

HISTORY IN THE

NO DECAPITATIONS, RAGE OR BRUTALITY...
IS THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN
BUTTON REALLY A DAVID FINCHER FILM?
YOU BET: IT'S HIS MAGNUM OPUS.
IN A WORLD EXCLUSIVE, TOTAL FILM VISITS
FINCHER'S SET TO WITNESS THE MAKING
OF A MODERN AMERICAN CLASSIC...

WORDS **NEV PIERCE**

Wrapped in a voluminous white blanket, and partly crammed into one of the cribs, there sat an old man apparently about 70 years of age. His sparse hair was almost white, and from his chin dripped a long smoke-coloured beard, which waved absurdly back and forth, fanned by the breeze coming in at the window. He looked up at Mr Button with dim, faded eyes in which lurked a puzzled question... [He] suddenly spoke in a cracked and ancient voice. "Are you my father?"

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON, BY F SCOTT FITZGERALD

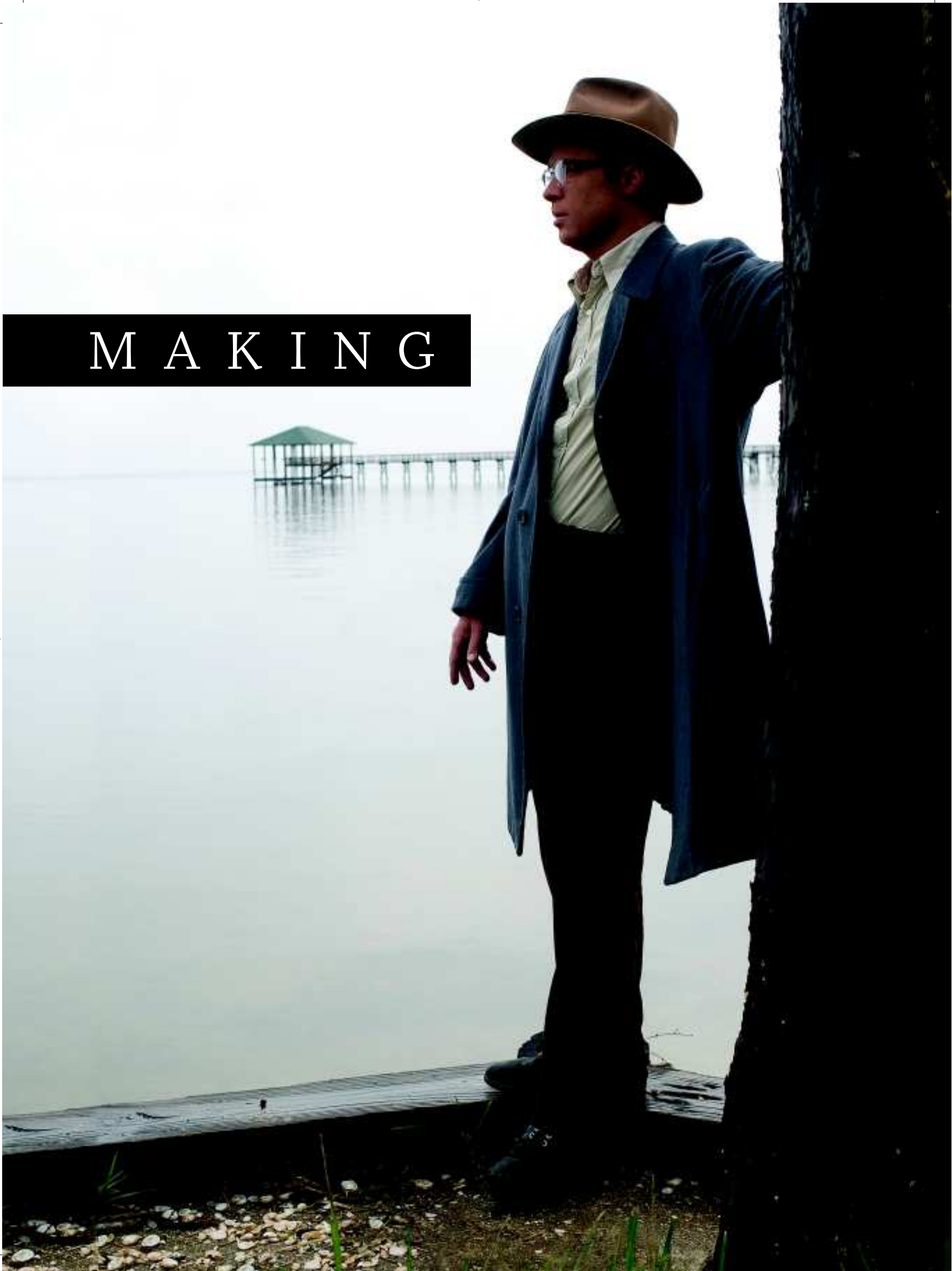
"You could say there's death... Death is the core of everything... of all my movies."

