revisit to indexicality, she analyses the work of art theorist Rosalind Krauss, stating indices do not convey realism proper, but rather point to, touch, and reference "a real without realism" (4). In this sense, Doane argues that indices act as forms of "performative evidence" rather than absolute markers of the past (3). In this performativity, indices are indeterminate and unstable.

While the conventional notion of indexicality links media's relationship with the real as dependent on its materiality, I argue that Fincher is more concerned with affect. Media, whether analog or digital, old or new, concrete or abstract, both affectively looms over and cuts through, pulls at, and fragments their respective events. With *Zodiac*, Fincher moves toward a more affective and temporal understanding of the index in line with Kris Paulsen's work, in which she returns to the index in a new and unconventional ways. Indices, for Paulsen, elicit an arresting charge, bringing about moments of pause which are inherently indeterminate. With this reconfiguration of indexicality, grounded in temporality rather than materiality, I shift to Homay King's conception of virtuality. The virtual, for King, arises in moments in which an object gives

us pause, thus making apparent durational time. As a result, this moment of pause births potentialities, trajectories into the future that are initiated by human reactions. Understanding evidence as a series of indices breaks the rigidity imposed upon it by standard procedure, requiring different, more flexible methods of narrativizing its implications.

Evidentiary objects in *Zodiac* behave like indices, affectively striking the recipient and opening a window into the virtual. However, because these moments are inherently indeterminate for Fincher, they are also moments of anxiety due to their lack of stability. Access to the virtual is, therefore, blocked by the mastery guaranteed by standard procedure. Failure, however, offsets these cycles, interjecting in their midsts and shifting one's starting place by refracting one's relationship with the real. Not only does failure initiate a moment of pause, it thrusts one who fails into a state of absolute virtuality, into a state of affective anxiety. This matters, because although the pursuit of standard procedure promises certainty and clarity, *Zodiac* issues an opposite understanding, and instead links the procedural to opacity as a participant in the melodrama of failure. Accordingly, failure is productive, refuting mastery, and instead generating opportunities for possibility within a once closed cycle. In this light, I draw back to Elisabeth Anker's notion of the "melodrama of failure," in which failure is a productive medium that promotes credence over certainty and possibility over mastery. With this reconfiguration of *Zodiac*, my research opens new ways of approaching not only Fincher's work, but also processes of mediation which include failure itself, which like all media, shapes and controls social operation. Such processes always require a look back, yet simultaneously establish and repress the potential for failure. Rather than viewing failure as regressive, these productive failures allow us to look back to the past only to move forward toward the future and welcome the moments of pause offered to us by media.

Literature Review

Much of the literature that contemplates David Fincher's work speaks to his depictions of crime, including serial killers and terrorists, and their associated obsessions with procedure and as mediation. *Zodiac* is no exception, as most scholars foreground the shortcomings of its institutions as manifestations of the characters' certainty in procedure. Although these shortcomings imply institutional failure, most scholars seem to miss failure as a major theme within Fincher's work. Instead, failure is considered a consequence of other narrative elements, such as the obsessive behaviors of a certain character or legal procedures undone by external threats. In crime narratives, legal procedures process evidence from objective judgement. Carol J. Clover states that, in the trial film, evidence is engaged in a "process of examination: first direct, then cross, and often redirect and recross as well" (255). This examination process hinges on objective interpretation in order to determine the guilt or innocence of a suspect. It works to reveal some objective truth, which lends itself to a tendency for mastery. However, in journalism, although one strives for objectivity, the insertion of one's subjectivity cannot be avoided. Indeed, to journal means to self-examine or reflect on one's own experience. Although journalism reaches for objectivity, it bears the fundamental problem of being a reflection of one's experience of an event.

In this thesis, I am interested in bringing Fincher's interests in the failure of procedure and mediation to the foreground and pairing it not with crime, but rather, with journalism. Mark Browning, author of *David Fincher: Films that Scar*, the most current and comprehensive analysis of Fincher's oeuvre, repeatedly refers to the shared elements of *Zodiac* and *Se7en*, positioning the latter as an early predecessor to the former within the serial killer genre. He states, "[*Zodiac*] is a serial killer narrative certainly but it also has elements of a police

procedural, a newspaper story, and even a bio-pic” (73). Despite the film’s genre hybridity, Browning prioritizes the serial killer narrative and views the film’s obsessive desire for knowledge as its motivating force. While I agree with the Browning’s contentions, I find situating *Zodiac* as a serial killer or crime narrative to be far too limiting. Foregrounding Fincher’s depictions of crime might allow scholars to discuss his obsessions with procedure. However, it does not allow room for a consideration of the relationship Fincher draws between the procedural and media, both within and without the film.

Some scholars have already addressed Fincher’s interest in journalism, often tying it to a lack of certainty generated by institutional impotence, yet still placing this interest within an investigatory couplet with crime as its dominant partner. Philip L. Simpson addresses journalism as a failed “investigatory apparatus,” an assertion not unrelated to my argument, but he ultimately privileges the police procedural in *Zodiac* (128). Although I agree with Simpson’s assertion that journalism in *Zodiac* is a failed “investigatory apparatus,” I argue that this relationship to failure is much more complicated than what Simpson proposes. For Simpson, journalism’s failure is symptomatic of its fixation on the *Zodiac* case’s minutia, and this failure is deemed fatal. I argue, however, that failure should instead be read as a productive medium that allows for new, relational narrative forms to emerge from standard procedure’s rigidity. Journalism, then, is an apparatus of failure. Taking seriously this idea of an apparatus of failure implicates media writ large, which includes evidence in the form of both analog and digital media. Reframing the discussion using journalism as a lens puts this relationship between media and failure into sharper relief, bringing into focus the epistemological certainty promised by the procedural and the evidentiary, and failure’s role in interrupting, and perhaps redirecting, this certainty.

Furthermore, in treating *Zodiac* as a journalism film, I argue that the film is a critique of the mass media's restorations of American valiance during the aftermath of 9/11. Although the Zodiac murders and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 are historically dissimilar events, the former allegorizes the journalistic failures of the latter. Furthermore, *Zodiac* looks back to past failures to show that journalistic failures are not new. They are in fact remediated in post-9/11 journalism through a repetitive adherence to standard procedure. In fact, in the aftermath of 9/11 restorative narratives were implemented through a procedural effort to repair wounds inflicted on the American national body. Journalists provided mediated evidence of heroism to reinstall epistemological certainty into the American cultural consciousness. To undercut these restorations and, therefore, the mastery for which they reach, Fincher looks back through evidence, material traces of past events often associated with concreteness, to reveal the productive failures of media, and thus open the procedural to virtual potentialities.

Moving toward *Zodiac's* relationship with analog and digital media, Fincher is heavily dependent on the evidentiary to create his film. Luis M. García-Mainar touches on Fincher's major influences for *Zodiac*, which include *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and the 1970s photography of Stephen Shore, which served as an aesthetic model for the film (142-143). Fincher appeared to privilege analog in his look back to the 70s, yet he did so through a digital lens. Sam Dickson, in his essay "Zodiac and the Ends of Cinema," addresses the relationship analog media holds with materiality, a relationship some scholars describe as indexical. According to Dickson, *Zodiac's* desire for digital media is ambivalent, at once looking back to old media while looking forward to the digital in its form. Analog media has been thought to contain a material trace to the real, while digital media is claimed by some scholars to be a product of abstraction. *Zodiac's* digital cinematography mimics that of analog, making the

film a work of cinematographic liminality. That is, according to Dickson, the film's ambivalence arises from its very in-betweenness, refuting the mastery of the analog, and refashioning the methods by which mastery can be achieved. However, I suggest that, by converging analog and digital, Fincher reveals the instability and indeterminacy of the analog rather than mimicking its stability with the digital. The meeting of the two always involves using dissolute fragments to form coherent narratives. In this instability, Fincher opens up what was once concrete and absolute to virtual, spatiotemporal potentialities by disrupting the opportunities for mastery with failure.

By turning to journalism, then, I reframe the discussion surrounding *Zodiac* as a “melodrama of failure,” a term borrowed from political theorist Elisabeth Anker. Though her work is more integral to my method, it is important to mention her notion of the melodrama of failure in support of my argument for *Zodiac*. For Anker, “melodramas of failure ... show how the very promise of freedom as license and sovereignty *contributes* to the ... subordination it critiques” (229). Rather than allowing for freedom through the achievement of sovereignty, Anker asserts melodramas of failure contribute instead to feelings of entrapment and thus subvert the very freedom promised by sovereign mastery. This mastery relates to *Zodiac's* ambivalence addressed by Dickson, in which the digital can master the analog by remediating older media forms. Furthermore, this mastery also reveals the indexicality upon which both media hinge. However, by turning to Anker, I argue that failure in *Zodiac* acts as an affectively liberating agent, interrupting the cyclical entrapment caused by this return to old media. Failure is, instead, productive, opening otherwise closed procedural sequences to new, yet virtual, potentialities. As a result, Fincher shows the instability of both evidence and media and shrouds the obsessive

search for truth in uncertainty, thereby disrupting mastery by way of mediation in favor of possibility.

Sources and Methods

Using *Zodiac* as my primary text, I move to extend the existing scholarship that appeals to David Fincher's obsession with knowledge, correcting the tendency to overlook his interest in journalism and thus filling a gap concerning his use of media to dramatize its productive failures. *Zodiac* looks back to the 1970s to show the malignancy of past failures, recalling the malfunctions of the New Left, the Watergate scandal, and the fall of the New Hollywood American auteur. These failures set Fincher's film apart from other post-9/11 journalism dramas. *Good Night and Good Luck* (George Clooney, 2005), for example, shares with *Zodiac* its nostalgia for a previous era, but the former film is nostalgic for the 1950s and serves to affirm journalism's democratic value. Instead, *Zodiac* opens a wound in America's history to not only critique contemporary American journalism after 9/11, but also reflect the instability of evidence and productive failures of procedure and reveal the evidentiary's dependence on looking back.

In this light, I read *Zodiac* as a "melodrama of failure," a term I introduced above. For Elizabeth Anker, in the "melodrama of failure," desires to surmount constraints that demobilize and demoralize an individual ultimately serve to undermine their own promises of freedom through sovereignty. As a mode of mastery, this sovereignty through freedom only reinforces a fantasy of overcoming feelings of impotence and defenselessness by controlling others. By failing to deliver on these promises, "melodramas of failure ... show how the very promise of freedom as license and sovereignty *contributes* to the unfreedom and subordination it critiques" (229). Melodramas of failure, for Anker, unravel the ties between sovereignty and freedom, thus refracting the trajectories conventional melodramas set for achieving mastery. This is important,

because within the realm of political discourse, Anker is addressing failure as productive rather than inhibiting. Failure liberates one from the desire for sovereignty and opens up new possibilities for freedom without restricting others to do the same.

While Anker is concerned with the implementation of melodramatic conventions within political discourse that link freedom to sovereignty, I find her notion of the “melodrama of failure” effective for explicating Fincher’s interests in journalism and the affective registers of media. Through standard procedure, journalists construct narratives from evidence gleaned to provide epistemological certainty to viewers. Returning to Anker, journalism upholds this procedure as a promise of freedom, privileging a sovereign position of mastery over information. In *Zodiac*, Fincher presents his evidence but leaves the viewer uneasy and the desire for epistemological certainty unquenched. Media, for Fincher, captivates viewers, drawing them into a circuitous entrapment of looking back to the past. Despite the certainty implied by the adherence to procedure, Fincher puts this into tension to reveal procedure’s temporal leakages, using failure as an agent of interruption and “refraction,” to borrow Anker’s term. In doing so, Fincher creates a melodrama of failure to reveal media’s promises of freedom as contributors to the uncertainty they claim to eliminate. In line with Anker, I argue that the failure of procedure redirects the trajectory of media’s affective and recursive loops, opening new spatiotemporal relationships with evidence. In these relationships, evidence might hold a material trace to the past, but it also resonates with us affectively in the present.

To better understand the affective relationship we hold with evidence, I turn to—then shift away from—discussions of media and indexicality. For some scholars, such as Vivian Sobchack, the digital is thought to contrast the analog, as the former supposedly lacks the material trace to the real inherent to the latter. The digital is tied to abstraction, while the latter is

tethered to concreteness. Indeed, Fincher plays with these more traditional conceptions of analog and digital. However, by applying Kris Paulsen's reconsideration of the index, I argue that Fincher complicates these relationships. Indices, for Paulsen and conventional media theory, are always "indicators of the present," since an index requires an interpreter to form meaning around it (92). However, Paulsen claims the index is an object that elicits an affective charge from within the interpreter, and rather than being constrained by physicality, instead involves temporality as its epistemological basis (91). Indices strike us, initiating moments of pause. I agree with Paulsen, and I want to take her argument further with Fincher's *Zodiac*. While evidence implies a look back into the past, it also stays with us into the future when coupled with a circuitous yet inconclusive narrative. The affective charge beckons us to return to the narrative's opening, and to search for new evidence and form new meanings.

This recursive return to media gives way to a virtual understanding of media and temporality. According to Homay King, "[The virtual] surfaces when time is perceived as a continuous stream of images that forks, loops, and doubles back on itself, beyond any computational or instrumental framework that we might be tempted to press upon it" (68-69). This perspective on time is one of affect, in which time's continuity becomes noticeable within a moment of pause, a moment of durational time. The body feels as if it is suspended in time, free of the constraints of linear time. For King, the virtuality of time opens up temporal potentialities. Matter, as an entropic force, pulls down on these potentialities, giving life order, thus binding time to space (72). *Zodiac* is an exercise in durational time, formed as a slow, linear narrative, yet one that loops back on itself. Although the film encourages cyclical viewership, it ultimately denies viewers the mastery promised by the evidentiary. Failure, interrupts these loops, just as it disorients procedure, and thus derails the cyclical obsession for knowledge.

Despite the evidentiary's dependence on looking back through procedural mediation, Fincher reveals the productive failures that result from the evidentiary's affective qualities. The cyclical viewership encouraged by *Zodiac* puts us in touch with potentialities granted by the virtual, using failure as a severance for past-oriented quests for knowledge and mastery. By breaking the continuity of this recursive, obsessive behavior, Fincher reveals future-oriented, open-ended relationships to the world. Although it entraps us in a "melodrama of failure" through content, it liberates us through the virtual potentialities introduced in its form. By looking back to *Zodiac* in our contemporary moment, we can respond to journalism's discourse of failure by offering the adoption of more inclusive narrative forms, involving a broader relationality among media outlets. *Zodiac* advocates for the embrace of ambiguity, rather than certainty, as a pathway to a reconfigured understanding of truth. Through ambiguity, we can find credence, an aporetic truth-space found between doubt and confidence, which allows for narrative forms to continuously develop and redevelop while still holding true to material facts.

Chapter Organization

In the first chapter, I lay a foundation for the historical context in which *Zodiac* is bound in order to bring together the reflective discourses of failure that arose during the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2007/08 economic crisis, the film's links to melodrama, and looking back through evidence and procedure. The discourse of failure produced by the mass media undercut the narratives of American valiance that attempted to reassert the nation's strength through the heroic actions of ordinary citizens. Failure, in this context, was considered fatal, positioned as a binary opposition to success that hinders the well-being of standard procedure. I argue, however, for an embrace of failure as a productive medium for journalism, one that allows for a more open practice of mediation. To explore these journalistic failures through *Zodiac*, I also shift the

conversation surrounding the film from crime to journalism. Since *Zodiac* is typically regarded by most scholars as a crime narrative, I bring its journalism narrative to the foreground. By looking back past failures, *Zodiac* serves as a nostalgic melodrama of failed journalism, one that reads a fragmented past to envision multiple, non-masterful possibilities for present and future. The film critiques journalistic failures by way of the Zodiac killer, whose very crimes are constituted and celebrated through journalism. Fincher implicates journalism, and media writ large, through their promise of certainty by way of mastery.

In my second chapter, I turn from reading procedure as mediation to discussing *Zodiac*'s mediation overall. Fincher looks back to a past decade of analog media through a digital lens in order to make sense of our contemporary digital network culture. By way of the index, *Zodiac* addresses questions pertaining to the digital's reformed relationship with truth. Rather than basing these reconfigurations of truth in an index's materiality, Fincher is more interested in its affective charge and the arresting virtuality that emerges from the preceding moment of pause. Through the procedural mediation of time and action, the virtual is blocked out of the actual, and only manifests as it is conditioned by the actual. Yet, in *Zodiac*, indices, whether analog or digital, allow access to virtual temporalities that parallel the actual. As a melodrama of failure, however, *Zodiac* uses failure to break the rigidity of this mediation so as to reconfigure our notion of media's promise of freedom. That is, media is liberating when we embrace its repressed ontology of productive failure. Through failure, *Zodiac* provides access to absolute virtuality, a time-space that is inherently indeterminate. In its indeterminacy, media enables us to not only look back to the past, but also look toward the future with confidence, rather than certainty, in mind.

In my Epilogue, I refocus my discussion of the post-9/11 discourse of failure, recontextualizing it within the Trump Era of America. With his claims of “fake news,” Trump not only proclaims the continued failures of standard journalistic procedure, but he also reveals the repressed abstraction of media through failure. Trump’s “fake news” seems to address the failures of journalism that Fincher reveals. However, the former misrecognizes their productive consequences, and turns toward a more nihilistic view of indeterminacy through his proclamations of the media’s apparent untrustworthiness. I suggest that Trump’s hegemonic push of media fakeness exposes media’s spectral relationship with reality, on which total materiality and total abstraction sit at opposite ends. While the former implies that media must retain a material trace to the real, the latter indicates that media bears no connection with the real and ultimately points to nothing. By turning to *Zodiac*, however, we can see that the two are not diametrically opposed to one another but are always entangled.

CHAPTER 1:

THE FAILURES OF JOURNALISM AND THE JOURNALIST AS FAILURE

“What’s your angle here? This is good business for everyone but you.”

— Paul Avery (Robert Downey, Jr.), *Zodiac*

“This is about going back to deep, hard dirty work, with tough people going down dark alleys with good instincts.”

— Senior general, in response to Seymour M. Hersh

Introduction: “The people have the right to know.”

