

KILLER INSTINCT

David Fincher's Netflix series 'Mindhunter' explores the genesis of behavioural profiling in the FBI in the 1970s. Here the director discusses psychosexual sadism and how to make sense of people who like cutting up hitchhikers

By Simran Hans

"You want to know, 'Why serial killers again?'" says David Fincher. We're discussing his new Netflix series *Mindhunter*, which follows two special agents working in the FBI's newly established Behavioural Science Unit in the late 1970s, who travel the US interviewing serial killers, the better to understand the criminal mind in order to help the process of tracking down others. A filmmaker whose own visual style is precise to the point of forensic, Fincher has fine-tuned the murder mystery genre with crime thrillers including *Se7en* (1995), *Zodiac* (2007), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and *Gone Girl* (2014). But what's interesting is not so much that Fincher keeps returning to stories about serial killers, but to stories about the people trying to catch them.

"I like the distilled nature of confronting something that's abhorrent," he explains. "Maybe that's coy. I like the notion of having a conversation with people who should be beneath our contempt, and the idea of a call for empathy." Based on the book *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* by former FBI special agent John E. Douglas (with co-author Mark Olshaker), the series revolves around Holden Ford (played by Jonathan Groff), a hostage negotiator turned criminal psychologist – and a thinly veiled fictional version of Douglas. Intelligent, idealistic and genuinely curious about the psychological impulse of criminality, Douglas was a thoroughly modern figure in the post-Hoover FBI. "If somebody demands the impossible, you can't just shoot them," says Ford to a class of trainee agents in *Mindhunter*'s first episode. An early adopter of criminal profiling at a time when psychology was still thought of as the terrain of 'backroom boys', Douglas also claims to have been the real-life inspiration behind both Thomas Harris's fictional, tormented Will Graham character in his *Red Dragon* novel (adapted for the first time by Michael Mann as *Manhunter* in 1986, and then by Brett Ratner in 2002), and Graham's superior at the FBI, Jack Crawford, as portrayed by Scott Glenn in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Harvey Keitel in *Red Dragon* (2002) and Laurence Fishburne in NBC's *Hannibal* (2013-15).


Another scene in episode one sees Ford watching *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). Observing Al Pacino's charismatic bank robber, he comments: "He was obviously disturbed, but I liked him." Fincher liked how in the Douglas book, he would describe the criminals he came across as "disarming". "You think of the golem, you think of the cave-dwelling Neanderthal, and then you're confronted with

somebody who's wildly articulate and surprisingly introspective, and yet at the same time, a raging narcissist," he explains. "Ultimately, the show is about narcissism."

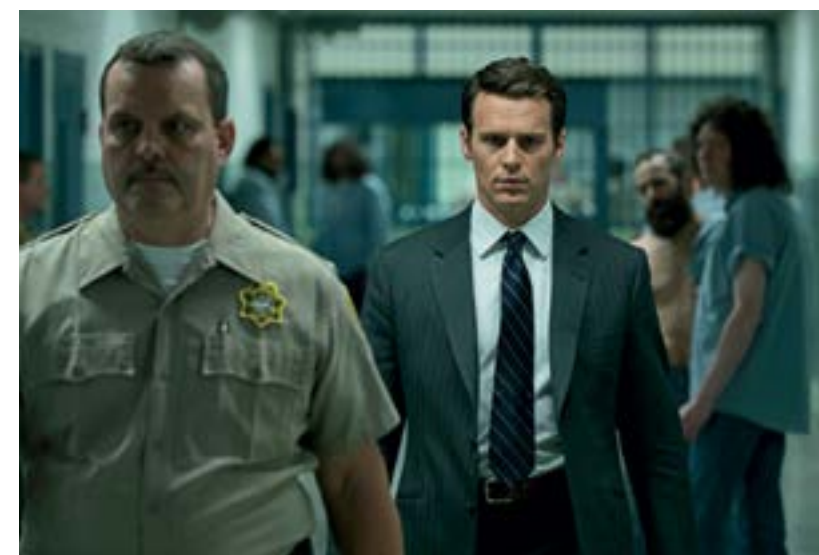
Developing *Mindhunter* with screenwriter Joe Penhall (*Enduring Love*, 2004; *The Road*, 2009), Fincher saw it as an opportunity to create "an interesting capsule for dramatic conversations that I would want to be present for, and that could be dramatised". The first two episodes, both directed by Fincher, offer a witty, thoughtful, pop psychology introduction to behavioural science. The show doesn't have the ticking-clock quality of his previous police procedurals, but its rhythms work in the context of episodic TV.

