David Fincher's *Gone Girl*: The lady vanishes

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Directed by David Fincher; written by Gillian Flynn; based on the novel by Flynn

Gone Girl is the latest from director David Fincher, whose career includes popular films like *Alien 3* (1992), *Se7en* (1995), *The Game* (1997), *Fight Club* (1999), *Panic Room* (2002), *Zodiac* (2007), *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008), *The Social Network* (2010) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). Fincher's new work is based on the novel of the same name by Gillian Flynn, who also wrote the screenplay.

Gone Girl opens with a mysterious, haunting image: a man's hand is touching the back of a blonde woman's head. Yet the violence of his words sets the tone for this bizarre, domestic study: "When I think about my wife, I always think of her lovely head, and how I'd like to smash it and watch her brains fall out."

The man and the woman are Nick Dunne (Ben Affleck) and Amy Elliott-Dunne (Rosamund Pike). They are a troubled married couple. On the day of their fifth wedding anniversary, Nick returns home to find his wife missing. As the police investigation progresses, Detective Rhonda Boney (Kim Dickens) uncovers evidence suggesting Amy's disappearance might be a case of murder, and that Nick may be responsible.

Disguised as a thriller, *Gone Girl* tries to be a psychological study, a black comedy about the upper middle class, a social critique and a satire of media sensationalism. And there are some aspects that are intriguing, even accomplished.

What appears initially to be an idyllic relationship gradually becomes a "battle of the sexes." Neither Nick nor Amy is the person he or she hoped to be. Both husband and wife are disappointed in themselves and their partners. Lower economic expectations play a role.

But the satire does not just involve the couple. It also focuses, somewhat glancingly, on her psychologist parents, Rand and Marybeth Elliott (David Clennon and Lisa Banes), creators of *Amazing Amy*, a profitable book series about the adventures of a little girl based on the fantasized image of their own daughter. The social criticism then extends to the exploitive national media, especially "tabloid journalism" (in the form of the Ellen Abbott [Missi Pyle] show, obviously based on the dreadful Nancy Grace), to which Nick and his twin sister Margo (Carrie Coon) are subjected as a result of the apparent kidnapping and, later, murder.

Fincher is a gifted storyteller, with a genuine sense of pacing. He knows how to manipulate the audience's interpretation of the facts through the use of various viewpoints and the gradual revelation of information about his characters. *Gone Girl* goes back and forth from the present (which introduces Nick's version of events), to flashbacks, accompanied by Amy's voice reading from her diary (which treats the deterioration of their romantic relationship from her perspective).

At its best moments, *Gone Girl* explores the gap between the veneer of respectability of upper middle class life layers and the more sinister side of life lurking beneath it.

However, *Gone Girl* is ultimately a disappointing film. Flynn has said that she wanted her novel to capture how the moral bankruptcy of her characters is linked to the economic decay of the communities in which they live: "I wanted the whole thing to feel bankrupt.... I wanted it to really feel like a marriage that had been hollowed out in a city that had been hollowed out and a country that was increasingly hollowed out." Peculiarly, this intriguing premise is almost entirely missing in Flynn's adaptation of her own novel.

At first, Nick and Amy are a privileged couple, living in New York. The recession brings some financial problems. Both lead characters lose their jobs, but their efforts to maintain their economic status quo do not

have a meaningful connection to the eventual chain of events. They move to a small town in Missouri, in fact, because Nick wants to take care of his ailing mother.

There are a few snapshots that show the economic despair. When their investigation leads the police to an abandoned mall, we see a group of homeless people. But Fincher seems more concerned with framing detectives flashing lights into the darkness, than revealing the conditions of those living in the ruins.

As a "film noir," the film becomes predictable and its middle sections are tedious. A viewer who has any experience with detective novels and such will not be awed by the twists and turns of the plot. Furthermore, much of *Gone Girl* is highly implausible, full of red herrings. Behind the alleged disappearance and homicide, for example, there is a clever frame-up, a plan meticulously designed for months. But that brilliant and perverse mind has not apparently paid the same attention to the future. The story does not hold much water.

The study of a marriage falling apart is also unsatisfying, as one of the characters essentially turns out to be a psychopath. The scenes involving Desi Collings (Neil Patrick Harris), a former boyfriend of Amy, are frustrating. Owner of an opulent lake house, with an elaborate security system, Collings looks like a wealthy version of Scottie Ferguson, James Stewart's character in *Vertigo* (1958), Alfred Hitchcock's sublime masterpiece about a man so obsessed with a dead woman that he asks an apparent stranger to change her looks to resemble the object of his desire.

However, this promising and ironic subplot of female imprisonment revisited is not well developed. Like so many other elements in *Gone Girl*, it quickly reaches a dead end. Fincher prefers to solve it with a bloodbath, a gruesome scene that calls to mind Brian De Palma, instead of Hitchcock. The latter's work displays a curiosity about human behavior and relationships. Whereas De Palma and Fincher, as crafted filmmakers as they are, have more of a taste for a superficial violence than an interest in people.

Many critics praise Fincher for his mise en scène, celebrating the technique and minimizing the weak content of the story. Certainly, he has a distinct visual sensibility, which does not rely on special effects or computer generated images. Since *Zodiac* (arguably his best film to date), Fincher's staging, framing and editing have been remarkable. But like most of his postmodern colleagues, Fincher's style hides his shortsighted, limited vision of humanity and society; an outlook often confused with a criticism of capitalism, corporations, contemporary civilization and modern marriage. Beyond the issue of misogyny, what *Gone Girl* reveals once again is a general misanthropy, a vague contempt for the characters. The ability to generate a pervasive darkness and the desire to make people uncomfortable are not sufficient ingredients for a compelling work of art.

Still, *Gone Girl* has a blackly amusing finale. After a fade to black, we watch a bookending shot to the first one: the image of Amy's face and Nick's musings suggest the craziness lying beneath the surface of this petty bourgeois couple, a reminder of how foul and even dangerous certain members of this layer have become. It is a pity that the makers of *Gone Girl* did not have the will or the creative capacity to more seriously explore this relationship, as well as the repercussions of the social and economic context, with that level of subtlety and depth.