Although most scholars commonly situate David Fincher’s *Zodiac* as yet another crime narrative in contemporary American auteur’s oeuvre, in this chapter, I move to situate it instead as a journalism film. Narrativizing the obsessive failure of procedure, *Zodiac* is both a backward-looking rumination on the failures of post-9/11 journalism and a forward-looking call to view future failures differently. Though often either overlooked or treated as secondary to the crime narrative in the extant scholarship, journalism in Fincher’s film works to reconfigure what the power of the media might mean, disrupting the notion of its role as the supplier of public epistemological certainty. Indeed, journalism promises this certainty of the past, using a procedural approach to mastering evidence of the past. Yet, this promise is self-defeating, as the procedural leads to failure. Through the procedural collection of evidence, Fincher critiques the mastery afforded to journalism in its looks back and forward in and for the present. Although the former group used this tactic to master the past in their present moment, Fincher embraces failure as a productive, rather than regressive, medium in order to refute the mastery attempted for by journalists, and media more generally.

Zodiac is constructed from two narrative components that seamlessly intersect with each other: one of journalism and another of crime. Both narratives serve the purpose of the attempt, and ultimate failure, to identify the ominous Zodiac killer, a faceless murderer who terrorized 1970s San Francisco. By way of his murders, the killer elevated himself to a looming presence by disseminating anxiety throughout the public by initiating a media frenzy. After both the police and the journalists at the *San Francisco Chronicle* fail to reveal the Zodiac's identity, the leading members of both institutions resign themselves to either accept defeat, even if done so begrudgingly. Paul Avery (Robert Downey, Jr.), the crime reporter for the *Chronicle*, succumbs to alcoholism and drug addiction, unable to cope with his failure as a journalist. Dave Toschi (Mark Ruffalo), by contrast, chooses to step away from the case, acknowledging the mental health risk posed by his obsession with the case. In between the two is Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), who is unwilling to allow the case to remain unsolved and commits himself to debunking the mystery. Although he risks a descent toward obsession, he eventually renarrativized the evidence from the case and publishes a book titled *Zodiac*, the real-life book from which Fincher's film is adapted. Unfortunately for Graysmith, he is only able to loosely confirm the true identity of the Zodiac killer. The film offers some closure toward the end, with Graysmith looking at the case's prime suspect, Arthur Lee Allen, but the film cannot offer concrete epistemological certainty. The Zodiac killer remains unidentified, even in the real world.

The existing scholarship surrounding *Zodiac*, although it is scarce, mainly considers Fincher's interest in crime and the procedures the investigation implies. There is unanimous agreement among scholars that *Zodiac*, aside from being a serial killer or crime narrative, is a film about process. Most scholars cite Amy Taubin, who made the initial claim about *Zodiac's*

procedural preoccupations. She states, “Zodiac is less a film about characters than about process - the process of mining and arranging information in search of truth” (“Nerds on a Wire”). Yet these preoccupations are more commonly attributed to Fincher’s interest in crime rather than the amalgam of genres that comprise *Zodiac*’s narrative. Scholars such as Mark Browning and Luis Garcia-Mainar are more interested in how Fincher’s film narratively mirrors the real police investigation from the 1970s, during which law enforcement experienced frequent setbacks that prevented any forward movement. Other scholars, including Philip L. Simpson, position the Zodiac killer as a figure for post-9/11 terrorism. Although I agree that *Zodiac* is a film interested in process, and that its narrative themes parallel such post-9/11 themes as terrorism, I want to shift the discussion to journalism. Discussed with journalism in the foreground, *Zodiac* functions not as an affirmation of the procedural, as Taubin and others have claimed, but rather as a critique of the mastery it implies.

To begin, then, this chapter establishes a sociohistorical context for *Zodiac*, detailing the discourse of failure and its anxieties of fatality that were born out of U.S. intelligence and soon shifted to journalism during the aftermath of 9/11. Within this context, I turn to reposition *Zodiac* as a critique of post-9/11 journalistic failures within a melodrama of failure. First coined by political theorist Elisabeth Anker, melodramas of failure “disclose the ways in which normative American practices of freedom undermine their own aims, and even suggest that the failure of these practices can reroute the pursuit of freedom to a more structurally emancipatory politics” (229). For Anker, the “normative American practices of freedom” aim for a mastery of one’s own agency. She argues that failure refracts these practices of freedom, delinking freedom from mastery, and instead opens up possibilities for non-sovereign approaches to political freedom. In a similar vein, I argue Fincher’s representation of journalism both mirrors the failures of

contemporary journalism and issues a call to forge new relationships with failure. Failure acts as a productive rather than regressive medium, serving to open up room for potentialities for journalism through refraction rather than allowing for the mastery afforded by procedure. Fincher's own melodrama employs productive failures, but does so with a nostalgic look back to the 1970s and a generative look forward to the future.

With one eye looking to the past in nostalgia and the other toward the future, *Zodiac* encourages the audience to not only ruminate on past failures in order to move forward, but also do so by treating failure as a productive, and refractive, agent. For Svetlana Boym, nostalgia is composed of two root words: *nostos* and *logos*. The former signifies a return and forms the basis for what Boym calls restorative nostalgia. According to Boym, "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (41). In this attempt to rebuild the past, one engages in an attempt to master the past for absolute certainty. On the other hand, nostalgia's latter root, *logos*, refers to longing and is the foundation for Boym's reflective nostalgia, which involves a glance to the past to suggest "new flexibility" for the future (49). Unlike restorative nostalgia, in which one looks back to the past to fix or bandage it, reflective nostalgia involves a longing for a past to which one cannot return. Furthermore, in reflective nostalgia, one also longs for something that only exists when the past joins the present in memory, making returning to the past doubly impossible. For Boym, the experience of reflective nostalgia is fragmentary and inconclusive (50). One does not look back to fix the past, but rather to integrate the past into the present. Fincher, however, employs what I call refractive nostalgia within *Zodiac*, a slight twist on Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia in conjunction with Anker's idea of refractory failure. While the latter's experience is fragmentary and inconclusive, refractive nostalgia is what fragments the past through failure. As if shining

light through a prism, one looks back to the past in the present, and sees multiple futures. Failure is the necessary medium to catalyze this look back and forward, as failure disrupts one mode of mediation to suggest multiple others.

By not only looking back to the promises and failures of 1970s journalism within the present sociohistorical context of journalistic failures, but also by recursively leading the spectator into failure, Fincher reveals the instability of evidence and uncertainty of procedure. He presents evidence by way of *Zodiac*'s narrative form that promise a mastery of the case, invoking restorative nostalgia only to deliver refractive nostalgia by way of failure. Evidence, however, proves inconclusive, a fragmentary puzzle that does not allow for epistemological certainty. As a result, Fincher reveals the instability of evidence and the uncertainty of procedure and unhinges mastery from this certainty through journalism in particular, and media more generally, to suggest instead the embrace of flexibility and ambiguity as pathways to reconfigured understandings of truth. By opening up room for these often masked qualities of procedure through failure, *Zodiac* advocates for an inclusive relationality among narrative forms that refutes closure, homogeneity, and mastery.

9/11 and the Discourse of Failure

Zodiac is a film surrounded by failure, historically bracketed by two journalistic failures and itself a domestic box-office flop that failed to generate a return on its budget. On one side of *Zodiac*'s release is the failure of American journalism during the aftermath of 9/11. Discourse concerning this failure was initially born out of scrutiny of U.S. intelligence institutions, and it shifted to reflect on the efforts put forth by American journalists. Bracketing *Zodiac* on the opposite side is the 2007/08 economic crisis and the discourse of failure concerning journalism's inability to provide some type of anticipatory knowledge for the inevitable crash. Furthermore,

sitting between the two failures of journalism is the film's domestic theatrical release, which only grossed just over \$33,000,000 to its \$65,000,000 budget. Yet, despite *Zodiac's* malperformance in domestic theaters and its position within a framework of major cultural failures, Fincher's film offers a productive approach to failure by revealing the cultural aporias that were covered up by American mass media, including the attempt to re-affirm American national identity through restorative discourses of valiance.

Discourses of institutional failures materialized in post-9/11 considerations of U.S. intelligence agencies published by the mass media. For the intelligence industry, the increase of standardization throughout the 1990s generated fatal failures in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Just one month after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Seymour M. Hersh wrote an article titled "What Went Wrong: The C.I.A. and the Failure of American Intelligence," published in the October 2001 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. The dust from the catastrophe had barely settled, yet Hersh was one of a few journalists who dared to bring to light a major American failure: the failure of American intelligence. According to Hersh, it is the job of the C.I.A. to provide anticipatory knowledge based on intelligence gleaned or provided by sources. The F.B.I. then steps in to provide solutions. This attempt to provide anticipatory knowledge works to lock down and master past evidence for the present and future. With the intelligence gained about the terrorist attacks, the C.I.A. was tasked with locking down the trajectory of the event by narrativizing the evidence. However, Hersh states, "Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, in 1991, the C.I.A. has become increasingly bureaucratic and unwilling to take risks, and has promoted officers who shared such values." The intelligence community, in the years leading up to 9/11, fell into a state of disarray, malaise, and failure. Due to a lack of communication and the increase of binding standard procedures, the intelligence community, according to Hersh,

suffered from an inability to prevent the terrorist attacks, resulting in a “fatal malaise.”

Standardization, then, generates failure, which ultimately reveals aporias rather than supplying the mastery it promises.

This discourse of failure shifted to reflections of journalism itself, composed by members of the media. Such rumination put into question the notion of journalism’s duty to provide epistemological stability to the public. In his article “The Media and 9/11: How We Did,” Raymond Bonner not only reflects on his own actions during the aftermath of 9/11, but also calls out his colleagues, although not by name, placing blame on their overriding willingness to avoid asking difficult questions. Instead, they succumbed to the fear injected into American consciousness by the terror attacks and failed to question the information offered by the Bush Administration. For Bonner, journalism contributed to the shared paranoia among the American public, using the phrase “Linked to Al Qaeda” as a buzzword that guaranteed the captivation of American audiences. Furthermore, journalists neglected the violations of civil liberties by the United States. According to Bonner, “Editors long ignored reports that the United States was holding suspected terrorists in secret prisons.” The actions taken by the U.S. were not exposed for four years, when Dana Priest published her controversial article concerning the United States use of secret prisons to detain suspected terrorists in *The Washington Post*. Journalism, as an institution crippled by fear, failed to allay anxieties, and instead only contributed to them despite its efforts to do otherwise. Just as the attempts for mastery made by the U.S. intelligence community failed, so, too, did those made by journalism. However, these failures might not be innately negative. Quite the opposite, I argue that they can instead be productive.

Echoing Bonner’s claims, Gary Kamiya asserts that journalists failed to provide epistemological stability and justification for the United States’ engagement in war in the Middle

East. He states, “[The] press’s most notable failure was its inability to determine just why this disastrous war was ever launched” (“Iraq”). Journalists lacked a sense of assertiveness, which is unlike the press of the Watergate era. Kamiya’s claims are not universal, as he states that there were a handful of journalists who did not shy away from approaching difficult questions. However, overall, the industry fell short in challenging the Bush administration during a time of anxiety, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Kamiya does not embrace journalistic failure with fatalism. Rather, he looks forward with hope, believing the industry can repair itself in a reassertion of its identity of tenaciousness. Unfortunately, the failures that plagued the post-9/11 press would resurface, undermining Kamiya’s hopeful look to the future. Tenaciousness, as Fincher and I demonstrate, cannot bring mastery, since a reassertion of tenacity serves to reiterate the standard procedures that lead journalism to failure in the first place. In Kamiya’s suggestion, the journalism industry would need to recognize its failures in order to reassert its own doggedness. However, the repetition of these claims of failures is indicative of the media’s remediation of failures past. Merely recognizing failure, then, is not enough. Rather, it is the impossibility of mastering the past that must be realized for a productive shift in journalism praxis to occur.

Journalism, though, is not solely interested in making sense of the past. Like the C.I.A., it also serves an ombudsman role, and one that, in its own standardized procedures, reaches for anticipatory mastery of the future. Just six years after 9/11, in 2007, the United States economy crashed, devastating many Americans. Despite evidence suggesting an impending economic crash, business journalists failed to alert the public. Dean Starkman claims that this was a crisis for the watchdog. Starkman’s claims recall the assertions put forth by Hersh, for whom the C.I.A., also a watchdog institution, failed to report an impending crisis and instead succumbed to

a sense of malaise. After studying the activities of the business press throughout the crisis, Starkman noticed that what was “[missing] are investigative stories that directly confront powerful institutions about basic business practices while those institutions were still powerful. The watchdog didn’t bark” (“The Great Story”). Like the cowardice towards the dominant powers displayed by the industry during the aftermath of 9/11 and throughout the beginnings of the Iraq War, business journalists eschewed the difficult questions that needed to be posed to the economic institutions on Wall Street. However, whereas the 9/11 discourse tried to remediate failures of the past, the 2007/08 discourse tried to premeditate future failures through standard anticipatory procedures. Both aimed for mastery, and in that aim, both failed to realize that mastery is not guaranteed, even if it might reconfigure the American public’s conception of journalism as better.

If eschewing questions leads to a failure of the press in the eyes of the industry itself, then it is the desire for mastery by journalism that puts failure in negative relief. As journalists strive for mastery as an indicator of a better journalism, they configure common perceptions of failure as ontologically fatal. This discourse of failure reveals an institutional desire for epistemological mastery through standard procedure, which in effect shrouds failure in a negative light. If journalism as an industry is unable to assert itself as a tenacious entity, and instead avoids confronting complex or sensitive subjects, then the industry fails by way of its malaise. Moreover, if the anticipatory narrative formed by using evidence from the past does not account for everything in the present and for the future, then journalism again fails. There is an apparent lack of flexibility within the standardized procedures. Using evidence of the past, journalists attempt to lock down the implications of that evidence to provide certainty in the present and a comforting guide for the future. Mastery, in terms of these desires, eases anxieties. However,

epistemological stability was never truly restored after 9/11 due to the failures of procedure. Furthermore, the reach for epistemological stability is a troubled goal, since masterful standard procedure is employed to block out information that might itself be disconcerting or ambiguous. Failure's disruption complicates these restorations of this stability, as it reveals that it can never be "stored" in the first place. As a result, a low wave of anxiety flowed steadily through the public, exacerbated by the failure of journalism during the 2007/08 economic crisis.

Given the sociohistorical failures of journalism surrounding *Zodiac's* release, I turn next to position the film as a journalism film. Just as the journalists during the aftermath of 9/11 and during the 2007/08 economic crisis fail in their respective endeavors at mastery, the investigative journalists of *Zodiac* fail to identify the Zodiac killer. Indeed, the post-9/11 media failed to provide a sense of *a posteriori* epistemological certainty, and the business press leading up to the economic crisis failed to provide any *a priori* knowledge to confirm what was suspected. Likewise, Paul Avery cannot lock down the identity of the Zodiac killer, and this inability renders him unable to provide either *a posteriori* certainty of the killer's identity, or *a priori* knowledge of the killer's possible next move. By drawing these connections between *Zodiac* and these historical failures, the film's political undertones addressing the past and contemporary powerlessness of news institutions to challenge looming entities become more overt.

“Go get the publisher.”

David Fincher's *Zodiac* follows two investigatory narratives that are seamlessly intertwined. After its opening sequence, one in which the Zodiac killer murders two youths on the Fourth of July, the film unfolds as a journalism film. The viewer follows Robert Graysmith as he sends his son off to school and embarks on his morning commute to *The San Francisco Chronicle*, where he works as a cartoonist. At the same time, the viewer follows the Zodiac's

first letter to the press, traveling from a mail truck, to the *Chronicle's* mail room, and eventually to the hands of the publisher. As the Zodiac's body count continues to rise, and as the case becomes increasingly ambiguous, the film fluidly shifts its focus to a different investigative team, that of Inspectors David Toschi and William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards). Although *Zodiac's* narrative momentum picks up in the newsroom, the film is often viewed as a serial killer and crime narrative, in which journalism is considered a secondary narrative element. In this section, I argue to reposition *Zodiac* as a journalism film with a clear lineage to others that came before it. Further, Fincher's film situates the journalist and journalism itself as failures, connecting these failures to the historical failures mentioned in the prior section.

For most scholars, crime remains dominant in their discussions surrounding *Zodiac*. Mark Browning, for example, compares *Zodiac* to one of Fincher's earlier films, the serial killer film *Seven* (1995). He states, "Like *Seven*, *Zodiac* is premised around the hunt for a serial killer. ... Also like *Seven*, *Zodiac* plays with the narrative expectations associated with the crime film and the serial killer sub-genre" (74). Just as *Seven's* William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) and David Mills (Brad Pitt) pursue John Doe (Kevin Spacey) through his demonstrations of the Seven Deadly Sins, *Zodiac's* Toschi and Armstrong attempt to decipher the Zodiac's cryptic messages with the hope of revealing his identity. Comparing the two films, though, is problematic, since such a comparison draws solely upon *Zodiac's* crime narrative and ignores the prominence that mass media plays in the later film. The Zodiac killer, as a faceless and ultimately uncertain enemy, contrasts the antagonists in Fincher's prior films. Doe initially mediates his own bodily presence through the lacerated bodies of others, substituting their material corporeality for his own. Although Doe communicates with the police by leaving notes on walls which reference one of the seven deadly sins, or by leaving photographs of the formerly

suffering victim, or by leaving his victims in a state of near-death, he uses the terror he has implemented to leverage his desire to be seen. Doe maintains a relationship with a direct material presence, even in this substitution, only to reveal his own body toward the end of the film by walking into the police station covered in blood. The Zodiac killer, on the other hand, mediates his body through material media, but does so to assert a presence by way of his own absence. Media, in this respect, acts a veil to an ambiguously present object. Contrasting Doe's desire to be seen, the Zodiac killer has a desire to exert a presence by way of an indeterminate mediation, creating an aporetic tension within the film. The Zodiac desires a mediated presence, using an absence of physicality to refute epistemological certainty and disseminate anxiety throughout the public.

The Zodiac's assertion of a presence through absence privileges the periphery, a marginal space that relies on a direct material presence for one to penetrate the boundaries of standard procedure. Luis Garcia-Mainar contends, "The film is not about a serial killer but the real experience of an investigation, with its delays, dead-ends, and frustration" (143). For Garcia-Mainar, these "delays, dead-ends, and frustration" provide a "peripheral view of crime" in which a peripheral character, such as Robert Graysmith, is able to offer an untraditional approach to solving the case (143-144). The periphery, in his view, is a site of productivity. Since peripheral characters are not directly involved with the standard procedures that hinder those within the legal system, they are able to introduce new or different ways of solving a case. Although I agree that the periphery is a site of productivity, I want to extend this reading to the periphery as a site of aporias and productive failures.

