the cinema of STEVEN SODERBERGH
indie sex, corporate lies, and digital videotape

Andrew deWaard & R. Colin Tait
preface by Thomas Schatz

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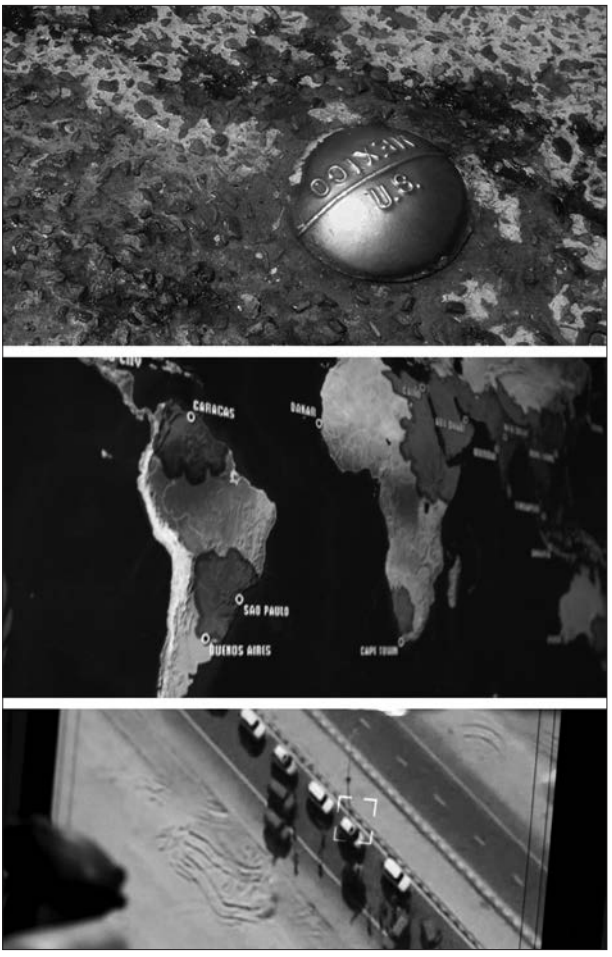
CHAPTER NINE

Trafficking Social Change: The Global Social Problem Film in the 2000s

> The idea was to address a social issue but sort of lay on the trappings of a thriller.
>
> Steven Soderbergh[1]

As international relations scholar Justin Rosenberg succinctly states: '"Globalization" was the *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s.'[2] A critic of the method in which the implications of globalisation have been theorised and aggrandised, Rosenberg draws attention to the way globalisation was more a 'felt' phenomenon than the rapid acceleration of globalised flows that the theory's advocates would have us believe; it was the 'spirit of the times' to believe the world was in a state of increasing interconnection and integration. While debate continues over the conceptualisation and extent of globalisation and globalisation theory, it still seems undeniable that we live in a much more 'globalised' – however you wish to define the term – world than we did fifty, twenty, even ten years ago. In typical Hollywood style, it took some time for mainstream cinema to embody characteristics of this sweeping geopolitical, socio-economic shift and pick up on the *zeitgeist*, but its effects have now most certainly arrived. Hollywood has, of course, always been a global institution. But like globalisation itself, the transformation is not so much a matter of innovation, but degree. The changes taking place – both globally and cinematically – are not necessarily new, but what is new is the rapid rate at which they are occurring. From worldwide release patterns and digital technology[3] to rampant piracy and the 'New International Division of Cultural Labour,'[4] the effects of globalisation on Hollywood are ever-increasing. One such development – simultaneously an embodiment as well as an artistic response to transnational flows, and the problems that accompany them – is the re-emergence of the social problem film genre in the 21st century. Mostly absent since the early days of Hollywood, the social problem film has returned amidst a decidedly global context.



The decidedly global locations of Soderbergh's later films are indicated by the US/Mexico border in *Traffic*, the map of the global pandemic in *Contagion*, and the increasingly timely depictions of the drone attacks in *Syriana*.

Steven Soderbergh can be seen as a key figure in this re-emergence, with his one-two punch of highly successful social problem films in the year 2000 – *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic* – paving the way for a cycle of politically and socially conscious films to be released throughout the following decade. *Erin Brockovich* sets the stage for the director's anti-corporate politics to follow, as the film documents a successful class-action suit against the energy corporation Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E) for their cancer-causing environmental pollution. At Section Eight, Soderbergh and Clooney also helped produce many other socially conscious films, such as the ambitious *Syriana* in 2005, with *Traffic* writer Stephen Gaghan writing and directing, and *Michael Clayton* in 2007, Tony Gilroy's story of legal impropriety on the part of an agricultural conglomerate knowingly selling a carcinogenic product, both films starring George Clooney. Section Eight also released Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* in 2005, a morality play about media responsibility and the politics of fear as seen through the conflict between television journalist Edward R. Murrow and Senator Joseph McCarthy. *Ides of March* (2011), another film written and directed by Clooney, continues the filmmaker's

preoccupation with American politics, this time casting himself as the corrupt, hypocritical presidential nominee in an even more corrupt system.

