

# Simplifying matters

Erin Brockovich, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by Susannah Grant

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In *Erin Brockovich*, a legal researcher and single mother, her employer and the citizens of a small California town are pitted against a large, privately-owned utility company. The company has contaminated the town's water supply, causing widespread illness and suffering. The film is based on an actual event.

Commentators have noted the structural similarities between this film, directed by Steven Soderbergh, and *A Civil Action* (1998), directed by Steven Zaillian, based on the book by Jonathan Harr. The latter treats the effort by residents of Woburn, Massachusetts to recover damages from two large conglomerates who have dumped poisonous chemicals into their water system.

Michael Mann's *The Insider* (1999) follows the efforts of a former tobacco company executive and a television journalist to expose the fact that tobacco firms have long known of the disease-causing effects of smoking and deliberately enhanced the effect of nicotine through the use of chemical additives.

If one were to believe the official version of things, corporations, the drive for profit and the market are indispensable to human happiness, indeed they're the source from which all such happiness flows. There is no mass means of opposing that view (or even, at this point, the *conscious* desire to do so). Insofar as films treat social problems in America today, they generally do so in a limp and carefully filtered manner. Tragedies are dealt with as individual events, aberrations, from which no general conclusions can be drawn.

Cinema is an industry, operated by financial interests, but it has an Achilles heel. It needs to make some point of contact with an audience or else movie theaters would be empty. Moreover, individual filmmakers, writers and performers have their own opinions, which don't necessarily correspond with those held in society's upper reaches. And indeed the film industry finds it *necessary* to impart certain types of anti-establishment sentiment to its products, again heavily watered down in most cases, to attract spectators.

If we were to assume that in the three films referred to above (and there are others) the intuitive feelings of ordinary people have slipped through the cracks, have found some sort of half-conscious or "quarter-conscious" expression, then it would be reasonable to conclude that a great many Americans, contrary to officially-sponsored opinion, view giant corporations and their hirelings as selfish, brutal, oppressive, destructive, indifferent to human

suffering and positively dangerous.

I mention this as a preamble to discussing *Erin Brockovich*, because I think it would be difficult to argue that Steven Soderbergh's film has more of an artistic than a sociological significance. The film registers, in some fashion or another, the ongoing process of disenchantment with corporate culture and present-day society as a whole. Unfortunately, the way it goes about that and the sort of lessons it seeks to convey put at risk the important truths it has to tell.

The work contains quite contradictory impulses. These reveal themselves even in the film's publicity campaign. The trailer for *Erin Brockovich*, in a rather unsavory and opportunist fashion, exploits lead actress Julia Roberts' physical appearance and her character's smart mouth. The unsuspecting spectator would have no idea—and is clearly intended not to have any idea—that the film deals with the tragic consequences of industrial pollution on hundreds of innocent victims.

The events themselves are compelling and horrifying. Hinkley, California is a town in the Mojave Desert, nearly midway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Pacific Gas and Electric, a \$28 billion utility company, operated a facility there that leaked hexavalent chromium, a highly toxic substance, into the town's water for years. The local population was consistently lied to by the company, which informed them that a different variety of chromium, actually beneficial to their health, had been used. Doctors cynically told extremely ill people, during appointments paid for by PG&E, that their diseases had nothing to do with pollution.

It is an extraordinary moment when the townspeople begin to put two and two together, assisted by Brockovich. Having been told that their ailments were their own fault, the result of poor diet, lifestyle problems or personal irresponsibility—the official line of the cancer establishment and many doctors in the field—they suddenly realize they've been poisoned by their corporate "benefactor." The film is remarkable and noteworthy for such moments alone.

If only they had been developed and made the center of the drama! *Imitation of Life* is an extraordinary work because director Douglas Sirk understood that the fate of Lana Turner as a successful actress with career and family problems was far less tragic than that of the black maid and her daughter. Is it merely the

amounts of money at stake that render contemporary filmmakers far less able or willing to make difficult and painful artistic decisions, the decisions that *count for everything* in the long run?

It's not that Brockovich's own life doesn't have its share of drama. It does, at least potentially. For a change we see a woman with past-due notices and cockroaches in her kitchen. Such people do exist—in America too. But we know in our bones, right from the start, that she isn't going to end up like that. Hardship is simply a prelude in such a film, a necessary stage in which the spectator is softened up, tenderized, for the knockout punch. We know what's coming, so does the filmmaker, the actors as well. Nothing can be done about it. Somehow implied in each and every frame, speeding along like a train on a downhill track, is the inevitable and uplifting 'triumph over adversity'!

