

Logan Lucky: Steven Soderbergh returns from retirement

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Directed by Steven Soderbergh; written by Rebecca Blunt

The new film by Steven Soderbergh, *Logan Lucky*, is set in West Virginia and North Carolina and involves the robbery of the Charlotte Motor Speedway during a major race.

Jimmy Logan (Channing Tatum) loses his job at the Motorway due to a “pre-existing” health condition, a leg injury, which previously ended a promising football career. His former wife (Katie Holmes) is threatening to move to Virginia, making it more difficult for him to see his young daughter, Sadie. The situation of Jimmy’s younger brother Clyde (Adam Driver), who lost a hand serving in the Iraq war and now works as a bartender, is not a good one either.

The brothers, along with their sister Mellie (Riley Keough), plan a heist of the race track that requires the participation of safecracker and explosives expert Joe Bang (Daniel Craig), now in prison. The latter insists on bringing in his two brothers, Sam (Brian Gleeson) and Fish (Jack Quaid). Clyde gets himself arrested and sent to the same institution as Bang. The two plan to break out of the prison during a “riot” and participate in the robbery, and return to jail during the commotion.

There are various other plot strands, some of them red herrings. Jimmy and Clyde tangle in an early scene with Max Chilblain (Seth MacFarlane), a pretentious British businessman and race car sponsor, in an unlikely bar brawl. Chilblain and his “clean living” driver, Dayton White (Sebastian Stan), will later figure as possible witnesses of the motorway robbery. Jimmy encounters a former high school classmate (Katherine Waterston), now a nurse in a free mobile health clinic. Will something romantic develop? A “Logan curse” is mentioned once or twice, to no great effect. Hillary Swank makes a last-minute appearance as a persevering FBI agent. There is also the matter of Sadie’s participation in a child beauty pageant ...

West Virginia, once a center of coal mining, is one of the poorest places in the US. *Logan Lucky* makes a few passing references to economic hardship, but that is not where its heart and brain lie. Soderbergh and his screenwriter cannot avoid stupid stereotypes in their presentation of this “Hillbilly Heist.” Sam and Fish Bang are particularly offensive characters, backward, religious, imbecilic. Middle class snootiness makes its unmistakable presence felt here and also in regard to the hair salon, car dealership and beauty pageant clichés. It’s all inexcusable, and not particularly courageous, in the face of the social misery inflicted on West Virginia’s population by definite corporate and political interests.

Fortunately, Tatum and Keough (who both perform well) are allowed to preserve their dignity. Craig is a big presence; although it’s not especially clear what makes his character tick. And, frankly, Joe’s role in the eventual robbery attempt seems less than crucial. Too many of the goings-on seem driven by the need to be clever, or worse, “quirky.”

There are comic moments as well in *Logan Lucky*, and some humanly sympathetic ones. The “Robin Hood” theme that emerges is perhaps welcome, but it seems belated and something of an addendum.

Soderbergh, who often shoots his own films, is a talented individual, but he does not have anything pressing or revealing to say about the current state of American life.

Amy Taubin prefaces an interview with the director in *Film Comment* by observing, first, “Imagine the perfect movie for the appalling, even frightening, summer of 2017,” i.e., *Logan Lucky*, and, later, “The film is set in Appalachia, and its heart is in a one-for-all and all-for-one brand of socialism among people who know that it does matter who’s running this country, and that they have to get what they need by themselves.”

This is wishful (if perhaps creditable) thinking on Taubin’s part. The interview itself proves the point, in that its concern with social questions, in the face of a work with a supposed “socialist” heart, is reduced to Taubin’s wondering out loud at one point “about what a political movie is,” and Soderbergh’s reply: “The script was written in the fall of 2014, and we were shooting in August and September of last year, so it was a question mark for me how this would land. And now West Virginia and those mining jobs have become a big issue.” There is not a single other reference in the lengthy conversation to the state of the world.

Soderbergh, who “retired” from directing in 2013 in part because of his dissatisfaction with the studio system, came up with a means of financing and marketing *Logan Lucky* outside the conventional channels. He has expressed his disappointment and frustration with the relatively tepid public response since the film’s opening August 18.

However, he is on shaky and somewhat presumptuous ground here. To be frank, why should people rush out and purchase tickets for the film? It does not have any features that are especially riveting or attention-grabbing.

At the time of Soderbergh’s retirement four years ago, we commented on the WWS: “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.”