After completion of his own 'historical global social problem film' in the form of *The Good German* in 2006, which probed American complicity in Nazi war crimes following the end of World War II, Soderbergh would again return to the issue of global corporate malfeasance with *The Informant!* in 2009, this time matching the institutional insanity of global corporate corruption with a comic absurdity. In 2011, *Contagion* re-utilised the successful formula of *Traffic*, interweaving multiple plot lines and celebrities, this time to tackle the issue of public health in the era of globalisation. In the chapter that follows, we will use four case studies to outline and explore the global social problem (GSP) film:[5] the originator, *Traffic*, with its three intersecting plot lines exploring the illegal Mexican-American drug trade from the perspective of user, enforcer, politician, and trafficker; *Syriana*, a geopolitical thriller which explores the political, military, economic, legal, and social aspects of the global petroleum industry; *The Informant!*, a biographical comic thriller about the whistleblower who exposed the global Lysine price-fixing conspiracy during the mid-1990s; and *Contagion*, a disaster film that follows a pandemic as it circles around the globe, along with the ensuing social strife.

Non-Soderbergh related examples of the GSP include *Fast Food Nation* (Richard Linklater, 2006), the fictional interpretation of Eric Schlosser's 2002 exposé of the same name, detailing the economic, environmental, and social consequences of the fast food industry, weaving stories from across the United States and Mexico. *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) is another: this multi-language, globe-spanning mediation on (mis)communication follows a chain of events linking a couple of American tourists, a Japanese father and daughter, two Morrocan boys, and a Mexican nanny on a cross-border trip with two American children. *Munich* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) is another historical GSP film, detailing the Israeli government's retaliation for the massacre of Israeli athletes by terrorists during the 1972 Summer Olympics. Other notable GSPs include *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005), which takes on the global pharmaceutical industry; *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006), concerning the war-profiteering of diamond sales, and *Lord of War* (Andrew Niccol, 2005), which documents global arms distribution.

As a genre cycle, the GSP is a result of postmodern genre hybridity, an integral characteristic of New Hollywood. As seminal genre theorist Steve Neale notes, 'New Hollywood can be distinguished from the old by the hybridity of its genres and films… this hybridity is governed by the multi-media synergies characteristic of the New Hollywood, by the mixing and recycling of new and old and low art and high art media products in the modern (or postmodern) world.'[6] And as he says of the social problem film directly, it is 'essentially a critical invention.'[7] Every film is to some degree dealing with socio-cultural 'problems,' and so any clear-cut structural grouping of the GSP film will itself be a problem. By no means an authoritative genre classification (though none is), our designation of the GSP will be those films whose hybridity is comprised of three main ingredients: the legacy of the original social problem film of early Hollywood cinema, including the use of melodramatic tone, with a focus

on wider, global institutional problems; the distinct influence of documentary and docudrama, in an effort towards realism; and the distinct utilisation of a multi-linear, rhizomatic web-of-life plot line. There is usually a dash of thriller, a smidgen of crime, a pinch of sardonic wit, and the whole bastardised recipe occurs in a global melting pot.

The Evolution and Globalisation of the Social Problem Film

In one of the first systematic analyses of the social problem film, Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy explicitly define the genre by its didacticism: 'the central dramatic conflict revolves around the interaction of the individual with social institutions (such as government, business, political movements, etc.)… it deals with social themes very much on the surface of the dramatic action.'[8] Similarly, another analysis of the social problem film finds it 'distinguished by the way its subject was usually given as much weight as its stars or story: the films used individual human dramas to present a morality tale with wider social repercussions.'[9] *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932), *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940), and *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1946) are three of the most notable, while Frank Capra carved out his own social problem niche, often incorporating elements of the screwball comedy, with *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941). Roffman and Purdy place the social problem film's rise and peak during the 1930s and 1940s, though Kay Sloan locates its origins in the silent era with what she terms, in the title of her book, *The Loud Silents* (1988), films in which reformist groups portrayed alcoholism, labour relations, and other social issues.[10]

Another short cycle of the social problem film can be located during the tumultuous times of the late 1960s and 1970s: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and Watergate providing ample social strife. The controversial mixed race couple in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967), the corrupt police force in *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet, 1974), the investigation into the Watergate scandal in *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976), and the labour union organising in *Norma Rae* (Martin Ritt, 1979) are some of the most prominent examples. The 1980s are typically marked by the rise of apolitical blockbusters, but independent auteurs kept the spirit of the social problem film alive with works such as Mike Nichols' *Silkwood* (1983), John Sayles' *Matewan* (1987) and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989).

