

THE GAME [1997]

by

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Nicholas Van Orton (Michael Douglas), a fabulously wealthy San Francisco investment banker, is so emotionally cold he chooses to spend his birthday alone in his opulent mansion watching financial reports on TV. Van Orton's disreputable younger brother, Conrad (Sean Penn), gives him an invitation to Consumer Recreation Services, promising something in unusual entertainment. The behaviorally rigid businessman eventually succumbs to curiosity and checks it out. Stunned at being rejected, that night Daniel Schorr's newscast becomes a direct address to him – the first in a long sequence of dream-like and disorienting adventures engineering by CRS. From here, Van Orton is sucked into a vortex of complete paranoia and uncertainty. When things become apparently life-threatening, he wants out, but cannot escape, almost drowning in a cab, being shot at by assassins, having his accounts cleaned out by con men, falling for a woman who drugs him, waking up in a coffin in Mexico, accidentally shooting his brother to death, and finally committing suicide. All this ends, having been engineered by CRS and his friends, in a gala birthday party. Van Orton winds up with his emotions thawed and apparently a better human being for his tortuous experiences. (Rated R)

The Game is one of those troublesome films that, chameleon like, looks so damnably different depending on your point of view – psychological or sociological. Perhaps the most striking film in this sub-genre is *Thelma and Louise* [1991]. From the sociological point of view, it says that liberated women cannot survive in contemporary patriarchal society and the only alternative is to give in to subjugation or death (this despite the fact that they clearly prove they can live like men on men's terms). From a sociological point of view, their mutual suicide at the end of the film is a rather depressing message. But from a psychological point of view the film's end is a message of transcendence in which women, who have achieved connection with their true selves, no longer have a place on earth and ascend into the sky, there to challenge the traditionally male gods who live there. The difference between the two takes couldn't be further apart. The same is true of *The Game*.

From the psychological point of view, *The Game* is straightforward and obvious, while a little surprising. The script, at least from the point of view of the hero/victim, is a cinematic rendition of the Hero's Journey as described in Joseph Campbell's book, "Hero with a Thousand Faces." (This proves, once again, that this foundation of storytelling will never wear out since it has so many possible incarnations – after all, who would see *The Game* and *Star Wars* [1997] as, basically, the same story.)

Like the classical hero, Van Orton has no idea what to expect; no one will tell him what "the game" really is. Against his better judgment, but following his "better instincts," he activates the gift. And then, as "the game" begins, his life becomes a living

hell. And the rest is Joseph Campbell: “Threshold Crossing, Battle with Brother, Battle with Dragon, Dismemberment, Crucifixion, Abduction, Night-Sea Journey, Wonder Journey, Whale’s Belly, Sacred Marriage, Father Atonement, Apotheosis, Elixir Theft, Return, Resurrection, Rescue” and conclusion to a higher state. One of the more entertaining aspects of this film is for those familiar with this scheme is to pick out the pieces as they occur (mostly in the exact order described by Campbell and sometimes as literal as one could imagine).

The names in *The Game* are just as meaningful and well-chosen as the plot elements. “Nicholas” is the patron saint of storm-beset sailors (as is Van Orton’s experience on the hero’s journey), of prisoners (of CRS), and children (his confusion and suddenly becoming “little” when he thought he was “big”). “Conrad,” in Teutonic, means wise counselor. “Christine” (the woman who saves Van Orton) means messenger of Christ, thus the path to rebirth, resurrection, and psychic health. And if all this isn’t enough, the gatekeeper, that is the person who interviews Van Orton for CRS is named Rebhorn (read “re-born”).

Of course, having survived the ordeal, Van Orton is a new man, sensitive where he was cold, warm where he was aloof, caring where he was once insensitive. But from a sociological point of view, we get a very different story.

The Game is also an unsettling, paranoia-inducing suspense film about an extreme invasion of privacy, which constantly warns us we can trust no one. There are corporations for hire that can ruin your life in unimaginable ways. Somehow, these corporations can learn everything about you to the smallest detail and, worse still, enlist all your friends and acquaintances to turn against you and betray you in the most heartless manner imaginable (indeed, in *The Game* it seems as if the whole city of San Francisco conspires against Van Orton). Still worse, we are told this is for our own good – Big Brother is Healing You. (Another danger which this film treads hazardously close to lies in the fact that some may not find it a thriller at all, but a political fulfillment – after all, men with automatic weapons shooting at rich bankers may be the attainment of many a radical’s dream.)

If we identify with the hero, our psychological journey is marred by the too outrageous sociology. We are constantly plunged from one situation to another with little rhyme or reason, indeed, each situation itself makes little sense. To make things worse (or better), the filmmakers keep us constantly off-balance by always changing the rules (much like David Lynch’s ploy in *Lost Highway* [1997]). Whenever we think we understand what is happening, the glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be an illusion simply signaling that we are even further confused and lost.

On the other hand, if we remove ourselves from the hero (which is not hard to do given he’s not a very nice guy), and watch the film sociologically, it is marred by the too outrageous leaps of faith it requires to make psychological sense.

Combining the points of view, we get a rather ugly picture. Psychological maturity can now be bought, even as a gift to another. There is a seemingly all-powerful

organization that can arrange flawless circumstances under which psychic growth is almost assured. The steps of the Hero's Journey can now be manufactured and customized much like a combination of your favorite dishes at a restaurant.

There is, after all, an attraction to this film. Despite the specter of the total loss of privacy always lurking in the background, despite the fact that it succumbs to never answering the problem of control vs. chaos, despite its sense of suffocating enclosure and mounting despair, the archetypal underpinnings are so strong, so ancient, so psychologically important, that we are nevertheless fascinated.

The Game. Directed by David Fincher. Screenplay by John Brancato and Michael Ferris. Polygram Filmed Entertainment, 1997.