"What we had – which sort of makes the first hour oddly more cinematic than televisual – is that Ford doesn't know [how to do his new job]. He has an instinct that something's amiss, and that he's somehow underqualified for the task that he's been assigned, and I liked that. In television, you mostly need the expert. It's a very odd place to begin winding the audience up, because for the most part, people want to go, 'Well is this the guy who's gonna get me there, or not?'" *Mindhunter* recreates the moment when behavioural profiling – at least in the police force – was still uncharted territory.

Fincher found something inherently amusing in the idea that an FBI agent could be "compelled to inject empathy" into his role, given that "we inherently understand the FBI's role as judge, jury and executioner." *Mindhunter*'s FBI contingent are, as he puts it, "almost like the guys in *Reservoir Dogs*". "I didn't want to ridicule the FBI, but the reference materials that we were using were a lot more like 1971 [than its late 70s setting] in terms of how WASP-y they were. There was a lot of plaid, a lot of fat ties – we were very consciously trying to say, this is going to be Las Vegas, ultra-unchecked." In the wrong hands, it might feel a little clumsy. Here, it plays as irreverent comedy.

"Here was an organisation that was really founded so you could chase people across state lines – and fire machine guns at them – who suddenly had to redefine themselves. The way they dealt with Baby Face Nelson was not going to be the way that they were going to deal with Baby Face David Berkowitz," he says, comparing the notorious Prohibition-era bank robber, killed by the FBI in a shootout in 1934, to the serial killer 'Son of Sam', who terrorised New York in the mid-70s, confessed to his crimes and went to prison in 1977. 

AMERICAN PSYCHO
Jonathan Groff as empathetic FBI Special Agent Holden Ford (right), and Cameron Britton as Edmund Kemper (with Groff below), one of a number of real-life serial killers portrayed in the show





TOUCH OF EVIL Jonathan Groff as criminal psychologist Holden Ford and Holt McCallany as colleague Bill Tench (with Thomas Francis Murphy, seated) in *Mindhunter*, the new series from David Fincher (opposite)

➔ (Berkowitz is named in the show, alongside the real-life serial killers Dennis Rader and Edmund Kemper.) “When you’re talking about somebody who’s compulsively drawn to segmenting hitchhikers, how do we make sense of that?”

Fincher wanted to explore what it might be like to go back to before these sort of law enforcement characters had become prime-time staples and “lock step with them as they went from case to case, fundamentally authoring what we know today as psychosexual sadism. At the time, it was *crime*. The notion of the artist’s signature in some way being left behind, without them even being aware of it, seemed like an interesting nest to kick.”

The artist’s signature, psychosexual sadism, segmented hitchhikers: these are recurrent motifs throughout Fincher’s filmography. But he rejects the idea that *Mindhunter* is an attempt to excavate and re-examine his own fascination with these themes. “It wasn’t about wanting to dredge that stuff and flaunt it on Main Street as much as it was the notion that there are these things that we sort of take for granted,” he says.

Two of the show’s ten episodes are directed by Asif Kapadia, best known for the collaged character study documentaries *Senna* (2010) and *Amy* (2015). The British filmmaker seems an interesting, if not obvious, fit for *Mindhunter*’s high-gloss, high-crime drama. “His connection to the material was interesting,” Fincher says. “He said, ‘What Holden is trying to do is how I made *Amy*. Before people would agree to be a part of my movie or tell me what troubled them about these last months of [Amy Winehouse’s] life, I needed to put them at ease.’ Holden was somebody whose inherent curiosity was something he related to.” Fincher went so far as to use the particularities of Kapadia’s inquisitiveness as a note for Groff. “I would say to Jonathan, look at the quality of [Kapadia’s]

listening. Because that needs to be part of Holden. It can’t just be open-mouthed breathing and writing stuff down and nodding,” he says. As well as Kapadia, Tobias Lindholm and Andrew Douglas also directed episodes. How did it feel for such an avowed perfectionist to hand over the reins? “It’s an odd thing to produce for another director,” Fincher admits. “I don’t ever want somebody to feel that they got managed into doing something that was lesser than what they were capable of. I’m always fascinated by watching, because I’ve never really seen other people work.”

Watching how other people work may have been a new experience for Fincher, though it seems his filmmaker colleagues had been paying close attention to how he works. He is known for his notoriously fastidious approach, and the steps he sometimes takes to get the actors to “modify and inflect the work” – he was reported to have averaged 50 takes for every scene during the making of *Gone Girl*. “Both Asif and Tobias played with shooting 25, 30 takes. In some way, they were indulging themselves; you could see that they were starting to feel guilty about it,” he says. “The only sin would be to spend all this time and not get it.

