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***Se7en* by David Fincher**
A New Line Cinema production

Production and Representation

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PRODUCTION

Before New Line Cinema became a major American distribution and production company established in Los Angeles with a branch office in New York, and a subsidiary of Time Warner in 1996, N.L.C.¹ was a small budget independent studio mostly living on niche projects in the 80's. If the N.L.C. team seem to have always been very ambitious and "motivated [...] to become a major studio"², to Shapiro and Goldman, creative activity has nonetheless been a priority and fundamental for their studio. And indeed, it was for art films that New Line Cinema was first founded by Robert Shaye "as a privately-held distributor"³ in 1967.

The successful transition of the studio "from a closely-held small business to its listing as a publicly traded company on the American Stock Exchange"⁴ can be dated back to 1986, followed by the formation of a specialty art house division named Fine

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¹ New Line Cinema.

² Ray Greene, "Re-drawing the line. New Line's Goldman and Shapiro on Turner, Transformations and 'The New Line Thing'," boxoffice.com, <http://www.boxoffice.com/sneaksep.html>

³ Tim Dirks (created by), "Film History of the 1960s," filmsite.org, <http://www.filmsite.org/60sintro.html>

⁴ Time Warner, "Michael Lynne: Co-Chairman and Co-CEO, New Line Cinema," timewarner.com, http://www.timewarner.com/corp/management/executives_by_business/new_line_cinema/bio/lynne_michael.html

Line Features in 1990. The greatest turn for the studio may be its becoming a unit of Ted Turner's Turner Broadcasting System in 1993, which gave financial support while New Line "retained its original executive structure with relative autonomy".⁵

The success of the movie *Se7en*, directed by David Fincher, is due to various factors. Considered as a cult movie which marked the 90's by its innovation and its using of popular culture's fascination with a critical underlay, *Se7en* responds to N.L.C.'s creative independence but also, at some point, to new industrial strategies under the Turner banner. The production, marketing and distribution of the movie reflect New Line's "commitment to more mainstream fare"⁶ though *Se7en* remains a free-mind product, what leads one to consider how influential the director's will was (among other people involved in the film) to respect the integrity of the original work written by scriptwriter [Andrew Kevin Walker](#).

I. PROFILES

I.1. *Turner's New Line Cinema*

N.L.C.'s policy lies on the production and distribution of "innovative, popular and profitable entertainment".⁷ The pre-sale of international distribution and exploitation of niche products are a few examples of the film industry strategies that Michael Lynne developed and which have been characteristics of the studio in the 1990's.

In the Hollywood studio system, the creation of 'units' accompanied the reinforcing ideology of creative individualism. As a unit, New Line Cinema has remained mostly independent with its own management after its merger with Castle Rock and Turner's broadcasting System. Nonetheless, its purchase has somewhat changed its profile: if deemed as "a company that used to rely on concept (rather than stars) driven

⁵ R. Greene, "Re-drawing the line," boxoffice.com

⁶ Greene, "Re-drawing the line".

⁷ Time Warner, "Michael Lynne: Co-Chairman and Co-CEO, New Line Cinema," timewarner.com

projects,”⁸ it has increasingly required the featuring of Hollywood stars –and so the starring of [Morgan Freeman](#), [Brad Pitt](#) and [Gwyneth Paltrow](#) in *Se7en*–. Al Shapiro said: “[Turner] hasn't really said, ‘I want this, I want that.’ He hasn't rejected any projects, he hasn't told us we have to make any projects. He's basically told us, ‘Continue what you're doing, but I want more movies, and I want bigger movies’.”⁹

The importance of actors can not be denied in the publicity for a film. Part of the promotion of a movie relies on the cast and if the press may be not influenced by their fame to judge a film, the audience’s attention may nonetheless be caught easier through a figure they know – even if that should be the filmmaker. Of course the stars already mentioned would do; but one miscellaneous element to be noticed in *Se7en* is that Kevin Spacey's name, who played the serial killer John Doe, was not included in the opening titles nor was revealed during the promotion. Consequently, he was given no interviews, not even for the press kit. This agreement, meant to keep the authenticity of the intrigue, goes along with the idea of concept – that of the movie, which is focused on the crimes (rather than on the characters):

Walker recentre le film sur les meurtres eux-mêmes au lieu de ces personnages, et sur ce que ces crimes représentent dans notre société, dans notre monde. Les crimes sont le jugement d'un homme, ces crimes sont la représentation de cet homme, cet homme EST le film lui-même.

Robert Osryan¹⁰

An agreement, meant to keep the authenticity of the man, which goes along with the idea:

*Who I am is not important.*¹¹

⁸ Greene, “Re-drawing the line,” boxoffice.com

⁹ Greene, “Re-drawing the line.”

¹⁰ Robert Osryan, “La première fois que nous avons entendu parlé de SE7EN,” Film de Culte website, <http://www.filmdeculte.com/video/video.php?id=27>

¹¹ “It doesn’t matter who I am. Who I am means absolutely nothing”, the character of J. Doe says.

1.2. Screenplay and Direction

Se7en was co-produced by New Line Cinema and Kopelson (Entertainment) Productions, with a production budget of \$ 33,000,000. N.L.C. received the script positively and David Fincher was proposed to direct the shooting. The script was ostensibly crude and controversial, and if its originality seduced the studios, certain scenes were put into question after second thoughts. However, the final cut remains close to the original script to make *Se7en* a free-mind product. This was possible due to different factors, various experiences and expectations related to the respect of creative autonomy.

Andrew Kevin Walker started to write *Se7en* in 1991 while working at Tower Records in New York. His inspiration for the screenplay came from the city itself and his condition of life, as he said: “NYC was an assault on my senses. I was just expressing some thoughts that occurred to me as I wandered hither and thither in New York. It did actually seem like you could just go around and find all the sins everywhere in the people, in stores, on billboards, in Times Square and the subways.” A. K. Walker then worked as a production assistant for Brisun Entertainment (a low budget company): “I was in a very exploitative mode, and the idea of the seven deadly sin murders kind of made sense to me.”¹² The writing required research and Walker channelled his depressed mood into the story, revealing a pessimistic vision of the modern world –*la fin du siècle*–, which Fincher rendered through a “sense of alienation and disillusionment”¹³, an expression typical of the 90’s trends. Even though the script was apparently a must-read among industry insiders, it took several years for the film to go into production as Walker rejected any re-writing. The barely palatable picture of a severed head and pessimistic

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¹² David Konow, “Interview with Andrew Kevin Walker” in *The Best of Creative Screenwriting Book: Interviews 1994-2004*, via [creativescreenwriting.com](http://www.creativescreenwriting.com), <http://www.creativescreenwriting.com/spw/awalker.cfm>

¹³ Chiranjit Goswami, “Se7en,” [notcoming.com](http://www.notcoming.com), <http://www.notcoming.com/reviews.php?id=509>

end were especially at issue for the producers.

