

Steven Soderbergh to retire after *Side Effects*?: Problems of independent filmmaking

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15 February 2013

Side Effects, directed by Steven Soderbergh, screenplay by Scott Z. Burns; Hyde Park on Hudson, directed by Roger Michell, screenplay by Richard Nelson

Steven Soderbergh's new film *Side Effects* is a thriller that tangentially touches upon "Big Pharma" and the pervasiveness of the prescription drug culture in America. The most interesting issue surrounding the film, however, may be Soderbergh's announcement that the work is his last and he plans to retire from feature filmmaking.

Side Effects begins with a traveling shot of a crime scene in a New York City apartment. It then jumps back three months. Graphic designer Emily Taylor (Rooney Mara) has been waiting four years for her husband Martin (Channing Tatum) to be released from prison on charges of insider trading.

Although Martin assures his wife they will once again enjoy a glamorous lifestyle of mansions and sailboats, Emily is depressed and overcome by feelings that are like "a poisonous fog bank rolling in." After she tries to drive her car into a cement wall, psychiatrist Jonathan Banks (Jude Law) is called in.

As more common antidepressants are unsuccessful in ameliorating Emily's emotional state, Banks prescribes a new drug recommended by a colleague, Dr. Victoria Siebert (Catherine Zeta-Jones). Banks is offered and accepts a \$50,000 stipend from the drug's manufacturer to recruit new patients for the medication.

But the antidepressant has chilling and deadly side effects. Banks, his family and practice are suddenly at the center of a high-profile murder case.

Side Effects is made with some care, despite its generally gloomy cinematography (shot by Soderbergh) and over-ambitious plot twists. Law is engaging, while Mara gives a semi-effective, staccato-like performance. Zeta-Jones, a fine comic actress, is not especially believable as the stone-faced psychiatrist.

The movie begins as a biting comment on the pharmaceutical industry with its direct-to-consumer marketing antics that saturate an unwitting, and at times endangered population. It also refers negatively to Wall Street, the official psychiatric

establishment and the justice system. In other words, the film announces itself in an interesting and provocative manner.

Unfortunately, it then pushes these questions into the background, opting to go in a more conventional direction. At the point when Soderbergh shows he is capable of intelligently presenting social ills and concerns, he withdraws to safer territory. In this regard, however, *Side Effects* speaks to bigger problems not only in Soderbergh's career, but in the current cinema as a whole and its "independent" branch in particular.

Soderbergh has directed 26 films since his 1989 debut, *sex, lies, and videotape*, released to considerable acclaim when he was only 26 years old. He proceeded to make a number of even more interesting films, such as *King of the Hill* (1989) and *Kafka* (1991). In the mid-1990s he underwent something of a crisis, which produced one of his most challenging works, *Schizopolis* (1996). The commercial and general critical failure of the latter helped propel him back toward more mainstream ventures, including the big-budget *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Ocean's Twelve* (2004) and *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007), featuring George Clooney, Brad Pitt and Matt Damon.

Soderbergh is a talented and informed individual. Over the years, he has covered a good deal of ground, addressing corporate malfeasance (*Erin Brockovich*, 2000, and *The Informant!*, 2009), the so-called war on drugs (*Traffic*, 2000), high-priced prostitution (*The Girlfriend Experience*, 2009), small town decay and murder (*Bubble*, 2005) and post-war Germany (*The Good German*, 2006).

As his latest effort, *Side Effects*, demonstrates, Soderbergh knows enough to broach important topics, but has rarely worked them thoroughly or persuasively through. For example, after directing a four-and-a-half hour film in 2008 on the life of Argentine-Cuban guerrilla leader Che Guevara—depicting the murderous role of the CIA and US military—he made *Haywire* in 2011, in which US intelligence operatives and assassins are quasi-heroes.