“Maybe it’s all stupid,” he continues. “But why are we trying to get done with this whole day before lunch? Why aren’t we trying to maximise what we’re all here to get? Normally, I don’t use a lot of close-ups – for me, close-ups are mostly about getting really good audio. Over-the-shoulder, moving mediums, alternate masters – that’s where I really want to make the geometry of the thing interesting. A lot of actors save themselves for the close-ups.” He adds, “You want the thing that’s going to reside on the server at Netflix to be the best version it can be, and so actors have to protect themselves, but I’m actively trying to get them to drop their defences all the time.”

Fincher is celebrated for his ability to draw career-best performances from actors: “You have to prove to actors that you are watching them more intently and seeing them more completely than anyone else in the room,” he says. Groff, who plays Ford with a kind of wholesome sharpness, had read for the part of Sean Parker in *The Social Network* (2010), but hadn’t quite been able to match Justin Timberlake’s oiliness; Fincher made a mental note to save him for another project. “He’s fantastic, and he kind of looks like Sean Parker, but he literally doesn’t have a single cell of venality in his body. It’s not earnestness; he’s legitimately curious about everything and everything. That was something I felt Holden had to have.”

Also impressive is Hannah Gross as Holden’s clever, caustic girlfriend Debbie – both witty foil and levelling influence on his well-meaning squareness. “Hannah has this flat affect thing that she does; you lean into it, but it can be bloodcurdling. There’s something I find so amusing about somebody who’s that laconic. She reminded me of girls I knew in the 70s.”

TO CATCH A KILLER David Fincher’s previous big-screen crime thrillers include (below, from left) *Se7en* (1995), with Morgan Freeman; *Zodiac* (2007), with Robert Downey Jr and Jake Gyllenhaal; *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), starring Rooney Mara; and *Gone Girl* (2014), with Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike



Fincher talks about actors with an understanding that is both highly technical and entirely intuitive. It makes sense that he would be drawn to television projects, such as *House of Cards* (2013), that could facilitate long-term collaborations between actor and director. The landscape of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Instant and Hulu, and their projects, has changed rapidly in the four years since Fincher’s first foray into the serial form. He was among the first directors of his generation – and his auteur prestige – to embrace these new platforms as an alternative to Hollywood, directing the initial two episodes of *House of Cards* as well as executive producing the show, which was one of Netflix’s first critically acclaimed big hits. “*House of Cards* was designed to have a very specific back door,” he says. “It was supposed to be a very specific two- or three-season arc [the show currently sits at five seasons and counting]. The initial ending was kind of the end of *The Godfather* [1972] or *The Conformist* [1970] or *The Candidate* [1972]. Like, what now? It started to slip into soap opera a little faster than I had envisioned.