David Fincher is having a haircut. He's in a trailer, taking a trim between set-ups on his seventh film, *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button*. He's chatting about grandchildren with the woman wielding the scissors, who has a family photo on the dresser. "He's a black belt?" says Fincher, peering at the boy in the picture, with surprise. "He can kill with either hand! It's going to be hard to discipline that child..."

Between snips and quips, Fincher is discussing the themes of his movies; to a point. He does, he says, "try not to think about that stuff... I like so few things; I don't want to limit myself by going, 'Oh, that's the thing you always like!'" The Flaming Lips are on the radio. "Do you realise..." comes Wayne Coyne's distinctly fragile voice from the tinny speakers. "That everyone you know... someday... will die..."

Fincher has distinct tastes. *The New York Times* once wrote an article questioning why he and his peers – Spike Jonze, David O Russell, Kimberley Peirce – weren't more prolific. He has a simple answer: "It's too hard, man." *Spider-Man*, *Mission: Impossible III*, *Seared*, *Squids*, *They Fought Alone*, *Lords Of Dogtown*, *The Black Dahlia*: the 46-year-old Denver-born director has been linked with each – some went on to be made by others, some still fester in Development Hell. If there's one thing Fincher learnt from *Alien*³ – easily >>

MAKING



the worst experience of his professional life – it’s to go into production with your eyes wide open. “I try not to be a guy looking for a gig, because that puts you at a disadvantage,” says Fincher. “Joel Schumacher once told me, ‘Never care more than they do.’ And I think that’s wise. I think you go into it and say, ‘This is what I need’. Tell the truth...”

The truth nearly scuppered *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button*. An adaptation of an F Scott Fitzgerald short story from 1922, it’s been knocking about as a potential movie since the early ’90s, touted variously as the next gig of Spielberg, Jonze and Ron Howard, whose version was kiboshed because of a spiralling budget. In 2005, as Fincher was poised to shoot, cash concerns saw it shut down once again. “But then we made *Zodiac* with them [Paramount and Warner Bros] and we gained a trust that if we said it was going to cost ‘X’, it wasn’t going to cost ‘X’ times two. So the planets aligned, Cate Blanchett was available and Brad had a baby and decided he liked the script and here we are.”

THE PLANETS ALIGNED, CATE WAS AVAILABLE
AND BRAD HAD A BABY AND DECIDED HE
LIKED THE SCRIPT’ — DAVID FINCHER



“Here” is New Orleans, Louisiana. Day 69 of the shoot, 14 February, 2007. The crew members greet each other with “Happy Valentine’s Day” – Cupid’s annual knees-up is more of an event in America. Later, we all enjoy celebratory champagne (from plastic cups), courtesy of Brad Pitt.

In the morning, a glance at the call sheet shows a scant three set-ups: ‘Benjamin POV of pictures/Benjamin POV of kitchen,’ ‘Benjamin shows the house to a couple’ and ‘Benjamin from a window watches Daisy exercise’.

This will probably amount to only about 20 seconds of film. Shooting it, somehow, will take 11 hours. The material may appear to be a departure for Fincher, but his methods remain the same: exhaustive, exacting.

The first set-up is a tracking shot, down a hallway festooned with family pictures. Around the fifth pass, Fincher mutters, “Not bad.” “Not bad?” says Kim Marks, the camera operator. “Don’t you know the word

‘excellent?’” There is no pause. “No.”