If the original social problem film was concerned with an individual in conflict with a social institution, the global social problem film multiplies both dimensions. Rather than a single individual, we get a multitude of interconnected individuals facing an array of problems; instead of a solitary institution, we get a network of immobilising social institutions. Both *Traffic* and *Syriana* follow a series of individuals in their interactions with the intertwined systems of law, military, economics, government, and media. *Contagion* expands its reach to the spread of disinformation now capable with new media – a contagion of another kind. Though *The Informant!* does follow a single figure, it also weaves law enforcement, government agents, lawyers, and international businessmen into a dense web of characters and institutions in order to tell the true

story of a global conspiracy to fix prices, all the while illuminating the pathological nature of the corporate structure.

In *Traffic*, the multitude of problems stems from the flow of narcotics, and its symptoms of addiction, crime, and political corruption. *Syriana* tracks another addictive substance, oil, as the access to and control of it requires legal impropriety, illegal arms trafficking, corporate monopolisation, clandestine assassination, and the radicalisation of young Islamists. Ostensibly, the 'problem' in *Contagion* is the virus, but the conclusion of the film reveals that it was environmental destruction by a mining corporation that is the root cause of the disease travelling from a bat to a pig to a human. Furthermore, it is the all-too-human response to the pandemic – fear, distrust, violence, rioting – that is the real target of Soderbergh's GSP parable for a hyper-connected world.

Roffman and Purdy locate two key reasons for the emergence of the social problem film in the 1930s. The first was the strong sense of social consciousness that grew out of the Depression, as well as the rise of authoritarianism/fascism in Europe. As demonstrated by the success of the novels of John Steinbeck and the songs of Woody Guthrie, audiences were hungry for social and political commentary during such turbulent times. The second factor was the 'golden era' of the Hollywood studio system, when Hollywood rose to central prominence in the popular culture landscape. However, having earned a reputation for being 'morally questionable,' Hollywood established the Production Code, a basic set of conventions and a consistent ideological framework. Rather than face government interference, potentially losing control over its product, Hollywood took it upon itself to 'self-censor' and promote 'traditional values' in order to placate its detractors. Thus, the social problem film was able to capitalise on both the audience's desire for social consciousness and the industry's need to clean up its image.

Seventy years later, the GSP is in a similar situation, albeit a vastly different social and political climate. Though *Traffic* predates it, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center of 9/11 mark a certain entrance – whether desired or not – onto the global stage for America. As Slavoj Žižek remarked, 'On September 11, the United States of America were given the opportunity to realize what kind of a world it was part of.'[11] While Žižek correctly identifies America's largely ideologically-reaffirming response, we might also witness a more globally-oriented American social consciousness arising out of the ashes of Ground Zero. The reactionary Bush presidency and its aggressive foreign policy only fuelled this fire. Though certainly not limited to the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, this emerging global consciousness – a concern for the global ramifications of our actions and decisions – parallels the one that gave birth to the original social problem film.

From a production standpoint, the GSP is also in a similar situation in that it benefits from the current state of the Hollywood system, as well as appeals to a certain niche audience. Rather than a studio formula, the GSP is a product of the middle tier of filmmaking that developed in the 1990s, as outlined in chapter two. Negotiating the fine line between art and commerce, the major independents provide the opportunity for big-budget, heavily-marketed films that focus on artistic merit and message in order to win valuable film festival and awards season prestige. *Traffic* was developed

with Universal's USA Films (now Focus Features), and won multiple Academy Awards and critics' awards; *Syriana* and *The Informant!* were developed by Soderbergh and Clooney's Section Eight, with financing from Warner Bros, and also earned multiple award nominations and wins, particularly the acting performances of George Clooney and Matt Damon. *Contagion* was set up through Participant Media (more on this company below), as well as Imagenation Abu Dhabi, lending some international funding alongside Warner Bros, and starred four Academy Awards winners and three nominees. Like its predecessor's emergence, the GSP benefited from a favourable industrial context and fulfilled its audience's desire for social consciousness following a major crisis.

Considering this political and industrial impetus, we can add some more groups of films from the 2000s that overlap with the qualities of the GSP film. Though they might not always exhibit a distinctly global scope, nor orient themselves primarily around a social problem, they do involve a wider, often international political realm, and they tend to insinuate larger social ramifications than just the interpersonal conflict typical of a Hollywood film. The re-emergence of the conspiracy film certainly took on a global scale, in films such as *Spy Game* (Tony Scott, 2001), *The Manchurian Candidate* (Jonathan Demme, 2004), *The Interpreter* (Sydney Pollack, 2005), and *State of Play* (Kevin Macdonald, 2009). Like *The Good German*, there were also other 'historical global social problem films' that revisited moments of conflict in history from a global perspective, such as *Ararat* (Atom Egoyan, 2002), *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George, 2004), and *The Last King of Scotland* (Kevin Macdonald, 2006).