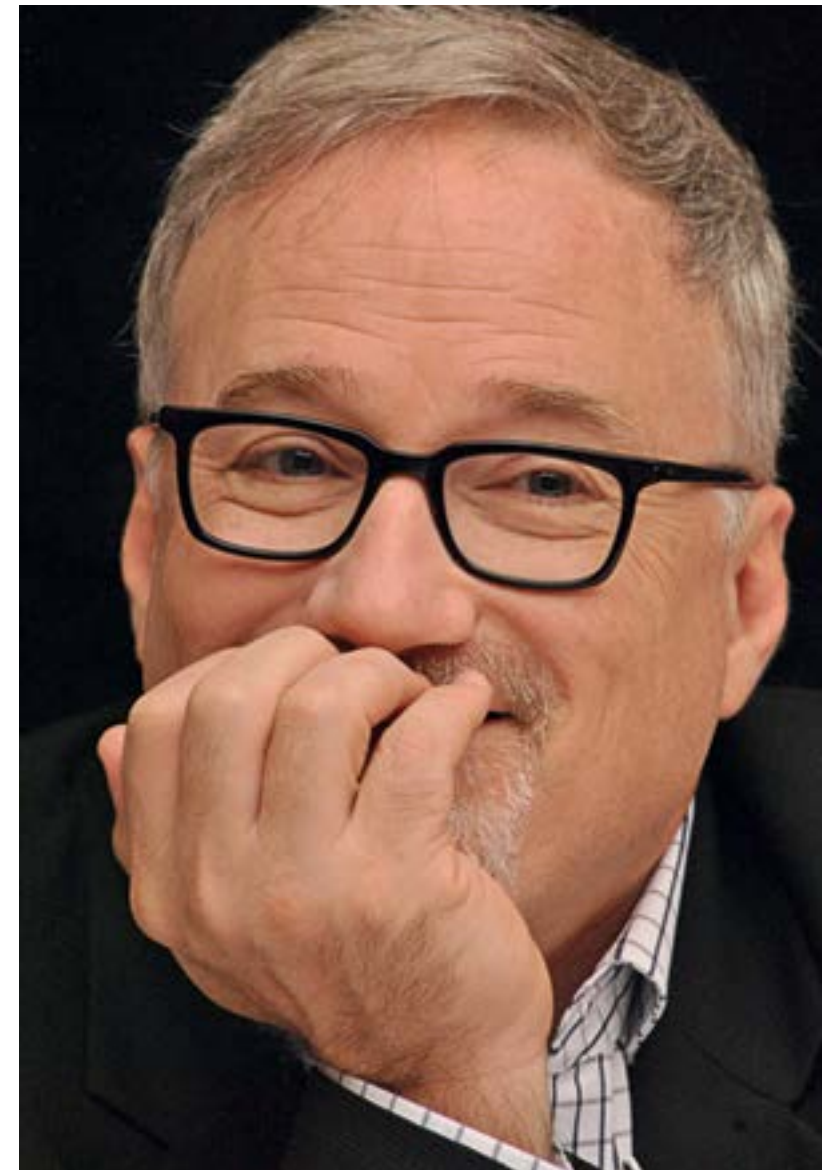
“I look at my commitment to Netflix, and at the TV work of directors like Jane Campion, Steven Soderbergh and David Lynch – we are all pushing towards a new sandbox where you can work with talented people who may or may not have been able to get a break on network, or get a break in a Marvel movie.

“There’s more money to spend, and with more money there’s more time to get it right.” He continues: “There’s more planning that takes place in making a two-hour movie than there is in making ten hours of a season, but that’s only because it’s the Spelling-Goldberg model as opposed to the Kubrick model” – contrasting the moguls of 70s production-line TV with the film director’s notorious multi-take meticulousness.

“In television, the race is on to have a library of something that you can sell off in different territories that will keep a healthy viewership – that’s a very different thing than what I’m involved with at Netflix, in that we’re trying to do slightly more languid movies. The idea of tugging something to create ratings and make stars in a world where the audience offers up their living room for an hour once a week – I don’t think anybody would be surprised to hear I think that’s dead.

“But the alternative to the movie business has yet to be defined, and that’s what we’re really in the process of doing. I cannot imagine a movie studio ever making *Zodiac* again; I can’t imagine a movie studio making *The Game* [1997]. They’re expensive and they’re risky and they’re odd and open-ended. That is the perfect purview for what television has become – a new venue to explore what used to be in mid-range movies. That part of the business is going to belong to television, or belong to the new purveyors of ‘episodic chronological streaming content.’” He grimaces. “There, I said it. But you know what I mean.”

So is he optimistic? Adaptive rather than combative, with regard to the supposed ‘death of movies’? “Now, look,” he says: “Money ruins everything. The age when a movie can make a \$30 million profit for a studio and they can be happy with that are over. When Disney makes a movie, and they put all of their apparatus behind us, and it makes \$30 million, it’s just not enough to keep the lights on in Burbank. When you’re talking about profit



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margins that have to be nine digits, you invariably are going to crush out storytelling as cultural imperative.

“Odd human characters in stories are a cultural necessity,” he says. “I watch a movie like *Close Encounters*, and think, there’s somebody who has identified: ‘I can take Area 51, and I can make it do a handshake with Watergate, and I can come up with something entirely life-affirming about a man leaving his clog-wearing *Hausfrau* wife in Gary, Indiana, or wherever it is, going up in an anti-gravity shopping mall to witness the secrets of the universe...’ Now that’s so weird, that is such a weird idea.

“I would not be as fascinated by the potential of cinema as I am today had I not seen that movie when I was 14 years old,” he says. “I remember looking up at the sky in a different way, and in present-day Hollywood it’s hard to imagine that somebody didn’t say, ‘You know Steven, what did his wife *do* that he wanted to leave her so badly?’ She didn’t do anything. He just had the opportunity to go to outer space, and he took it. But I do think Netflix would still make that movie.”

i **Mindhunter** screens on Netflix in the UK from 13 October