For David Fincher, working for N.L.C. was an opportunity to have a second chance in filmmaking with a creative autonomy. A video director, Fincher entered the world of the seventh art in 1992 with *Alien3*, an experience which he considered as a failure not just because of the negative critics of the press or the audience but above all because Twentieth Century Fox left him no room for free manoeuvre. Most reluctant to alterations on the script of *Se7en*, he rallied behind Walker with Brad Pitt (who stipulated in his contract that he would leave if the final sequence was to be changed) against the interference of the production company. It was nonetheless agreed that the scene on the revelation of the dead wife (Mills' wife) would not actually show her severed head.

1.3. Critics –Social roles and deletion

A media relationship may influence the individual in the development of a variety of very different value orientation.

John L. Caughey, *Imaginary Social Worlds*.¹⁴

The original and actual ending of *Se7en* –which concludes with young inspector Mills (played by Brad Pitt) shooting the serial killer– may not have been kept if it was not for David Fincher, who finally convinced Arnold Kopelson (Annex 2). Indeed, an alternative implicating retiring Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) shooting instead of Mills was shot, consequent to the apparent concerns of New Line Cinema and Kopelson with Brad Pitt's social-model role regarding the younger generation. This subject was one which the press critics did not fail to raise amid questions of psychological violence, of aesthetics (of the crime's aftermath) that was considered as an assault to the eye, and questions on the moral message set. On the other side, however, the movie was received

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¹⁴ J.L. Caughey, *Imaginary social worlds: A cultural approach* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

as something of a little *chef-d'oeuvre* and established Walker as a A-list screenplay writer. The article of Sean Lindsay puts an emphasis on the contradictory visions that critics can have of the film: “Foster Hirsch¹⁵ has high praise for the setting of *Seven*, because it “may well be the most richly rendered symbolic space to date in the history of neo-noir.” However, he concludes that “*Seven* is compelling if morally hollow.” I would instead argue that *Seven* floods us with morality, not all of it palatable.”¹⁶

Various cross-cut arts, pop-culture and postmodernist facets can be detected in the movie, responding to and fuelling the sense of alienation, disenchantment and cynicism felt in the society. The “other unique trait of the 90’s that *Seven* [adopted] is the notion of a serial killing”¹⁷, which was indubitably an element that favoured its commercialisation at a time when the subject was still to be developed and explored; not to mention the topic of religion –fascination and sin– that is a most “cultural popular subject”¹⁸, and which has been tackled for a long time and often described in literature and cinematography as a cause for deviance or fanatic behaviour. Nonetheless, religious fanaticism as *one* individual’s behaviour against community seemed to be less current; it was skimmed over in 1967 in Robert Aldrich’s *The Dirty Dozen*.¹⁹

If *Se7en* was meant to be disturbing, Fincher was nonetheless conscious of the limit of visual effects to be used, and avoided the easy unnecessary ones. “*Se7en* manages to present a unique, philosophical spin on evil,” a website user commented. “Unlike other films belonging to the same genre, it does not depend on blood and gore to create suspense and keep the viewer intrigued.”²⁰ Fincher deleted several images

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¹⁵ A film historian, Foster Hirsch is the author of fifteen books about film and theatre. He specialized in the film noir and its influence. The quotation used by S. Lindsay was taken from *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999).

¹⁶ Sean Lindsay, “David Fincher,” sensesofcinema.com, 2003, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/fincher.htm>

¹⁷ Chiranjit Goswami, “Se7en,” notcoming.com

¹⁸ Goswami, “Se7en”.

¹⁹ Referring to the character of Archer J. Maggot, played by Telly Savalas.

²⁰ Metacritic, “What our users said,” metacritic.com, <http://www.metacritic.com/video/titles/seven>

and scenes, as he explained for the “Pride crime scene” (Annex 1): “I loved the kind of meticulousness of the crime scene... and you know, the horror seemed better spelled out but, you know, people respond differently to blood in movies [...]. A lot of people get really worked up by them... really offended.”²¹ The auto-censorship that Fincher adopted shows the kind of concern he had about the influence of the images but of course, as cinematographer Darius Khondji (Annex 2) remarked, they worked on the aesthetics of the ugly. For it went with the logic of the film and of the killer’s mind.

II. PROMOTION

Besides the importance of advertising, publicity has great influence in the promotion of a film. Press and critics, but also festivals and exhibitions are means to promote a film in the public sphere as well as in the professional sphere. As a distributor, New Line was in charge for the advertising process on the American territory and partnered with international distributors for theatre and home entertainment abroad. Film industry today pays great attention to such elements as teaser and trailer, posters for billboards and merchandising, and the exploitation of the film *Se7en* as an industrial product partly reveals a commercial strategy, but also a meticulous work for quality and style.

II.1. Advertising and Audience

The shooting of *Se7en* began in December 1994 and was completed in March 1995. The movie, released in September of the same year, “rocketed past the \$100 million mark”²² in homeland at the box office while the worldwide gross is estimated between \$ 316 and 327 million.

²¹ Fincher’s comment on “Deleted Scenes and Extended Takes”. New Line Cinema, *Se7en* (Entertainment in Video, 1997), CD 2.

²² Tribute, “David Fincher,” tribute.ac, <http://www.tribute.ca/DIRECTORS/BIOS/3095.htm>

If the film was nominated for various awards –including the American Society of Cinematographers, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts for best original screenplay, and the Academy Awards (Oscar) for best editing in 1996–, it hardly received any from the academics. In 1995, only cinematographer Darius Khondji and Kevin Spacey were awarded. Cinematographer D. Khondji won the Chicago Film Critics Association, while Kevin Spacey won the National Board of Review’s, the New York Film Critics’ and the Broadcast Film Critics Association’s awards for best supporting actor for his performances in several films. However, *Se7en* being a top box office film, in 1996 Howard Shore won an ASCAP Film and Television Music Award. The Academy of science-fiction, fantasy and horror films also dedicated two Saturn Awards for best make-up and best script writing, while the International Fantasy Film Awards Fantasporto elected *Se7en* best film and screenplay. In Japan, during the Hochi Film Awards (1996) and the Blue Ribbon (Shou) Awards (1997), David Fincher’s *Se7en* was voted Best Foreign Film.²³

