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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C O N T E N T S

by Thomas Schatz

Among the most important and elusive filmmakers in contemporary Hollywood, Steven Soderbergh both demands and defies scrutiny. Since *sex, lies, and videotape* in 1989, one of the most impressive debuts in movie history, Soderbergh has carved out a career that puts him in a class by himself among active auteurs. And yet he has avoided even routine coverage by journalists, let alone the kind of celebrity treatment that most other Hollywood filmmakers more readily cultivate. Nor has Soderbergh's remarkable body of work been subjected to close analysis by critics or scholars, who seem either unwilling or simply unable to deal with the filmmaker's varied and voluminous output.

That reluctance is understandable, given both the range and pace of Soderbergh's work. In terms of sheer productivity, his performance has been astounding. Soderbergh has directed two dozen films since 1989, a record matched only by Woody Allen (who also has directed 24 over the same period), and well ahead of the other top American directors – Clint Eastwood with 19, Steven Spielberg with 17, Spike Lee with 16, Martin Scorsese with 14, the Coens with 13, Tim Burton with 12, and so on. Soderbergh has also produced over twenty films, which further distinguishes him from his contemporaries. The only other top Hollywood director with serious producing credits, other than on his or her own films, is Spielberg, who through Amblin and DreamWorks has taken producer (or, more usually, executive producer) credit on some three dozen films. Most of these are nominal credits with little if any active involvement on Spielberg's part, however, whereas Soderbergh's role has been not only active but invaluable in most cases. Indeed, he has backed and contributed to a number of risky, innovative films that may not have been made without his participation – films like Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007), and Tony Gilroy's *Michael Clayton* (2007).

The risk and innovation in these films is indicative of Soderbergh's own work, which without question is more eclectic and daring than that of any other contemporary American director. In terms of budget level, production conditions, subject matter, narrative form, and film style, Soderbergh's films run the gamut, from no-budget digital experiments and low-budget independent art films to mid-range star vehicles and big-budget studio blockbusters. He has enjoyed his share of critical and commercial success in these wide-ranging efforts, although he has had his share of failures and misfires as well. The misfires were most painful and pronounced early on, and in fact Soderbergh's mere survival in the early to mid-1990s was a feat in itself. *sex, lies, and videotape* was a true phenomenon, putting not just Soderbergh on the industry map but Miramax and Sundance as well, and going on to win the top prize at Cannes and jump-start the American indie film movement. While that movement caught fire, though, Soderbergh suffered through a string of commercial and critical flops – *Kafka* (1991), *King of the Hill* (1993), *The Underneath* (1995), *Gray's Anatomy* (1996), and *Schizopolis* (1996). He had joked in his 1989 acceptance speech for the Palme D'Or at Cannes that "it will be all downhill from here," and for nearly a decade that turned out to be precisely the case. One measure of that downhill slide came after the Academy Awards in early 1997, at the Miramax party celebrating the Oscar sweep by *The English Patient* (1996). Writer-director Anthony Minghella invited Soderbergh to the Miramax bash, and upon arrival he was denied entrance to the special VIP section, where he spied Minghella through a glass partition as a big-screen TV played trailers of Miramax's signature hits, including *sex, lies, and videotape*.

After the failure of *Schizopolis* Soderbergh took a studio assignment, *Out of Sight* for Universal, and it was this 1998 release which sparked a career revival that went into overdrive in 2000 with back-to-back critical and commercial hits, *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic* – two more mid-range studio films, both of which garnered multiple Oscar nominations (including Best Picture and Best Director), restored Soderbergh's credibility with American critics, and grossed over $200 million at the box office. *Out of Sight* also marked a career breakthrough for George Clooney, who teamed with Soderbergh to launch Section Eight, an independent company whose first production, *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), took both of their careers to the proverbial next level while cementing their partnership. That slick, all-star heist film grossed nearly half a billion dollars worldwide for Warner Bros., securing the new company's relationship with the studio and Soderbergh's standing among Hollywood's filmmaking elite. In the wake of that flurry of hits, Soderbergh has been able to make the films he wants to make on his own terms, and he's been able to get other films made as well. In 2002 alone, his signature was on an astounding seven films – five as producer, including *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes), *Insomnia* (Christopher Nolan), and Clooney's directorial debut, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*, along with two risky and vastly different projects of his own, *Full Frontal* and *Solaris*.

Soderbergh followed those dicey projects with *Ocean's Twelve* in 2004 and, after another pair of ambitious, offbeat films, *Bubble* (2005) and *The Good German* (2006), with *Ocean's Thirteen* in 2007. Both *Ocean's* installments were global hits with all-star casts (including Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Matt Damon) that ensured the financing,

creative control, and artistic license on Soderbergh's other projects – a price the film-maker has been altogether willing to pay, particularly since all involved in the *Ocean's* franchise seem to be enjoying themselves. The blockbuster *Ocean's* films and his asso-ciation with Clooney have been crucial to Soderbergh's success, obviously enough, and both are indicative of far more than his commercial instincts. Glimpsed in *sex, lies, and videotape* but not coalescing until *Out of Sight*, *The Limey* (1999), and *Traffic*, Soder-bergh has become an "actor's director" *par excellence*. He consistently gets terrific – in many cases career-best – performances out of his cast, and he is a director with whom top talent, from character actors and independent stalwarts to marquee stars, are eager to work. And like Woody Allen and the late Robert Altman, Soderbergh is also a masterful ensemble director – an artist who is at his best when handling multi-strand narratives with multiple principal characters.