Reading the periphery as a marginal space that encourages productive, as opposed to regressive failures, provides the audience new perspectives from which we can approach

evidence. That is, although evidence might not provide epistemological certainty through the construction of an all-encompassing master narrative, it might offer confidence instead through flexible narratives left open to additions and reformations by way of failure. Just as there is a unanimous agreement among scholars about *Zodiac's* procedural preoccupations, scholars also contend that *Zodiac* is littered with failures, such as the two failed investigations pursued by the newspaper and the police, the breakdown of personal relationships, and the shortcomings of narrative climaxes. However, it seems that these failures, according to scholars, are merely a result of falling into obsessive behaviors due to the case's inconclusiveness. Failures, I argue, generate room for new possibilities in which we engage with evidence through uncertainty rather than mastery, while still maintaining a responsibility to material facts and their indeterminate mediation at once in the same time. Unlike the journalists in the aftermath of 9/11, who served to moralize the failures of the industry and thus maintain standard procedure as a closed mediation that allowed for mastery, Fincher instead generates openness through failure. *Zodiac* positions evidence as objects that lead to delays and dead-ends, as Garcia-Mainar states, and ultimately failure, as I argue, thus opening the boundaries set by standard procedure to an indeterminate liminality. The film circles back on itself and encourages new interpretive frameworks that deviate from standard procedures. In this context, failure is a medium itself, one that enables us to reconfigure the ways in which we obtain knowledge and form procedures. Failure, as a medium that generates openness rather than closure, grants new interpretations and new standards of procedure to emerge.

In order to make this shift to journalism, it is important to first establish a foundational understanding of the journalism film as a genre. Matthew C. Ehrlich states that journalism films, as a genre, “underscore journalism’s preeminence in American life even as they highlight

tensions at the profession's core" (6). Journalism, whether celebrated or scorned, plays an active role in meaning making for the American public. To return to the earlier discussion of the news coverage of 9/11, although the press may have failed to provide a sense of epistemological certainty, the industry still formed a comprehensive narrative, if only loosely, with the evidence available. In their failure, these journalists opened an aporia in which our relationship to meaning is reoriented. Because the press could only form a loosely comprehensive narrative, meaning itself is restructured as always open to reinterpretation and re-narrativization. However, for Ehrlich, journalism films are typically constructed as morality tales, in which failure is moralized and the American cultural myths, such as "democracy can work," are affirmed (12). By moralizing journalistic failures, these films extract masterful lessons from failure in order to maintain journalism's role within the status quo (9). Failures, in other words, are not taken as opportunities to rework standards, but are instead integrated into the larger tale of mastery. In his understanding of the journalism film, past failures are often looked upon with restorative nostalgia, serving only to reaffirm the standard procedures followed to ensure epistemological certainty. It would seem that Ehrlich's understanding of failure in the journalism film mirrors the sociohistorical failures of journalism that came after 9/11. The reflections of Seymour M. Hersh, Raymond Bonner, and Gary Kamiya called for attention to be paid to journalistic failures in order to prevent their repetition. They called for some lesson to be learned from these failures so that the industry could improve upon its procedures in order to ensure epistemological certainty for the future. Whereas Ehrlich seeks moralization through the failures present in journalism films that precede *Zodiac*, I contend that these moralizations fall into a similar trap of mastery that dominated post-9/11 journalism.

By moralizing against failure, journalism films can position material facts as that which provides certainty about the past, thereby affirming the institutions virtuous role within democracy. In *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976), for example, Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) work to obtain concrete evidence that will lead to the exposure of the political actors involved in the 1973 Watergate Scandal, displaying demonstrable persistence in the face of adversity. Ehrlich describes the film as a film about journalists “who stand in resolute opposition to the official power structure and upstanding citizens who fulfill their prescribed social roles” (119). In a time of political uncertainty, Pakula reinforces the democratic need for a strong press, in which journalists supply mastery over the past. In the film’s closing scene, Woodward and Bernstein slave over their typewriters, the strikes of the keys ringing throughout the *Washington Post* newsroom. Although the first shot of the scene places Woodward and Bernstein at a distance from the audience, that distance soon collapses through a series of dissolves. On the television to the left hand of the frame is Nixon’s inauguration; to the right, Woodward and Bernstein continue to write the story that presumably influences Nixon’s eventual resignation. The television, an electronic medium, is contrasted by the eventual victoriousness of print media. The frame dissolves into a medium close-up shot of Woodward and Bernstein while patriotic music blares from the television, concretizing the press’ integral role within democracy by virtue of the material connection to the past it fosters (see Figure 1-1). After another dissolve, the audience watches as the words exposing the wrongdoings of the Nixon Administration are typed onto the page. Woodward and Bernstein, as tenacious journalists, provided certainty about the past, using a material medium to stabilize that certainty over the representations provided by the images on the television.

In this light, *Zodiac* is often discussed by its creators and popular film critics alike as having a lineage to *All the President's Men*. *Zodiac* screenwriter James Vanderbilt recalls in an interview with Nev Pierce that Fincher references Pakula's 1976 film specifically, stating, "I've done a serial killer movie. I'm not interested in repeating myself. I see something closer to *All the President's Men*. It's a newspaper story," (120). Despite the allusions Fincher makes to 1970s journalism films, the citation of *All the President's Men* as the tonal model for *Zodiac* is striking since the latter film does not share its cited predecessor's celebration of journalism. Indeed, the journalists of the former film are steadfast champions of democracy, whereas the journalists of the latter fail to fulfill their democratic duties. I argue that rather than presenting journalism as an entity that is able to supply the same mastery achieved by Woodward and Bernstein, Fincher presents his journalists as failing in their pursuit of such mastery. From the start of the film, journalist Paul Avery is aloof, taking his job lightly until the *San Francisco Chronicle* receives correspondence from the Zodiac killer. Yet, because he cannot manage to unmask the still-faceless enemy, he is driven to alcoholism, and eventually leaves the industry to live in solitude on a boat.

Avery is Ehrlich's failure personified, attempting to moralize his failure to reveal the Zodiac killer's identity in an effort to let go and move on. Avery, with his descent into alcoholism, adopts a fatalistic mindset, accepting that the case will forever remain at a stalemate. When Robert Graysmith visits Avery on his boat, the two men occupy frames by themselves more often than they share it, indicating a disconnect between the two men and setting a divide between their failures (see Figures 1-2 & 1-3). On one hand is Avery, existing in fatal failure; on the other hand, Graysmith personifies the productive failure for which I argue. In a series of shot-reverse shots, Avery is seated on his couch in a medium shot, while Graysmith sits in a chair,

captured in a medium-close up. Graysmith pitches his idea to write a book about the Zodiac murders, hoping to put all of the information together to “jog something loose.” For Avery, however, the Zodiac killer has become insignificant, a man who “faded into a footnote,” as he states. It is Avery’s fatalism that Fincher ultimately condemns, as it reflects the negative failure to supply mastery by journalism. Avery’s acceptance of defeat in his pursuit of epistemological certainty by way of mastery plagues him. For Fincher, clinging to certainty through mastery is detrimental to the self and standard procedure if one fails to obtain such certainty. This, however, is the very problem inherent to setting failure as the binary opposite to success.

Contrasting Avery’s fatalistic malaise is Graysmith’s hopefulness. Graysmith pursues the case from the periphery, to recall Garcia-Mainar, since he lacks the legal or journalistic expertise to follow the standard procedures of both industries. By doing so, however, Graysmith recursively returns to the evidence not with an eye towards certainty and mastery, but rather with an openness to reinterpretation. When he visits the Vallejo Police Department to analyze the existing case files and evidence collected throughout the years, Graysmith becomes completely ensnared by the information. Fincher interjects close-ups of police files, which double as point-of-view shots from Graysmith’s perspective, in between close-ups of his expressions of concentration, frustration, and exhaustion (see Figures 1-4 – 1-7). The viewer is able to scan the documents as Graysmith does, analyzing the documents to glean as much information as possible before the camera cuts to the next shot. The film moves on, leaving what we could not gather from the evidence in the past. For both Graysmith and the viewer, Fincher forges an uncertain and unstable relationship with evidence. What initially promises epistemological certainty through procedure leads to the opposite. This deviates from the relationship formed to evidence and uncertainty between character and viewer in Pakula’s *All the President’s Men*. Unlike

Woodward and Bernstein, whose immersion is rewarded with the revelation of a major political scandal, Graysmith's immersion only rewards him, as well as the viewer, with more inconclusive evidence. In the film's closing sequence, he faces prime suspect Arthur Lee Allen in a hardware store. Although Graysmith gains some closure by confronting his prime suspect through an unmediated gaze, the Zodiac killer's identity is never confirmed due to a lack of hard evidence. Yet, this is the mistake against which Fincher warns. Linking certainty to the necessity of material evidence leads one to mastery. Instead, he advocates for a restructuring of procedure as indeterminate mediation. He proposes a new relationship to uncertainty in which openness to interpretive possibilities, rather than mastery, is encouraged.

Revealing the Parallax View

Because of the many divergences *Zodiac* makes from Pakula's *All the President's Men*, it might be more fruitful to draw a lineage between the former film and a different journalism film by Pakula, *The Parallax View* (1974). Whereas in *All the President's Men* Woodward and Bernstein successfully challenged and exposed the U.S. government with valiant efforts of journalism, Joe Frady (Warren Beatty) of *The Parallax View* is unable to provide the same sense of epistemological certainty as a journalist. The latter film shares with *Zodiac* themes of ominous and looming entities, inconclusiveness, and an affirmation of malaise and powerlessness in the face of a larger authority. In the former film, reporter Frady attempts to uncover details about the assassination of Senator Charles Carroll (Bill Joyce) previously withheld from the public. Although Frady discovers evidence of the Parallax Corporation's involvement in the assassination, he is required to go against standard procedure in order to pursue his leads. Unfortunately for Frady, he ultimately fails to forge a link between corporation and the assassination, despite the material evidence indicating their involvement. In his failure, he is

murdered after he witnesses a second assassination, that of George Hammond (Jim Davis). Pakula reveals the uncertainty of evidence, as well as the procedures that repress that uncertainty by forming master narratives. However, whereas the looming in Pakula's film is centralized within a system overseen by the government, the looming in Fincher's film explores the postmodern shift to a decentralized, permeating looming figure.

The problem for journalism presented in *The Parallax View* is a tension between knowability and reachability. For Frady, his targets are identifiable, since they are already established institutions that loom over the public by way of their omniscience. However, although his targets are identifiable, the evidence he collects leads only to further uncertainty and failure. Frady cannot forge the material links necessary with the evidence he has accumulated. Frady analyzes photographs, letters, and typewritten documents, following their material traces to a past event, and their ultimate promises of a grasp of the truth. Near the beginning of the film, when Lee Carter (Paula Prentiss) visits Frady in fear that someone wants to murder her, she hands Frady a newspaper clipping regarding Senator Carroll's assassination. The film provides a close-up shot of the newspaper, providing an intimacy with material evidence (see Figure 1-8). This newspaper story, as Frady claims, answers all outlying questions surrounding the assassination. Carter, however, provides new evidence to Frady that disrupts the stability the news story once provided. Throughout the rest of the film, Frady tries to reclaim that stability by re-mastering the case. In his reach for mastery, though, he fails, suggesting that mastery is impossible to reach.

The film refocuses the source of epistemological certainty from journalism to the looming entity itself. After the opening sequence of *The Parallax View*, the film cuts to a long shot of a congressional board declaring the nature of Senator Carroll's assassination. In a low-

angle, freeze frame shot, the members of the congressional board gaze down at us, the symbols of the American judicial system sitting above them as overbearing impositions on us (see Figure 1-9). Pakula creates a lasting impression of the board for the audience, so we feel their presence throughout the film: Someone is always watching, and the larger entity is who finalizes the narrative for certainty. With this freeze frame, Pakula reveals the identity of those that loom in the film, yet also shows throughout the film those that loom are always beyond reach. The film's last shot is a low-angle close-up of the congressional board, the camera in a similar position to the shot discussed above, but this time it tracks backward. Although evidence promises certainty through the pursuit of mastery, it can also lead to uncertainty, instability, and failure. Evidence within Pakula's film is itself the object of a parallax.

A similar relationship between looming, intervening failure, and a parallax view of evidence is forged in Fincher's *Zodiac*, although it is done with a slight twist. Whereas the looming forces in *The Parallax View* are already established entities, such as the government, the police force, or the Parallax Corporation, *Zodiac* uses looming to simultaneously stabilize a presence and open it up to uncertainty. However, *Zodiac* marks a shift in terrain for journalism. Part of the issue facing journalism, for Fincher, is addressing targets who are not established institutional targets, but rather ones who operate outside of the aegis of official control. These figures employ a media-saturated style of looming. The Zodiac killer uses the newspapers to instill fear within the public and requests that his ciphers be printed in for public access. He establishes a mediated relationship with San Francisco, first by feeding the public information about his killings, followed by taking credit for murders that either mirror or echo his killing style. Like the sovereign institutions in *The Parallax View*, the Zodiac killer is both looming and intervening. He asserts his omnipresence through media and cuts through that space with his

murders. Moreover, the establishment of presence in *Zodiac*, similar to the existing institutional presences in *The Parallax View*, only leads to further uncertainty.

In this light, the Zodiac killer is a figure for the 1970s institutions that loomed over a post-Watergate society, and, within its historical context, the faceless and absent enemies that loom over post-9/11 America. By bringing *Zodiac's* representation of journalism to the foreground, and by placing the film within its historical context, one can see post-9/11 anxieties surrounding the terrorist attacks and mass media come to the surface. Philip L. Simpson states, "To an audience accustomed to a sense of a continuing siege mentality since 2001 and frustrated by the national inability to capture the chief architect of the 9/11 attacks, the Zodiac killer ... is perceived as much as terrorist as he his serial killer" (129). The media coverage that was broadcast immediately after the attacks represented the enemy as faceless, an evil that lurked behind the scenes of an elaborately planned assault on the U.S. According to Elisabeth Anker, during Fox News' initial coverage, "The images of the attacked towers show the *effects* of the violent action but no the body of the villain" (53). It was not until moments later that the network substituted images of Osama bin Laden for the bodies responsible for the attacks. Despite this substitution, the War on Terror that soon followed 9/11 shifted the image of the enemy from an identifiable face to terror itself. Fincher's Zodiac killer similarly becomes an ominous, looming entity yet maintains a sense of anonymity by using mass media outlets to elevate himself as a figure for sovereign power. His ambiguous, mediated presence generates a low and steady wave of anxiety throughout the public. The Zodiac's looming presence remains ambiguous, a faceless enemy, using the medium of journalism as his platform.

Like Zodiac, Robert Graysmith also looms on the margins, acting as a complementary antagonist to the Zodiac's media-saturated style of looming. Graysmith's looming is more of a

physical annoyance to his coworker Paul Avery, and both the cartoonist and the killer act as intervening forces, as the former intervenes into the standard journalism procedure established by the film. Graysmith is a peripheral figure that introduces an untraditional approach to investigative journalism, although he also risks obtaining a position of marginality similar to that of the Zodiac. That is, Graysmith's operation from the periphery, understood through the Zodiac as a lens, indicates that he operates from a space of aporetic failure. It is not until the procedures of journalism fail and encounter an impasse that Graysmith begins to seriously pursue the Zodiac case. To revisit his visit with Avery on the now-defunct journalist's boat, Graysmith suggests writing a book about the case to ameliorate the failure of journalism. In another instance, when Graysmith visits Ken Narlow (Donal Logue) at the Nappa County Sheriff's Office, the latter man states he is unable to "cooperate with writers." Graysmith, however, replies that he is not a writer, but rather a cartoonist, leaving Narlow puzzled. From within this space, and like the Zodiac, Graysmith is able to interrupt standard procedures with failure. However, unlike the killer, Graysmith's position can be read productively. While the Zodiac uses the periphery to create a landscape leading to "delays, dead-ends, and frustration," to quote Luis Garcia-Mainar, Graysmith introduces a flexibility into journalism otherwise unavailable to the standard procedures by which the institution adheres and by which they fail. That is, a failure that is fatal for standard procedure is generative for Graysmith. His efforts to collect evidence lead to the publication of two true-crime books. Graysmith's failures gave way to new opportunities for different, and perhaps competitive narratives to be formed. The generation of new narrative forms breaks the restrictions of the procedural and introduces an alternative form of mediation that departs from the mastery of standard procedure.

Reading the periphery as a marginal space that encourages productive, as opposed to regressive failures, provides for the audience new perspectives from which we can approach evidence. That is, although evidence might not provide epistemological certainty through the construction of an all-encompassing master narrative, it might instead offer that certainty through flexible narratives left open to additions and reformations by way of failure. Like *Zodiac* and *Graysmith*, the audience also remains on the margins, watching the film unfold from the periphery while Fincher implicates us in the process using close-up shots on pieces of evidence that double as point of view shots. We are led to failure with *Graysmith* and by the *Zodiac* yet the film does not allow us to pursue certainty through mastery. Rather, the film circles back on itself and encourages further inspections to refute opportunities for mastery. Although we reside in an extradiegetic space, it is from within this space that we recognize and accept the generative qualities of failure. If the viewer is convinced by all of the evidence presented near the end of the film, then the *Zodiac* killer is Arthur Lee Allen. If, however, the viewer is not convinced, then the killer's identity remains coded within his initial cipher. *Zodiac*, like Pakula's *The Parallax View*, provides evidence as the object of a parallax for the viewer.

By reconfiguring evidence as the object of a parallax, Fincher urges us to reconcile with uncertainty rather than assemble master narratives that support rigid frameworks of understanding. Fincher leaves his film open-ended, and some film critics who revisited the film for its tenth anniversary claim that it is a film without an ending. With title cards, Fincher informs the viewer at the end of the film that the *Zodiac*'s identity is never revealed. A quick Google search confirms this is still the case, although many have tried to discover the truth of his identity. By not moralizing these failures, as Ehrlich does in his account of the journalism film, Fincher typifies post-9/11 anxieties of a faceless, looming enemy. The identity of the terrorist

threat to the United States is loose, continuously shifting from one face to the next, despite the identification of Osama bin Laden as the organizer of 9/11. If the *Zodiac* represents these looming enemies, then the viewer, as an extradiegetic looming entity, is encouraged by Fincher to use their peripheral positions as sites of productivity.