As with *Zodiac*, Fincher is shooting tapeless, with images captured straight to digital hard drives. At lunch, he reviews the morning’s footage on his laptop – logging into a website where dailies have been uploaded. Using PIX (Project Information Exchange), he then makes notes for the editor and cinematographer. Fincher uses three preset buttons: ‘Could be better’, ‘Performance good’ and ‘Excellent’. You imagine the first is used quite a lot. Happy – or at least, mildly content – with the footage he has seen, Fincher then turns his attention to some streamed auditions, as he’s casting for later in the film’s 150-day shoot.





Prime of life: (above) Benjamin and Daisy enjoy their time at the same age; (left) Brad Pitt on set; (below) Cate Blanchett as an old lady and Pitt as a baby.



As a particularly nubile actress appears on the screen, one of the crew leans in and makes a lewd comment. Fincher turns. “You are an evil, vile and sick man,” he says. “And that’s why you are continually working for me...”

Evil, vile, sick, fascistic. Fincher’s films have been called a lot of disparaging things. He is cinema’s ‘Prince of Darkness’: the man who torched Sigourney, put Gwyneth’s head in a box and threw Michael off a roof. He beat Jared beyond recognition, incarcerated Jodie in a vault and made Jake teeter on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Fincher is unflinching in his desire to make us flinch.

Perhaps he is aware of his reputation. There’s probably even a part of him that enjoys it. And yet, *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button* is – at least in part – a romance, scripted by *Forrest Gump* scriptwriter Eric Roth. He calls it “a fable. It’s about a man who ages backwards and whatever that means in one’s life. And if you have parents or children then I think you’ll probably like it. It’s about life and death.” One thing’s for sure – it’s definitely not *Ei8ht*...

Fincher had always been interested in the project, but its appeal crystallized after the death of his father – Jack Fincher, journalist and writer – in 2002. The director started to think about the difficulty of dealing with death, as much for those left behind as those who go through it; about the toll of loving someone.

“I thought the movie was kind of an exploration of the duty that love is,” he says. “I mean, it sounds unpalatable, the way I’m saying it, but it was wrapped in a tender filo, a nice pastry. The upshot of it was about a guy who grows up in an old folks’ home, sees people die all around him and so is sort of comfortable with that passing, falls in love... is... you know... it doesn’t happen... boy meets girl, boy gets girl and whatever after that... I just thought...” He pauses. “I just thought it would make a rippin’ yarn!” >>



“Good Lord!” he said aloud. The process was continuing. There was no doubt of it — he looked now like a man of 30. Instead of being delighted, he was uneasy — he was growing younger. He had hitherto hoped that once he reached a bodily age equivalent to his age in years, the grotesque phenomenon which had marked his birth would cease to function. He shuddered. His destiny seemed to him awful, incredible.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON, BY F SCOTT FITZGERALD

At lunch, the day before Valentine’s, Fincher shows *Total Film* another scene on his laptop. Cate Blanchett is Daisy, Benjamin’s lover. She’s in a swimming pool. She finishes a length and looks up to Benjamin, standing on the tiles. She looks troubled, upset. Because, says Fincher, as she’s getting older, he’s getting younger “and, ironically, looking like Brad Pitt.” The story is about love separated by time — as Blanchett has it, “There’s a moment in time when we’re together, like star-crossed lovers.” Benjamin, born circa 1918, lives through



Growing young: (below left) Benjamin notices his body changing; (below) Ben and Daisy share a moment.



‘IT’S A FABLE. AND IF YOU HAVE PARENTS OR CHILDREN YOU’LL PROBABLY LIKE IT. IT’S ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH’ — ERIC ROTH

WW2, the swinging ’60s and beyond, almost to the present day. It could be *The Curious Case Of The 20th Century*.

Pitt had to be convinced to sign up. At first unsure, he re-read the script after the birth of his first child and called Fincher to ask what he’d done to the ending. The answer: “Nothing, man. You just had a baby!” Paternity, mortality... Time changes everything.

Total Film witnessed the birth of Benjamin earlier in the week, seeing his father Thomas (Jason Flemyng) discover the nature of the new arrival and do a runner, ditching the baby in the New Orleans night. It was a day off for Pitt, who was probably grateful of the break, given days where he plays the older-looking Benjamin require 4am starts to apply extensive make-up. But today he is aged. He has grey hair and grandpa glasses. He’s filming in the Button townhouse, walking >>

ALIEN & ZODIAC

Fincher has spent his career preparing to make *The Great American Movie*...



