With David Fincher’s THE SOCIAL NETWORK now a hit in theaters, the time is right to take a look back at his 1995 serial-killer thriller SE7EN. There have been countless films with similar subject matter in the past two decades, but to this day, SE7EN continues to shock with its jaw-dropping ending.

Detective William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) is just a week away from retirement, anxiously awaiting the day he can hand in his badge and gun. Life in the dreary and rainy city has made him quite bitter and cynical, and the last thing Somerset wants to do is deal with a naive rookie. The young and brash Detective David Mills (Brad Pitt) is at the start of his career, striving to prove he has what it takes to work in the grim world of Homicide.

When Somerset and Mills arrive at a filthy crime scene, they discover an obese man dead in his chair, his hands and feet tied. After reviewing the evidence, Somerset speculates that the obese man was forced to feed himself to death. Upon discovering the word “Gluttony” engraved on the dirty wall, Somerset believes this is only the beginning of something horrible. When Mills uncovers the word “Greed” bloodily written on the floor at a second murder, they both conclude this is the work of an ingenious serial murderer.

This man, eventually revealed as John Doe (Kevin Spacey), leaves a cryptic message for the duo at one of the crime scenes, pleading with them to stop him. As the body count rises, Somerset asks Mills to keep him on the case even after his last day of retirement approaches. Little do they know, the murderer has stealthily followed them to their precinct. With his bloody hands raised, John Doe walks into the police station, giving himself up—and he then challenges them to work harder to piece together the giant puzzle he has conceived.

In this unnamed modern city, the urban streets are always flooded with rain, homaging the settings of classic noir movies. At the same time as it’s a police procedural, SE7EN also blends in elements of a slasher movie. The audience never sees any of the killings actually taking place, however; only the grotesque aftermaths are depicted. The sewn-up corpses are far scarier than witnessing the execution of the murders, with John Doe’s gruesome handiwork created in excruciating detail by makeup FX wizard Rob Bottin.

Andrew Kevin Walker was a struggling screenwriter in New York City when he came up with the plotline. As he walked the then crime-infested streets, Walker would see each of the deadly sins taking place, and his shut-in neighbors would drape garbage bags over their windows so that no one could see what was going on inside. This was a dizzying culture shock for Walker, who had just moved there from suburbia.

The chilling conclusion, in which Detective Mills gets the answer to his repeatedly shouted question, “What’s in the box?” made New Line executives extremely nervous about audience reaction. Producer Arnold Kopelson insisted on a different ending, with a much happier tone. But Freeman and Pitt knew the original conclusion was always the right one, and the two leads and Fincher threatened to pull out of the project if it was changed.

The success of SE7EN was a game-changer for the director and one of his leads. Fincher’s first feature had been the critical disaster ALIEN^3, and Pitt had been typecast because of his previous films THE RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT and LEGENDS OF THE FALL. The actor wanted to be more than just a romantic lead, which is why Fincher took a big chance on casting him. The duo continued their collaborative efforts more recently with THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON.

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