

A dull thud; or, Filmmaking in bad faith

Ocean's Eleven, directed by Steven Soderbergh, screenplay by Ted Griffin

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"I said, 'I'm curious as to what it was you found so difficult, or unbearable when you were making The Underneath.'

He [Soderbergh] explained, 'It was not ambitious, it was ideologically lazy. I just thought, if this is as ambitious as I'm going to be in making films, which is to basically do a slight variation on a genre film, then I've either got to quit or I've got to do something else with my filmmaking. This just isn't good enough. I expect more from other people and I have to expect more from myself.'

I commented that it must be difficult to resist the pressures of the film industry at times.

'It isn't for me,' Soderbergh responded. 'I'm not interested in money, I'm not interested in amassing power, I'm not interested in courting acclaim, and I'm not interested in being a celebrity. So immediately that just puts me in another category. That's not better or worse, it just means that I'm immediately separated from most of the people in the film business.'"

—Steven Soderbergh in a 1996 interview with the *International Workers Bulletin*

Ocean's Eleven is an unexciting heist film directed by Steven Soderbergh and a remake of a 1960 work, starring Frank Sinatra, directed by Lewis Milestone. The new version accumulated \$39.3 million on its opening weekend in the US, making it Number One at the Box Office, the only measuring stick that counts anymore with the American film industry and media. The film's stars (Julia Roberts, Andy Garcia, George Clooney, Brad Pitt and Matt Damon), as well as Soderbergh, are currently on a "morale-boosting mission" to US forces overseas. They visited the Incirlik Air Base—one of the principal starting-points for bombing raids against Iraq—and then will continue on a promotional tour in Rome and London.

Everything about this film reeks of self-satisfaction, conformism and bad faith.

It concerns a scheme to rob three Las Vegas casinos, all of whose takings flow into one apparently impenetrable vault. Danny Ocean (Clooney), just out of prison, is the mastermind. His former wife (Roberts), it turns out, is currently involved with the casino owner. He wants to carry off the robbery and

win her back.

The film is competently made and the narrative relatively coherent, and might therefore appear a work of genius held up against the *oeuvre* of a Michael Bay (*Pearl Harbor, Armageddon*) or a Roland Emmerich (*The Patriot, Independence Day*), but that would truly be marking on the curve.

This is empty filmmaking, without deep feeling or purpose. The relationship between Clooney and Roberts, upon whose chemistry a great deal of the film depends, is dead in the water. The two are given nothing in the script or direction with which to mobilize tension or desire. They hardly seem to know each other. Have they really met before? Clooney can be fine when someone directs him firmly. When he's left on his own, he simply smirks. Roberts has a large mouth and nice hair. I have nothing particularly against her, but, on the other hand, nothing particularly for her. Andy Garcia glares. Brad Pitt, oddly enough, comes off best here. Matt Damon, a nervous, stiff actor, is also acceptable in the role of a nervous stiff, crime novice. At least he looks uncomfortable. Don Cheadle, generally a fine performer, is ridiculously misused as an allegedly British electronics expert.

The whole thing is simply a waste of time.

Soderbergh thinks he's cleverer than practically anyone. In 1996, at the time of *Schizopolis* (an absurdist effort that he wrote, directed and performed in), he swore at Hollywood and promised never to be part of it. Then *Schizopolis* failed and his career was threatened, and he recanted his earlier view. It seemed he had been self-indulgent, and, after all, one had to make films occasionally "that people go to see." *Out of Sight* was a success, followed by *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*. There was an Academy Award sandwiched in. Soderbergh has become Julia Roberts' favorite director, the equivalent, one supposes, in its perquisites and burdens to the position of a preferred court portraitist in another epoch.

Everything has worked out for the best. And now Soderbergh imagines that he can simply return to the sorts of problems he considered in *Schizopolis* and to its style. He has made a new film, entitled *Full Frontal*. It is a low-budget effort, reportedly

a sort of sequel to *sex, lies & videotape*, his first film. He says, “*Full Frontal* is challenging. *Ocean’s Eleven* is a bonbon.... I like bonbons. I just don’t want to eat them all day every day. The goal of my career is a balanced diet.” *Full Frontal*, however, has Roberts and David Duchovny in its cast. The route from *King of the Hill* and *Schizopolis* to *Ocean’s Eleven* is more or less a one-way street.