And this "inspirational reminder of the power of the human spirit" (production notes) makes *Erin Brockovich* so much less interesting than it might have been. And how convincing is that hackneyed notion anyhow in a film that ends on such an "unspiritual" note, with Brockovich receiving a check for two million dollars? The ending simply leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Was it all really about money then, like everything else in American life?

In none of the films about corporate malfeasance is it suggested or even hinted at that there might be any response to the crimes and injustices in question other than taking the company responsible to court or exposing their actions in the media. No one can yet conceive of a mass movement emerging that brings together all the social questions. Truly, at times the imagination of artists seems woefully limited.

Of course, if one were to take these films at face value they paint a somber picture of the situation of the average citizen and, for that matter, the state of American democracy. Everyone knows that the circumstances in Hinkley, and the results of other kinds of corporate atrocities, are repeated in countless communities. What do you do, for example, if an indefatigable lawyer, researcher or investigative reporter, prepared to risk everything, doesn't happen upon your case? Presumably you're out of luck. The implication seems to be that a successful struggle against corporate power in the US today requires some sort of miraculous intervention. I suppose there's more than a grain of truth in that.

Steven Soderbergh is an interesting filmmaker, one of the brightest in the US. His career so far has had three distinct chapters. He began by making *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *Kafka* (1991), *King of the Hill* (1993) and *The Underneath* (1995), all relatively idiosyncratic films, the last less so. In fact, during filming of *The Underneath* he concluded that he was not doing the sort of independent-minded and difficult work he'd set out to do, and went off and shot *Schizopolis* (1996).

This absurdist work, by no means entirely successful, is difficult to summarize: it involves a Scientology-like cult, a harassed office worker, a cuckolded dentist and his brother (or is it the brother who's cuckolded?). One of the most interesting American films of the decade, *Schizopolis* made no dent on the film industry, in fact, attracted a good deal of hostility. Soderbergh, apparently chastened, has gone on to direct more conventional works: *Out of Sight* (1998), *The Limey* (1999) and now *Erin Brockovich*. It's

difficult to make sense of the latest film, in other words, outside of the filmmaker's particular trajectory.

Possibly Soderbergh thought he could transcend a relatively conventional, even clichéd screenplay and perhaps the presence of a film superstar (Roberts), with all the contradictions and limitations that implies, simply by the force of his own artistic personality. This was probably an error.

Soderbergh's cinematographer Ed Lachman observes that the filmmakers set out to shoot "a major motion picture with an independent approach." He goes on: "Stylistically, Steven wanted to film in a point-of-view manner, and because we filmed on location, we were able to shoot it in a very naturalistic way. In several scenes, people from Hinkley who had been involved in the case worked with us as extras and secondary actors. We were able to merge a narrative based on a real story with the reality of the world that was inhabited." The presence of the Hinkley residents, real faces, real human beings, only serves to underscore, however, some of the film's weaknesses, it's all too formulaic quality.

If one reads between the lines, Soderbergh acknowledges the limits of Susannah Grant's script. He says the film's attraction for him was simply that "the screenplay was very linear. It was performance-driven and had a female protagonist who was in every scene in the film. I had never done a film like that before and it really appealed to me."

The screenplay is quite "linear," i.e., it has a certain familiarity and inevitability that doesn't encourage or require much thought on the part of the spectator. Roberts is brassy, foul-mouthed, irrepressible from beginning to end; Finney rumpled and gruff, but essentially goodhearted; the expensive lawyers, on both sides, snotty and stiff, etc. Merely because this sort of characterization goes on all the time—considered no doubt a sort of necessary "short-hand" by screenwriters, directors and studio executives, or justified condescendingly (and self-servingly) in the name of making a film "accessible" to a mass audience—doesn't make it artistically acceptable. It has consequences. To the extent that audiences take this sort of evening out of life's contradictions seriously, they are done and they do themselves a disservice.

Erin Brockovich is simply *not complicated enough*, either in regard to social life or human behavior. Is it really true that all you have to do is persevere, shoot your mouth off, wiggle your rear end (if you have a nice one) and heaven and earth will move? I would hate to think that we're going to be stuck at that level of banality forever.

There are truthful and honest moments in this film. But not enough. Too much of the disruptive and subversive, but thoughtful, feeling of Soderbergh's first films has been lost for the moment. Will he get it back? Or will it continue to be his fate to apply his artistic restraint and intelligence to essentially second-rate material?



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