Melodramatic Restorations of Heroism and Productive Failures

With *Zodiac* now firmly placed within the journalism film genre, I want to turn back to the narratives surrounding 9/11. The discourse of failure born out of reports regarding American intelligence that shifted to journalism existed alongside narratives of restoration brought to fruition by mass media. Political discourse claimed the terrorist attacks involved not only the destruction of the World Trade Center and the deaths of thousands of civilians, but also the penetration of the American national body. The mass media attempted to heal the wound from the inside out, celebrating the heroic actions of ordinary Americans to inspire a sense of unity within the fragmented national body. Through unity we can find freedom, the media suggested, and ultimately overcome the injuries we suffered at the hands of a faceless enemy. However, since these restorations supporting collectivism imply a desire for backward and forward-looking mastery through evidence, they ultimately rely on standard procedures that mediate against failure as immanently fatal. As a result, mastery provides a means to concretize a national identity in order to recapitulate what was apparently threatened or lost, and it blocks out opportunities for productive reconfigurations of that narrative.

A narrative of good versus evil, us versus them, and American versus Other was put in place by the media during the event. Discussing the televised political discourses broadcast by Fox News, Elisabeth Anker asserts that televised news coverage of the attacks formed as melodramas, stories of the overcoming of suffering by a once virtuous collectivity. Analyzing a

montage of images and sounds broadcasted around 5:26 p.m. on the evening of the attacks, Anker states, “Starting the narrative with the plane flying into the tower means that everything that comes beforehand is not part of the story. . . . In this montage, the cause of the events is external to America; the nation suffers as a virtuous innocent entity without responsibility for the actions of this day” (51). The constructed innocence of America helped to further solidify calls for unity and collectivism. Not only was the national body now wounded, but it was also wounded by a faceless enemy with malicious intent. A once impermeable America collapsed through the efforts of an external evil. The news media helped to vilify the faceless Other and align America with virtuosity.

To reconcile with this physical and ideological wound inflicted upon the U.S., the mass media contended the nation ought to be healed by way of a return to normalcy. For mass media, a return to normalcy meant the restoration of nationalism within the American public through representations of historical narratives, as well as a return to a regular television broadcast schedule. The selection of narratives was particular, as many companies referred to instances in which America reigned victorious over an outside evil, rallying the masses around the moral goodness afforded by an American victory and the social values it reinforced. Journalists often opted to engage in nostalgic looks to America’s past, identifying moments of American defeat over an undisputed former enemy in order to reinforce the narratives of American innocence and set into motion the restorations of American valor. Among the popular victories referenced by journalists were World War II and the American defeat of Nazi Germany (Spigel, 245). This era is particularly important for the discourses of valiance surrounding 9/11, since it is exemplary of an overcoming of a foreign enemy imposing evil over the world. America, in this context, is more of a superhero, freeing the world of evil.

Alongside these restorative narratives, which valorized the strength of American militancy, rose the commercialized elevation of the ordinary American into present-day heroes. Dana Heller explains, “What advertisers and marketers [gave] us was a new breed of American hero. Firefighters, police, and emergency medical workers—ordinary working-class people doing their ordinary jobs—emerged in American culture as extraordinary” (11). A domestic wound called for a flexing of domestic strengths, implying concreteness within the American working-class person as opposed to the conceptual monetary abstraction by which Wall Street abides. The wound inflicted on the American national body needed to heal from the inside out. With 9/11 came the elevation of an extraordinary working-class hero. In their restorative narratives, mass media outlets forged a link between ordinary American heroes of 9/11 with militant strength capable of overcoming an imposing evil. The actions of ordinary Americans were aggrandized through advertisements, resetting the foundation of a national unity and moving America back toward its former position of sovereignty. Yet, by essentially commercializing the healing process through advertised narratives, the wound was instead provided a patch with which it could cover itself.

The restorations of American valiance attempted to alleviate the sense of victimization felt by Americans by engaging in nostalgic looks to the past. For Anker, feelings of victimization “[lead] up to the promise that the victim will become the hero and gain mastery over the agent that caused the injury” (163). These promises appealed to a past-oriented approach to knowledge to reaffirm, according to Anker, America’s political, social, and economic power and sovereignty. Both journalists and advertisers looked back to rebuild a lost home, engaging in what Svetlana Boym calls restorative nostalgia. Boym describes this mode of nostalgia as patching a gap, which indicates a sense of impermanence despite the patch. The restorative

nostalgic contemplates the past, indeed reconstructs the past, in order to rebuild a perceived lost home and quell the anxiety of this loss for the present. However, in this mode of nostalgia, one forms a masterful relationship to the past. By patching the gap, or, in the context of the discussion above, the wound, restoration idealizes the past for the present, but not necessarily for the future. Mass media looked back through the representations of the terrorist attacks and used the opportunity to concretize American values such as goodness and innocence, while simultaneously working to privilege these values by looking back on the defeat of former enemies who threatened the American national identity. By reclaiming America as a tenacious entity through restorative nostalgia, mass media aimed to reclaim a position of sovereignty for the nation, and thereby achieve freedom from anxiety and fear. These moves toward mastery, however, are problematic due their attempt to lock down a national identity through inflexible and definitive procedures that determines how the ideal national identity can be achieved.

If appeals to mastery aim to concretize an ideal national identity through standard procedure, then failure disrupts these procedures to introduce instability and ambiguity. To redress the sovereignty afforded by mastery of the past, Anker introduces the “melodrama of failure,” a sub-genre to her analysis of 9/11 news coverage as melodramatic forms. For Anker, these melodramas refute the mastery typically achieved through past-oriented approaches to epistemological certainty. Melodramas of failure “reveal the failure of the freedom that their conventions . . . promise and interrogate sovereign practices of freedom conventionally idealized as the solution to socially produced experience of impotence and vulnerability” (228-229). Seeking freedom through sovereign mastery, for Anker, is a self-defeating desire, since “the very promise of freedom as license and sovereignty *contributes* to the unfreedom and subordination it critiques” (229). The promises of freedom offered by sovereignty only serve to entrap rather than

liberate, since although they might guarantee an overcoming of a national tragedy, they do not liberate one from other political and social ailments. Rather, melodramas of failure “demonstrate ... the inability of state and individual action to overcome diminished political agency, unexpected violence, and the terrors of globalization that shape the contemporary era beyond singular events of terrorism” (243). In these failures, however, can be found new paths toward freedom, paths absent of sovereignty that emphasize collective participation. With this understanding of the melodrama of failure, in which failure is a productive rather than regressive medium, I turn back to *Zodiac* and the failures it explores.

Looking Back to Refract the Malaise

While the narratives that shaped 9/11’s restorative qualities looked back through evidence to reaffirm American heroism, David Fincher looks back to the 1970s through evidence to inform his filmmaking process. By referencing 1970s photographs, police files from the original *Zodiac* case, and 1970s films such as *The Parallax View* and *All the President’s Men*, Fincher meticulously reforms the decade as a melodrama of failure. Through *Zodiac*’s narrative and form, he exhibits the generative qualities of failure. As a result, this melodrama of failure engages in refractive nostalgia, a term similar to what Svetlana Boym calls reflective nostalgia. In Boym’s notion of reflective nostalgia, one longs for a past to which they cannot return. However, in refractive nostalgia, one looks back to the past *in* failure. When one fails, the present seems fragmented and warrants a retracing of the past in order to open potential, virtual futures through which we can move forward. Fincher looks back to a time of cultural malaise, persistent failures, and New Journalism to refute the mastery implied by procedure.

Rather than offer a restorative narrative that would align with the commercialized heroic narratives offered by advertisements, contemporary journalism, and televised mass media,

Fincher brings us back to an era of cultural malaise. Some of this malaise was discussed in the context of Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* in which journalism was powerless against overriding American institutions. Journalism thus fails by way of Joe Frady's murder, leaving the audience without a sense of certainty. *Zodiac* opens old wounds that provide a window to view not only a terrorized 1970s San Francisco, but also through which previous cultural failures can be recalled. Recollections of failure undercut the restorative narratives offered by mass media with the elevation of working-class Americans exhibited during the aftermath of 9/11. Such failures as those of the New Left, the Watergate Scandal, and the Vietnam War are recalled through *Zodiac*'s tone. As was previously discussed, *All the President's Men* was Fincher's tonal model for his film. The former deals explicitly with Watergate scandal as a political failure and portrays its revelation as a celebration of journalism. Fincher, however, is less interested in celebrating journalism than he is in revealing the productivity of past failures.

Fincher dredges up past failures by engaging in a procedural reconstruction of the 1970s. Not only did Fincher create a film with a tonal and thematic lineage to *The Parallax View*, as I have argued, and *All the President's Men*, as others have claimed, he also painstakingly combed through old police files from the case, photographs taken by 1970s photographer Stephen Shore, and documented accounts of surviving victims or the living investigators or reporters involved with the case. Garcia-Mainar states that Shore's urban landscape photographs from the early 1970s influenced cinematographer Harry Savides's approach to "static camerawork, natural light, and subdued colour" (142). Fincher constantly plays with stasis and movement throughout *Zodiac*, recalling the camerawork from *All the President's Men*. In both films, more cuts than camera movements are used, and the camera only moves when the action on-screen demands it. Further, both films use close-ups to enhance feelings of claustrophobia and, by extension, the

viewer's anxiety. Fincher also used old newspaper clips to glean historical information for his film.

Fincher's procedural meticulousness is mirrored in the film. Despite their adherence to procedure in their treatment of evidence, journalist Paul Avery and detective Dave Toschi fail to unmask the Zodiac killer. Robert Graysmith, as an outsider, publishes a book detailing his investigation of the Zodiac case, although he is also unable to identify the killer with absolute certainty. When he confronts Arthur Lee Allen, the prime suspect for the Zodiac case, Graysmith walks away with some sense of closure, yet the viewer cannot be so sure (see Figure 1-10). In a series of shot-reverse shots, he confronts Allen in a hardware store. The two men stare at each other, framed in separate medium close-up shots, similar to Graysmith's meeting with Avery earlier in the film. Graysmith cannot occupy the same screen space as either Allen or Avery, since the latter two characters occupy a marginal space of failure. Allen, as the suspected Zodiac killer, imposes failures on others; Avery fails as a journalist. Only through the film's editing are the two men respectively connected to Graysmith. However, Graysmith also occupies this space of failure. Failure, here, is fatal, implying a state of disconnection from others or the world. Fincher juxtaposes Graysmith and Allen in their respective spaces, but by not occupying the same space, epistemological certainty cannot be provided to the audience. Like Fincher, Graysmith follows an investigative procedure, gathering and analyzing evidence and using that evidence to support his narrative. However, despite this adherence to procedure, Graysmith and the audience must contend with uncertainty. Failure within *Zodiac* does not necessarily indicate regression. Rather it opens up a new conception of mediation, one that encourages a productive relationality between mediating forms.

Within his nostalgic look back to the past, Fincher provides an open-ended narrative in which failure catalyzes the productivity gained through reflective nostalgia. According to Elisabeth Anker, failure is a refractive force that opens up a new understanding of freedom without sovereignty, rendering it productive rather than regressive. Within refractive nostalgia, one looks to the past to see fragmentation, indeed to embrace fragmentation, and to carry what can be learned from the dissolute fragments toward the future. When one looks to failure, one can see the dissolute fragments it creates. Furthermore, such an understanding of failure can be applied to forward-looking narratives, in which one uses evidence to lock down an event's inevitability. Like backward-looking narratives, these looks to the future also imply mastery through the evidentiary. If failure reveals dissolute fragments in the past, then one can use failure as a lens for the future in order to embrace fragmentation rather than the construction of an absolute whole. Moving back to Fincher, I argue that *Zodiac* embodies this understanding of productive failures through its construction as a melodrama of failure.

While the restorations of American heroism form a link between sovereignty and freedom, Fincher, like Anker, problematizes the mastery implied by past-oriented approaches to knowledge. Indeed, these approaches do not guarantee mastery. Returning to the scene described above, Graysmith may have provided a small nod after confronting Arthur Lee Allen in the hardware store. However, this nod might only indicate Graysmith's acceptance: The acceptance that this man may or may not be arrested, that Allen may or may not be the Zodiac killer. Any certainty gleaned from this scene is falsified by Fincher at the end of the film, when he reveals to the viewer that Allen passed away before he could be arrested and charged with the murders. Although he has scoured the available evidence, and although he eventually forms a narrative that accounts for that evidence, Graysmith does not necessarily master the past. Further,

because the film's narrative is inconclusive, Graysmith's efforts to write a book cannot master the future. Instead, with the possibility of failure in mind, one can look toward the future in uncertainty rather than certainty. The pursuit of certainty by way of this promise of mastery, in the spirit of Anker, only furthers limits to knowledge and uncertainty.

By reflecting on the past, as opposed to attempting to restore it, *Zodiac* uses its backward glance to pose new possibilities for using past evidence for present and future. However, it does not reflect on the past to move one toward the future along the same temporal trajectory occupied before the reflection. As a melodrama of failure, *Zodiac* not only wants to open new possibilities through the scrutiny of evidence, thereby refuting the staunch boundaries established by the procedural, but it also uses failure to refract those procedures, thus opening new spatiotemporal trajectories. If Avery never failed to identify the Zodiac killer, then Graysmith's window of opportunity never would have opened. When Graysmith visits Avery at his new home, a boat, Graysmith pitches the idea of "someone" writing a book, hoping Avery would respond in favor of writing the book himself. Avery claims to have thrown out whatever evidence he had prior to moving onto his boat. Avery's failure produced a potentiality that sat outside of the standard journalism procedure: It motivates Graysmith to assume the role of investigative journalist. The process, then, repeats with Graysmith, except with a little more success. Although he managed to form a narrative encompassing the evidence gathered through his tireless research, he still fails to reveal the Zodiac killer's true identity. Fincher rejects procedures that mediate with mastery in mind, construing failure as fatal, and instead advocates for procedures that mediate with mastery's impossibility in mind, construing failure as generative.

If epistemological certainty cannot be gained from attempts to master the past or lock down then the future, then *Zodiac* encourages us to view failure as a productive and refractive

medium. Through mastery, one achieves a position of sovereignty that merely repeats the established procedures one attempts to refute. Even in failure, attempts to restore the past by only bandaging the wound can still reinforce the cycle of mastery. By recognizing failure, however, as a chance for pause and reconsideration, one can navigate through the moment of ambiguity presented without trying to lock down future potentialities.

A Look Through Media

By introducing *Zodiac* to Matthew C. Ehrlich's work, that is, by positing that Fincher's film belongs to the realm of journalism films rather than crime films, an opportunity to engage critically with the failures of contemporary American journalism is made accessible. Fincher's interest in failure is often overlooked, yet it remains a major theme within his oeuvre. To name a couple examples, the men of *Fight Club* (1999) are products of a defunct social system, failing to provide blue-collar workers with a sense of purpose within contemporary society; in *Se7en*, John Doe offers a prognosis of a sick society obsessed with commercialism and materialism. The discourse of failure manifested through reflections of American intelligence and journalism undercut the commercialized narratives of heroism launched into the American cultural consciousness by mass media outlets.

Zodiac, as a melodrama of failure, offers not only a critique of the procedures involved with data collection, but also issues a warning for future implementations of procedure. Through standard procedure, one must look back through evidence to form meaning. However, these procedures afford one a mastery of evidence, discounting the opportunity for narrative flexibility and malleability. Such was the case with the restorative narratives of American valiance published during the aftermath of 9/11. With *Zodiac*, Fincher urges one to recognize the mastery of evidence as a fundamental danger to our understanding of past, present, and future. Procedural

backward and forward-looking narratives, as masterful accounts of evidence, become self-defeating processes by failing to deliver on the freedoms they promise.

It is failure that opens up the procedural to a productive, rather than regressive, act. Failure reveals the uncertainty within procedure, making apparent its implications of mastery by way of sovereignty. However, for Fincher, failure is also tied to the affective use of media. Not only do the failures of journalism deny us epistemological certainty, they also plague us, encouraging cyclical visitations with a gravitational affective pull. In the next chapter, I will explore the affective registers of media, exploring how failure opens up not only potentialities, but also the virtuality in which they reside.

