

Out of Sight: Steven Soderbergh makes do, but what does he make?

David Walsh
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Steven Soderbergh is one of the more talented American film directors. In six previous feature films, including *sex, lies and videotape*, *Kafka*, *King of the Hill* and *Schizopolis*, he has examined social and personal relations in an unsettling manner and from a number of different angles. Unfortunately, neither of his most recent efforts, *Schizopolis* and *Gray's Anatomy*, a filmed version of one of actor/performer Spalding Gray's monologues, was a commercial success. This has apparently obliged him to seek work as a director of more conventional fare. Hence his role in the production of *Out of Sight*.

In the new film George Clooney plays a bank robber, Jack Foley, who escapes from a Florida prison and ends up sharing the trunk of the getaway car with a federal marshal, Karen Sisco, played by Jennifer Lopez. Their unlikely relationship is the main thread of the film. Later they meet again in Detroit. Foley is there to take part in a heist of uncut diamonds; Karen is there to arrest him--or is she there because he interests her? In any event, one could say, I suppose, that Karen gets the best of it. She sleeps with Foley and subsequently gets to shoot and arrest him.

A chief difficulty with *Out of Sight*, from a novel by Elmore Leonard, is that there is nothing seriously convincing about a single one of the story's critical elements. We are expected to believe that Jack, a relatively gentle and genial soul, is responsible for 200 bank robbers and that while in prison he would attempt to foil, simply through his smart mouth, the schemes of a pathological killer and his equally pathological associate. After his escape from jail we are expected to believe that he would actively pursue a relationship with the federal marshal hunting him. (The word 'unlikely' has a real content.) We are expected to believe that the federal marshal would be seen dallying

for some time in a public place with a prison escapee presumably on every law enforcement agency's most-wanted list. We are expected to believe that a top financial shark would let it become public knowledge that he had a fortune in diamonds sitting around his mansion and that he would make no arrangements to protect them. And so forth...

The film, true to Leonard's style, boasts a collection of relentlessly 'off-beat' characters. Ving Rhames plays a thief who has a compulsion to confess his crimes to his sister, Steve Zahn a stoned surfer type and hot-shot car thief, Luis Guzman a convict obsessed with magic tricks, Keith Loneker a bodyguard whose clumsiness culminates in his shooting himself in the head. The characters' idiosyncrasies, however, don't lead anywhere, one doesn't learn anything from them. They are arbitrary, dead ends, simply added for effect. The contradictoriness of life is reduced in Leonard's novels to quirkiness. This is the sort of material that is described by contemporary critics as 'wised up and witty.'

Foley, specifically, the suave and sensual man of words *and* man of action, is a consummate fantasy creation. The middle-aged, middle-class writer says to himself, 'I would be exactly like that--if only the circumstances were right!'

Leonard used to be a modest crime-novel writer. It was possible to read and even enjoy him then. Now, according to Universal Pictures' production notes, he is 'considered one of the leading American authors of the 20th Century.' This is not amusing, it is simply painful. Of course, the judgment is not primarily an aesthetic one, so perhaps one should not take offense. Leonard's primary qualification, in the world-encompassing view of a Hollywood film publicist, as one of the century's leading authors is that his novels have formed the basis,

in the last few years, for several films, including *Get Shorty* (a box office hit) and Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*.

The film's leading performers are also a problem. In interviews Clooney appears to be an affable and intelligent person. Perhaps, as much as anything else, he is stuck with his current screen persona. In any event, as things stand now, the actor is a walking smirk. It cannot be healthy for anyone to be that pleased with himself. Only in one scene, in which he blows up at the financier who has treated him shabbily, does he go beyond what we have to come to expect of him. Possibly in the future he will be allowed or will allow himself to do something more challenging.

Jennifer Lopez is attractive, but generates very little heat. She looks at the camera lens as though it were a mirror in which she is continually checking her figure. Anyway, she portrays a federal marshal. And I am tired of films siding with police, telling us how human they are. Playing a representative of law and order today in America is not a neutral act, it's not the same as playing a plumber or a taxi driver. More than one million people are behind bars, executions are frequent. Even without wanting to, one takes on responsibility for too much misery, too much cruelty. It inevitably gives a certain coloring to the performance. If we take Karen seriously as a woman of compassion and humanity then she is not a cop, if we take her seriously as a cop then she is not a woman of compassion and humanity.

Soderbergh does his best to enliven the film. He is imaginative and has an extraordinary eye. His shots of inanimate objects are extraordinary. He makes a considerable effort to ignite the seduction and love scenes between Jack and Karen. He almost succeeds, single-handedly, with his odd cuts and freeze frames. But while Soderbergh is electrifying, his performers are static and mostly worried, one gets the feeling, about their looks and their careers. One has to have active participants to do something truly interesting in a film.

When I interviewed Soderbergh in September 1996 he voiced, without prompting, his distaste for the current state of the film industry. He spoke, I think, with utter sincerity. (Soderbergh referred with a certain amount of hauteur at that time to his own film, *The Underneath* (1995), a remake of a *film noir*. It must be said that in nearly every way the latter film is superior to *Out of Sight*.) And I don't imagine now that he feels

chastened by the experience with *Schizopolis* and *Gray's Anatomy*. *Out of Sight* was not his own project, he pursued it and thereby 'inherited,' as he explains, a script and leading performers. He told one reporter, 'Every nine years, I think that's fair, to make a movie that people go to see, that doesn't seem greedy to me.'

One can feel a certain sympathy for Soderbergh. He is a serious film-maker obliged to earn a living and maintain a career in an unforgiving and at this point still largely vacuous industry. It must have been very difficult to absorb the philistine abuse he received for the ambitious, if not entirely successful *Schizopolis*, described as a 'self-indulgent misadventure' and 'unwatchable' by one critic quite pleased with his new film.

Nonetheless, every film, like every public or private act, has consequences. *Out of Sight* will strengthen, if only slightly, the hold of a certain kind of writing and film-making. It will strengthen, if only slightly, the grip of certain social views. It will strengthen, if only slightly, a kind of complacency and thoughtlessness in approaching life and its problems.

This is not the end of the world, but couldn't it have been avoided? One hopes Soderbergh will not be a permanently less interesting director for the experience.

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