Soderbergh also shares with Allen and two other veterans of the Hollywood renais-sance, Scorsese and Eastwood, an artistic fervour and an obsessive work ethic – traits that are altogether rare in contemporary Hollywood. Despite repeated announcements over the past several years that he will take a break from filmmaking and refocus his creative energies on painting, Soderbergh continues to produce and direct films at a furious pace. He remains as productive, as eclectic, and as ambitious as ever, seemingly oblivious to the industry conditions and constraints that force his contemporaries to go two to three years (or longer) between films.

As Soderbergh approaches fifty and threatens to retire (or refocus), one wonders what the coming years might hold in store, and what to make of his remarkable career. Andrew deWaard and R. Colin Tait initiated *The Cinema of Steven Soderbergh* when the filmmaker first threatened to retire, which seemed an opportune time to under-take this project. That was at least four films ago, and Soderbergh has as many in the works. Thus the authors may well be providing a mid-career assessment, although that scarcely diminishes the significance of this book, which stands as the first comprehen-sive, in-depth examination of Soderbergh's films and filmmaking. This is no mean feat, given the range and diversity of his work and his working methods. The authors note that Soderbergh has described himself as a "chameleon" due to his capacity to adapt to an array of projects and production situations – one key reason, no doubt, that critics and film scholars have shied away from Soderbergh as the subject of serious study and have been reticent to rank him among today's canonised auteurs.

deWaard and Tait display no such qualms, readily acknowledging Soderbergh's multi-faceted filmmaking career, celebrating its rich diversity while identifying the key characteristics and signature effects of his work. Indeed, the authors approach Soder-bergh as a radical text case for contemporary auteur analysis – a multivalent filmmaker who continually moves through varied modes of production and market sectors, from Hollywood to Indiewood to the fringes of the independent realm. They celebrate this mobility as a key marker of Soderbergh's singular style, while tracing the permutations of that style in each of these varied filmmaking venues. The authors celebrate, too, the risks Soderbergh has repeatedly taken in terms of both film technology and film technique – his pioneering forays into digital cinema, for instance, and his compulsive experiments with narrative continuity. They also trace the development of key motifs

in Soderbergh's films, most notably the recurrent narrative-thematic tropes of detection and disease. While virtually all movies – or all good ones, anyway – are suspense films and many of Soderbergh's films are outright detective films, deWaard and Tait show how the process of detection in a Soderbergh film, for the viewer as well as the principal characters, is operating on a far more intricate and sophisticated level than in most films. They also trace his steadily deepening fascination with corruption and contamination, whether on an individual, a communal, or a more broadly social (even global) scale. The "contagion" in his recent hit is both a medical and a social condition, and the narrative itself is an instance in which a frequent thematic undercurrent in Soderbergh's films bursts through to the surface with alarming, visceral force.

Assessing Soderbergh's eclectic career also requires deWaard and Tait to chart the development of the American film industry at large, as their subject veers from the mainstream to the margins, from global blockbusters to specialty films, from very traditional filmmaking projects to cutting-edge digital experiments. Soderbergh's work as a multi-hyphenate producer-director-cinematographer (and occasional writer, editor, composer, *et al.*) also requires them to rethink film authorship, which is a signal strength of this study. And as they examine Soderbergh as auteur, as brand-name empressario, and as "corporate revolutionary," they demonstrate how very complex the issue of authorship has become in contemporary cinema – particularly for a filmmaker who refuses to stay put. Indeed, the figure that emerges in *The Cinema of Steven Soderbergh* is an agent of constant change and relentless independence. Soderbergh may have pioneered the indie movement and learned to operate within the vastly complex machinery of conglomerate Hollywood, but he has remained a consummately free agent within an increasingly deadening, convention-bound industry. And while other top filmmakers locate their comfort zones and market niches and signature styles, Soderbergh just keeps pushing himself, his audience, and the expressive range of cinema itself.