The 'War on Terror' also spawned some counter-terrorism thrillers with a GSP dimension, engaging with both the causes of terrorism and the efforts to contain it, such as *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007), *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012). And war being the ultimate 'global social problem,' a new era of armed conflict – in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere – spawned a new cycle of war films, which often attempted to pull various geopolitical interconnections together. By no means an exhaustive list, this cycle of global war films include *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005), *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), and *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008). Genres continue to cross-pollinate and hybridise, and the act of genre classification becomes even more difficult; the global social problem film is another layer to be added to this increasingly diffuse mix.

Keeping it Real: The Documentary/Docudrama Impulse

Documentary filmmaking – and its fictionalised offshoot, docudrama – is the second key influence for the GSP film. As the primary focus of the GSP is to shed light on a real-world problem, the effort to achieve a sense of realism is vital. One of the key strategies that the GSP uses to achieve this realism is a reliance on non-fiction resources in the pre-production process. Although based on the British television miniseries *Traffik* (Alastair Reid, 1989), Stephen Gaghan made significant changes to his adap-

Elements of the docudrama include the intersections of real-life people and settings in fictionalized contexts, such as Michael Douglas' discussions of drug policy with actual Washington politicians in *Traffic* (here we see Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid), on-location shooting at the Center for Disease Control in *Contagion*, and the declaration that *The Informant!* is based on true events, but with a twist.

tation after a year's worth of obsessive research, interviews with key political figures in Washington, and investigative trips to San Diego and Tijuana. Most notably, the drug cartels were shifted from Columbia to Mexico and the drug was changed from heroin to cocaine, corresponding with the real-life relocation of drug production that occurred in the decades separating the television series and the film. Another element of realism is Gaghan's own drug addiction, which started in high school (the basis for Caroline, the prep-school drug abuser), continued throughout pre-production of the film, and became a promotional narrative during the publicity run-up to the film's release.[12]

Syriana's premise also comes from non-fictional origins; the term Syriana is a metaphor for foreign intervention in the Middle East, used by Washington think-tanks to describe a hypothetical reshaping of the region to ensure continued access to oil. The screenplay is loosely adapted[13] from former CIA case officer Robert Baer's memoirs, *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War Against Terrorism* (2003). Robert Baer became the basis for George Clooney's character, Bob Barnes,

who similarly undertakes various clandestine Middle Eastern operations, including a failed assassination plot. Because of this fictionalising of non-fiction memoirs, the film carries this unique statement in the credits: 'While inspired by a non-fiction work, this motion picture and all of the characters and events portrayed in it (except for incidental archival footage), are fictional.' The fine line between 'real' and 'reel' is certainly blurred. *The Informant!* takes even more liberties with its source material: the non-fiction book *The Informant* (2001), by journalist Kurt Eichenwald. Heavily fictionalising and satirising the original true story, *The Informant!* also contains a unique statement in its opening credits: 'While this motion picture is based on real events, certain incidents and characters are composites, and dialog has been dramatized. So there.' This cheeky epilogue sets the stage for the absurdity to come, while also defusing any criticisms the film may face based on fictional distortion.

Contagion is the only GSP film of the four that is an original screenplay, yet it also employed a unique strategy in achieving a sense of realism: enlisting Dr. W. Ian Lipkin, Professor of Epidemiology and Director of the Center for Infection and Immunity at Columbia University, as the film's chief science advisor. In what was far more than a token consulting position, Dr. Lipkin was actively involved in the film during the script-writing phase and on set, assuring realistic depictions of the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and WHO (World Health Organization) operations, and working with the actors and set designers to depict proper laboratory technique. Dr. Lipkin and his team also designed the film's main star: the imaginary virus that drives the narrative. Based on the real-life Nipah virus, which caused a pandemic in Malaysia in the late 1990s, also originating from the transfer from bats to pigs to humans, the MEV-1 virus of the film was built as a 3-D model and then Dr. Lipkin and his team developed how it would evolve and how public health, medical communities, and governments would respond. 'Is this fiction?', Dr. Lipkin asks rhetorically in a *New York Times* op-ed published the weekend the film was released, 'Yes. Is it real? Absolutely.'[14]

As much as these films strive for realism, they are bound to the fictionalising process necessary to make them palatable as multiplex fare. The techniques of docudrama, then, are an essential influence on the GSP, and are the most explicit example of the grey area that exists between fact and fiction in these films. Docudramas typically involve recreations or dramatisations of documented events, and may involve real footage of the events themselves. *Syriana* and *The Informant!* are obvious examples of docudrama, having heavily dramatised their non-fictional source material, but *Traffic* contains a unique scene of docudrama as well. When Michael Douglas's drug czar character goes to Washington, D.C., he is seen at a party talking with actual, real politicians, both Democrat and Republican, such as US Senators Harry Reid, Barbara Boxer, Orrin Hatch, Charles Grassley, and Don Nickles, and Governor Bill Weld, as well as lobbyists and journalists. Entirely improvised, the sequence contains frank discussions about the drug war, and its public perception, edited together as a quick montage. This is a very Soderberghian scene; it simultaneously pulls in the viewer with its raw, 'uncut' realism, but distances with its artifice and fictional juxtaposition.

