

The Girlfriend Experience: Not rich or thorough enough

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1 July 2009

Directed by Steven Soderbergh, screenplay by David Levien and Brian Koppelman

Steven Soderbergh's new film, *The Girlfriend Experience*, is a glimpse into the life of a high-priced call girl in New York City, set and filmed during the financial meltdown (and pre-election period) in the fall of 2008. The title refers to the "experience" for which clients of this category of prostitute, who claim to offer the companionship of a "girlfriend," pay a great deal of money.

Christine or Chelsea (Sasha Grey) earns \$2,000 an hour providing intimacy and conversation, as well as sex. Soderbergh's film, shot inexpensively in 16 days with nonprofessional actors for the most part, follows Christine over the course of a week. She meets a variety of clients, including a French businessman, a Hassidic Jewish diamond dealer, and a married screenwriter. She also has encounters with an investigative journalist looking into her profession, as well as a number of consultants who advise her on ways to "grow her business" or increase her online visibility.

Christine lives with her boyfriend, Chris, a personal trainer to some of Manhattan's well-heeled. He knows what she does for a living and apparently accepts the situation. He has his own business issues, attempting to launch a clothing line and organize a more financially rewarding relationship with the health club where he works. In a sequence scattered throughout the film, Chris accompanies a wealthy client and his friends (hedge fund managers) on a hedonistic weekend in Las Vegas.

Christine projects herself as cool and collected, and

entirely in command of every situation. A series of episodes, including a sordid get-together with an online reviewer of "escorts," her apparent rejection by a preferred client in favor of another call-girl and her growing feelings for the screenwriter who eventually abandons her, reveals chinks in her "thick armor." She is human, after all.

The Girlfriend Experience takes place almost entirely in luxurious restaurants, hotels, shops and apartments. One character refers to a \$10,000 bill for a single night's drinking. Christine keeps a detailed journal and records her liaisons, including the brand names of the clothes and shoes she wore, and her extensive purchases.

Soderbergh emphasizes the modern, gleaming, soulless surfaces. The film is accurate and attentive enough to convey the appalling emptiness of this world. Moreover, the filmmaker was fortunate in his timing. *The Girlfriend Experience* captures some of the growing anxiety in New York's upper echelons as an entire financial epoch comes to an end.

We see the nervousness on certain faces. "It's just the beginning," someone says. There are references to recession, Depression, the bank bailout. The midtown diamond dealer tells Christine, "Diamonds have no value. Keep it in gold." In the background, on television screens, the presidential campaign carries on, essentially uncommented upon by anyone.

The film is attractive to look at, shot on dense high definition video, in a fluid, semi-poetic style. The story is told in fragments out of chronological sequence. The spectator is obliged to work at piecing them together.

Soderbergh is gifted and intelligent.

As criticism, however, if criticism this be, *The Girlfriend Experience* is ultimately timid and evasive. It relies far too much on its self-consciously oblique

and “non-linear” approach, which tends to take center stage, and far too little on genuine insight into the world it represents.

Soderbergh claims to be fascinated “by this idea that people will pay extra money for intimacy.” Fake, paid-for intimacy seems entirely suited to this social milieu, made rich by the piling up of mountains of fictitious capital. Speaking of Christine, the director explained to an interviewer, “This is someone who has made the acquisition of money the center of her life.” For an artist to imagine the type of emotional life and relations that corresponded to these years of widespread speculation, semi-legal swindling and outright criminality seems entirely legitimate.

But that work is not done here. The character of Christine is deliberately constricted and largely blocked from view. Grey’s face is most often a blank. Soderbergh makes the mistake of representing a superficial, self-centered social circle in a minimalist, deadpan fashion. The two negatives do not add up to a positive. The journalist asks Christine, “Do you get bored talking to rich people?” At any rate, we tend to get a bit bored listening to them.

The filmmaker’s mistake here seems to be supposing that the awfulness of most of these people means there is no high drama to be extracted from their lives. Is that the case? Does the Madoff affair, for example, offer no material for tragedy? Or the failure of large institutions, or the fate of countless innocent and not-so-innocent individuals, including those involved in the sex trade, somehow caught up in the financial bubble and its bursting?

In an interview with *Cinemablend*, Soderbergh presents *The Girlfriend Experience* simply as a “snapshot of a very, very specific point in time and a very specific place.” He continues: “You should have absolute omniscient perspective on something, or none at all. And this one has none at all. This movie is absolutely swimming in its own juices, and its universe extends out 3 feet in every direction.... It’s not selling any idea. It’s sort of a fictionalized documentary. It’s a slice of someone at a certain place at a certain time.”

Advertising a complete lack of perspective will not disturb many critics or commentators at present, but we would venture to argue that it is not artistically or intellectually healthy.

The film tends to fall back on the argument that

everyone in contemporary society is a prostitute. Asked by an interviewer from Collider.com, “Is there something fundamentally different about the whoring that Sasha’s character does versus the whoring that everybody else in the film does, or does capitalism make whores of everyone?,” Soderbergh replied, “It depends on how you define whore and how you define capitalism. Do I personally see any difference between what she does and what I do for Warner Bros.? No, I don’t.”

This is rather facile and, in fact, not true.

Soderbergh, as nearly always, is too clever for his own good. He splits his time at present between large-scale commercial projects (*Ocean’s Eleven*, *Twelve* and *Thirteen*, etc.) and more personal films, which he often films himself (as in this case).

That Soderbergh is brighter than most of the people in the film industry impresses him a little too much. He is not profound enough to criticize American society in a serious and all-rounded manner. Bringing bits and pieces of this unpleasant, narcissistic universe to life in *The Girlfriend Experience*, for example, is not a satisfying substitute for explaining why such a social existence came into being and why it fell apart.

No perspective at all, in this instance, means ignoring certain larger realities. For instance, the principal charge to be leveled against this Manhattan elite is not that it was—or is—cold, stupid and philistine, however true that may be, but that its frenzied looting of the economy (and the frenzied looting carried out by the entire American elite) came at the expense of the vast majority of the population and has brought the society to the precipice of catastrophe.

The Girlfriend Experience is neither rich nor thorough enough, and hence merely a glancing blow.



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