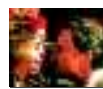
ALIEN³

Sigourney Weaver finds herself stuck on a barren new world surrounded by loads of violently disturbed, fanatically religious men from the British Isles. Hello pilgrim fathers! With its themes of paranoia and isolation, *Alien* serves up Fincher's first sneaky metaphor.



SE7EN

Something none-more-black lurks in the heart of the rain-lashed American city, rotting it from the inside... With a big pointy dildo. John Doe and Detective Somerset become icons of sin and apathy in modern society. What's in the box? Hint: it's not a puppy.



THE GAME

Another Great American Son without a father, banker Michael Douglas gets sucked into a pre-*Fight Club* spiritual crisis on his 40th birthday. Classic they're-all-out-to-get-me paranoia and madness. Which is obviously in no way connected to the US psyche.



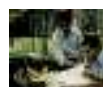
FIGHT CLUB

Tyler Durden and Project Mayhem demolish the American Dream by ripping into the addiction to capitalism and consumerism. It's hard to know what's more shocking: blowing up two corporate towers... or Starbucks! Gasp!



PANIC ROOM

Get some weapons, lock the doors, turn the surveillance up to 9/11, sit on the pile of cash and defend your home by shooting anything that moves. Jodie Foster and Kristen Stewart get a lesson in isolationism and US foreign policy. Be afraid.



ZODIAC

American impotence might be a key theme – its vision of cops handcuffed by red-tape and chewed up by obsession makes it a bedfellow of *The Wire* – but this meticulous study of the hunt for the Zodiac killer is more a mirror of its maker. Be very afraid.

down the hallway, looking at the pictures. The star and director – working on their third film together – clearly have an understanding. “You need to ease into those stops,” Fincher tells Pitt, “as if you were retarded.” Another take. Pitt nails it. He’s a convincing pensioner. Not that all the aging effects are in-camera: one of the key reasons the film has taken so long to mount is the demands it places on CGI.

“We had to figure out a way [to age Benjamin], aside from casting six different actors to play the same person, so we did tests and were able to cast separate bodies and do head replacement and put this CG character on the shoulders of the body,” says Fincher. “We didn’t want it to be animated, we didn’t want it to be: ‘Here’s Gollum, from the clavicles up!’ We had to make it so that Brad was driving the performance. So we worked out a way to do it.” He pauses and gives a smile. “It still hasn’t actually worked satisfactorily, but we have every reason to believe it will...”

Wry as he is, Fincher will make it happen. The work-in-progress images we see are startling. He shows us Blanchett, before and after CG rejuvenation. “That’s Cate as she looks today – see that stuff [he uses the cursor to show a minor skin blemish], those little imperfections of which she has maybe two – and this is her at 21.” As she ages and Pitt grows younger, virtually every frame will be retouched. The special effect is showing the passing of time.

Back on Valentine’s Day, haircut finished, Fincher is walking back to the stage. Is this a departure for him? Maybe. We discuss the theory of one critic, that his previous films, up to *Zodiac*, all had lead characters in conflict with “the doppelgänger of the protagonist”. Except for *The Game* – his “least convincing” picture.

“Hmmm,” says Fincher. “There you have it: ‘The reason that didn’t work was because he wasn’t making that same old movie.’” He pauses. “My favourite things I’ve been involved with, there are a lot of reasons outside my own influence why I like them. There were a lot of things that were done in spite of my instincts, which now make them memorable to me! That’s why it’s such a bizarre art form to deal with, because you’re... it’s an



Age gap: (above) Benjamin gets younger as Daisy ages through the film.

‘WE DIDN’T WANT IT TO BE LIKE GOLLUM. WE HAD TO MAKE IT SO THAT BRAD WAS DRIVING THE PERFORMANCE’ — DAVID FINCHER

instinctual thing, you’re looking for somebody’s instinctual response to the day’s work and the story and yet you’re going to have good days and bad days.” He pauses again. “You’re going to have a lot of bad days...”

We arrive back at the shooting stage. It’s empty. Fincher does a comedy double-take. “Is everybody at fuckin’ lunch or something?” He lets out an exaggerated sigh, “You can’t leave for 10 minutes...” **TF**

***The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button* opens on 22 January and will be reviewed in a future issue of *Total Film*.**