In a recent interview with the *Atlantic*, Soderbergh offers some reasons for his retirement: "It's a combination of wanting a change personally and of feeling like I've hit a wall in my development that I don't know how to break through. The

tyranny of narrative is beginning to frustrate me, or at least narrative as we're currently defining it. I'm convinced there's a new grammar out there somewhere. But that could just be my form of theism."

The filmmaker legitimately indicts not just the studios, but the "absolutely horrible way the people with money decide they can fart in the kitchen." He then goes on, however, to take a shot in the dark, claiming that "the people who pay to make the movies and the audiences who see them are actually very much in sync."

This is not the first time Soderbergh has contemplated withdrawing from the film industry. In a September 1996 interview with the *International Workers Bulletin* (a forerunner of the WSWS), the director was clearer about his dilemma. He told us: "It had reached the point when I was making *The Underneath* [1995] that I didn't like the film I was making, and I began to wonder whether or not I wanted to make films at all anymore, because I wasn't enjoying the process.

"I didn't feel I was making things that really reflected what was going on around me and around all of us, what I felt was happening to all of us emotionally as a result of the way American culture is, and I wanted to do something about that, that had something of that in it."

When asked what was so difficult or unbearable about making *The Underneath*, Soderbergh replied: "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."

Later on in the IWB interview, he remarked that the "freedom to experiment and fail is being taken away. John Ford made 20 movies before he made one that we know. It's a shame, because there's such incredible drama out there."

Soderbergh's valid dissatisfaction with both his Hollywood and independent-cinema sides and the impasse he has reached are not his personal quandary. Making art has never been easy. It is always hard to get at something important. But added to the inevitable problems of working in the for-profit film industry in recent years has been a loss of perspective and orientation. The present state of things does not inspire the artists, but confidence in the possibility of an alternative has been dealt serious blows. The majority of films lack purpose and inspiration. Many writers and directors continue to go through the motions. Soderbergh is smart enough and honest enough with himself not to be able to do that.

His own career represents something of a vicious circle. He began 20 years ago directing films that struck a certain chord, but the initial, somewhat limited impetus for his work eventually exhausted itself. Soderbergh "reinvented" himself as a commercial director in the late 1990s, but found that success on this score didn't eliminate his dissatisfaction. He tried to make both "blockbusters" and "personal" films, but the latter

were glancing blows that did not make a deep impression. The less of an impression they made with the public, the less he put into subsequent films. And, of course, deservedly, those works had even less of an impact. And now he throws his hands up in the air.

One feels a certain sympathy, but, unfortunately, Soderbergh continues to look for a formal or organizational solution to what is an objective artistic and intellectual problem. His difficulty is not with the "tyranny of narrative." Frankly, a narrative, conventional or otherwise, is a satisfying experience for both filmmaker and audience to the extent it really reflects what is "going on ... around all of us" and addresses the "incredible drama out there," i.e., if it really gets to the bottom of things. A film like *Lincoln*, viewed up to this point by more than 20 million people, is a case in point.

Hyde Park on Hudson

In Roger Michell's *Hyde Park on the Hudson*, President Franklin Roosevelt (Bill Murray) and his wife Eleanor (Olivia Williams) host King George VI and his wife Elizabeth (Samuel West and Olivia Colman) in June 1939 at the Roosevelt estate in upstate New York. The Royals are attempting to enlist Washington's support as Britain prepares for war with Germany. Narrated by Daisy Suckley (Laura Linney), FDR's distant cousin with whom he begins an affair, the film is preoccupied with the small change of personal relations in the household.

Hyde Park on Hudson is a piece of badly-constructed fluff. The film is neither very comic nor does it have much value as an account of historical events. The film's creators assume the audience will be as uncritical as they of Roosevelt, the monarchy and World War II. Kings who stammer and presidents on crutches are normal people who can enjoy a hot dog together before the bombs drop, apparently.

The author also recommends: Steven Soderbergh at an impasse with *Haywire* [21 February 2012] *Contagion*, the latest from Steven Soderbergh [26 September 2011]



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