The aim of a docudrama is to concentrate on the facts and avoid editorialising or opinionated bias; in practice, of course, this rarely occurs. *Syriana* was subject to considerable criticism for its political bias. As is often the case in such a polarised public sphere, this 'liberal' cultural text that ventures criticism towards American governmental policy was met with accusations against those 'typical Hollywood liberals' and their 'anti-American' values. An op-ed in the *Washington Post*, entitled 'Oscars for Osama,' claimed that 'Osama bin Laden could not have scripted this film with more conviction.'[15] We will leave the validity of that statement to the reader's discretion.

Seth Feldman's analysis of the genre, 'Footnote to Fact: The Docudrama,' focuses on the function of such films.[16] His analysis of the three most popular incarnations of the docudrama – *Roots* (Marvin J. Chomsky and others, 1977), *Holocaust* (Chomsky, 1978), and *The Day After* (Nicholas Meyer, 1984) – finds them 'firmly grounded in events that had already achieved a central place in the public imagination. What all three programs then spoke to were the personal, psychological reasons for that centrality.'[17] The same could be said for *Traffic*'s engagement with the 'War on Drugs', *Syriana*'s interconnection of the 'War on Terror' with 'Big Oil', *The Informant!*'s satirical dismembering of 'Big Agriculture' and corporate profiteering, and *Contagion*'s frank portrayal of a globalised pandemic: prevalent issues in the forefront of the social imaginary seen through the eyes of a range of (mostly) sympathetic characters. However, it should be noted that unlike *Roots* and *Holocaust*, which are set in the past, *Traffic*, *Syriana*, *The Informant!* and *Contagion* engage with contemporary, ongoing issues that demand attention and action.

Furthermore, Feldman's reading of the conservative, comforting nature of the docudrama is not applicable to the GSP. *Roots*, *Holocaust*, and *The Day After* attempted to provide 'explanations of an incomprehensible world to the disenfranchised,' but failed to offer 'a deeper understanding of historical forces; rather it is the durability of [the] familial order' that is celebrated.[18] Conversely, the GSP's greatest strength is its illumination of geopolitical socio-economic forces through narrative means. By threading multiple stories together into a larger fabric, yet retaining character-based action and the pleasures of melodrama and the thriller, viewers get a glimpse of the sheer complexity and scope of these global problems. And while the GSP is also concerned with the familial order – *Syriana* has two sets of fathers and sons, one of the three plot lines in *Traffic* is a drug czar and his addict daughter, the titular informant is distinctly a 'family man,' and one of the key plot lines in *Contagion* is a recent widower coping with the loss of his wife and son while protecting his remaining daughter from the pandemic – here the solidarity of the family is seen to be in decay in the face of such dire global problems and interconnected corruption.

As realism is of central concern to the GSP, the use of ostentatious cinematography is rare, but if used, serves a utilitarian function. *Traffic*, for example, uses distinctive colour palettes to clearly distinguish its three plot lines: the East Coast scenes are shot in bright daylight to produce icy blue, monochromatic tones; the Mexican scenes are overexposed and use 'tobacco' filters for grainy, bleached-out sepia tones; and the San Diego scenes use the risky technique of 'flashing' the negative for a halo effect to

The final montage of *Syriana* oscillates between the interrelated dimensions of the global petroleum industry, as seen in images of the Middle East refinery, the awards ceremony for 'oil man of the year,' and the terrorist attack perpetrated by the young, radicalised Wasim (Mazhar Munir).

compliment the vibrant hues. *Contagion* uses a similar visual scheme, assisting the viewer to keep track of the various different geographic locations by shooting them in different hues: Minnesota is cold blues, Atlanta is warm oranges for example. *The Informant!* also uses a distinct colour palette in the service of its subject matter: a drab, claustrophobic yellow hue is cast over much of the film, emphasising the degree to which corn is used in an astonishing amount of everyday products, not just food.

Another utilitarian stylistic convention of the genre is the use of graphic matches with sound bridges to draw connections between narrative strands. In the conclusion of *Syriana*, for instance, a shot of the videotaped burial requests of a young Pakistani terrorist, Wasim (Mazhar Munir), slowly fades into a graphically-matched shot of the energy analyst's (Matt Damon) sole surviving son, while Wasim's chilling dialogue bridges the edit: 'From the dust a new person will be created.' Wasim commits this terrorist act in retaliation for the foreign exploitation of oil companies, an example of what is referred to by foreign policy specialists as 'blowback'; the generic convention of the graphic match renders this problem bare.

