

Steven Soderbergh and Ocean's Thirteen

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Ocean's Thirteen, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by Brian Koppelman and David Levien

Director Steven Soderbergh was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1963, but grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where his father worked as Dean of the College of Education at Louisiana State University. He made several short films and music videos before his first feature film, *sex, lies and videotape*, became a great success in 1989, when he was only 26.

Subsequently, he directed *Kafka* and *King of the Hill*, both interesting and sensitive films that were not commercial successes. After *The Underneath*, a remake of a 1949 crime drama, Soderbergh underwent something of a personal and artistic crisis and shot the absurdist *Schizopolis* in Baton Rouge from March to December 1995 on a tiny budget. I saw that film at the Toronto film festival in September 1996. According to authoritative sources, *Schizopolis* opened at two theaters in April 1997 and brought in \$10,580.

No ambitious filmmaker, particularly one who had known considerable success (*sex, lies and videotape* earned nearly \$40 million in 2006 dollars), could be expected to be happy with such a turn of events. How a given artist responds to a crisis is determined, in the end, by previous history and inclinations, strength of character and, perhaps most importantly, his or her artistic and intellectual 'immune system.' Of course, the film industry being what it is, the choices are also limited.

In any event, a year later, Soderbergh's *Out of Sight*, with George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, an adaptation of an Elmore Leonard crime novel with comic and romantic overtones, attracted a substantial audience. To a certain extent, Soderbergh found his commercial and stylistic stride, for better or worse, with that work. *Erin Brockovich*, *Traffic* and three films focused on the gang led by master thief Danny Ocean and their exploits in Las Vegas, most recently *Ocean's Thirteen* (referring to the number of gang members), have followed.

Soderbergh has teamed up with Clooney, Julia Roberts and Brad Pitt, three of the most popular film stars of the last decade, on a number of occasions. Three films directed by Soderbergh released between March 2000 and December

2001 earned \$433 million at the box office.

In Soderbergh's large-budget films, which he directs with a hint or more of condescension, he takes a sly, knowing look at the events and characters. At its best, this style conveys a certain warmth and ease. The spectator is made to feel that the events are not overly challenging, but that perhaps, along the way, something amusing or sympathetic will occur. And, in places, it does.

He has used his commercial success and clout in the American film industry as a lever enabling him to direct more personal works, films with less possibility of making anyone rich. These include *The Limey*, *Full Frontal*, *Solaris*, *Bubble* and *The Good German*. This is a very uneven group of films, with considerably more weaknesses than strengths.

What are Soderbergh's important themes? He takes a fairly cold-eyed (and self-critical) look at relations between the sexes and conventional, petty bourgeois life and aspirations. At the same time the filmmaker attempts to record (and preserve) instances of genuine contact, fitful and unstable as they may be, between human beings. The films imply a liberal, somewhat skeptical, vaguely humanistic outlook. Intelligence is clearly at work.

Have Soderbergh's films captured in a significant fashion features of American life in the 1990s and 2000s? At moments, yes, something of the falling apart of the traditional family and other more intimate structures and relations, a sense of people at sea in a situation where old allegiances and affiliations have broken down or no longer operate with the same force.

A film like *Bubble*, Soderbergh's 2005 low-budget effort about working class life, however, expresses many of the weaknesses. This was an opportunity for the filmmaker to deal with some of the most pressing contemporary issues and, fundamentally, he failed the test.

The story follows a number of workers at a West Virginia doll factory (filmed in Parkersburg, on the Ohio River). Certain details are captured well, the bleakness and monotony of the workers' lives, the lack of culture and opportunity for culture, the generally depressed economic and psychological state of things. But, in the end, Soderbergh takes the easy road. Instead of a serious,

concrete, concentrated attack on what's foul and backward in US life, the genuine American *misère*—and an indictment of those responsible for the conditions in which millions and millions find themselves—he turns the film into another superficial study of a psychopath in the making. Cheap, easy and unchallenging.