The movie mostly aimed at an 18-35+ years old audience. Given the 8.4 weighted average rating estimated by IMDb (the Internet Movie Database), it can be concluded that the film has been highly rated (8.9/10) by males under 18, even though they make a small portion of the viewer.²⁴ While *Se7en* was rated R (Restricted)²⁵ –for grisly afterviews of horrific and bizarre killings, and for strong language–, the trailers were made for all audiences, what allowed them being shown with no restriction and viewed by a larger number of movie goers. Trailers were approximately 2.20 minutes and respected the rhythm of the movie, sustained by music and sounds, with the crucial

²³ IMDb, “Awards for *Se7en*,” imdb.com, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114369/awards>

²⁴ Out of 14778 votes, there were 72196 male voters; 2097 were under 18. See ratings table on imdb.com, <http://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0114369/ratings>

²⁵ ‘R’: Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian. “The Rating system [for guidance] is sponsored by the Motion Picture Association of America and the National Association of Theatre Owners and went into effect on November 1, 1968.” See: The Classification and Rating Administration, filmratings.com.

scene that breaks the rhythm in two. Presenting the main stars that featured in the film (except Kevin Spacey), the trailers also revealed the M.O. of the serial killer and various tag lines were chosen to illustrate it:

Long is the way, and hard, that out of hell leads up to light.

Seven deadly sins. Seven ways to die.

*Gluttony * Greed * Sloth * Envy * Wrath * Pride * Lust * Let he who is without sin try to survive.*

Earnest Hemingway once wrote, 'The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.' I believe the second part.²⁶

Obviously, trailers were shown on television spots, in such programs as T.V. News and special programs dealing with new released films, and were made available on the Internet. Teasers were also made for theatre and press kits. In 1999, *Se7en* won the Golden Trailer Award for Best of the Decade.

II.2 Releasing and Recycling

New Line Cinema sold *Se7en* to various companies for local distributions, including Metropolitan Filmexport for France, Edifilmes for Portugal, Lider Films S.A. for Spain and Argentina. Some companies would be in charge for both theatrical and video distribution such as Constantin Film in Germany; as for Alliance Atlantis Communications, it was in charge for all media in Canada. Due to several video releases but also different formats from 1995 to 2005, different partnerships had to be made, for instance with International Video Entertainment, Universal Pictures Benelux in Netherlands in 2000, Warner Home Video for the DVD releases in Switzerland and Germany in 2005. In the United States, The Criterion Collection²⁷ distributed *Se7en* on laserdisc in 1995.

²⁶ This is the last sentence said by Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) which concludes the movie.

The first commercial video, which was a movie-only edition, was released in 1996, “when the DVD format was just getting off the launching pad.”²⁸ “Fortunately, *Seven* was something of a dark horse triumph at the box office in 1995, and its status as a video hit was pretty much assured the second they cast Pitt.”²⁹ In 1997, a 2-disc set DVD was released based on the extra features of the Criterion Collection Laserdisc, with audio commentaries, a multi-angle exploration of the opening title sequence, a section on alternate endings as well as on deleted scenes and extended takes, storyboards, production design and photographs, an animated still gallery of the seven crime scenes, and comments from the designers of John Doe’s notebooks. In 2000, the New Line Platinum Series disc edition was launched, with most of the same features plus a special cover art: a ‘John Doe’s’ notebook.

The several videos enabled to ‘recycle’ the film. As Fincher said, he looked for quality to render the atmosphere and the details of the film at best; for the Platinum Series disc, the film was remastered, with a transfer derived from the original negative: “When we started working on the DVD for *Se7en* just couldn’t get any prints that had blacks in it [...]The Criterion Collection Laserdisc came from such a low cost [silver retention] print, but this time I talked to New Line and Michael De Luca was incredibly supportive, so we went for a high definition negative telecine transfer.”³⁰

²⁷ The Criterion Collection “was founded in 1983 in order to release selected canonical films on laserdisc. [...] Laserdiscs appealed primarily to a niche audience of cinephiles and academics who were attracted to the format's superior picture and sound as well as its ability to hold special features. Criterion is perhaps most important to the video industry as a pioneer of "special edition" releases.[...] By 1998 Criterion had branched out into the DVD format, which quickly supplanted the laserdisc in the collectors market and exploded in popularity. [...]Criterion discs are no longer the sole property of the elite.”

- Bradley Schauer, “The Criterion Collection in the New Home Video Market: An Interview with Susan Arosteguy,” *The Velvet Light Trap - Number 56* (Texas: [University of Texas Press](http://www.utpress.edu), Fall 2005): 32-35, via muse.jhu.edu, http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?url=/journals/the_velvet_light_trap/v056/56.1schauer.html

²⁸ D. K. Holm, “Se7en: Platinum Series (second edition),” [dvd.journal.com](http://www.dvdjournal.com), 2000, <http://www.dvdjournal.com/reviews/s/seven2.shtml>

²⁹ Bill Chamber, “Spoiler warning in effect...,” [filmfreakcentral.net](http://www.filmfreakcentral.net), <http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/dvdreviews/seven.htm>

³⁰ Guido Henkel, “David Fincher: Fighting the Odds”, [dvdreview.com](http://www.dvdreview.com), 2000, http://www.dvdreview.com/html/dvd_review_-_david_fincher.shtml

“Fans of the film always found the [first] disc lacking,”³¹ and the exploitation of John Doe’s world is one that made next DVDs most attractive. Somehow, the last video seems to create an attachment or an interest to John Doe –if not to the character himself, at least to his artwork and culture–. Designed like a J. Doe’s notebook, the Platinum Series disc worth being an object of collection. Besides the attention to aesthetics, making John Doe’s art look authentic and the commodities to reflect this authenticity was a priority. Fincher had long thought of the ‘real’ that John Doe needed to be surrounded with. For this purpose, Melodie McDaniel was hired so as to do the “John Doe photographs”, that is to say to do photographs supposed to be taken by John Doe.

The artistic explorations for the film prove that David Fincher and Darius Khondji had an precise idea of Doe’s mind and personality; the notebooks, costing \$15000, were actually created and crafted for the occasion and were essential for the title sequence made by Kyle Cooper. The designers of the books explained how the books came to take life and the references that helped them for the illustrations, such as Robert Frank and Joel Peter Witkin (Annex 4). In fact, most of the illustrations were worked out from original documents that the designers came through during their researches. The notebooks can be defined as a *collage* where the “obsessive quality to [John Doe’s] handwriting [...], [the] perverted stream of consciousness, anal handwriting”³² defines the personality of the serial killer (Annex 5).