Figures for Chapter 1



Figure 0-1 All the President's Men, 02:14:36



Figure 0-2, Zodiac, 01:49:00



Figure 0-3, Zodiac, 01:49:09



Figure 0-4, Zodiac, 01:54:45

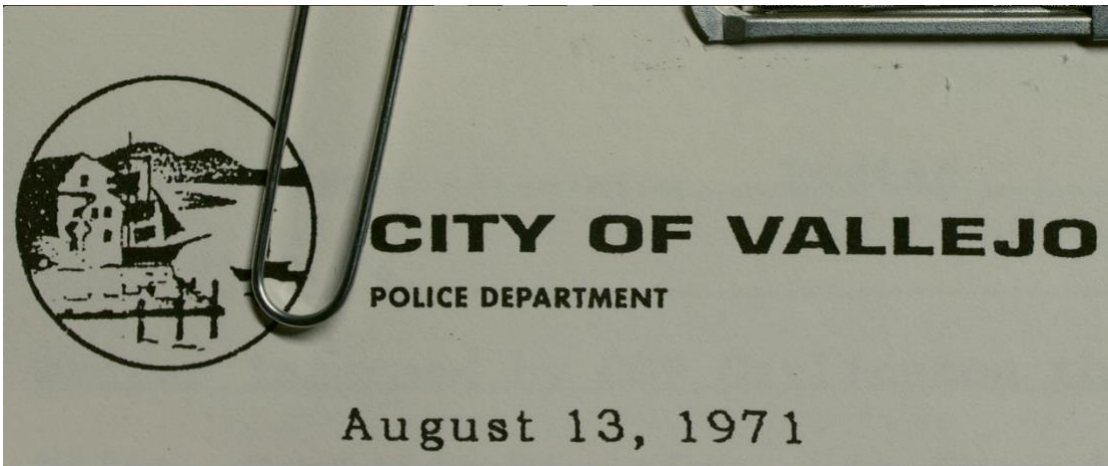


Figure 0-5, Zodiac, 01:54:48



Figure 0-6, Zodiac, 01:54:56

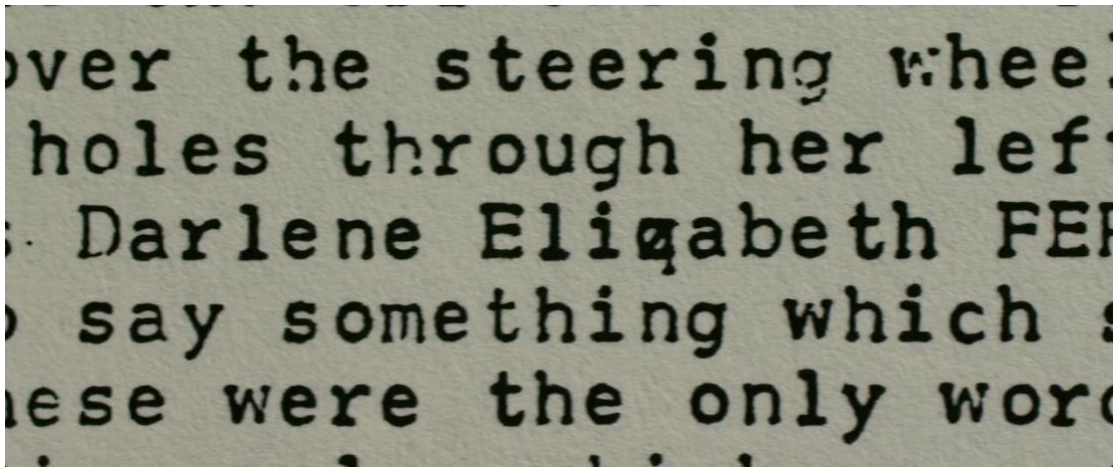


Figure 0-7, Zodiac, 01:54:58



Figure 0-8, The Parallax View, 00:14:54

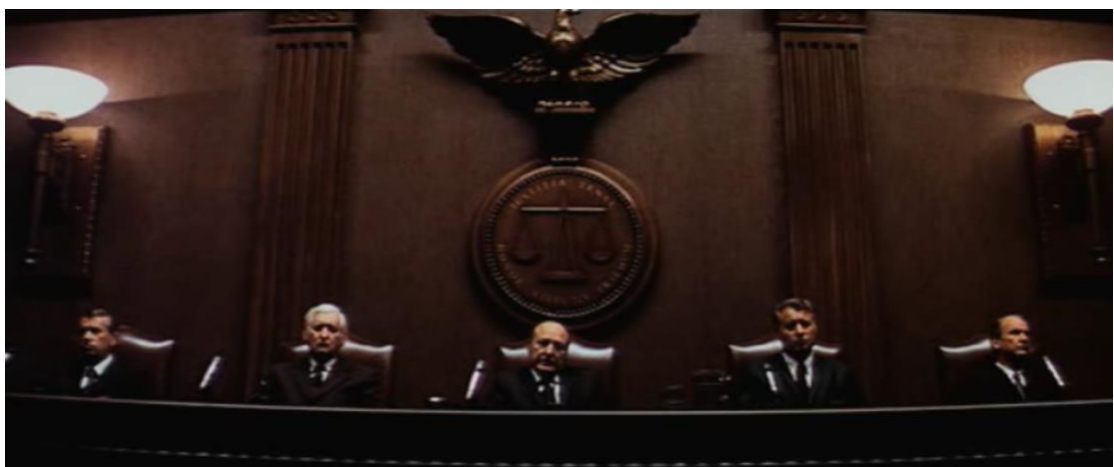


Figure 0-9, The Parallax View, 00:07:03



Figure 0-10, Zodiac, 02:35:42

CHAPTER 2:
**FAILING IN TOUCH AND TIME: AFFECTIVE INDICES AND LIMINAL
VIRTUALITY**

“[I]t is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association.”

— Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*

“I want you to print this cipher on the front page of your paper. In this cipher is my identity.”

— Templeton Peck (John Getz), reading the first Zodiac letter, *Zodiac*

Introduction: “This is the Zodiac speaking.”

Citing Marshall McLuhan in the opening epigraph might seem an odd place to start, considering his roots in media theory and my previous discussion of journalism. Yet McLuhan’s proposal that the medium is the message is instructive when figuring procedure as a form of mediation. In line with McLuhan, procedure certainly “shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action,” yet it does not necessarily imply mastery. As McLuhan states, the very applications of media are multifarious, since “they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association.” It is not the content itself that influences one’s association, but rather the medium by which that content is disseminated. Here, I re-contextualize standard procedure and failure as two forms of mediation with opposite relationships to evidence. Standard procedure contests McLuhan’s assertion, as it emphasizes content over medium and strives for mastery and closure. It imposes itself upon evidence, and begets a rigid and impermeable narrative form to guarantee epistemological certainty. Failure is, in effect, considered fatal and positioned as the binary opposition to success. In return, journalistic procedure issues a promise of freedom

through the epistemological certainty offered by way of mastery. This masterful procedure acts as a mode of containment that orients one toward certainty, and its promise manifests itself in objects that have a material trace to the past or future, thus grounding the very foundation of epistemological certainty within materiality. However, in line with McLuhan is my reconfiguration of failure as a productive medium that strives for openness and flexibility. As an alternative form of mediation, failure implies an active procession of evidence. Failure shapes human action by requiring one to reconsider evidence, disallowing the same closure and mastery afforded one through standard procedure. It disrupts the reach for mastery, leaving open the potential for future reconfigurations and renarrativizations of evidence.

By positioning procedure as a form of mediation, I turn to discuss media more generally, and the terms of mastery by which it frequently operates. In a moment of digital mediation, Fincher's film looks back to a prior historical moment of analog mediation in order to work through our problematic relationship to mediated truths. Analog media are conventionally thought to be guarantors of truth due to their apparent material link to the real. Further, in times of crisis, the analog is linked to security and grounding. After 9/11, the analog was looked upon as a source of comfort and material memory. In their discussion of the commercialization of the 9/11 event site, James Trimarco and Molly Hurley Depret suggest, "The materiality of [an] object makes otherwise ethereal memories tangible and maintains connection to the past" (44). The terrorist attacks sparked a desire for tangibility within some members of the American public. Some visitors, according to Trimarco and Depret, desire a "material memory," found through objects that put them in touch with the past. By contrast, this same sense of touch is thought to be inaccessible to the digital. In the case of 9/11, the terrorist attacks were first witnessed on television, a precursor to what the digital has only exacerbated. Various news

outlets were able to broadcast their coverage of the catastrophe around the globe using digital media, providing access to event immediately but from a distance. This intertwining of immediacy and distance was tied to the digital, which, despite the speed at which it distributes images, is conventionally thought to remain at a distance from the real. However, through *Zodiac*, Fincher re-evaluates the analog, the digital, and their respective relationships to truth through materiality. He wants to move us away from a total embrace of materiality to recognize the parallax in which all media reside. On one side of this parallax lie materiality; on the other abstraction. Recognizing their entanglement changes our relationship with mediations of the real. That is, it changes how we contact the real.

Touch and being in touch are heavily thematized in *Zodiac*, and these two themes have not gone unnoticed by the extant scholarship. According to some scholars, such as Sam Dickson, *Zodiac* revisits the problem of indexicality, by which he means signs that have a material trace to their referents. Tying materiality to indexicality renders analog media as indexical and digital media as non-indexical. For Dickson, *Zodiac* reveals the death of the analog in favor of the digital. In his view, the film furthers the notion that the digital remains at a distance from the real, lacking the physical connection to reality inherent to the analog. The former cannot bridge this absence and can only serve to mimic the latter. Similarly, Michele Schrieber argues that the digital cannot convey a true sense of the real. I disagree with these claims and argue instead that indexicality has not perished. I contend that *Zodiac* is less concerned with the materiality of the index than with the index's affective permeations and responses. Indexicality, rather than being indicative of a past reality, is more about what Kris Paulsen might call the anxious indeterminacy that arises as a bodily affect when one encounters an index. The body, for Paulsen, is arrested, captured in an indeterminate moment of pause. The index forces us to recognize our present

moment but offers no resolution to the arrest. Instead, it disrupts notions of actuality and brings to light not only an index's contingent relationship to materiality, but also its relationship to temporality.

Time in the existing scholarship on *Zodiac* is a less discussed topic and is usually tied to observations about the film's long running time. The film lasts nearly three hours, and some scholars have pointed out that the film's slow pacing mimics the tedium of the procedural. Although I agree with these observations, I want to take them one step further and suggest *Zodiac* is a product of durational time, which, for Homay King, is the very foundation of virtuality. For King, virtual time is a non-linear continuum rather than a linear progression from past to present to future. In the actual, our perception of time is proceduralized through notions of linearity, which leaves other temporal possibilities on the margins. With *Zodiac*, Fincher explores how media attempt to lock down time through different modes of calculation, such as clocks, calendars, and deadlines. Each proceduralized mode of time blocks the virtual from disrupting the bounds of the actual. Moments of pause, initiated by indices, might allow for small manifestations of the virtual within the actual, such as when, in *Zodiac*, *The San Francisco Chronicle* editor encounters the serial killer's first letter. As the editor looks at the letter, the dialogue drops. The film rapidly cuts from the editor, to Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), to another staff member, and back to Graysmith. Though the film continues to move, the lack of dialogue arrests us, and serves as an upheaval of the action. The editing amplifies the tension of this upheaval. However, these moments quickly defuse, since mediated time shapes and controls our interactions with the virtual. Failure breaches the closure of linear time, disconnecting one from the actual, and thrusting them a moment of total virtuality. In this moment, one becomes

intensely aware of the present as conditioned by the past, and the many potential future temporal trajectories that branch off from that present.

In this chapter, then, I explore how *Zodiac*, through affective indices, advocates for productive failures and their ability to open post-9/11 mediation to absolute virtuality. That is, in failure, one is thrust into an indeterminate, virtual space-time, one that does not point intentionally to a fixed past or future. In this open-endedness, one must conceive failure as a productive medium itself in order to move toward the future. Accepting failure as fatal encourages the recapitulation of a masterful procedure. However, Fincher's film leaves the viewer to contend with this absolute virtuality, advocating for a non-masterful and relational network of media forms. I begin, then, by first discussing the conventional view of the index and its associations with materiality, only to shift away from these contentions and toward what Paulsen regards a more affective understanding of indexicality. From this understanding of the index, I then move to discuss its connections to virtuality and the hindrances imposed on it by journalism's standard procedure of mediation. Finally, I bring this discussion of media back to *Zodiac* and its melodrama of failure, which reveals media as apparatuses of failure. Understood in this way, I suggest an alternative form of mediation, which, through failure, disallows the closure sought through masterful systems. Mediation in this view is not a process that limits our experience with a mappable world, but rather, opens our experience to new and alternative ontologies as a true extension of the senses or the sensible. Failure thus brings this alternative form of mediation to the body, reorienting our sensorial experience with the real. Media do not guarantee truth, but rather, confidence, a liminal thought-space that lay between doubt and certainty.

Material Traces & Grasping the Real

Zodiac critiques the notion that only analog-based media hold an indexical relationship to the past. By definition, an index is a material record of the past in which one material makes an impression on another. This concept is conventionally tied to analog media, implying the analog indicates a knowable, evidentiary truth due to the physical contact made with the past.

Understood through photography, and by extension analog cinema, objects represented on film stock are inscribed by both the light captured in taking the image and the chemical processes involved in producing the image. In *Zodiac*, Fincher draws the viewer closer to indexical media by way of close-up shots of material traces from the investigation, thematizing old media's associations with touch and being in touch with the past. When inspector William Armstrong (Anthony Edwards) is coordinating case information over the phone with Napa County detective Ken Narlow, the film cuts from a medium close-up of Armstrong to a close-up of a boot print (see Figure 2-1). Not only does the viewer see a literal impression of a boot left in mud, already indicative of one material pressing into another, but the photograph is itself indexical since it was captured on analog film stock. In these close-ups, Fincher offers the viewer an intimacy with indexical media.

Despite Fincher's look back toward old media, and despite his repeated references to the analog's tactility, a tension arises when one looks to Fincher's use of digital cinema technologies in the creation of his film. Digital cinema technologies are often seen as foils to the analog in media studies, as not sharing the same material trace to reality. At once desiring closeness through the analog and distance through the digital, Fincher reveals our desire to not only be in touch with media, but also to be touched by media. By complicating the binaries of index/non-

index and analog/digital in linking analog and digital, he foregrounds the index's relationship affective, rather than physical, touch.

Although affective touch implies a transactional relationship between an index and an individual, traditional understandings view our relationship with indexed truths as unidirectional. This view, of course, is one with which I disagree. However, it is necessary to set a foundational understanding of traditional indexicality to then explore how it functions within *Zodiac*. According to Kris Paulsen, "Photographic theory has typically understood indexical signs as material traces of past moments of physical contact that therefore provide incontrovertible evidence of some existential truth" (84). Understood through Paulsen's terms, the conventional conception of the index addresses ideas of pastness. Such undeniable existential truths are found by the material index's direct correspondence to the real, since an object in the past left a physical impression on the analog film stock. Indices allow one access to a knowable past in the present and provide tangible proofs of a referent that existed in the past by way of its physical contact with another material object. In this way, physical contact is a guarantor of truth.

Fincher often bears out this relationship between material truths and analog media by accentuating the role of material evidence in the *Zodiac* case. More often than photographs, Fincher uses the *Zodiac*'s letters as images. Letters, like analog photographs, rely on past moments of physical contact between two material objects; in the case of the former, the ink of a pen imprints symbols on paper. When the first *Zodiac* letter arrives at the *San Francisco Chronicle* headquarters, Fincher first reveals the letter in a close-up shot (see Figure 2-2). This shot, following a medium shot of Robert Graysmith, brings the viewer uncomfortably close to the letter as space is collapsed, and we are thrust into a confrontation with an index, a letter-as-image. This close-up, as well as the narration of the letter provided by the *Chronicle's* editor,

emphasize the letter as a source of concrete certainty, thereby affirming the killer's role in the past murders. This piece of tangible media enables us to be in touch with an index from a knowable past through a close proximity. Toward the end of the film, when Graysmith is acting on his own volition to reveal the Zodiac killer's identity, he visits Mel Nicolai (Zach Grenier) from the Department of Justice, who insists on these material traces as Graysmith's only option. In a medium close-up shot of Nicolai, he tells Graysmith, "You're looking in the wrong place. Handwriting, fingerprints, that's what this whole thing is about." Nicolai affirms tangibility's associations to certainty, since the existential connection found in material traces secures the narrative's actuality.

Zodiac substantiates this relationship between material traces and epistemological certainty rather overtly, even exploitatively, positioning tactile media as objects to master through standard procedure. If analog media is indexical and holds a material trace to the real, then analog evidence can be used as existential touchstones for the organization of past events. In fact, standard procedure relies these indexical properties in its approach to master analog evidence. As existential touchstones for past moments, indices serve one's desire to master the past through standard procedure. In *Zodiac*, if Graysmith follows the indexical, evidentiary media that hinges on physicality, then he should be able to unmask the Zodiac killer through the stability implied by that evidence. If the analog brings us closer to the real and allows us some sort of physical access to past reality, then implied by the desire for its retention is a desire for mastery. Reaching epistemological certainty by collecting and narrativizing material data indicates a desire to master the past, finding comfort in an all-encompassing procedural narrative in and for the present. This, however, is an impossible goal, as Fincher shows that the analog might lead one not to certainty, but rather to failure, thus undercutting the stability the analog

traditionally implies. The Zodiac's letters as images point not only to a past presence, but also to a present absence. The Zodiac uses his letters to establish presence through absence, suggesting the analog might be linked to abstraction rather than concreteness.

Despite these links between the analog and abstraction, the digital is often situated as the binary opposite of its material-based predecessor. Whereas the latter is considered by some scholars to be indexical due to its dependence on the photographic medium, the digital is thought to be non-indexical due to its code-based composition. For Vivian Sobchack, who discusses digital technologies in terms of electronic media, the digital is divorced from materiality. She states, "Digital and schematic, abstracted from materially *reproducing* the empirical objectivity of nature that informs the photographic, ... the electronic constructs a meta world where aesthetic value and ethical investment tend to be located in *representation-in-itself*" (154). Unlike the analog, the digital cannot put a spectator in touch with the real, according to Sobchack, since the latter itself lacks the physical connection to the real found in the former. Rather, the digital is a work of simulation, she argues, in which representations are always copies lacking roots in a material base. The digital remains at a distance from the real because it only replicates the abstractions upon which it is based.

This binary opposition between analog and digital, not to mention reality and abstraction, is brought to light in *Zodiac* when one looks to the film's digital cinematography. While Fincher looks back to the analog, desiring a close connection by way of a material trace to a masterable reality, he also foregrounds mediation, and therefore, distance by looking back through a digital lens. The distance implied by the digital, however, does not also imply a necessary disconnection from the real. To shoot most of the film, Fincher and cinematographer Harry Savides chose to work with the Thomson VIPER. In the scenes shot with a digital camera, Fincher insists on

keeping his camera patiently still, only tilting or panning the camera when necessary. He opts to cut the film more often than moves the camera. When Graysmith is walking home after the *Chronicle* receives the first Zodiac letter, he walks past his colleagues gathered in a bar. The camera tracks backward as he approaches the door, and the film cuts to capture Graysmith's point-of-view (see Figures 2-3 & 2-4). Graysmith, the viewer, and the digital camera are all hovering outside the door, remaining at a distance from the interior space of the bar, not passing through the threshold. Here, the three bodies merge to ground the digital in a material, corporeal form, intertwining abstraction with materiality. Furthermore, this shot emphasizes a shared approximal relationship through bodily affect. Despite its distance, the digital still transmits emotional cues from one object or subject to another.

Accompanying the digital camera is Fincher's use of CGI. He digitally recreates 1970s San Francisco with the most notable recreation being the time-lapse of the Trans-America Pyramid midway through the film. Not only does Fincher reconstruct the 1970s pyramid, he also uses this sequence to show a passage of time. According to Sobchack, the digital cinematography in *Zodiac* would be non-indexical, and the reconstruction of the Trans-America Pyramid would be the epitome of an electronic simulation, bearing no physical connection to a referent. However, I argue that the passage of time, in its digital construction, works to mediate the very absence the digital supposedly obscures. Like the Zodiac's letters, which mediate his presence in his absence, digital media also mediate a presence through simulations and reconstructions, while still eliciting from the viewer an affective response. In the film, while the Trans-America Pyramid is being reconstructed in a digital time-lapse, the camera tilts upward to follow its progression. Further, with the tilt, the viewer is struck by the immensity of the Pyramid, despite its digital reconstruction (see Figure 2-5). Looking at the Pyramid from an upward angle, the

viewer feels small. The digital, like the analog, emotionally affects viewers, indeed emotionally touches them. Moreover, the digital accomplishes these affects by mimicking the limitations of the analog. For a time-lapse, the digital could conceivably film the construction of a building in one take. One could then digitally speed up the footage to lapse the time. The analog, however, relies on the subliminal editing of dissolute fragments. In Fincher's digital time-lapse, he imitates the analog approach by using a fragmentary aesthetic in his reconstruction. The tower appears to be reconstructed in fragmentary glimpses.

