Steven Soderbergh's *Let Them All Talk*: A writer crosses the Atlantic with company

David Walsh
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Directed by Steven Soderbergh; written by Deborah Eisenberg

Let Them All Talk is the most recently released effort from prolific American filmmaker Steven Soderbergh.

Alice Hughes (Meryl Streep), a prize-winning author, is at work on a new novel. She does not care to discuss or disclose its contents. Her publishers in New York hope it will be a sequel to one of her most well-received books. A prestigious literary award in the UK has been bestowed on her, but Hughes does not take airplanes. Her new, youthful literary agent, Karen (Gemma Chan), prevails upon her to take a ship instead, the transatlantic ocean liner Queen Mary 2.

Alice somewhat reluctantly agrees, on the condition that she can bring two of her old college friends, Susan (Dianne Wiest) and Roberta (Candice Bergen), and her nephew, Tyler (Lucas Hedges), to whom she is particularly close. Unbeknownst to Hughes, Karen also books passage on the ship, hoping to learn something about the new work, on whose success or failure her job apparently depends. As well, Hughes is taking the opportunity of the trip to Britain to visit the grave of an obscure (fictional) late 19th century writer, whose work she vainly champions to her friends.

Roberta, a frustrated divorcee from Texas, harbors a decades-long resentment against Alice because she believes her onetime friend used unflattering facts about her life in a novel, which had dramatic consequences for Roberta's marriage. The latter spends much of her time during the ocean voyage trying to land a rich husband.

Also on board is an immensely successful (and presumably wealthy) thriller writer, Kelvin Kranz (Daniel Algrant), at whom Alice tends to look down her nose, and a mysterious middle-aged man whom Tyler sees coming out of her room each morning. The distinguished African American man proves to be Alice's personal physician, Dr. Mitchell (John Douglas Thompson).

As its title would indicate, Soderbergh's film, scripted by well-known American short-story writer Deborah Eisenberg, consists primarily of conversations and confrontations (or the avoidance of confrontations) between the various characters.

Roberta complains bitterly to Susan about Hughes but manages to put off airing her grievances directly until the last moment. Karen befriends Tyler and asks him essentially to spy on his aunt and learn, if possible, the character of her new novel. Tyler enjoys the attractive Karen's company and at a certain point makes a romantic advance on the woman, a dozen or so years older—and far more worldly—than he. During a lecture Alice delivers on board the ship, the commercial Kranz (his name perhaps meant to echo that of best-selling author Dean Koontz) proves to be an admirer of her work and a relatively astute literary analyst.

After the extended party disembarks in Southampton, Roberta proposes to Alice to reveal more details about her (Roberta's) private life, thus supplying the novelist with material for a new work, in exchange for a healthy portion of the profits. After Alice laughingly dismisses the idea, Roberta observes, in one of the film's more poignant moments, "I loved you when you were Al." When tragedy unexpectedly strikes, various plans come to naught, and others begin to unfold.

Unfortunately, *Let Them All Talk* does not have a strong purpose or make a strong impression. Soderbergh (born 1963) has now made dozens of films on a variety of subjects and in numerous genres and formats. After starting out as an independent filmmaker, working "under Hollywood's radar," in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he went on to direct a number of large-scale productions, including *Ocean's Eleven*, *Ocean's Twelve* and *Ocean's Thirteen* (2001–2007). He made several movies featuring Julia Roberts.

In 2008, Soderbergh released a two-part, four-and-a-half-hour film about Che Guevara. This was a pivotal project that offered the director the chance to make a strong statement about contemporary political and social life. Soderbergh's noncommittal *Che* shed little light on either the Argentine political figure's life and career or the director's attitude toward the Cuban revolution and related matters.

The semi-ironic, semi-cynical, socially aloof, "wait-and-see" attitude that belongs to Soderbergh, the Coen brothers and many others has its roots in social circumstances, the suppression of the class struggle over the past four decades, the temporary absence of the working class as a politically independent force and the dissolution of the USSR and related matters (the "end of history," the "fall of socialism," etc.), but that doesn't make it any less harmful as an artistic-intellectual

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position. Left-wing French writer André Breton once referred to the phenomenon of "the man with one hand resting on his hip," which he identified with the "main enemy," fatalism, resignation in the face of great events. We have many such "pitcher-men" today.

