

# Two toothless, pointless films about the film industry

Full Frontal, directed by Steven Soderbergh; Simone, written and directed by Andrew Niccol

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How long must we treat seriously works that are not in any fashion serious themselves? We have the fable of the emperor's new clothes to guide us. At a certain point a film's central "problem" may be the existence of the film itself.

The US movie industry is not merely insular and insulated, its works failing to reflect, even in a distorted fashion, popular concerns or sentiments; it has become something quite *external* to wide layers of the population, and at odds with their elementary interests. There is virtually no significant aspect of contemporary American life that finds truthful or any other kind of representation on the screen.

A severe falling off in artistic skill has accompanied this social and intellectual degeneration, in ways that would require specific study. US filmmakers for the most part cannot tell a dramatic story in a coherent or convincing fashion. Attempts at humor lack wit and timing. Studio films are largely bombastic, deadening market products in which various combinations of "stars" are tried out, in the hopes that one will catch on with the public.

Two recent examples:

*Full Frontal* is Steven Soderbergh's futile effort to regain some artistic credibility, after directing several commercial films, including the miserable *Ocean's Eleven*. We know this is an art film because there are several characters with long faces and others who say things they shouldn't when they get drunk, and there is handheld camera work. *Full Frontal* follows several people in and around the film industry—a screenwriter, his wife and sister-in-law, a movie star, a

producer—over the course of a day, but it is less than scathing about the present state of affairs in Hollywood. Indeed it does not appear to have anything to say about its purported subject.

Soderbergh has a film within his film, a silly story of a budding romance between a movie star (Blair Underwood) and a reporter (Julia Roberts). Presumably the point of *Full Frontal* is that life is more complex, fragile and difficult than the version of it presented on screen. However, in this case, the "real-life" dramas are as unconvincing and shallow as the filmed sequences. The banality extends throughout.

The director and actors apparently thought they were doing something quite unique and exciting. Soderbergh filmed the work on digital video, using existing light and locations and providing no trailers for his actors and requiring them to drive to work and handle their own wardrobe, make-up and hair. Unfortunately, he neglected to provide them with a meaningful or dramatic script.

Soderbergh told an interviewer from the Associated Press, "A lot of it was just a reaction to coming off *Ocean's Eleven* and wanting to have a very different experience. Because that was such a physically large undertaking, I just wanted to go and do something small."

*Ocean's Eleven* was large and pointless, whereas *Full Frontal* is small and pointless. Soderbergh imagines that he can play around with artistic and moral issues, but he is only fooling himself. He has wound up as Julia Roberts's favorite director (the modern equivalent, one supposes, of the artist "kept" by a royal

patron in an earlier day), with a great deal of money and industry “influence” and little else.

“There’s something rejuvenating about it that focuses you on the things that I think are the most important, which are the characters and performances,” Soderbergh told the same interviewer. “This was an experiment for me to take this notion of giving responsibility to the actors as far as you could possibly take it, and see what happens.”

Only individuals who live deeply privileged lives and have no feeling, intuitive or otherwise, for the critical realities and peculiarities of our time could imagine that this paltry, self-referential and complacent work represents a breakthrough.

*Simone* is a witless and amateurish affair, written and directed by Andrew Niccol. It tells the story of a filmmaker, Viktor Taransky (Al Pacino), who happens upon the idea of creating an entirely computer-created movie star.

Simone, the computer’s creation, becomes an international phenomenon. To explain her failure to appear in public or even on the sets of her own films, Taransky tells the media that she insists on strict privacy. Studio executives and tabloid journalists are determined to learn her secret. One thing leads to another. Eventually, the filmmaker reports that Simone has died of some obscure illness, but he ends up being charged with her murder.

Again, it is important to note that *Simone* has virtually no satiric edge. Given the present degraded state of the film industry, its subject matter, this is nearly a provocation.

Nothing about the work is believable. Taransky is supposedly an “art film” director, with uncompromising aesthetic vision. In the first place, there are no such people in Hollywood at present. In any event, the bits of his films that we see resemble nothing so much as perfume or perhaps high-priced lingerie advertisements. They are ridiculous.

The dialogue and the direction of scenes are so poor that one sympathizes with the actors. They are very evidently struggling to make something of the material.

If writer and director Andrew Niccol wanted to suggest that the entertainment industry has so far removed itself from the domain of the human that it might prefer an electronically fabricated creature to the real thing, all right, this might have been the starting

point for a work. But *Simone* goes nowhere with the idea. Indeed it ends on an entirely unprincipled and complacent note, with the fictional director accepting that the preference for fakery over reality is just part of life and that he should simply get used to the idea.

These are abysmal films, which do not deserve to be taken seriously by anyone. Enough is enough.



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