In this context, some scholars assert *Zodiac* signals an anxiety over the death of indexical cinema. For Sam Dickson, "Reading *Zodiac* 'narratographically' reveals a great ambivalence resonating through the film's narrative and materiality. It is at once anxious concerning the loss of indexicality with the passing of celluloid, while at the same time obviously animated by the capabilities of code to remediate older cinematic visions" ("*Zodiac* and the Ends of Cinema"). For Dickson, *Zodiac* at once looks back to cinema's analog past with nostalgia and also looks forward to a future in which the "ontological premises of the indexical, photographic image have been supplanted by the code-based digital image." The analog, it would, has been laid to rest, and its forms have been resuscitated through digital mimesis. Digital cinematography can imitate analog cinematography in its form and appearance, but it cannot capture the analog's indexical relationship with the real. This absence of the real in the digital is displayed most clearly by the film's inconclusive ending. Dickson states, "The ending of *Zodiac* can only suspend an unbridgeable disconnect between the imaginary and real registers of its historic narrative. ... With its digital naturalist aesthetic, *Zodiac* creates imaginary, created approximations of an absent real." If, as Sobchack states, the digital lacks a material trace to reality, then it is only ever able to mimic reality through processes of imagination. Furthermore, if, as Dickson asserts,

Zodiac marks a turn away from the analog, then *Zodiac* also indicates the demise of evidentiary stability. I, however, do not endorse this reading of *Zodiac*, and move to reconfigure the conventional binary as an entanglement of media.

While I agree that Fincher looks to old media to pay homage to 1970s cinematography, he does not endorse this binary within *Zodiac*. Although Dickson claims that the digital serves to destabilize what was once understood as stable with the analog, his binary thinking reinforces the conventional oppositions of analog/digital and index/non-index. I agree that the digital destabilizes the analog's supposed determinacy. However, I disagree that this destabilization must do so to buttress the conventional binaries of indexicality. I argue instead for an intertwining of analog and digital to bring forth the affective resonances of the two media. Rather than showing that both the analog and the digital can be used toward the same masterful ends, Fincher offers a chance to reassess indexicality by exhibiting an interest not in how an index touches reality, but how an index affectively touches an individual in its arrest of time.

Corporeality and the Failure in the Material

Despite his frequent allusions to the index and its material base, Fincher's employment of the index is to bring to light the affective weight of media and the strength of its affective resonance within an individual. Indeed, he is less concerned with whether or not the analog or digital hinge on materialist conceptions of the index. Rather, Fincher is more interested in indexicality as a site of contingent materiality that refocuses one's bodily experience as the index's site of meaning. He explores how mediated objects as indices spark within us an anxiety through their inherent spatiotemporal indeterminacy. An index, in this view, opens up affective aporias blocked out by the mastery implied by an emphasis on materiality, bringing one to failure and multiple possibilities for interpretation rather than certainty.

By bringing objects of old media closer to the audience with close-up shots, Fincher not only establishes an intimate relationship between us and old media, but he also provokes our anxieties through his manipulation of scale. Often, in *Zodiac*, Fincher throws us off balance by framing these close-up shots at odd angles. While the *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial staff are exchanging the Zodiac's first letter, the cipher is handed to Robert Graysmith. The film cuts from a medium long shot of Graysmith copying the letter to an intense close-up of his hand and pen replicating the symbols on the cipher (see Figure 2-6). The upper-left corner of the Graysmith's folder dominates the frame in a point-of-view shot, which makes the viewer uncomfortable due to a close proximity to the paper. The film collapses the space between viewer and Graysmith, moving us from being a separate, extradiegetic member of the editorial staff, to sharing an embodied space with Graysmith. Surrounding Graysmith is a conversation held by the *Chronicle* editorial staff as they debate whether or not to include the Zodiac's letter on the front page of their afternoon edition. The film cuts more rapidly as the conversation gains momentum, each shot lasting no more than two seconds. The discomfort elicited by the film prevents us from finding stability in the analog for which conventional views of the index advocate by disturbing our sense of scale. According to Mary Ann Doane, "The close-up always carries the threat of a certain monstrosity, a face or object filling the screen and annihilating all sense of scale" (73). For Doane, close-ups not soft-pedaled by classical convention upset the spectator's sense of scale. In turn, viewers react with adversity, discomfort, and anxiety. The close-up negatively emphasizes the viewer's bodily experience in cinema through one's affective response to the image on the screen. This "spatial violence," as Doane calls it, is mitigated through continuity editing, which is supposed to enforce a homogenous and continuous space, yet struggles to do so (73). The close-up shot, then, initiates a failure of continuity editing,

opening up cinematic space to heterogenous, yet ultimately anxious, bodily experiences.

Likewise, Fincher offers close-ups of analog evidence and rapid editing techniques to not only bring us closer to supposed mediated traces to a past real, but also to emphasize our bodily and affective involvement in perceiving these traces. Both moves are destabilizing, as indeterminacy is discovered within continuity editing and our bodily experiences with media.

Fincher accentuates the body to not only destabilize our sense of scale, but also show that media are extensions of our own subjectivities by merging our bodies with both camera and index. In the film, the Zodiac's first letter is photographed with a Polaroid camera in order to process it for publication. The letter is placed in the center of the frame, with Fincher's camera focused on it in a close-up shot. The film cuts, and we see a Polaroid camera being brought into the proper position to photograph the letter. After another cut, Fincher merges the two lenses of his Polaroid and digital cameras with the viewer's look (see Figure 2-7). Here, Fincher links analog, digital, and human, associating image capturing with more than a similarity in opticality, but also a similarity in embodiment. Certainly, there are distinct differences between human and machine, but Fincher is interested in how bodies process images. The film cuts once more, and this time places the viewer in the perspective of the letter, when the Polaroid camera finally snaps its picture. Here, Fincher is drawing a similarity between our eyes and the camera's functionality. The director wants us to pay attention to how we receive media, to how we capture them with our eyes. Just as we embody both digital and analog cameras, Fincher also merges our subjectivity with the letter as both object and subject. On one hand, the letter is an object of correspondence sent to the *Chronicle* by the Zodiac killer. With this merger, Fincher is equating us with this objectivity found in the letter. However, on the other hand, the letter is also an extension of the Zodiac's subjectivity, a subjectivity we now share. For Fincher, this

intermingling of subjectivity and objectivity between the viewer and extensions of diegetic subject blurs the boundaries of the body.

Within this anxiety, an individual engages with both an affective and cognitive process to determine the value of the mediated object. The Zodiac's letters, for some scholars, incite only a cognitive rather than affective process within an individual. However, by striking an emotional chord, I argue that media project a call for interpretation and an affective calling out that arrests the body. Mark Browning, in his discussion of the role of the letters in *Zodiac's* self-reflexivity, remarks,

It is the photographic potential of the letters as both iconic pieces of evidence but also the means to increase circulation of a paper that makes them particularly fascinating. Unlike the rather dull captions in typescript, these letters and symbols invite discussion—challenging the police, the newspaper staff, and even the public more widely to be involved in an interactive process of semiotic interpretation (138).

For Browning, the letters engage one in an “interactive process of semiotic interpretation,” demanding the receiver's attention and inviting them to decipher semiotic value (138). The letter is a mediated account of a past reality that affects the courses of action taken by those who encounter it, sparking conversation and provoking decisions. Although Browning is only concerned with semiotic analyses in which the characters in the film are immersed, Fincher implicates the viewer, drawing us into the discussion. In one notable point-of-view shot, Paul Avery (Robert Downey, Jr.) slides the letter toward the viewer, asking for clarification of the

abstract symbol drawn at the bottom of the page (see Figure 2-8). Fincher wants the viewer involved in the semiotic process.

Browning's recognition of semiotics is telling, yet he neglects that initial arresting shock that overtakes the body. With this affective arrest, however, I argue to push Browning's contentions a bit further, since an account of this arrest allows for a different understanding of the index than the conventional view described above. I then want to apply this reconfigured understanding of the index to Fincher's film and media in general. According to Kris Paulsen, indexicality is determined by the affective resonance of a sign, not its basis in materiality. She states, "If the index is based in 'touch,' it is not the material touch that creates the sign; it is the way in which the sign touches its interpreter. ... The index must ... be understood not as mark of resemblance, proof, or truth, but rather, as an instance of relationality, interpretation, and decision" (94, 95). An index, for Paulsen, is determined by its affect for an individual, not necessarily its material trace to the real, and the impact of that affect in the receiver's present moment. This is not to say that materiality for Paulsen no longer matters. Rather, Paulsen is shifting her emphasis away from the material and toward the affective, while still maintaining an index's contingent relationship to materiality. The interpretations of an index may vary, since one's experience of an index is contextual. Because of this, indices are by nature indeterminate. Indices cannot be understood as guarantors of truth or as physical evidence indicative of a knowable past reality. Rather, they can only be experienced in the present. Furthermore, for Paulsen, mediated indices are accessible through a virtual interface, a mediate boundary that allows for an exchange of touch between receiver and index. While a user might touch an index, the index touches the user back through an affective upsurge within the user. Paulsen states,

Through the virtual interface, the user could touch and affect the thing without experiencing the automatic, reciprocal experience of being touched back that occurs in embodied action—if I touch a surface, it touches me too. When the virtual index touches the user, ... the sign provokes the user to apprehend its significance and make an abductive leap (104).

Just as we may touch an index, the index touches us back. If the index is mediated, then its effect on an individual occurs through the virtual. After this exchange, an individual can then determine an index's significance by making what Paulsen calls an "abductive leap," a process of cognition similar to Browning's notion of interpretive engagement, though one not so straightforward. An abductive leap, according to Paulsen, involves more guesswork. She states, "[In] certain circumstances when one is confronted with a fact or sign out of context, one must guess its meaning ... It is the means by which one adds information to indices ... [which] are signs in need of contextual or supplemental information" (97). Abduction emphasizes an index's indeterminacy, its openness to interpretation and reinterpretation. Furthermore, because media are extensions of the body, undergoing a process of abduction involves an exchange between subjectivity and objectivity.

Returning to Fincher's merging of analog and digital, not only does he establish an embodied connection with both analog and digital media, he also shows that it is precisely this intermingling of objectivity and subjectivity that allows for a virtual exchange. An index's ability to touch us back, to affectively arrest us relies on the very subjectivity of which it is an extension. The virtual, then, is a site of interactive indeterminacy. It both looms over and interjects through the actual in the form of media. For Fincher, media, regardless of their material relationships to

reality, strike emotional chords with their audiences. He presents media as objects of perturbation, disruption, and indeterminacy, which spark affective charges experienced within a contextualized present moment. However, these indices do not lead one to an absolute truth. Because of their indeterminacy, they produce anxiety rather than certainty. In *Zodiac*, when the killer's first letter arrives at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, it is arresting for the members of the press. The *Chronicle* editor, Templeton Peck (John Getz), examines the letter and requests that the newspaper's publisher be brought into the room. As Peck studies the letter, the film cuts from a medium-close up of Robert Graysmith to a second medium-close up of two other members of the press, and then back to the initial shot of Graysmith in rapid succession. The fast-paced editing at this moment disrupts the steadiness that the film ultimately fails to establish. Fincher is quick to evoke uncertainty and anxiety not only from the members of the press, but also from the viewer with the letter's introduction into the room. Rather allay our anxieties, moreover, the film soon cuts to an uncomfortable close-up of the *Zodiac*'s letter. The camera does not waver its focus; it only tilts downward to offer us the rest of what the frame cuts off. Not only are we able to study the letter's content as the publisher reads it aloud, itself disturbing since the letter is an anonymous admission of guilt, but our discomfort is also amplified by our proximity to the communication device of the killer.

The letter's affective charge is further heightened, meanwhile because the viewer witnessed the event to which the letter is referring: the attack of a young couple, after which the female victim died. Like the characters, the viewer experiences the letter-as-index in a present moment. Unlike the characters, however, we are aware of the killer's existence, though not his identity. The killer is still a mediated looming threat, but the context provided for us, and therefore our anxieties, is slightly different from that of diegetic characters. While the characters'

anxieties are located in the content of the letter, the viewer's anxiety is rooted in media's ability to provide a presence through one's absence. The killer is able to assert a presence through the affective charge emitted through his letters, and therefore, through mediation at a distance, thus defying distinctions between analog and digital media. Despite the letter's examination by handwriting specialists later in the film, the killer's identity cannot be verified. What would normally imply certainty is now a site of indeterminacy, which produces anxiety.

This indeterminacy conjures anxiety because it provides neither a temporal grounding, since it arrests us in time and thereby lifts us out of linearity. Moreover, it also conjures anxiety due to the lack of a temporal directionality. Roughly midway through the film, a montage Indexical anxiety displays a flurry of newspaper articles, additional Zodiac letters, and Polaroid cameras, all intercut with shots of the spaces through which characters travel. The Zodiac's handwriting is lifted from his letters and digitally imposed on the interior walls of buildings, revealing the latter's penetrability as opposed to protection (see Figure 2-9). For Fincher, to extend Paulsen's notion of the affective index, an index's affective charge lingers in our minds in the future in the absence of epistemological certainty. This refutes the very possibility for such certainty because it privileges temporal openness and uncertainty. Michele Schrieber argues that this sequence "[blurs] the boundaries of space, time, and the real," since the Zodiac's written words now entrap inspectors Dave Toschi and William Armstrong (7). For Schrieber, this continuity of time and images leads to a temporal ambiguity, but one concerned with linear time. She argues that *Zodiac's* "digital sequences communicate a real we comprehend but cannot quite feel or place in time" (6). While I agree that our temporal position is unclear, I move away from Schrieber's historical conception of time. With this lack of temporal grounding, Fincher shows

that indices not only affect us in the present, but indeterminate affects such as anxiety become emotionally and cognitively inundating for a receiver, moving with them into the future.

Indices, as sites of indeterminacy, open up logical aporias that the dominant standard procedure's approach to evidence attempts to repress. Standard procedure encourages a mastery of the past and future by removing the possibility for anxiety and uncertainty. After the Zodiac killer murders a cab driver, detectives Toschi and Armstrong analyze the evidence left at the murder scene. Although most of the formerly bloody surfaces have been cleaned by the murderer, some blood is left on the victim's clothes, the killer's gloves, and on the outside of the taxi cab. The evidence does not provide a comprehensive idea of what happened. Rather, the evidence merely presents the detectives with the fact that *something* happened, but the evidence is open for interpretation. By forming a narrative, the detectives strive to account for everything in order to catch and unmask their murderer, ultimately engaging in a masterful pursuit to uncover the identity of their elusive killer. They see evidence as having similar qualities to the conventional definition of an index, or, as having a material trace to a past occurrence. Through their procedural collection and narrativizing of evidence, mastery becomes their goal. In stringing together evidence, they not only believe they can form a comprehensive narrative of what happened in the past, but that they can also conduct predictive knowledge for what might happen. This predictive knowledge would enable the detectives, and even the journalists, to capture their suspect in a pre-emptive strike. As we see throughout the film, though, both journalist and detective are unsuccessful. They fail to achieve their goal, and instead are left within the very aporias standard procedure attempts to deter.

Violence in the Virtual

The indeterminacy found in the material index gives way not only to modes virtual touch, as Kris Paulsen suggests, but also to virtual time. The index, according to Paulsen, is always indicative of the present moment. With this assertion in mind, I argue that indices remove one from the bounds of the materiality of the actual and into a virtual moment of pause through their arresting affective charges. As a result, indices generate a temporal openness for the present in which one can both reinterpret memory and identify future potentialities. Yet, media within standard procedure are used to construct a closed system of time, or to proceduralize time, thus marking the virtual not as a site of possibility but rather of violence that threatens the continuity and homogeneity of the actual. With the failures present in *Zodiac*, Fincher critiques the use of media to safeguard ourselves from the virtual in an attempt to lock down a real that is knowable, mappable, and navigable. In doing so, he reveals the aporias of indeterminacy that loom in the margins. By instituting failure as a medium of productivity, Fincher's film reconfigures our relationship with indeterminacy by advocating for the very failure standard procedure tries to repress.

Time in *Zodiac* is discussed within the extant scholarship in only two ways. On one hand, popular film critics and scholars alike remark on the film's duration, a plodding two hours and forty-five minutes. Whereas some film reviewers saw the film's running time as detrimental to its success in the box office, others reveled in Fincher's craftsmanship claiming the film never once hits a lull, despite its length. Peter Bradshaw from *The Guardian*, for example, remarks of the film's duration as a testament to Fincher's proficiency in his craft. A film of such a lengthy running time has the potential to be boring. This, for Bradshaw and others, was not the case with *Zodiac* ("Zodiac"). On the other hand, scholars such as Michele Schrieber, whose work I

discussed in the previous section, examines *Zodiac* as a clash of historical timelines. For Schrieber, this clash is born out of *Zodiac*'s representation of the death of analog and the triumph of digital cinema. She states, "[*Zodiac*'s] digital sequences communicate a 'real' that we comprehend but cannot quite feel or place in time" (6). Although I used this quote earlier, I want to emphasize Schrieber's latter point: our inability to place the sequences in a particular timeframe. Because Fincher uses CGI to rebuild 1970s San Francisco, Schrieber asserts that these digital recreations are inauthentic revisions of history. Since they can only attempt to communicate a sense of the real, they cannot issue any epistemological certainty of the past. For Schrieber, the digital's communicative relationship to the real produces a temporally ungrounded space, a space not unlike Vivian Sobchack's notion of the digital space and its lack of a material base. Further, Schrieber's conception of the progression of time in *Zodiac* is one of linear stagnation. She states, "Neither the case nor the film itself is moving forward; both remain in a smooth state of immobility" (6). Schrieber links time's progression as dependent on that of the narrative. However, I argue that through *Zodiac*'s temporal stagnation, one becomes aware of durational time, which gives rise to a different type of temporality: the virtual. *Zodiac* is a film during which we *feel* time drag on, moving us from the bounds of linear time. That is, in temporal stagnation, we become aware of our existential relationship with time outside of what is calculated and mediated through time-telling devices.

As a procedural film, *Zodiac* brings to the foreground the sluggish progression of time experienced by the characters and the viewer throughout the film. Luis Garcia-Mainar points to time's viscosity within the film. He states, "Screen time approximates story time as it follows the detectives in their standard procedure when inspecting crime scenes, but rather than realism its ultimate effect is to reduce action and suspense, replaced with the drudgery of routing police

work and the exploration of the crimes' impact on the detectives' personal lives" (143). Rather than being a linear device by which the detectives and journalists orient themselves within the world, time becomes, for Garcia-Mainar, an affective, daunting constraint on the individuals. The failures experienced by the characters in the form of "delays, dead-ends, and frustrations" contribute to a sense of temporal constriction (143). According to Garcia-Mainar, the reduction of momentum through repeated failures is felt, too, by the viewer, who endures the running time by actively engaging him or herself in the mystery. Despite its length, the film provokes our curiosities, obsessions, and ultimately our own failure. Although I agree with Garcia-Mainar, I offer a slightly different reading of time. Rather than using time as a constricting force, I argue that Fincher uses the affective resonance of indices to point to virtual temporality, which is always grounded in liminal space. This notion is similar to Schrieber's assertion that *Zodiac* cannot be felt or placed in actuality. However, whereas Schrieber argues that Fincher's use of the digital leaves us ungrounded, I argue that Fincher links the analog and the digital as affective indices that give way to the virtual.