As a final note on the documentary/docudrama impulse, we would be remiss not to mention the recent resurgence in documentary filmmaking of works that are also largely concerned with global connections and consequences, resulting in something of a sibling cycle to the GSP. This parallel strain of GSP documentaries should be seen as a significant cycle in its own right. The all-time highest grossing documentary

film is *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), which lampoons the Bush administration and its corporate cronyism for exploiting the 9/11 attacks to flex an aggressive foreign policy with dire global consequences. *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) is a passionate and informative plea for clarity and action against worldwide climate change. Other popular examples of the global social problem documentary include *The Fog of War* (Errol Morris, 2003), outlining the global threat of the American military as seen through the eyes of Robert S. McNamara, architect of the Vietnam War; *The Corporation* (Mark Achbar, 2003), a psychological examination of the corporate organisational model that has dominated economic, political, and social forces around the world; *Darwin's Nightmare* (Hubert Sauper, 2004), which explores the global network created around the Lake Victoria perch, from European supermarkets to Russian arms dealers to exploited Tanzanians; and *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki, 2005), an exploration of the quest for global domination by the American military-industrial complex. That the GSP documentary should rise to popularity and critical acclaim in the same five-year span that the GSP film did should warrant their consideration as significant cycles of film production.

Everything is Connected: Networked Narratives, Productions, and Problems

The final essential ingredient to the GSP is its innovation on the web-of-life plot line. Instead of the traditional two primary lines of action, the 1990s saw a surge of films weaving together a variety of plot lines involving a multitude of characters, as we explored in the editing section of chapter one. Again, this is not a matter of precedence, but degree. The last fifteen years produced a tremendous increase in multi-linear filmmaking; some prominent examples include *Slacker*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993), *Pulp Fiction*, *Magnolia* (P.T. Anderson, 1999), *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2000), *Amores Perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2002), and *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004). In his exploration of networked narratives and transnationalism, David Desser dates the multi-linear narrative back as far as *Intolerance* (1916), D.W. Griffith's silent-era epic spanning 2,500 years, paralleling four different ages in world history.[19] For our purposes, we might see *Intolerance* as the birth of the GSP nearly a century before its popularisation, though it concentrates on the enduring problem of intolerance throughout the ages, rather than its global interconnections. Multiple story lines focused on a single locale are also not uncommon in the history of Hollywood, *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932) and *Dinner at Eight* (George Cukor, 1933) being the earliest incarnations. The disaster film also relies on multiple characters united in adversity, and *Contagion* is certainly influenced by such films as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974). Many horror films, to a lesser degree, rely on a similar structure, such as the web of unrelated new characters in each entry of the *Saw* franchise (2004–present).

A pioneer of the web-of-life plot line is Robert Altman, and as such, he is a tremendous influence on the GSP. *Nashville* (1975) is a landmark film, not just for the GSP, but for cinema as a whole. With *Nashville*, Altman weaves a cinematic web the likes of which had never been seen before in mainstream film: densely interconnected story

lines, a massive ensemble cast, and a satirical mixing of presidential politics with the business of country/gospel music. His *Short Cuts*, 'an L.A. jazz rhapsody,'[20] is inspired by nine short stories by Raymond Carver and follows 22 principal characters. Altman's signature style – overlapping dialogue and a wandering, zooming camera to capture his web of improvising actors/characters played by improvising actors – complements this formal experimentation, as it did in *Nashville*.

Utilising the web-of-life plot line creates an expectation within the viewer for unforeseen relations and causal connections among the film's disparate characters. With the GSP, the web-of-life is woven on a much larger scale: a global web-of-life. Thus, the connections made are far more startling and unexpected. For example, in *Traffic*, a teenage drug abuser in a Cincinnati prep school affects her father's ability as the newly appointed drug czar to combat a corrupt Mexican General (Tomás Milián) who has just enlisted the help of a double-crossing cop (Benicio Del Toro) in his effort to continue supplying cocaine to a jailed San Diego-based drug kingpin (Alec Roberts) whose wife (Catherine Zeta-Jones) continues the family business while under the surveillance of a rogue African-American DEA agent (Don Cheadle) who has just lost his Puerto-Rican partner (Luis Guzmán) to a Mexican hitman (Clifton Collins Jr.). This is, of course, just one line of connection between the central characters, and various 'connect-the-characters' trajectories could be traced in *Syriana*, *The Informant!*, and *Contagion* as well. It is here, in the limitless possibility of interconnection, that the GSP presents its most innovative act. We would like to pick up where Desser, in his consideration of 'global noir' and its broader impact on cinema itself, leaves off:

> Multiple storylines, the simultaneity of events forever skewing chronology and linearity, and chance encounters are, after all, not only the very core of global noir, but the very stuff of the hypertext that is digital and cyber technologies. Is global noir, then, the future of cinema, and is the future here?[21]

A detour to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari is necessary in order to answer Desser's rhetorical question.