Generally speaking, main titles have become most important in the film industry and the work of Imaginary Forces is highly valued:

The pioneering work of Bass in the fifties and sixties and its revitalization by Kyle Cooper and

³¹ D. K. Holm, “Se7en: Platinum Series (second edition).”

³² Audio interview of the designers for ‘John Doe’s’ notebooks: New Line Cinema, “The Notebooks,” Se7en (Entertainment in Video, 1997), CD2.

Imaginary Forces in the nineties, have elevated the opening credits to an art form. The title sequence has come to rival commercials and music videos as the leading indicator of contemporary

visual style: dense and multi-layered—invariably more challenging than the film that follows it.

J. Counts, “Just the Beginning: The Art of Film Titles.”³³

So it is no surprise that K. Cooper’s “brilliant title sequence, which provided us with our first glimpse of John Doe as he toils in his lair,”³⁴ was used for the introduction to the ‘root menu’ of the videos. Part of the quality and originality of a film medium is based on the DVD or Laserdisc’s design of the ‘menu’ and the presentation of the various sections. The designs usually take up one or several elements of the movie, so as to immerse the viewer into the mind of the film. As for *Se7en*, the notebooks are *the* element: the animated designs are dark coloured and multi-layered, based on a mix of the visual styles of Fincher and of John Doe’s notebooks. The introduction to the menu uses a similar dense *collage* and is mostly based on the title sequence of the movie.

The 2000’s New Line Platinum Series DVD is considered as one of the best commodities on *Se7en*. Due to the artful piece of work as well as the special features, which include professional techniques information, it was nominated for a Video Premiere Award and an OFCS Award in 2001. An official site was created so as to promote the merchandise, giving a preview of the serial killer’s room “John Doe’s World” featured on the *Se7en* DVD. In this very room a link to his fan sites is available from the DVD, establishing by this way a ‘private’ circle.

CONCLUSION

Significant in the market place, *Se7en* is one example of film as cultural entity

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³³ J. Counts, “Just the Beginning: The Art of Film Titles”, twenty4.co.uk, <http://www.twenty4.co.uk/on-line/>

³⁴ C. Goswami, “Se7en”.

in the Hollywood sphere. While the film faced a fair amount of controversy, its conceptual and stylistic approaches have elevated it at once to the status of a cult movie, establishing David Fincher as one of the greatest American filmmakers of this generation. The status of *Se7en* as an industrial product under Turner's banner (and Time Warner's from October 1996 until 2001 when AOL Time Warner was created) helped New Line Cinema on a large scale in the development of the movie, its promotion and distribution. *Se7en* was integrated with many subsidiaries and worldwide distributors, and the advancement of new technologies as well as the financing allowed D. Fincher to re-explore the film and to create a new video at the dawn of the third millennium. Apart from rental and home videos however, few varieties of products were made: a novelisation of the screenplay was edited in 1995 and a series of posters by Peter Sorel³⁵ (Annex 2) were printed for sale via the Internet. Obviously, a soundtrack was released and included the tracks by [Trent Reznor](#) and David Bowie, who were on tour at the time when the movie was released.

Meant to be a big movie, *Se7en* was a challenge for the producers Kopelson and New Line Cinema, as well as for Fincher who achieved to make of his film a free-mind product. After the critically and commercially hit of *Se7en*, the new opportunity given to Fincher to make improvements to the New Line DVD edition set off his ambitions and special interests. If Fincher creates pop art, *Se7en* presents a cinematic treatment of meaning which reflects the pessimistic sense and critical awareness of the 90's generation. Through the film's (sometimes grotesque) crime scenes, the broken opening credits and layered images, the handwritten end credits rolling down, John Doe's notebooks and photographs, etc. the film features a specific art style which Fincher clearly wanted to promote with the DVD. Creating authenticity through the works of John Doe, a cross-over between imagination and reality, Fincher made relevant an emerging

³⁵ Peter Sorel won a Key Art Award for a sheet poster design.

style and representation in visual arts –which had long existed in photography. Often labelled as tortured, morbid, or even sick because of their contents (such as Witkin’s works), crude artworks have nonetheless acquired a certain notoriety and their styles and visions have come to be embraced. This artistic movement has been more and more developing with performance art, photography and painting, and has become even best-known through video clips for industrial music groups³⁶, taking part in the popular culture.

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³⁶ See: Nine Inch Nails, The Prodigy, Rammstein etc.

REPRESENTATION

Much influenced by the *film noir*, Fincher used several components of this genre. The story takes place in urban environment under a constant shower of rain, an unnamed city symbol of depravation, where sin is common and unseen as such. A “soiled city” and society, depicted as dark and violent. The movie also presents a myth and realism combination typical of the 90’s, with a parallelism between literature, lithography, black and white photography (of victims), and finally actualisation (*mise en scène* in life) – in other words, art and life combination.

Directed in 1995, the movie came within the time of identity politics. It shows a convergence of values and characters, while asking if the gap that has lead to the degradation of society is due to a difference of values or of visions. By screening a serial killer as a defender of morals, the roles are put upside down, and the fringe between barbary and civilisation is questioned. The theme of justice is declined into three types : law of God, law of the institution, law of the individual. The couple of detectives, representatives of the Authority, put on stage disparately different values and forces. Somerset takes his profession as an ethic role while Mills presents ambiguity about it, and shows a very ‘personal’ motive. How can the value of the institution combine with double-faced ideals and stereotyped representations spread by the media and the

audiovisual medium generally? How much does the legacy of the individual abuse the legacy of society? As values are challenged, *Se7en* demystifies the serial killer and the representative of the Law fallen in the trap of his individualism. Violence and deviances are focused on to address an apocalyptic message.

I. VALUES

I.1. Jonathan Doe –the serial killer

In the core value of equality under God, J. Doe incarnates the idea of election. He says he “was chosen” [by a superior force]. However, Detective Somerset interprets the character of John Doe as a self selection: “He is John Doe by choice”. Anonymous, but also used to indicate the common citizen – *all* citizens in fact (the criminal enters all social classes) –, the name of John Doe considers the life ritualized by sin of people which makes them offenders, and who have to pay the price.

Each act and each elaboration of crime scenes is a representation of *the* act as a whole: of the purpose. Each detail is built on logic as symbolic. The discrepancy between the biblical references and violence can be explained in Doe’s murders by the major role of inter-textuality creating syncretism. It reflects also a common absurdity present in the world, in front of which cold cynicism can become a value.