Virtual temporality exists outside the limits of perception. Hoday King, in her understanding of virtuality, describes the realm of the virtual as a temporal trajectory that flows parallel to the boundaries of the real. She states, "The virtual is [the] 'beyond.' It is always available, but it is usually screened out" (68). In other words, virtual temporality exists beyond the realm of our daily perception yet always runs parallel to the actual. Earlier in her piece, King argues, "[The virtual] is everything in the world that we have missed seeing and experiencing because at the time we encountered it, our attention was directed elsewhere — focused on things that were more relevant to our interests" (68). The virtual escapes our notice while we tend to the business of everyday life. However, although we do not regularly encounter the virtual, it is an

ever-present affective realm. The virtual holds an existential relationship to the real, as it exists as, according to King, “the stream of images that duplicates and accompanies our perception at any given moment” (67). The virtual, then, is a looming temporality of potentialities. It is not, however, a perpetually looming body. Rather, according to King, the virtual is contingently linked to matter, but matter does not determine the form in which the virtual manifests. As King states, “It relies on matter not simply because materialism and embodiment are good things that sustain living beings and a precarious planet but also because it requires a continued existence over time” (70). While the virtual looms over the real, its recognition depends on matter for its potentialities to come to fruition. Still, this is different from the extant scholarship on *Zodiac*, which argues that materiality is necessary for temporal recognition.

Just as virtual time is connected to matter, its recognition is also dependent on one’s interaction with an index. As Paulsen explains, an index incites a moment of pause in which one is arrested and provided an opportunity to contemplate the sign they have just received. These moments of pause are delays in a temporal trajectory and are inherently indeterminate. King conceives a delay as moments in time from which the virtual is born. She states, “This delay is where the virtual arises. It exists for all sentient beings that have the capacity to pause or hesitate before acting and, in that interval, to connect the present moment to memories of the past and sketches of the future” (162). Moments of pause, in this context, are opportunities to look both back and forward. They are moments in which one is able to look back to the past through memory or see the potential futures that might come to fruition. As King states, “In order to access [the virtual], there must be a coalescence among memory images from the past, hypothetical images directed toward the future, and present-tense images that tend to fall under the radar of everyday awareness” (68). To recall Paulsen, moments of pause may be initiated by

indices, whose indeterminate affects are always indications of the present. Whether one uses moments of pause, or delays in time, as access points to either the past or future, one becomes aware of the duration of time that is passing. According to King, “The doorway to the virtual ... opens when we become aware of the continuity of time” (69). When one recognizes that time consists of a past, present, and future that are always progressing, then one becomes aware of virtuality. Virtual time is viscous, recursive, and scattered, impossible to master. Although indices might provide access points to the virtual, the existence of virtuality itself is not predetermined by materiality. Rather, the virtual is more of an affective time-space that both looms over and interjects in the real.

With *Zodiac*, it seems, Fincher works to block out this beyond, adhering to a linear timeline through media. Yet, just as he critiques the division of the analog and digital by their respective materiality and immateriality, he also critiques the apparent separation of mediated time and virtual time. Such moments reveal the virtual’s presence, despite its lack of an immediate material form. From the beginning of the film, Fincher grounds us in a historical moment with timestamps at the bottom of the frame (see Figure 2-10). The viewer will know when and where he or she is within the narrative, as the film provides a date and location with its sequential developments. Even in the world of the film, the characters operate by linear modes of time, as they try to stitch together a narrative by keeping the evidentiary components in chronological order. Further, in *Zodiac*’s world, characters often adhere to different mediations of time: the detectives link events to clock-based time; Robert Graysmith and other journalists are pressured to meet deadlines; and the press’ release of information, at least in the beginning, is time sensitive. True to the procedural form cited by Garcia-Mainar, *Zodiac*, at first glance, appears to be a clock-based film.

However, this compliance to linear time is undercut as one's attention to it begins to wane within *Zodiac's* moments of pause, and as the virtual's parallelism to the actual becomes more apparent. When Dave Toschi, William Armstrong, and sergeant Jack Mulanax (Elias Koteas) interview Arthur Lee Allen in an attempt to confirm their suspicions, short moments of pause emerge as questions are contemplated or as evidence is observed. These questions and objects are indexical, as they arrest recipients in indeterminacy before they engage them in a process of interpretation. While Armstrong questions Allen about his illicit actions against former students, the tension rises. Armstrong is centered in the frame in a close-up shot, looking at both Allen and us. With this camera placement, the viewer is positioned inside the conversation, indicating that this question is an intimate one and might lead to revelatory details. Fincher's patient camerawork and slow pacing puts into tension clock-based time with the duration of the moment itself. The film then cuts to a similar shot of Allen, who remains quiet, yet looks back at Armstrong. When his eyes shift to the left and the right, the film cuts first from a close-up of Allen to Toschi and then from Allen to Mulanax. For the viewer, the rise in tension is accompanied by images of the past and potential images of the future. We are given the opportunity to remember what has happened thus far, and the film, in this tense moment, encourages to consider the future implications of the present. When Allen finally replies, he denies being the Zodiac killer, which slightly deescalates the tension. However, he manages to maintain a low level of anxiety by adding, "If I was, I certainly wouldn't tell you," speaking directly to Armstrong and the viewer. The film then cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of Armstrong from behind Allen, taking us out of the intimacy, and out of the moment, although it has not completely dissipated. Indeed, as King states, one becomes aware of durational time in these moments, as time's continuity comes to the foreground in the intersection of past as

memory, present, and future as potentiality. However, in these moments, although indices are encountered, the virtual cannot be fully realized because of its procedural container.

The moment of pause is revitalized when Toschi asks to inspect Allen's watch, forming a link between clock-based time and durational time. Earlier in the film, Paul Avery reveals to Robert Graysmith that the killer took his name and signature symbol from a watch brand called Zodiac. As Toschi looks down at the watch, we get a close up of the watch's face from his perspective (see Figure 2-11). Although Toschi continues to speak with Allen, questioning him about where he picked up the watch, this second moment of anxiety is meant for the viewer. Discovering Allen has the watch we had previously learned was associated with the Zodiac killer is arresting. Mulanax affirms our anxieties and surprise when the watch is passed to him, and he looks up from it wide-eyed. By initiating a moment of pause from a mediator of time, the watch, Fincher associates the manifestation of these moments with a closed system. That is, openness through an encounter with durational time is allowed within the confines of a controlled, proceduralized time. In this way, the virtual is immanently conditioned by the actual in order to limit the threat posed by the former. The virtual, as a site of possibilities, threatens the order and continuity of the actual.

This link between the mediated time, durational time, and the Zodiac is further developed through its associations with liminality, which, in the context of *Zodiac*, can indicate violence. The film's titular character not only occupies a liminal space within the film, his existence persists through virtual memory. Indeed, just as the Zodiac asserts a spatial presence through absence, he also asserts a temporal presence through absence, occupying what King calls the "beyond." After the killer's first cipher is cracked by a history teacher and his wife, Robert Graysmith reads the translation aloud with Paul Avery. Although he did not provide his name,

the serial killer mentioned his desire to accumulate the souls of his victims for an afterlife in paradise. This utopic afterlife is not one rooted in religious ideology, but rather, one linked to virtual memory. The killer's self-preservation, indeed his own celebratization through media, overtakes his desire to kill. Avery reveals to Graysmith that the Zodiac began taking credit for murders he did not commit. He would issue letters to the press after a murder committed stylistically similar to his own was published in the newspaper. In another moment in the film, the Zodiac remarks that perhaps one day a film would be made about him. This statement is obviously ironic, since Fincher's *Zodiac* is just that. The film also features a fictionalized adaptation of the case, *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971). Still, it expresses the Zodiac's desire to persist through memory, ensuring his presence despite his absence. Encountering the killer's mediated body through indices strikes us with fear in the present, while conjuring a past and potential future. The virtual that exists beyond the bounds of the actual threatens to penetrate the latter temporality. If what exists outside of the social boundaries is a site of anxiety, threatening violence, then mediations of time that bracket actuality are efforts to establish comfort by warding off the virtual that threatens these boundaries.

Fincher, however, is not content with guarding ourselves against the virtual. Rather, he shows that although mediation might promise the ability to safeguard ourselves against anxiety, he also reveals media's repressed ontology of failure. Through failure, one encounters an immediate interaction with the virtual. Indeed, it thrusts us beyond the realm of the actual, and into a time-space of indeterminacy, which lacks temporal directionality in its open-endedness. Since this lack of directionality inspires anxiety, we must learn to contend with anxiety not as an adverse affect, but rather a necessary one that opens up the possibility to a fruitful and dynamic uncertainty.

Touch and Time in the Melodrama of Failure

Given Fincher's interest in affective touch and virtual time, I now want to return to *Zodiac* as a melodrama of failure, in which failure is an alternative form of mediation that allows for flexibility, indeterminacy, and openness. In *Zodiac*, the evidence, which promised freedom through its material connection to the past, led only to failure. As analog media, and within the conventional conception of the index, evidence placates to similar promises of freedom in their appeals to mastery made by way of a material trace to a past, promising freedom in the present and for the future, thereby repressing failure as an undesirable fatality. I argue that by understanding failure as a productive medium, we can come to understand the repressed ontology of failure inherent to media. In this context, media are apparatuses of failure that make one intensely aware of one's bodily experiences in present reactions to indices. Furthermore, failure serves as the recognition of the parallax by which media sit between affective aporias and epistemological certainty, providing access to temporal aporias that are inhibited by mastery. In doing so, media can liberate us not through mastery, but rather, by reintegrating uncertainty and indeterminacy into the processes of mediation by which we live. This not only reconfigures the values we assign to failure in our contemporary moment, but it also brings to light the necessity of failure in cultural systems.

Melodramas of failure, according to Elisabeth Anker, refract masterful frameworks of understanding to promote new, non-sovereign modes of overcoming a fractured individual agency. Anker understands failure not as the binary opposite of success, but rather, as a medium generative of new narrative frameworks that do not imply mastery. Desires for mastery, according to Anker, are self-defeating, since obtaining such mastery would only lead to further entrapment rather than liberation. Due to the rigidity implied by mastery, one is unable to adopt

different modes of understanding into master narratives. With *Zodiac*, Fincher looks back to the past to recall the journalistic failures of the 1970s, yet does so to critique the failures of post-9/11 journalism. He problematizes attempts at mastery implied by journalism's standard procedures that not only look back, but also forward, critiquing the formation of master narratives to ensure epistemological certainty. However, rather than rendering these failures as fatal, *Zodiac* advocates for failure as a catalyzing medium of productivity. Through failure, one can break the rigid boundaries of procedure and open the door to new narrative forms.

Within this context of productivity are media as apparatuses of failure, which both critique and deviate from media as that which issue false promises of freedom. When one looks to Fincher's other work, one can find parallels to *Zodiac's* critiques of media. In one of Tyler Durden's speeches to the club members of *Fight Club* (1999), for instance, he criticizes various media forms for promising a sense of liberation through impossible dreams such as fame and wealth. The members of Fight Club work menial jobs only to remain at an economic disadvantage, failing to achieve the mastery promised them through media. In their failure, however, the club members devise a reactionary overhaul to a systemic failure and its apparent economic stability. Through Project Mayhem, members of the club plant bombs in the basements of buildings containing credit card information. However, this failure generates the potential for a new beginning at the close of the film. The final scene cues an explosive reaction, and literally so, by Project Mayhem, laying bear media's false promises. In the film's final shot, the camera pushes in toward Marla (Helena Bonham Carter) and The Narrator (Edward Norton) staring out a skyscraper window, marveling at the spectacle formed by the crumbling buildings (see Figure 2-12). Yet, as the buildings fall, the way seems clear for new possibilities, new systems, to be formed.

While the media failures displayed in *Fight Club* culminate in apocalypse, *Zodiac* transforms that destruction by unveiling the parallax in which media sits. Media objects, as affective indices, are fundamentally indeterminate. They occupy and allow access to the indeterminate aporias of affect blocked out by mastery. On one side of this parallax view, media promise freedom through mastery. On the other side, they are indeterminate objects that cannot be mastered. Failure, then, is a medium that enables not only the recognition of standard procedure's repressed indeterminacy, but also the parallax by which media-as-index is situated. With this understanding of failure, we can reform our conception of media as apparatuses of failure, which work as extensions of ourselves into the world that lead us toward a multiplicity of possibilities. In this way, failure acts as a key to the virtual, a realm of spatiotemporal affects that looms over the realm of the actual yet cannot come to fruition without a catalyst.

Turning back *Zodiac*, Fincher offers a self-reflexive account of media as apparatuses of failure, most overtly shown when one juxtaposes the film's opening and closing scenes. The film opens with an aerial shot of San Francisco, CGI fireworks exploding in the digital night sky. It then cuts to a subjective tracking shot, with the camera placed in the passenger seat of a car, moving us from a position of omniscience and implicating us as investigators in the mystery that is to come (see Figure 2-13). As the car drives down the neighborhood road, a digitally imposed date on the lower part of the frame tells us it is the Fourth of July in 1969. Here, we see the first meaning of time passing. The film is literally driving us back into a past decade, and further, given the nighttime setting, it is bringing us into the darkness of that decade. The reference to time elapsing has a double meaning in this opening sequence. On one hand, it is referring to time *past*, as the film takes us back to the 1970s. On the other hand, it also tells us that so much time has *passed*, that we are late. The car in which we are riding comes to a stop, and a boy runs to the

car. As he approaches the window, he asks, “Where have you been? I have been waiting since seven.” The question is asked directly to the viewer. The concern for us is not just where we have been, but also in what time. Somehow, we are always already late in our return back to the 1970s, since the question is stated at the beginning of each screening of the film. A significant duration of time has passed. From the start, *Zodiac* is showing that it is not only concerned with its immediate temporal trajectory, that is, the lengthy narrative upon which it is about to embark, but it also wants us to consider other past temporal trajectories.

The film’s opening scene sits in a couplet with its closing scene, which not only implicates future temporal trajectories, but also issues a return to the past, a past to which we are already late, through failure. After Robert Graysmith confronts Arthur Lee Allen at a hardware store, the film fades to black as the narrative jumps to the 1990s and an airport in Ontario, Canada. Graysmith’s book on the Zodiac case has been published. In a close-up shot, we see a copy of the book in the briefcase of officer George Bawart (James Le Gros), who is tasked with tying up loose ends related to the case. The man he meets at the airport is Mike Mageau (Jimmi Simpson), one of the first Zodiac victims in the film’s narrative and also the boy we meet in the beginning of the film. Bawart asks Mageau if he can identify the man who shot him in 1969 from a series of case-file pictures. Mageau examines the pictures and identifies Allen as his assailant, pressing his finger onto the photograph, which releases touch’s affective charge. The tension of possibility permeates the air, for it is in this moment that both characters and viewers may finally reveal Zodiac identity. The film provides a close-up shot of the photograph from Mageau’s perspective (see Figure 2-14). We share the affective tension held between the victim and the photograph of the suspected serial killer. In a close-up shot, Mageau confirms his certainty about the killer’s identity, and we get a chance to look into his eyes for extra assurance. The film then

cuts to black, and title cards inform us that Allen suffered from a fatal heart attack before he could be charged for the Zodiac murders. By cutting to black and obfuscating Mageau's claim with the final title cards, the film leads us to failure, interrupting the possibility for mastery and leaving our epistemological desires unquenched. Viewer are left to contemplate the film, mulling its questions over in our heads though unable to conjure answers. With the feelings of lateness that emerge from the film's opening, the viewer now also feels as if they may have missed something. The film beckons us to return to its beginning and once again to return to a past to which we are already late.

From this reading of cyclical narratives and recursive failures, it would seem *Zodiac* is a work of fatalism. There are other instances in the film in which failure's fatalistic affect has overtaken the characters. For example, Paul Avery withers in alcoholism and defeat, and detective Dave Toschi suffers from obsession until he is ordered off of the case by his superior. Fincher, however, does not advocate for failure's fatality, and in fact, warns us against it. Just as he uses failure to interrupt the mastery for which journalists and detectives strive, he interrupts our opportunity for mastery over the film. It is here, from *Zodiac's* cyclical narrative, that the virtual reveals itself. According to Homay King, the virtual can only be recognized through the realization of the continuity of time. Media enables one to see that time exists as an endless stream of images that often refer back to one another. In *Zodiac*, the film's ending refers us back to its beginning. However, by doing so through failure, it unhinges us from the actual, thrusting us into a moment of pause and opening the door to other virtual possibilities.

Merely recognizing that this door is open, though, is not enough. The opportunity to think must be seized rather than left in the past. *Zodiac* emphasizes the dangers of blocking out the affective, virtual realm that opens up when we encounter indices. By reaching for mastery

through hard-lined mediation, understood in this project through standard journalistic procedure, we deny ourselves the bodily experiences that draw us into moments of pause in the first place. Mediated indices absorb us into their own object worlds, yet our desires for mastery reject the potentialities those worlds hold. By reconfiguring failure as an alternative form of mediation, however, we can open up conceptions of certainty to embrace doubt and find epistemological confidence in indeterminacy rather than mastery.