Soderbergh is perhaps the starkest example of the contemporary non-committal filmmaker, someone unable or unwilling to adopt an important stance toward political and historical questions. His four hours of *Che* (2008), from which one learned next to nothing about imperialism, colonialism, Latin American nationalism, the Cuban Revolution, Bolivia, guerrillaism or any related matter, was something of a defining moment.

This “even-handedness” seems less and less innocent. In *Logan Lucky*, as usual, Soderbergh wants to have it both ways. He takes certain, relatively easy satirical shots at American popular and, specifically, NASCAR culture (at a time, incidentally, when NASCAR attendance and television ratings are plummeting), but then goes out of his way to balance those with conventional “patriotic” gestures. The early bar fight, for example, begins when the snide foreigner, Chilblain, mocks Clyde and his “service” in Iraq. Later, at race time in Charlotte, Soderbergh offers us country singer LeAnn Rimes performing “America the Beautiful,” air force jets flying overhead and the Stars and Stripes fluttering in the breeze, without a hint of irony.

Identifying Soderbergh’s social vagueness and evasiveness--the ultimate source of the artistically inadequate quality of his efforts--is not such a difficult matter; pinpointing its roots, however, is more complex.

We often argue that these problems have a basis in objective social and cultural development. To those who prefer ad hominem attacks on apparently recalcitrant artists this may be unsatisfying. But Soderbergh is an excellent example of the pointlessness of such attacks. He is a bright individual, not unsubtle, clearly gifted with a visual sense. Yet he sees the world in a very limited way. The deeper currents, including, above all, the element of class, appear in his films only here and there, incidentally or as after-thoughts. Why is that the case?

Soderbergh was born in 1963. He was a child during the radicalized wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He came of age, so to speak, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when considerable sections of the middle class--rejecting their “leftist” or “protest” pasts in many cases--were moving sharply and hedonistically to the right, along with more privileged portions of the working class. Later, the collapse of the Soviet Union and Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, accompanied by the widespread blather about the “end of socialism,” affected further layers, confirming their view that “Nothing can be done, anyway.”

This does not mean that the artists all turned to the right or into reactionaries. Not at all. (In fact, as a side note, when we arrived for an interview with Soderbergh at the Toronto film festival in 1996 and a festival publicist muttered to him under her breath that

we were “communists,” the filmmaker expressed particular pleasure in meeting us.) But these shifts in mood and orientation have a broad influence, including--or perhaps especially--on those who believe they are letting it all roll off them like water off a duck’s back.

The harmful pressure of postmodernist irrationalism and subjectivism, the rejection of the “naïve” belief that objective reality could be reflected in thinking and acting, exerted itself very strongly on the generation of artists who began their work in the 1980s. Again, this does not mean that the individual filmmakers read or consciously agreed with Michel Foucault or Jean-François Lyotard, although some undoubtedly did, but the efforts by those thinkers--and many others--to codify and legitimize the avoidance of critical historical questions has had significant consequences.

The end of “grand narratives,” proclaimed by Foucault, was more than anything else an attack on Marxism and the “narrative” of the class struggle. The floodgates of “micro-politics,” the obsession with identity, were opened. These are the generally retrograde trends that Soderbergh and others absorbed into their collective bloodstream.

In any serious manner, the working class and its conditions have virtually disappeared from cinema. The appalling stereotypes in *Logan Lucky*, and elsewhere, are only explicable from this point of view.

The point can be established in another manner. One only has to consider the work of Soderbergh’s more or less exact contemporaries to grasp the impact of the 1980s and beyond, and to recognize that the problems are not the result of his personal failings. Other directors born in 1963 include the misanthropic Quentin Tarantino, Neil LaBute and Gaspar Noé, the overwrought and also fundamentally non-committal Alejandro González Iñárritu and the relatively empty Jean-Marc Vallée, François Girard, James Mangold, along with the late George Hickenlooper and Ted Demme.

Peter Jackson, Alfonso Cuarón and Tom Ford were born in 1961, Baz Luhrmann, Kenneth Lonergan, Hirokazu Koreeda and Rod Lurie in 1962, Guillermo del Toro, Peter Berg, Joss Whedon and Gore Verbinski in 1964, and Doug Liman, Sam Mendes and Tom Tykwer in 1965. There are exceptions as well, but by and large the generation born in the early 1960s has been prevented by objective social processes from providing rich, serious pictures of life.



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