The ritual accumulation of goods – as well as acts made possible without any meaningful obstacle – is a sign of God. In John Doe’s apartment, the collection of bottles where pieces of human beings are kept reflects the possession and the trace of the capturing of sins, in the same way photography captures the image of people, signifying their position as preys or belongings. Collection of note books, whatever apocalyptic it seems to be, reflects an intellectual process. In fact, John Doe’s collections and acts can be viewed as an intellectualised form of ritual and art because it is a language of symbols, and creative too. He “uses the 7 sins as calling cards”¹, his preaching and killings (or

sacrifices) are an inter-textual performance based on written works known as pieces of art exposing religious aspects, productions that have had great impact on mentalities. These fictions are anchored in the cultural heritage of European nations, and find their place on the American continent as an influence connoted with myth and irreducible justice which John Doe actualises. If fantasies are pushed to the extreme of violence, to the state of perfection, the representation of the killer does not imply dehumanisation nor animalisation but the un-human characteristic in the act.

John Doe has erased his own identity in the name of morality: who-he-is is irrelevant. It is what he does that is important, as the will of God from the First Testament to punish. The tension is constructed on the contradiction between normality and election, the individual and morals. The final act shows that as an individual, John Doe considers himself as the incarnation of envy: the envy of a normal life. There on the process of preaching is directed to himself as well. Individuality takes shape in the pleasure he gets in the acts, but the frontier between morality and identity is undefined mostly because nothing can establish John Doe's construction of personality on a psychological level. Past has been erased, psychological motivations and troubles are erased, only present acts count. By visual observation, only the physical handicap could establish a long process of connection with the envy of being normal (to have a normal life), but intellectualisation has overcome the physical representation.

We said the murders were used for a purpose – “as a method of preaching [...] about the seven deadly sins”¹. These acts are definitely a means of expression, that he could not found verbally – as John Doe says: “you can't just tap someone on the shoulder and expect them to listen to you; you have to hit them in the face with a sledgehammer”. At some point, it reflects the idea of violence as being a form of expression, which won't be verbalised because there is a feeling of no reach. Similar notions are found in artistic

¹ Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, “Seven (film),” en.wikipedia.org.

works, such as expressionist ones, in which a sense of drama and horror is depicted; but considering the very idea of shocking in order to reach the audience, the media use as well (ultra)violent images. The motive of John Doe “[to set] the example” is communication: an act of revelation – of guilt. We will see that it is in the final act of revelation that lays the very aspect of Doe’s perversity. The purpose is criss-crossed with that of pleasure, basically based on sadomasochism that leads up to destruction.

Transformation or metamorphose needs a sacrifice of the self. Therefore a loss, which is the place of exchange, of compromise. John Doe represents the sacrifice of one’s identity to tell religious truths – what recalls the brain-washing process and the ‘erasing’ of one’s memory to be a new human being who integrates American values – pushed at the extreme and made ironically the consequence of his incarnation of the alien : an anonymous creature that threatens. John Doe is the name for the common citizen: being anonymous in a strict term (for instance, he has no prints), he incarnates the unrecognizable enemy within the society.

In the reality, he can be the icon of the serial killer, whose stereotype is a white educated male. However, he seems to have acquired maturity and voluntarily detached himself from society. It may be observed a new figure type of the serial killer, one driven more by purpose than (or, as much as) by impulse. In the fiction, he is the one who makes the symbol literally alive. He claims the responsibility of people and of his own, putting the sins on stage as a true reflection of the society. The concept of deviance is reversed and presented as the characteristic of society, of every social class.

1.2. Detective Lt. William Somerset

The idea of success that William Somerset incarnates is based on the ethic of work. He has built himself intellectually and socially. He says love is work – this incarnates the Protestant value of life being work, that work is a celebration to God. A

wise man, one of principles, Somerset incarnates a patriarchal figure even though he is single and without children. Altogether, Somerset appears as a force of control.

The notion of integration should be considered from two angles: as a Black male we can analyse how much he is integrated in society and, what is more relevant, how American values have been integrated, or internalised by him. Integration in society is always relative, nevertheless the different representations of Black people in opposition in the film proves he is integrated in society, on an equal level to White people. Three representations of Black people are observed and reflect reality: a member of the scientific police, a group of Black people who work as night guards in a research library and a poor couple. Respectively, they represent: integration as a single individual that is in other word, social mobility; relative integration with a strong racial community feeling; and finally a minority at a low social scale. The attitude of his boss reveals how William Somerset has found his place in the world as a professional and much he can be as an individual.

The social tension that William Somerset represents is in relation with the American principles. He is the representation of criticism to the fall of founding values, even a reverse of values: a society in which “sloth [is preached]” – or more precisely, a system of mass culture producing intellectual ‘stagnation’. Tina Butler speaks of the “mass culture’s assault on our national mental life”² and indeed, Somerset also considers its influence is prone to deviance and that society is conditioned to be a derelict one, where incomprehensible violence is spreading. In other world, he criticises a ritual of indifference, (auto)destruction that he tries to fight by a ritual meticulous and patient ordering of items in his private life. The metallic items (pens, knives etc.) carefully put on his table appear like medical instruments underlining a sense of expertise and control that

.....
² Tina Butler, “Non-place is Still Someplace: Seven’s Failure to Surmount Mass Culture,” mongabay.com

is a characteristic representation of the world of science. Through him is also unveiled the reality of a controlling system but which can be corrupted at will. What he himself uses as means to get to the truth.

The code of his character evolves to find a compromise between his values and the reality of the world. He is aware how much the conditions of life and his principles have forced him to make choices which have conditioned his present state. His private conversation with a secondary character, Detective Mill's wife Tracy, puts him in the role of a patriarchal figure who gives support and comfort, while himself has no confidence but seems nonetheless to evolve and find answers to his tensions through shared conversations or confrontations on visions of life, like when with Mills. He is a mature person who can internalise experience and built himself in a humanistic driven purpose, despite his pessimistic point of view: the concept of control "frames the schemes of motivation and evaluation"³. His will to retire and escape from the urban environment he has been living in is finally overcome by his undefeated humanistic vision. The quotation from Hemingway "The world is a fine place, and worth fighting for", resolved in : "I agree with the second part " summarises where the point of his tension lies. If there was a change of vision, the world has however regained value to his eyes.

His will for retirement meant the end of work for a society whose attitude he couldn't agree with. While evil is proved to have won society and to perpetuate, ethic wins in his mind. Somerset incarnates the concept of (social) responsibility and ethic.

"The characters of John Doe and Detective Somerset are made by the environment; they see the ruinous nature of their world and its affect on humanity and act on it, albeit in strikingly disparate ways."⁴ Though driven by different concepts of Good,

.....
³ Divina Frau-Meigs, "La communication de l'information scientifique dans les fictions télévisées" in *La Communication de l'information*, ed. J.P. Esquenazi. (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1997).

