

# ***Black Bag: Steven Soderbergh's spy thriller: "So we're all horrible people. Is that what the point is here?"***

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*Black Bag*, about spies and various forms of loyalty and treachery, is the most recent film from prolific American filmmaker Steven Soderbergh. Available for streaming, it involves a group of British intelligence officers and a plot to destabilize the Russian government.

George Woodhouse (Michael Fassbender), a counterintelligence officer with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), is married to Kathryn St. Jean (Cate Blanchett), the NCSC Head of Signals Operations. Woodhouse is given a week by his superior Philip Meacham (Gustaf Skarsgård) to find out which of five possible suspects leaked a top-secret software program, codenamed Severus. One of the names on the list is his wife's.

The program, if physically introduced to a nuclear reactor, in Russia, in this case, "can target and melt down the reactor core." Rogue elements have apparently stolen Severus, and plan to use it within days, in order to create chaos and, with any luck, bring down the Russian government. (Although British intelligence has never used the program, the thinking is that such a "meltdown" would cause political havoc. For an enemy involved in an endless war and a teetering government, they'd run dear leader out of Moscow on a rail. We'd be rid of the prick once and for all.")

George sets about investigating the urgent matter. He organizes a small dinner party at his flat for the four suspects—NCSC case officer Freddie (Tom Burke), his girl-friend and imagery specialist Clarissa (Marisa Abela), staff psychiatrist Zoe (Naomis Harris) and her lover, NCSC counterintelligence officer James (Regé-Jean Page). George puts drugs in the food in an attempt to lower their inhibitions and learn more about them. Indeed, various unpleasant secrets emerge, of a largely personal

nature. At the climax of the evening, Clarissa stabs Freddie in the hand with a steak knife.

George also discovers, by underhanded means, that Kathryn is traveling to Zurich and that seven million pounds are sitting in a bank account in the Swiss city available to her. He pressures Clarissa into redirecting a satellite and witnesses Kathryn meeting with a Russian dissident, Lt. Col. Kulikov. We soon learn that Kulikov and Gen. Pavlichuk, with Severus in hand, are en route to Russia with the intention of unleashing the program.

By now, Kathryn has concluded that her boss, Stieglitz (Pierce Brosnan), deliberately caused the leak, even though he knows it will kill great numbers of innocent people. (She eventually confronts him: "How many would a meltdown have killed? 10,000? 20,000?") George and Kathryn realize each is being set up, from two different directions and for two different purposes ("There's a plan. And a counterplan. One is using you to get to me, the other, me to get to you"). George invites the same individuals to another dinner party, although this time without food ("I didn't cook," he informs them stolidly), and exposes the traitor.

*Black Bag* is adroitly shot and put together. It is concise and matter of fact. Fassbender sets the tone with his stoical, no-nonsense, morally upstanding Woodhouse ("I don't like liars"), with hints of John le Carré-type creations, Michael Caine characters in various spy films and so on. Moreover, the various rather vicious, lacerating conflicts over the Woodhouse-St. Jean dinner table (although not between George and Kathryn themselves) are meant to bring to mind Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Soderbergh told *Variety*, "[screenwriter] David [Koepp] and I talked about what it would be like if George and Martha were spies," Soderbergh says. "We wanted to

make an espionage version of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*"

Freddie to Clarissa, for example:

I have indulged your constant need for support and encouragement and reassurance and fucking paternal engagement for a year and a half now, and I'm sick to fucking death of it. He left. I'm so sorry. Daddy walked out the door, probably because he didn't love Mummy, but maybe because he became so hopelessly bored with your needy, constant demands that he figured getting out was better!

What do the various elements add up to?

On the whole, as human beings, the spies are unpleasant, nasty and chilly. James says, "So we're all horrible people. Is that what the point is here?" A good question.

Clarissa adds, "Come on, most of us are sick as shit." Based on what we see, no one will want to argue this very strongly. Later, she muses out loud, "When you can lie about everything, when you can deny everything, how do you tell the truth about anything? How does that work? How can that possibly work?"

However, the film doesn't hint at a general criticism, doesn't make any effort to connect the generally deplorable behavior on view with these individuals' social function as defenders of British imperialism, one of the most criminal enterprises on earth—currently helping to coordinate the mass murder of Palestinians. *Black Bag* was filmed six months after the launch of the genocide, with the UK's full support. How is it possible to be so "neutral" and ambiguous about British intelligence and its human personnel under such conditions?

*Black Bag* takes the characters' spy operations, and everything else, entirely for granted. The film and design work is intelligent, restless, assertive, but *thematically*, the watchword here is intense passivity and accommodation to the status quo.

Woodhouse insists on his unswerving loyalty to Kathryn, declaring he "would do anything" for her. "Anything at all?" "Yes." ... "Would you kill for me, George?" "Yes." "Would you?" "Yes."

The filmmakers seem to be on their way toward lining up behind writer E.M. Forster's famed dictum, "If I had

to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." However, they undermine even that possibility by having Kathryn prove to be innocent of the leak and ultimately an ally of George in his investigation. The oath of loyalty is never seriously put to the test. So why include it?

Why include many things here? What's the significance of the *Virginia Woolf* reference? What is Soderbergh's attitude toward the Russian government, or the Ukraine-Russia war? We have no answer by the end of the film, or even the hint of one, to any of these questions.

This is an objective problem, centered on the generation of filmmaker to which Soderbergh belongs. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, the "end of socialism," the terminal deterioration of what was once the labor movement in the US, the decline in the protest movements, didn't make political reactionaries out of figures like Soderbergh, the Coen brothers, David Fincher and others. But it tended to paralyze their nerve, intimidate them, work against their more radical or anti-establishment inclinations, render them *noncommittal*. Soderbergh is a talented and fluid technician-artist, with genuine precision and taste, but he has ended up, for various social and historical reasons, with almost nothing to say.

In the 1940s, art historian Meyer Schapiro and surrealist writer André Breton discussed the problem of the artist who reminded them of a *kitchen pitcher*, "with one hand resting on his hip (or else both hands on his hips or both arms along his sides)," during a period in which art seemed "to be marking time, to be stagnating," and concluded that "the main enemy today is fatalism (the hand on the hip) and the time has come to declare: *No more pitcher-men.*" The significance of this for our day too is clear enough.



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