In any event, legitimately unhappy with the state of the film industry and the respect accorded only to "the people who make a lot of money," Soderbergh announced his retirement from directing in 2013. He returned (after working in television during the meantime) with *Logan Lucky* in 2017 and *Unsane* in 2018. *The Laundromat*, a biting satire (with Streep) about shell companies and offshore accounts helping the filthy rich to accumulate even more wealth, inspired by the Panama Papers revelations, appeared in 2019.

At the time of that film's release, Soderbergh told an interviewer: "Every serious problem that we're facing right now as a species can be traced back to some form of corruption. And the trajectory of it is pretty alarming. In 2000, the top 50 financial elites owned a third of the world's wealth. Now they own a half. That's not sustainable … It's either going to get rebuilt by agreement or it's going to get rebuilt some other way that's not as pleasant."

One would think such an "alarming … trajectory," along with the far-reaching political implications Soderbergh hints at, would not be dropped as subject matter after one work, but that gives some indication of our present cultural dilemmas. *Let Them All Talk* is a step backward.

Soderbergh is a highly skilled individual, who often produces, directs, photographs and edits his own films. The new work, shot on board the Queen Mary 2 during an actual crossing, presented intriguing technical and logistical challenges. The Cunard Line, the director explains, hopes to get bookings as a result of the film. That seems a bit like small change to us, even granting that shooting took place before the pandemic.

Although the performers are appealing enough, the narrative is not especially plausible. The script presents Alice Hughes—is her first name a tribute to Canadian short story writer Alice Munro?—as a serious author apparently swimming in cash, with a publisher desperate for a new work. Where is there such a figure in America today? Moreover, her high-flown, amorphous comments about life and literature are not compelling, nor is her admiration for the fictional "Blodwyn Pugh" especially convincing. (If this is satire, it falls short.) We never get a serious chance to see what Hughes' own work is like.

And her friends from half a century earlier? Susan, who works with female prisoners, seems possible, but the inclusion of Roberta, a mercenary lingerie saleswoman, without the slightest interest in Alice's writings, is a character contrivance that makes no particular sense. Why would Alice go to the effort of having the two women accompany her only to largely ignore their presence? The various elements do not truly cohere. They stick out at odd angles, and not in a lifelike way.

This does not appear to be Eisenberg at her best either. She has published five collections of short stories, *Transactions in a Foreign Currency* (1986), *Under the 82nd Airborne* (1992), *All Around Atlantis* (1997), *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2006), and *Your Duck Is My Duck* (2018).

Eisenberg has taken principled stands. In April 2015, along with a number of other writers, she criticized PEN's decision to bestow its Freedom of Expression Courage Award to the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*, calling the choice "an opportunistic exploitation of the horrible murders in Paris to justify and glorify offensive material expressing anti-Islamic and nationalistic sentiments already widely shared in the Western world."

In *Twilight of the Superheroes*' title story, Eisenberg piercingly described the atmosphere that prevailed in the US following the 9/11 terror attacks. "When the smoke lifted," she wrote, "all kinds of other events, which had been prepared behind a curtain, too, were revealed. Flags waved in the brisk air of fear, files were demanded from libraries and hospitals, droning helicopters hung over the city, and heavily armed policemen patrolled the parks. Meanwhile, one read that executives had pocketed the savings of their investors and the pensions of their employees."

Eisenberg continued, aptly: "The wars in the East were hidden behind a thicket of language: patriotism, democracy, loyalty, freedom—the words bounced around, changing purpose, as if they were made out of some funny plastic. What did they actually refer to? It seemed that they all might refer to money."

And later: "New York had once been the threshold of an impregnable haven, then the city had become in an instant the country's open wound, and now it was the occasion—the pretext!—for killing and theft and legislative horrors all over the world."

More of this oppositional spirit would have greatly strengthened Eisenberg's collaboration with Soderbergh. *Let Them All Talk* is essentially and unnecessarily an innocuous work.

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