Figures for Chapter 2



Figure 0-1, Zodiac, 00:36:18

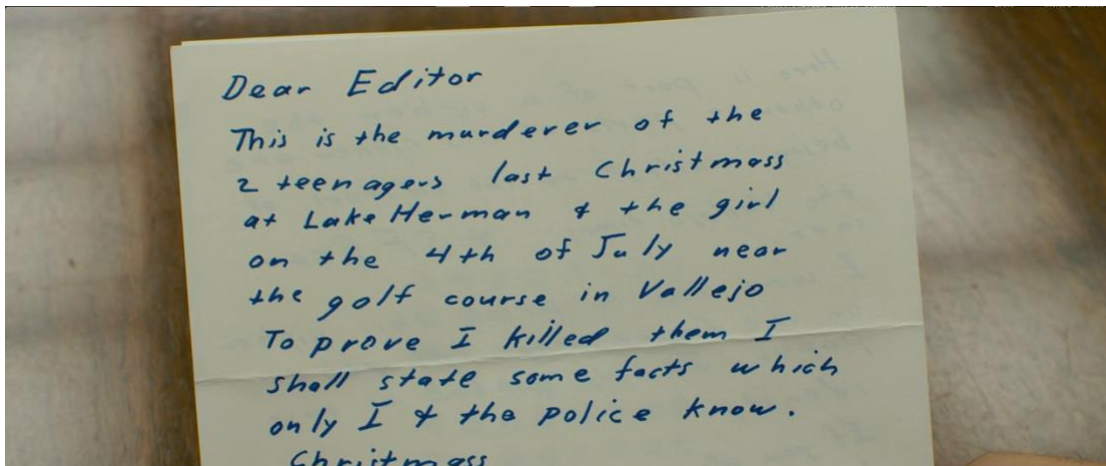


Figure 0-2, Zodiac, 00:10:22

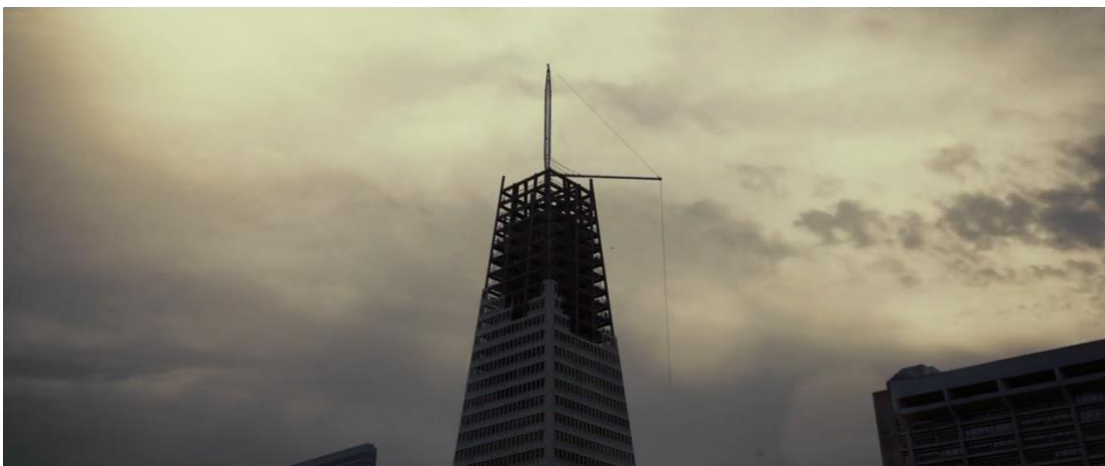


Figure 0-3, Zodiac, 01:31:05



Figure 0-4, Zodiac, 00:14:06

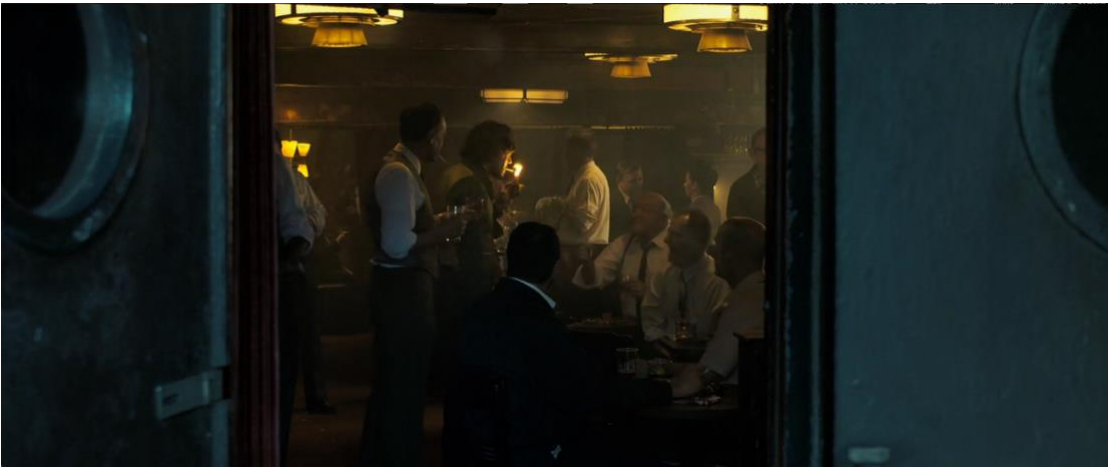


Figure 0-5, Zodiac, 00:14:09

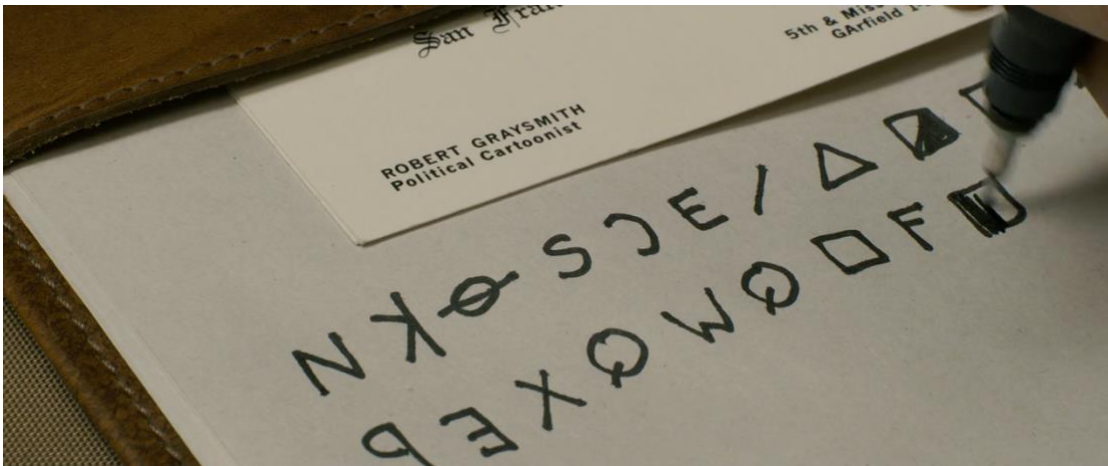


Figure 0-6, Zodiac, 00:12:00

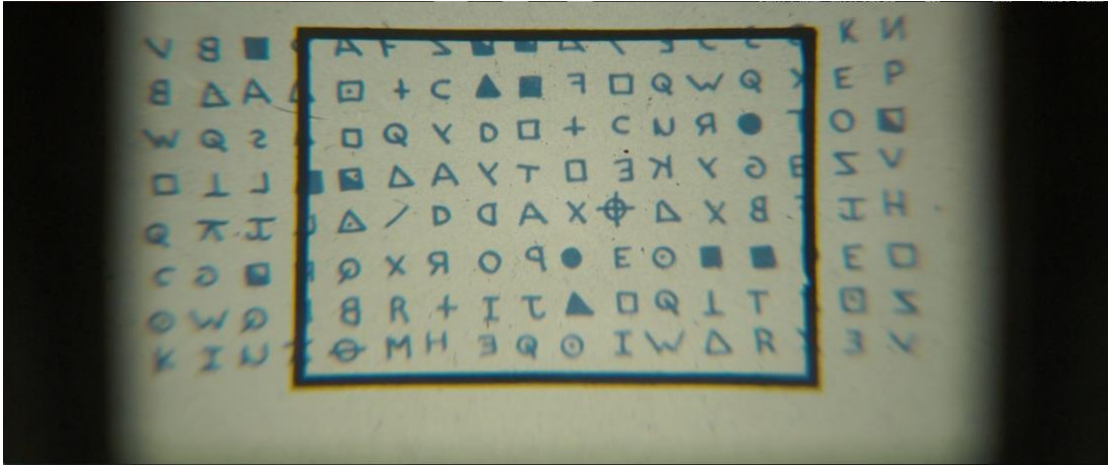


Figure 0-7, Zodiac, 00:14:23

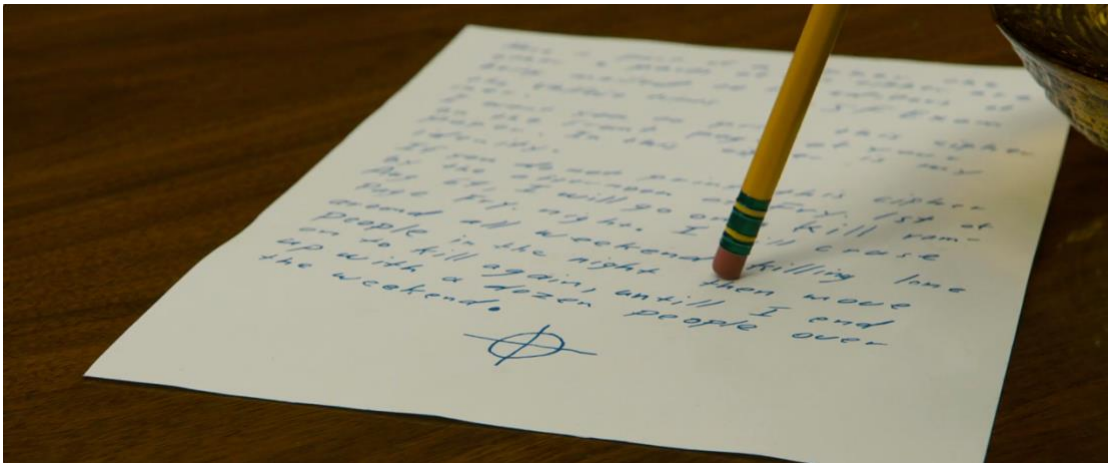


Figure 0-8, Zodiac, 00:11:41



Figure 0-9, Zodiac, 01:02:04



Figure 0-10, Zodiac, 00:17:51



Figure 0-11, Fight Club, 02:16:13



Figure 0-12, Zodiac, 02:37:51



Figure 0-13, Fight Club, 01:25:42



Figure 0-14, Zodiac, 00:00:47

EPILOGUE:

FAILURES, FALLACIES, AND FICTIONS IN THE TRUMP ERA

“Nothing makes sense anymore.”

“Did it ever?”

— Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Melanie (Chloë Sevigny), *Zodiac*

“[From] a primal interweaving of all processes, we have arrived at a point where the world appears to us as things that must be ordered and amassed.”

— Sean Cubitt, *Eco-Mediation*

Cries of media failure have all but disappeared in our contemporary moment. Upon reflecting on journalism’s performance throughout the 2016 presidential election, journalists and other members of the media claimed that journalism again failed in fulfilling its role of providing certainty for the American public. In the right-wing construction of hegemonic “fake news,” the media has always already failed. Throughout his campaign, and continuing so far through his presidency, Donald Trump has beguiled the media. Despite his dependence on media to assert a presence within the broader American public outside of the White House, Trump contemptuously delegitimizes the media, by both proclaiming them as failed and revealing their actual failures. For us, this reinforces that our most immediate mode of meaning-making is inherently false. In a self-reflexive move, Trump’s claims of “fake news” call attention to the apparatus on which we depend for epistemological certainty, claiming with nihilism that apparatus is one of fatal failure. It would seem, then, that Fincher’s advocacy for a reconfiguration of failure was clearly missed, since both post-9/11 failure and Trump’s failure in falsehood are both fatal to standard procedure. I suggest that Fincher’s *Zodiac* is a midway point between the two ends of the failure spectrum these two events form, offering failure as a

productive medium that encourages openness, reconfiguration, and re-narrativation.

Furthermore, Fincher shows the entanglement of what the media express as “fact” and what Trump considers to be “abstraction,” calling for a new form mediation that embraces both aspects of media as two sides of the same coin.

The discourse of failure born out of 9/11 has maintained its malignancy rather than taking a productive turn. Eric Alterman, writer for *The Nation*, describes the Fake News phenomenon as indicative of the media’s upside-downness, an industry overturned by way of its own standard procedures. In his article “Upside-Down Days,” which is part of a larger edition of *The Nation* entirely dedicated to the condition of journalism of 2017, he writes,

“The phenomenon I find most difficult to stomach is Trump’s genius for upside-down attacks on the media. CNN spent the last two years sucking up to him, giving him billions of dollars’ worth of free airtime and hiring ‘analysts’ whom Trump was paying to lie for him—and he nonetheless accuses the network of spreading ‘fake news’ on those rare occasions when it actually reports real news. To Trump, it’s the real news that is ‘fake news,’ and vice versa. Every day is Upside-Down Day” (6).

For Alterman, the mainstream media’s behavior is troublingly paradoxical. On one hand, journalism fails in its own right, continuing to eschew difficult questions in favor of providing a celebrity platform to those they claim to oppose. In this respect, journalism fails in its standard procedure as it did after 9/11 and the 2007/08 economic crisis. Journalists could not gain mastery over Trump, or even tame his more erratic behavior. Despite this, Trump dominated the media throughout the election. According to Thomas E. Patterson, Trump received fifteen percent more

media coverage than his Democrat opponent, Hillary Clinton (“News Coverage”). Moreover, the media exercised what Patterson calls its negativity bias, turning the campaign cycle to something that resembled a melodramatic reality television series than a political election race. This negativity bias amplifies the shortcomings of politics, but does not offer what politics does correctly, which helped increase an outlet’s exposure. In their drive for mastery, the mass media strengthened its focus on aggrandizing spectacle for the sake of exposure, thus skewing their production of epistemological certainty. Of course, sensational journalism is nothing new, but more active Trump’s participation fuels the other side of Alterman’s paradox.

On the other hand, Trump lays bare journalism’s failures by condemning the institution as fake, and thus linking failure with falsity. By declaring the news as “fake,” Trump implies the meaning made by the media to consist of artificial constructions with no bearing in reality. Trump, to some degree, recognizes the media’s failures, and harnesses the fatalism of these failures to terrorize the media. On February 16, 2017, in his first solo press conference, Trump claimed that the media has “become so dishonest” and their apparent dishonesty is “out of control” (Beckwith, “Read a Transcript”). In the same press conference, the president was questioned about information leaks from members of the United States government suggesting the White House’s collusion with Russia. He stated, “The leaks are real...the leaks are absolutely real. The news is fake because so much of the news is fake” (“Read a Transcript”). Trump provides first an affirmation that leaks themselves are real, yet condemns the media for being fake, equating the media’s reporting as abstractions of the truth. His claims forge a link between what he declares to be fake news, or legitimate pieces of journalism that report on some level of fact, and “real” fake news, that which was created by Russian companies and dispersed into the

American media-sphere through social media networks. Furthermore, by linking fakeness with failure, failure becomes an undesirable medium that only serves to entrap an individual.

In this paradox, one important problem becomes evident. The stringent standard practices leave journalists unprepared to handle President Trump, while, simultaneously, faith in journalism is being unraveled by Trump's claims of Fake News. According to Alterman, "[The media doesn't] know how to cover a pathological liar who has convinced himself of the truth of those lies and who is able to get millions of gullible Americans to believe them too" (6). For Alterman, this statement rings true for both print, televisual, and digital media, as they all participate in our contemporary media-sphere. This dual failure of the press indicates a still masterful nature of their mediating procedures. The standard procedures of journalism do not equip journalists with the tools necessary to make sense of Trump. Indeed, what Trump reveals about the media is the inflexibility of their procedures, and how their drive for certainty through mastery leads only to the celebration of problematic figures, whether political or otherwise.

In this sense, I suggest that Trump's convictions are actually useful in understanding the media's failure as a problem of mediation, although perversely so. To be sure, I do not condone Trump's behavior, nor do I condone his alt-right agenda. Yet, because of his contentions of the media as failure, I argue that we can look to *Zodiac* to find balance on a spectrum that Trump reveals. Trump ultimately occupies an end of a spectrum opposite from where we were after 9/11. Whereas processes of mediation for the latter clung to material facts and materiality, mediation for the former leads to only abstraction. In a way, Trump does the work of Fincher, bringing to light the failure that mediated procedure worked to repress. However, he misrecognizes the consequences of his actions, endorsing a more nihilistic view of media that doubles down on the fatalism of failure. If scholars perceive the problem as one of mediation, a

problem that I have already alluded to, then they will see that *Zodiac* advocates for an intertwinement of the abstract and the material, the “fake” and the “real.”

Trump’s claims of fakeness implicate not only the content of which the news consists, but also the mediating forms that constitute it. Fakeness implies a construction that delves in abstraction and artificiality, a simulation that lacks a connection to the real. This idea of fakeness is reminiscent to Vivian Sobchack’s view of electronic media, which “constitutes a system of *simulation*, a system that constitutes copies that seem lacking an original ground” (154). Yet, in Trump’s image of “fake news”, these groundless copies are derived from both print and digital media, which challenges even the idea of contingent materiality discussed in my second chapter. The consistent remediation of Trump keeps the material fact at a distance and foregrounds the many immaterial abstractions that indicate falsehood. Such hard distinctions between fact and falsehood, real and fake, imply a mediation spectrum. On one side, as expressed through the conventional notion of the index, mediation hinges on materiality. On the other hand, for Trump, mediation delves in the world of affective abstraction, bearing no connection to reality itself, and is instead fake. The stances taken by the media and Trump suggest that material facts and abstractions forever oppose one another. With *Zodiac*, however, Fincher suggests that the material and the abstract are not binary oppositions, but rather are intertwined. By way of failure, *Zodiac* moved us away from a total embrace of materiality and certainty called for by post-9/11 journalism. In the Trump Era, *Zodiac* can also shift back from a crisis in abstraction and uncertainty. By reconfiguring failure as an alternative form of mediation, Fincher refutes both forms of mastery in favor of open and mutable conceptions of mediation that allows for renarrativization and reformation.

Much more work is warranted for understanding mediation in the Trump Era. I suggest that looking back to *Zodiac* would be not only instructive for scholars in understanding the productivity of contemporary failure, but also in determining how we have moved from one end of a media spectrum to the other. More current journalism films such as *Spotlight* (Tom McCarthy, 2015) do not do the same work that *Zodiac* does. Although McCarthy's film looks back to 2001, and specifically the months immediately before and after WTC was attacked, he places the struggle for journalism in economic failure rather than procedural failure. The *Spotlight* investigative journalism team at *The Boston Globe* is at risk of losing its funding at the start of the film. However, the film ultimately affirms the *Spotlight* team, and investigative journalism overall, and celebrates its importance to a well-functioning democracy. It was with this affirmation that we entered the 2016 presidential election cycle, and it was this affirmation that could not prepare us for Trump's supposed war on media. *Spotlight* attempts to keep failure at bay, labelling it fatal to the larger democratic hegemony. Failure, however, might just help reorient ourselves from hanging upside-down to wading in a productive indeterminacy.

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