So there is something in Soderbergh's work, or hints of something, but not a great deal, certainly not enough. So many things have been glossed over. So much is missing or rendered murky or indistinct. To have decent instincts and an artistic eye is not sufficient. What is most desperately lacking at present in people's thinking, an understanding of historical and social processes, *of their own social and historical position*, also has to be an artistic concern. The artist's job is not merely to record interesting sights and sounds, make the occasional sharp or witty observation, point out a few of the oddities or ironies of life, but to contribute something to social humanity's deeper self-awareness.

It's not easy to be an artist and tell the truth at any time in history. Some moments are more difficult than others.

Soderbergh was born in 1963, which means that he matured under the Carter and Reagan administrations in the US (1977-89), years of increasing political reaction, during which substantial sections of the middle class were turning to the right, along with layers of the working class. Soderbergh's exact contemporary is Quentin Tarantino.

World and American filmmaking reached a low-point in the 1980s and especially the 1990s. Tarantino claims to have spent the 1980s in a video store watching every film in stock. Yes, but what was he watching and what was he thinking about? American political and cultural life was terribly narrow, cramped, stagnant. Political indifference dominated in middle class circles, who had "gone beyond all that." The labor movement was in precipitous decline, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, whether the artists were conscious of it or not, deepened certain selfish or hedonistic moods. It "proved" to many that the project of creating a better world was a futile or doomed one.

Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, self-consciously violent, cold, a film dedicated to celebrating the absence of human solidarity, interestingly, came out in 1992.

Soderbergh is a more thoughtful and humane figure, a more serious artist, but he has not overcome the limitations of his time and social milieu. Or even, as far as one can tell, seriously attempted to, after his first few efforts. He conspicuously alternates between quasi-self-indulgent 'personal' works and blockbusters, as though cinema offered no other possibilities.

To think about life seriously, to picture it deeply and feelingly, to struggle against the current, all the currents ...

this option is open too. Soderbergh, in an interview in 1995, expressed his disdain for money and celebrity. There is no reason to believe he was being less than honest. But intentions don't settle the matter. Objective conditions and pressures are very powerful. One has to have an orientation and a perspective to withstand them.

To make a film that "grosses" \$183,000,000 (*Ocean's Eleven*) carries with it heavy burdens. In one sense, possibilities "open up," in another, the world closes in on the filmmaker—there are suddenly accountants, assistants, an entourage paid or unpaid, studio expectations, stars wanting to benefit from the director's golden commercial touch, media exposure, demands of every kind. One becomes an industry, a machine for making money. It can be overwhelming. It's possible to sympathize with the individual caught up in it, but still certain harsh truths need to be spoken.

The film industry has its demands, but art and life have their own. These are not always compatible.

Ocean's Thirteen is an improvement on *Ocean's Twelve*, which was fairly insufferable, with Clooney, Roberts and Pitt (and the filmmaker) pleased with themselves and all apparently in on some joke that was largely kept from the audience. The story was full of complications that were never explained or developed properly.

The newest film is simpler. *Ocean* (Clooney), Rusty Ryan (Pitt) and the rest of the gang set out to revenge one of their circle, Reuben (Elliott Gould), after he has been cheated out of his share of a new casino by Las Vegas mogul Willie Bank (Al Pacino). They decide on a plan to ruin Bank by rigging his casino so that he will lose half a billion dollars in a matter of minutes, the time during which a 'state of the art' security system will be inoperative if it can be forced to shut down. They are also obliged to steal Bank's collection of diamonds, as part of a deal with rival casino owner Terry Benedict (Andy Garcia).

The whole thing is entirely improbable, but the talented cast members do their best, occasionally providing some amusing moments. As a whole, however, the film is an artistic placeholder. Soderbergh is currently working on two films about the life of Che Guevara, *The Argentine* and *Guerrilla*. We shall see.



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