Steven Soderbergh's *No Sudden Move*: Many intriguing sights and sounds, except the important ones

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Directed by Steven Soderbergh; screenplay by Ed Solomon

Steven Soderbergh's *No Sudden Move*, written by Ed Solomon, is a crime thriller set in Detroit in 1954. The movie's timeframe coincides with that period when the city was at the center of global automobile production and had reached its peak population, some two million people. The genre, the locale and the era are promising.

Soderbergh had already made one relatively light-hearted film primarily set in the Detroit area, *Out of Sight* (1998). Perhaps the director would take a more serious look this time?

The new work opens with a visually striking sequence in which Curt Goynes (Don Cheadle) ambles through a gray Detroit neighborhood. Just out of jail, Curt needs some fast money. A bulky Doug Jones (Brendan Fraser) offers the ex-con a considerable sum of cash for what appears to be a straightforward job.

Curt becomes one member of a trio of masked men that also includes Ronald Russo (Benicio del Toro) and Charley (Kieran Culkin). Curt and Russo are assigned to watch the Wertz family at gunpoint, while patriarch Matt Wertz (David Harbour), a General Motors accountant, is forcibly escorted by Charley to retrieve documents from his boss's safe.

When it emerges that the hostage situation is a set-up, Curt shoots Charley, soon realizing that he and Russo are pawns in a bigger game. Two rival mobs are involved—one black, led by Aldrick Watkins (Bill Duke), and the other headed by Italian-American Frank Capelli (Ray Liotta). The central characters replicate this divide: the soulful and relatively decent Curt makes a favorable contrast to the alcoholic, racist Russo.

It takes the movie almost three-quarters of its running time to reveal a fact that will come as a shock to very few, that auto company executives are ruthless and corrupt. And furthermore, that they have police officers, such as Detective Joe Finney (Jon Hamm), in their pocket. Meanwhile, the audience is subjected to a convoluted plot that features cheating husbands, duplicitous wives and girlfriends, and gratuitous bloodshed.

With stolen GM documents (blueprints for a catalytic converter, the antipollution device) in hand, Curt ultimately faces off with the head of the Consolidated Car Association, Mr. Big/Mike Lowen (Matt Damon), who coolly remarks that Curt, low man on the totem pole, has breached "all laws of history, nature, class—no, caste" by confronting him.

Undeterred, Curt upbraids Lowen and the car companies for leveling Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, "entire neighborhoods [where] you tore up the trolley tracks and now you have this redlining bullshit everywhere. Where are the people supposed to live, Mike?" Earlier in the film the process of "urban renewal" has been dubbed "Negro removal." (Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were both African-American communities in Detroit razed in the early 1960s.)

Defending the theft of GM's blueprints for the pollution-reducing device, Mr. Big glibly asserts there is "no conclusive evidence that the automobile has anything to do with the pollution level in Los Angeles, or in any other city on the planet for that matter." A one-time executive at Ford, he complains that the latter auto giant was "losing sales to GM. We, who invented the whole damn thing became the underdog…

"I and others like me did create these rules in this

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world," Lowen goes on. "It's money, and I have lots of money. I will continue to have more still. It's like a lizard's tail. Cut it off, the damn thing just grows back. I work, it grows. I sleep, it grows. In fact, however we end up here, I'll go home, I'll call my banker, and I will sleep like a baby tonight." This is the most telling moment in *No Sudden Move*, but it does not carry a great deal of weight when the film is considered as a whole.

A postscript informs us that "in 1969, the Department of Justice filed an anti-trust case against GM, Ford, Chrysler and American Motors for 15 years of collusion to withhold the science of pollution-reducing technologies.

"Auto manufacturers settled with the government and in 1976, the catalytic converter became mandatory equipment on all US automobiles. No fines were levied." Is this then a happy ending?

The problem of the film's essential thematic timidity and blandness finds expression as a triumph of style over substance. Much has been invested in creating the look, including costumes and interiors, appropriate to Detroit at the time. The opening credits pay attractive homage to the imposing, rolling credits of Hollywood films in the 1950s, backed by a soundtrack reminiscent of Henry Mancini's effort for Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958).

But the actors find themselves at the mercy of an overly complicated and rather banal storyline, with many left to their own devices.

In an interview with *Esquire*, Soderbergh referred to Detroit in terms that would gladden the heart of the local Chamber of Commerce and other "boosters," apparently bending over backward not to offend the city fathers and others who promote the falsehood that "Detroit is back!"

The filmmaker commented that the "face of the city has changed drastically ... and [is] continuing now to go through more changes." It's "such a fascinating city. It's so emblematic of a certain kind of American city—one that can only exist in America. ... It's a big, sprawling city."

This is cotton candy, puffery. Detroit is ravaged, parts of it resembling a city devastated by military conflict: decaying neighborhoods, empty lots, abandoned and boarded-up buildings, closed businesses.

That the filmmakers focus on catalytic converters already reduces a tragic social process to historical small change. In any event, car pollution continues to be one of the major causes of global warming, according to *Sciencing* website in 2018.

Detroit symbolizes, above all, the long-term decline of American capitalism and its loss of global economic hegemony—and the relentless avarice of the financial aristocracy. In 1950, Detroit was the most prosperous city in the US on a per capita income basis. Today it is the poorest. Shouldn't that transition be of interest to a major filmmaker? Instead, in *No Sudden Move*, Soderbergh settles for creating an impressive image of one particular moment and milieu at the expense of a far fuller, richer, more contradictory picture.

The decline in auto and other jobs has been a collapse. Between 1967 and 1982, Detroit lost more than half of its manufacturing jobs. Since 1989, auto-related employment in Michigan has fallen by 70 percent. Between 1950 and 2011, the number of manufacturing jobs in Detroit proper fell from 296,000 to 27,000. The city's traumatized population has paid a high price, in poverty, unemployment, homelessness, drug addiction, disease.

Soderbergh continues to get many things right, except the truly important ones.

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