Deleuze and Guattari set out to enact, among other things, a transformation of 'the image of thought.' Rather than the grand pursuit of truth or reason, they define philosophy as the creation of concepts that define a particular range of thinking with which to grapple with a certain reality. One such valuable conception is the *rhizome*, a multiplicity which aims to move away from the traditional binary structure of Western thought. A figure borrowed from biology, the rhizome is a model in strict opposition to the conventional figure of the tree which operates on the principles of foundation and origin. The rhizome, on the contrary, is proliferating and serial; it operates on the principles of connection and heterogeneity. There can be no static points or hierarchical positions within a rhizome: 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.'[22] Neither mimetic nor organic, a rhizome is a mobile and bifurcating series of lines; it only ever attempts to *map*, never resolve.

How appropriate, then, that *Syriana* deals with a hypothetical 'remapping' of the Middle East. As 'the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed,

Despite his American origins, Soderbergh can be thought of as a global filmmaker: his movies have spanned a dizzying array of countries, oftentimes within the same film, as seen in *Contagion*, *Syriana*, *Che*, *The Good German*, *Haywire*, and *Ocean's Twelve*.

a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight,' *Syriana* works to outline the map of law, military, politics, economics, and terrorism that is the global petroleum industry.[23] The terrorist act shows this rhizome's detachability; the globe-spanning locales show its connectability; the double and double-double crossings by CIA agents show its reversibility; anti-trust regulators show its modifiability. The young Pakistani victimised by a post-Fordist disposable workforce and led astray by radical Islam simultaneously provides an entry into and an exit from this rhizome.

A rhizome 'has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills.'[24] Perhaps this explains the common reception of *Syriana*'s plot as too complex to follow. As Roger Ebert states with precision: 'we're not really supposed to follow [the plot], we're supposed to be *surrounded* by it. Since none of the characters understand the whole picture, why should we?'[25] The film has thus utilised the structure of the rhizome in the structure of its plot to illuminate the rhizomatic quality of its subject matter. The viewer is *supposed* to get lost in the film's

complex story and be even more bewildered by its fruition. Like every useful answer to a difficult question, the GSP reveals even more complex questions instead of offering a tidy resolution.

In order to present this rhizomatic subject matter, the GSP's form must be rhizomatic, and in order to formally be a rhizome, it must have a rhizomatic production process. 'To attain the multiple, one must have a method that effectively constructs it.'[26] Referring to it as his '$49 million Dogme film,' Soderbergh directed and shot *Traffic* with the spontaneity and freedom he enjoyed with his self-financed efforts.[27] Three months, ten cities, 110 locations, and 163 speaking parts: the shoot was a frantic affair. The cast and crew travelled light and quick, 'like the Grateful Dead,' according to Benicio Del Toro.[28] Unable to secure permission to shoot in the White House, Soderbergh and Douglas went on a tour and stole footage guerrilla style. This is true rhizomatic style: 'Speed turns the point into a line!'[29] *Syriana* was a similarly complex endeavour; shooting took place in over a dozen locations around the globe, including Geneva, Dubai (the first Hollywood production in the U.A.E.), Egypt, Tehran, London, Morocco, New York, Texas, Maryland, Baltimore, and Washington D.C. *The Informant!* was also filmed around the world, with location shooting in Illinois, California, Missouri, Paris, Switzerland, and Hawaii, and additional scenes set in Mexico City, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. Naturally, *Contagion* would require a globalised production, with shooting in Hong Kong, Macao, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, Casablanca, London, and Geneva.

A further rhizomatic dimension to *Syriana*, *The Informant!*, and *Contagion* is the involvement of production company Participant Media (formerly Participant Productions) in the development and marketing process. Founded in 2004 by Jeffrey Skoll, the billionaire entrepreneur and first president of eBay, Participant Media produces socially relevant films and documentaries that aim to be 'compelling entertaining stories that also create awareness of the real issues that shape our lives.'[30] Adding an educative and activist dimension to its criteria of choosing which projects to finance, Participant Media typically produces films that are based on current events and topical subjects which lend themselves to the kind of social action campaigns that are enacted in tandem with associated non-profit organisations around a film's release. As an example, the social action campaign that was launched alongside *Contagion* included an informational hub with a range of material on pandemics – history, profiles, precautions – complete with videos, infographics, interactive quizzes, and a social networking experience meant to mimic the viral nature of a pandemic. Participant Media also partnered with HealthMap, an online information system that monitors and visualises the global state of infectious diseases.