⁴ T. Butler, "Non-place is Still Someplace," mongabay.com

Somerset and Doe show more than one point in common that contrasts with Mills. They are solitary and single, insight of home life is brief – but ritual gestures are focused on: what is underlined is not only a fetishism of reality but also a compulsive perfectionism. Patient, and models of sobriety, they are hard on work and eager for culture, they have a great awareness of psychological impacts and traumas. As for Mills, home is an important element: he is married and tries to settle. Home allows insight into intimacy and emotional feelings. Through Mills (and his couple), privacy and professional duty are mixed.

1.3. Detective David. Mills

The young detective is driven by ambition; he strives not to be undermined and to prove what he is capable of. His recent coming to town underlines two points: his character embodies the value of self-reliance; his will to be valued, to have a role in society as an agent for the official “Good” and for security. As a husband, he also incarnates the value of the family. He appears to have faith in the American dream and values the way they have been presented through mass culture. He is the characteristic of the hero as a man of action, anti-intellectual, deeply inspired by the myth of the hunter and of the dispenser of justice. But these two myths, implying an instinct of violence, can incarnate the criminal as well. The ambiguity of his role is all the more striking when, as a hunter, he is himself a tracked prey.

His optimistic vision finally crumbles; he concretises the sense of damnation.

1.4. The ensemble –Force and value of the law

The two Eyes are presented in a setting of film noir, though altered. In the film noir genre, the detective always reveals to have a flaw or a dark side; but in the end, is re-valued as good. Here, value of good is barely perceived: Somerset’s humanistic view implies a quite mild hope while Mills definitely incarnates damnation, as he is ruined by his flaw.

If meant to be solitary detectives, Somerset and Mills are put on the stage working together. If there is a generation gap, a gap of beliefs and motivations, they are shown nonetheless as *complementary* extremes: Somerset's "cerebral and methodological [approach] to catch criminal"⁵ combined with action, which characterises Mills. As such, they act as an equal force (if the element of time is ignored) against an act carefully thought out and planned at length. In her article, Tina Butler stressed on the "representation of the other law enforcement officers as mildly inept and complacent to the prevention or halting of the killings". And indeed, statistics prove the "inefficiency of inquiries" and the "powerlessness of the police" faced to a multiplied number of crimes committed by 'specialists' of crime – serial killers.

II. FORCES

On a general point of view, one would say that *Se7en* relates the opposition between good and bad. It requires the analyse of the image of the characters and the cognitive signs put in relation with the visual to understand how characters are represented on a certain aspect which is more subtle than a system of strict categories and, more profoundly, reflects a convergence of forces.

II.1. Amoralité

The description of the introduction of John Doe and Somerset will show how they are put into striking contrast as the main forces in the context. Textual analysis takes into account the forms, colours, composition but also the visual techniques, the "texture" of the image. The generic begins with a direct dive into an anonymous meticulous work: a manual performance in process. The object of the act is barely comprehensible as there is no oversight or general view of it, but also because the use of a short depth of field blurs

.....
⁵ Dragan Antulov a.k.a. Drax, "Seven," rec.arts.movies.reviews, Rotten Tomato website, <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1066164-seven/>

it. Moreover, the jump cuts, the superposition and the flashes of black and white photographs, writings, and cutting give the impression of an experimental work, suggesting the underground culture, what is re-enforced not only by dark colours but also by the texture of the film itself: a grained film, with scratches. The underground world is culturally seen as amoral and the character of John Doe will be explicitly connected to it, by the black and white photographs he makes of live performances (though the sequence is short, it has a strong impact as a revelation of his interests).

Artistic performance, Henri-Pierre Judy says, is the exhibition that provokes terror : “Toute l’histoire contemporaine des performances artistiques atteste ce principe fondamental: la puissance de l’exhibition tient à la volonté du dévoilement public d’une certaine monstruosité du corps induite par l’ordre moral de nos représentations. Il ne s’agit plus d’une monstruosité « naturelle » ou « mythique », mais d’une monstruosité intellectualisée. [Où] le corps représenté par l’art [...capte] les expressions de l’obscénité en les offrant au regard comme une «esthétique du monde».” The indirect representation of Doe through the product of his creative acts is indeed that of violence of obscenity, manifesting his monstrosity.

The most artistic products may be the scene of Gourmandise (the first one seen) and Sloth : one giving a most organic aspect and one presenting a living body as a sculpture of death (which recalls *Le cavalier de l’Apocalypse* by Fragonard). The two bodies unveil the inside as a watermark – flesh is texture. Both provoke our sense of (non-)aesthetic of the organic inside.

The idea of monstrosity is emphasized by the notion of torture and is all the more communicable as there is no human face shown of the criminal. John Doe has no body in the major part of the movie. He is in fact *absent* except through the crime scenes, like still and lifeless *tableaux* he leaves behind him and which incarnate his omnipresence. The first sight of him as a whole is that of a back-lit shadow; until the camera focuses on his hand, pointing a gun at Mill’s head, what embodies his omniscience. The metonymy of the hand to represent him is recurrent: the generic only shows his hands, of which symbol

gains clarity as a signification of the act : of creation, of destruction, or of grace. Texture is skin, it is the very body scratched and cut which repulses the eye. The aesthetic of ugly (linked to suffering and sadomasochism) is sustained by industrial music – an association that is frequently used and speaks directly. The track by Nine Inch Nails is, however, barely recognisable, and this introduces the theme of otherness. John Doe is the element of ambiguity and of “turbulence”. But we will see that the “element of organisation” (Mills especially) shows ambiguity in its role, too.

A striking contrast to J. Doe is established with the neat image introducing Somerset in clear white light. The gestures of Somerset in his apartment are focused on, revealing his set character – set with ritual gesture, ordered, silent and thoughtful. Intrusively, sounds come from outside, permanent echoes of reality that situate the place mingled with stress and conflict: a town.

II.2. Defence and Otherness of Good

Whilst institutions and systems of control were established for ‘the good of citizens’, its corruption is usually a point that is stressed in American movies. The *film noir*, particularly, shows the dark side of everything, the double face of good and bad, the ambiguity of social roles and values in a world of crime, corruption, lies and vice. To focus on the otherness, a sense of distortion, Mills is the character of predilection to contrast with John Doe, ‘the killer for morals’.