Soderbergh is hardly the first who has thought he or she could beat the film industry at its own game. Indeed it’s almost classical. How many clever men and women—writers, directors and actors—have imagined they could simply take the money from the studios, play the game for a while and then go about their artistic business? It doesn’t work that way, certainly not with an artist whose oppositional or critical views were as amorphous and undeveloped as Soderbergh’s. He’s simply been eaten alive, and hasn’t noticed it yet. His participation on the tour of US bases and support for the bloody war in Afghanistan is not a small matter.

The choice of *Ocean’s Eleven* has its own significance. The original, starring Sinatra’s “Rat Pack”—Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop, et al—was not much of a film, even as heist films go. (See *5 Against the House*, directed by Phil Karlson, for a better film in this vein.) How much director Lewis Milestone had his heart in it is questionable. Milestone (1895-1980), born in Russia and the cousin of the violinist Nathan Milstein, was something of a “left.” He was responsible for *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum*, *Of Mice and Men* and *The North Star*, one of Hollywood’s wartime pro-Soviet films. According to some, he was a victim of the blacklist. In any event, he made films in Britain and France and directed the television series *Have Gun Will Travel* between 1952 and 1959. *Ocean’s Eleven* was his second film back in Hollywood. (Sinatra had been a member of the Committee for the First Amendment, founded to oppose the HUAC attacks on Communists in Hollywood.)

Critic Andrew Sarris rather nastily commented in his *American Cinema*, “A formalist of the Left, Milestone was hailed as the American Eisenstein after *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Front Page*. It is of course possible, though not highly probable, that Eisenstein himself might have ended up directing the Clan in *Ocean’s Eleven* if he had remained in Hollywood.” Sarris goes on to comment: “Milestone’s fluid camera style has always been dissociated from any personal viewpoint.... A propagandist in press releases only, Milestone is almost the classic example of the uncommitted director.”

In any event, however history had contrived to drop the somewhat improbable project in his lap, Milestone no doubt worked away conscientiously on *Ocean’s Eleven*. He probably had little choice in the matter. Even in the last days of the studio system, directors were more or less at the beck and call of the studio chiefs. The more talented, working within an institutional strait jacket, struggled to imbue their genre projects

with personal and social meaning, with varying degrees of success.

Soderbergh’s case is somewhat different. He works with some degree of consciousness. In the most general sense, he has been a figure of the counterculture, an “art film” director. This places him in a different relationship to genre material and to the studio apparatus. The German director R.W. Fassbinder commented in a 1972 interview: “American cinema has generally had the happiest relationship with its audience, and that is because it doesn’t try to be ‘art.’ Its narrative style is not so complicated or artificial. Well, of course it’s artificial, but not ‘artistic.’ ... [A] European doesn’t have the same naiveté as a Hollywood director. We have no choice but to consider very carefully what to produce and how to produce it.... American directors can work from the idea that the USA is the land of freedom and justice.”

Substitute “art [or independent film] director” for “European” and the point is made. There was a coherence to the work of the Hollywood film directors of the past. They weren’t laughing up their sleeves at the audience when they presented contrived or sentimental or patriotic work. They were approximately at one with it, naïve or not. They believed in it, as they believed that the USA was “the land of freedom and justice.”

Soderbergh knows too much (although, unfortunately, not enough). He doesn’t believe in his own material. He explained somewhere that his new film, *Full Frontal*, will be for everyone who hated *Ocean’s Eleven*, implying that he half-hates it himself. This is at the same time an expression of semi-contempt for those he expects to go see it. No one with principles could work on such a basis. In 1996 he criticized himself for making *The Underneath*, because of the laziness of the project and that film had five times the seriousness of his newest effort.

Ocean’s Eleven is such a dull, insincere and unconvincing work because it is not genuinely and truly itself, it is principally, rather, “Not-something-else.” In other words, it is, above all, *not* the film that Soderbergh, somewhere in the back of his head, knows that he should be making and should have been making all along and now will never make. Instead of going to war with the film industry, he stifled whatever was best in himself. *Ocean’s Eleven* is a congealed expression of his retreat from his own more thoughtful positions and criticisms, and, objectively speaking, the congealed expression of the retreat of an entire middle class social-artistic layer. It is filmmaking in bad faith, filmmaking with a guilty conscience, and no work can gracefully sustain such a weight.



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