In addition to *Syriana*, *The Informant!*, and *Contagion,* Participant Media has produced more than three dozen films since 2004, making it a key catalyst and financial driver of the GSP cycle of Hollywood filmmaking. A few of the GSP narratives are *Fast Food Nation*, *North Country* (Niki Caro, 2004), *Charlie Wilson's War* (Mike Nichols, 2007), and *Fair Game* (Doug Liman, 2010), while the GSP documentaries include *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Darfur Now* (Ted Braun, 2007), *Food Inc.* (Robert Kenner, 2008), *The Cove* (Louie Psihoyos, 2008), and *Countdown to Zero* (Lucy Walker,

2010). Of course, corporate encouragement to 'participate' is both successful branding and innovative 'lifestyle' and 'viral' marketing. It would be easy to take a cynical view of such a crass venture funded by a billionaire who has turned to Hollywood through the guise of philanthropy, but the fact remains that Participant Media has produced dozens of films with social and educational messages at their core, leveraging the power of social networks and the rhizome structure to produce something more than 'mere entertainment.'

The GSP then – in construction, structure, finance, and theme – is a true personification of the rhizome. To return to Desser's question: *yes*, hypertext is at the core of the future of cinema, *but* its truest contemporary incarnation is not the global noir and its flaccid intertextualisation, but the GSP and its rhizomatic embodiment. And *yes*, the future of cinema is here *if* filmmakers use the logic of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. According to Roffman and Purdy, 'the Hollywood social problem film represents a significant social and artistic achievement, marshalling the resources of film to provide a vivid commentary on the times.'[31] Through its propagation of a global social consciousness, its commitment to realism, and a utilisation of the rhizome structure, the GSP has reinvigorated the potential for far-reaching social and political commentary in mainstream Hollywood cinema. To rewrite Manuel Castells' famous proclamation about the network society: the logic *of* the rhizome is more powerful than the power *in* the rhizome.[32]

Though there are definite antecedents to the GSP film, both in form and in content, there is a distinct enough wave of films that occurs just after the turn of the century that warrants this demarcation of the GSP film. That these films explicitly engage with some of the largest cultural and sociopolitical shifts of the last quarter-century – globalisation and digital technology, and the increasing interconnectedness that each brings – means they deserve further scrutiny. As opposed to Hollywood's ever-increasing reliance on over-blown spectacle and reformatted properties, this wave of films engages with its world directly and provocatively, with a unique formal and stylistic approach. Steven Soderbergh's role in this significant wave of filmmaking should not go unnoticed. *Traffic* is patient zero in this pandemic, with *Syriana*, *The Informant!*, and *Contagion* spreading the 'global social problem virus' to new hosts. As with his innovative financial practices, his cinematographic and digital experimentation, his generic preoccupations, and his intertextual reworkings, where ever there are significant developments in Hollywood filmmaking to be seen in the last twenty-five years, Soderbergh is there.

Notes

1 Quoted in Richardson, 'Life Of Steven Soderbergh.'
2 Justin Rosenberg, 'Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem,' *International Politics* 42 (2005), 2.
3 Robert E. Davis, 'The Instantaneous Worldwide Release: Coming Soon to Everyone, Everywhere,' in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (New York: Routledge, 2006), 73–80.

4 Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood 2* (London: BFI, 2005).
5 In a nod to Miller *et al.*'s convenient dropping of a letter in their acronym, NICL (New International Division of Cultural Labour), we have taken the liberty of dropping a letter in ours, GSP, to parallel such other globally used acronyms as GNP and GDP.
6 Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 248.
7 Ibid., 105.
8 Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), viii.
9 Michael Brooke, 'Social Problem Films: British Cinema and Postwar Social Change,' *ScreenOnline*, accessed February 15, 2010, http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1074067/index.html.
10 Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
11 Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11* (London: Verso, 2002), 47.
12 Waxman, *Rebels on the Backlot*, 325.
13 To Gaghan's dismay, *Syriana* was deemed an Original Screenplay by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
14 W. Ian Lipkin, 'The Real Threat of "Contagion,"' *New York Times*, September 11, 2011.
15 Charles Krauthammer, 'Oscars for Osama,' *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2006, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/02/AR2006030201209.html.
16 Seth Feldman, 'Footnote to Fact: The Docudrama,' in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986).
17 Ibid., 349.
18 Ibid.
19 David Desser, 'Global Noir,' 516–536.
20 Michael Wilmington, 'Short Cuts: City Symphony,' *The Criterion Collection*, November 15, 2004, http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/349-short-cuts-city-symphony.
21 Desser, 'Global Noir,' 534.
22 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Vol. 2*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7.
23 Ibid., 21.
24 Ibid.
25 Emphasis added. Roger Ebert, 'Review: Syriana,' *rogerebert.com*, December 9, 2005, http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051208/REVIEWS/51130002/1023.

26 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 22.
27 Quoted in Waxman, *Rebels*, 315.
28 Ibid., 317.
29 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 24.
30 'Our Mission,' *Participant Media*, accessed January 15, 2011, http://www.participantmedia.com/company/about_us.php.
31 Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film*, vii.
32 The original statement is: 'The logic of the network is more powerful than the power in the network,' Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 500.