Let us go back to the theme of sadomasochism and violence. Denis Duclos wrote about sadomasochist scenarios: “la jouissance de l’atroce [...] pour déclencher l’indignation [...] incite aussi à la complaisance”, “la répression par la justice peut devenir elle-même sadique, par le plaisir de chasser le mal.” The two observations are a base to understand Mills’ character and his relationship with John Doe. How Mills, as a child of mass-media, has integrated notions of good and bad, of normality, like

etiquettes is revealed in dialogues – with Somerset, who argues that Doe “is just a man” (he demystifies his representation), and with John Doe himself.

Detective Mills (to J Doe) : We're not just picking up two more bodies, are we?
That wouldn't be shocking enough. You've got the papers to think about, yeah?

[...]

You're no messiah. You're a T-shirt, at best.

Mills clearly underestimates the purpose of Doe. He refers to the idea of success as being fame, quite a temporal thing. His words show arrogance and disrespect, but trying to discredit Doe, he betrays himself and the media- mass-cultured background's influence, knowing the serial killer's representation could be raised nearly like an effigy for the young.

D. Mills : I tried to figure out something. Maybe you can help me? When a person is insane, as you clearly are... do you know you're insane?
Maybe you're reading, masturbating in your own feces, do you just stop and go: "Wow, it's amazing how fucking crazy I really am"?
Yeah? You guys do that?
J. Doe: It's more comfortable for you to label me insane.
D. Mills: It's very comfortable.

Complaisance offers a sense of security.

Emotional motives put Mills in the status of an easy victim, contrary to Somerset who is self-controlled and, let us say it, has nothing to lose. Mostly driven by impulse, Mills tends to have violent reactions, usually provoked by a feeling of disempowerment. On the other hand, as said previously, his impulse is close to that of a hunter as a dispenser of justice. Tracking is a pleasure linked to empowerment, to revenge face to injustice and disturbance. In the very desire for pleasure, there is a complexity revealed on the fringe between good and bad, between the institution and the individual. Justice turns to be hate and revenge. Provoking Mills' wrath, John Doe will use it so as to show that deviance is not out of society (the act of an outer or outsider) but within

society, inherent in every man. John Doe reveals the wrath Mills is supposed to control within. On a day of revelation, the “light” is put on what was only a shadow in a city under the rain and dark sky: the hatred.

The message of damnation lies in two facts. Human beings are sinners and can't escape the inner sin. The argument of the “gene” of violence is usually claimed; the religious aura of the movie draws something similar with Mills. We have spoken here of the God of Wrath, who does not only exist in the First Testament but also in the Day of Revelation. Man, created in God's own image, is therefore a man of Wrath. Furthermore, wrath as a motive for justice is in the power of God. Mill's damnation lays in the fact he, as an individual, condemned a man like only God can do, taking a life away. Man as God. The myth of Babel runs through.

CONCLUSION

The serial killer seems to have been used in fictions to show the exceptional character of violence and bury the real fact of mass murders in society ⁶. While media tend to follow the same path, underlining as well the ephemera of crime, *Se7en* shows on the contrary the permanence and banality of crime, be it physical or psychological, officialised or not. John Doe says that “we tolerate it”. What tolerance suggests is more precisely indifference. “Long is the way... And hard, that out of Hell leads up to Light” quotes the first calling card discovered. One of the symbols given to light is awareness – the need for collective awareness of the moral degradation of the human being. The “connection between violence, degradation and spiritual defeat” which, as Stephen Prince would say, enables “the spectator to feel both compassion and condemnation”⁷. The decline which Mills embodies leaves nonetheless a feeling of hopelessness and doubt. It

⁶ See: Denis Duclos, *Le complexe du loup-garou* (Paris : Editions La Découverte, 1994).

⁷ Peckinpah's *mise-en-scene* was an influence for the new representation of violence in cinema. The parallel with Stephen Prince's study on the character of Benny in *Alfredo Garcia* is based on the points underlined by the author, that is to say “spiritual low depths” and the attraction of violence. See: Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema - Sam Peckinpah and The Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 196.

draws a parallel with the wobbling of justice. But the witnessed dead-end is at some point disillusion. Self-affliction of Doe's victims, for instance, is significant as a punishment for their *own responsibilities*, for the choices of life they made.

Force should be considered on a specific aspect: as the development of a gift. Indeed, Somerset and Doe appear as obvious forces because they have taken time to understand their possibilities. Unlike them, the gift of Mills is not apparent – the force he represents is unstable and not clearly defined. There is a feeling that his force is only fed by mediated ideals to which he identifies.

Pleasure is a fundamental ground in American society and its dream of happiness. Fictions have built fantasies and fear round the serial killer by showing his insatiable perverted pleasures. We meet here the rejection of such theory, when the perverted pleasure is reflected back on the young detective: deviance and violence are suppressed by institution but exist in the depths of the human psyche. The theme of pleasure is however absent from the profile of the serial killer built during the investigation, what rather demonstrates that the act has a deeper significance: it concentrates on the success of giving symbol a shape in reality – a dead shape.

Different types of myths appear through the personalities of the characters, from American myths back to European ones, as well as religious myths and fictions: a superposition that has taken part in the American culture and its evolution. It can be detected through these myths a great tendency to violence; if the coherence of a balance between good and bad has constructed myths, *Se7en* shows the absence of meaning that has resulted, leading up to destruction. The apocalyptic message delivered by John Doe sows alarm and confusion. It affirms the damnation of man, the end of the idea of happiness or family success: the head of Mill's pregnant wife stands for a trophy - the only trophy the young protagonist gets in return for his flaw. In a world referred to as "Hell", the probation of forces and values shows that only self-control and respect of the individual for his human nature enable to give hope for a better future. The practice of

'virtue' is not only a matter of environmental influence but also a matter of personal choice.

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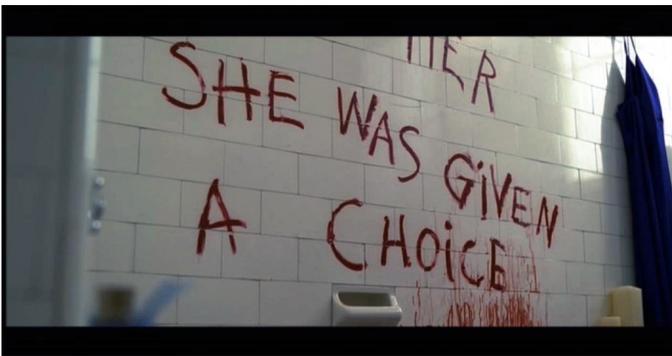
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_%28movie%29> Downladed: October 2005 and May 2006.

ANNEX

Annex 1: Deleted “Pride crime” images.



“I loved the kind of meticulousness of the crime scene...”



“I loved the kind of meticulousness of the crime scene... and you know, the horror seemed better spelled out but, you know, people respond differently to blood in movies [...]. A lot of people get really worked up by them... really offended. The last [undeleted scene] is graphic because there are ideas in it you know ideas that are just horrifying, and this is more graphic because you have all this white with all this blood spattered all over it. It looks so much like somebody’s face has been lifted off.”
(David Fincher)

Annex 2: Cast and Crew for *Se7en*.*

Directed by

David Fincher

Writing credits

Andrew Kevin Walker (written by)

Cast

Brad Pitt Detective David Mills
Morgan Freeman Detective Lt. William Somerset
Gwyneth Paltrow Tracy Mills
Kevin Spacey John Doe

Produced by

Arnold Kopelsonproducer
Phyllis Carlyle producer
Dan Kolsrud executive producer
Anne Kopelson executive producer
Gianni Nunnari executive producer
William C. Gerrity line producer: additional photography
Stephen Brown co-producer
Nana Greenwald co-producer
Lynn Harris co-executive producer
Richard Saperstein co-executive producer

Cinematography by

Darius Khondji (director of photography)

Film Editing by

Richard Francis-Bruce

Other Crew

Melodie McDaniel still photographer: John Doe's photographs
Peter Sorel : still photographer

Original Music by

David Bowie (song "The Heart's Filthy Lesson")
Brian Eno (song "The Heart's Filthy Lesson")
Trent Reznor (song "Closer: Precursor")
Howard Shore

Sources: IMDB (imdb.com) and New Line Cinema, *Se7en* (Entertainment in Video, 1997).

* The list is not exhaustive. For more information, see: [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com),
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114369/fullcredits>

Annex 3: Company Credits for *Se7en*.*

Production Companies

New Line Cinema
Kopelson

Distributors

New Line Cinema (1995) (USA) (theatrical)
New Line Home Video (1996) (USA) (video)
Alliance Atlantis Communications (1995) (Canada) (all media)
Asso Film (video)
Cecchi Gori Group (1995-1996) (Italy) (theatrical)
Constantin Film (1995) (Germany) (theatrical)
Edifilmes (1996) (Portugal) (theatrical)
Focus Film AG (1995-1996) (Switzerland) (theatrical)
Gativideo (Argentina) (video)
International Video Entertainment (IVE) (video)
Líder Films S.A. (1996) (Spain) (theatrical)
Líder Films S.A. (Argentina)
Metropolitan Filmexport (1996) (France) (theatrical)
PlayArte Home Vídeo (199?) (Brazil) (DVD)
PlayArte Home Vídeo (199?) (Brazil) (VHS)
The Criterion Collection (USA) (laserdisc)
Universal Pictures Benelux (2000) (Netherlands) (DVD)
VCL Communications GmbH (Germany) (video)
Warner Home Video (2005) (Switzerland) (DVD)
Warner Home Video (2005) (Germany) (DVD)

Other Companies

Call The Cops	police technical advisors
Chapman/Leonard Studio Equipment	camera cranes and dollies
Clearvision	copyright clearances
Entertainment Brokers International	insurance
Imaginary Forces	main titles
Kona Cutting	negative cutting
TVT Records	soundtrack published by
Video Hawks	video equipment
Warner Hollywood Studios	studio facilities

Sources: IMDB (imdb.com) and New Line Cinema, *Se7en* (Entertainment in Video, 1997).

* The list is not exhaustive. For more information, see: [imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com),
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114369/companycredits>

**Annex 4: References for John Doe's Notebooks:
R. Frank and J. P. Witkin**



J. P. Witkin
Woman once a Bird, Los Angeles (1999)



J. P. Witkin
Glassman (1995)

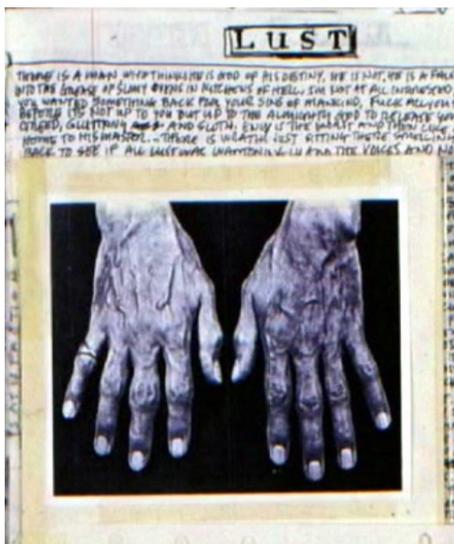
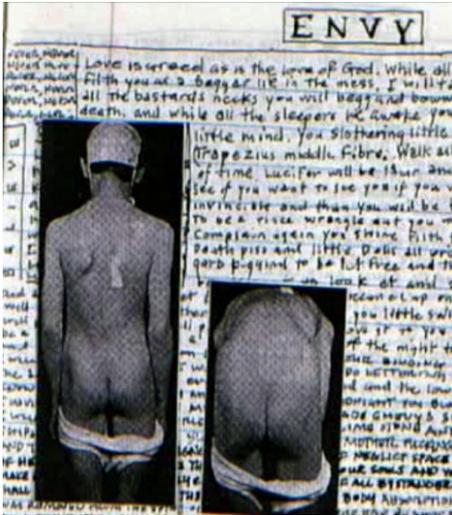
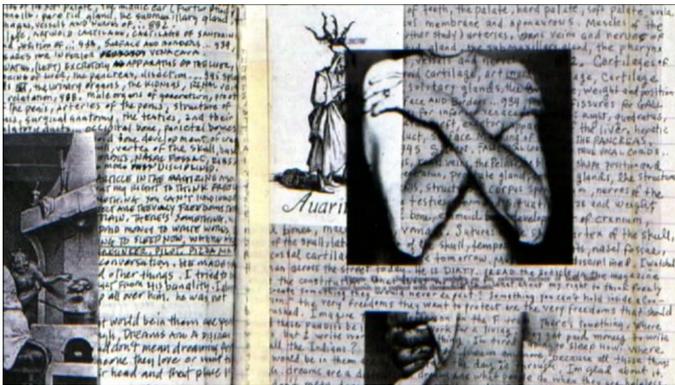


Robert Frank
Sick of Goodby's, Mabou (1978)

Sources:

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- R. Frank: www.tate.org.uk, <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue2/sixreflectionsfrank.htm>

Annex 5: The Notebooks.



Source: New Line Cinema, "The Notebooks," *Se7en* (Entertainment in Video, 1997), CD 2.