INTRODUCTION

> Because the house always wins. Play long enough, you never change the stakes, the house takes you. Unless, when that perfect hand comes along, you bet big, then you take the house.
>
> Danny Ocean, *Ocean's Eleven*

Gambling, like cinema, is a game of chance – and endurance. The art of the long con is the ability to plan with purpose, to be patient, and when the opportunity presents itself: to pounce. Uncertainty and unpredictability unite the gambler and the film-maker, each profession more known for its spectacles than its careers. Romanticised enterprises both, the true story of gambling and cinema is one of minor acts, repeated over and over and over – in other words, labour. Prolonged labour does not lend itself to narrative though; it prefers sensational moments of exaggerated importance and overwrought imagery. The true story of gambling and filmmaking – equal parts banality and bombast – is rarely glimpsed. Instead, we have the Cincinnati Kid, as depicted by Steve McQueen in the 1965 film of the same name, a precocious young poker player who goes all in on that one all-important deal, the prototypical gambler. And we have the Sundance Kids, as formulated by James Mottram in the 2006 book also of the same name, to describe the new generation of American filmmakers who arose in the 1990s out of the Sundance Film Festival, starting with Steven Soderbergh. A trivial tale of 'mavericks taking back Hollywood,' this book – along with other titles like *Rebels on the Backlot*, *Cinema of Outsiders*, and *Down and Dirty Pictures* – mythologises the American independent film movement and obscures the true nature of filmmaking at this time. The real story, as it is wont to be, is far more complex. In particular, Steven Soderbergh – with nearly thirty films as director and dozens more as producer – is by far the most prolific filmmaker of his time, and as such, irreducible to any singular, romanticising narrative.

Despite his well-publicised and oft-mythologised debut at Sundance (then called the US Film Festival) and Cannes in 1989, Soderbergh has directed, produced, written, edited, photographed, and starred in such a diverse array of projects in his continuously evolving twenty-plus year career that he has not been pinned down by any concrete brand name. Quentin Tarantino has his violent pop-culture mash-up, David Fincher his gritty, gloomy palette, Spike Lee his political provocations, Wes Anderson his precious nostalgia, Sofia Coppola her tragic tales of youthful desperation, the Coen Brothers their darkly comic absurdity[1] – all finely-crafted artistic personas that are easily marketed and easily championed in this brand-heavy, publicity-centric era. What about Steven Soderbergh? We are hard-pressed to capture his oeuvre with a comparable encapsulation. Though he is a distinct aberration in the field of contemporary American Hollywood directors – and is responsible for more films than the combined total of his aforementioned kin – compared to his peers, there is precious little scholarly attention devoted to this important director. What accounts for this omission?

Our initial response to this question is simple: he is too inconsistent. The range of his filmmaking practice varies widely. Formally, generically, stylistically, and aesthetically, Soderbergh refuses to work within any one paradigm; in fact, he prides himself on his ability to continually experiment with new forms and styles. The scale of his films deviates considerably as well, from the humble, independent roots of *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) – and its 'spiritual sequel' *Full Frontal* (2002), which retained its minor scale but added A-list celebrities working 'for scale' – to the immense budgets of *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), and *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007). Even his digital experiments cover a wide range: minor, *Bubble* (2005); epic, *Che* (2008); and special-effects intensive, *Solaris* (2002). Finally, the success of his films, whether measured critically or commercially, fluctuates like a wild heartbeat. Considering these three factors in tandem, it should become apparent that Soderbergh is inherently unclassifiable. As critic Ty Burr elegantly summarises, his multiple 'personae can be ticked off like stations on a commuter line: neophyte genius, sophomore slumper, tasteful artiste, B-film train-wreck, committed avant-gardist, crime-film genre master, Godard's heir, king of Hollywood blockbusters, Oscar-winning directorial godhead, smug insider, and… romantic visionary.'[2]

Steven Soderbergh's story is one of constant r/evolution. His career could be conceived of as a long series of cinematic interjections from a diverse range of angles: historical, political, industrial, digital, ideological, economic, aesthetic, and textual. Having quickly moved from indie darling (*sex, lies, and videotape*) to industry pariah with a string of unsuccessful films, from *Kafka* (1991) to *Schizopolis* (1996), Soderbergh clawed his way back into relevance by learning nearly every major above-the-line creative role in filmmaking and then establishing a tenuous relationship with Hollywood, eventually resulting in the tremendously profitable *Ocean's* trilogy. Alongside this mainstream work, Soderbergh continues to carve out a niche for himself by funding his own low-key, esoteric fare.

Emblematic of many of the significant shifts within cinema in the last two decades, Soderbergh adopts and emulates the various forms emerging in the cinematic *zeitgeist*: a polished period piece, *King of the Hill* (1993); a brooding neo-noir, *The Underneath*

(1995); a Tarantino-esque crime film, *Out of Sight* (1998); a disjunctive non-linear narrative, *The Limey* (1999); an American Dogme-inspired film, *Full Frontal*; a science-fiction spectacle yet love-letter to his arthouse influences, *Solaris*; a meta-fictional reality television series, *Unscripted* (2005); a brazen pastiche, *The Good German* (2006), and a zany corporate satire, *The Informant!* (2009). Documentary has been a continual concern for Soderbergh: *Gray's Anatomy* (1996) stylises one of Spalding Gray's incomparable monologues, while *And Everything is Going Fine* (2010), released a few years following Gray's death, crafts a fitting tribute to the unique artist, presenting a mosaic of clips from throughout his life. The effect is the construction of a thoughtful narrative allowing the monologist to present his own eulogy in his own words. These are in addition to his ongoing and frequent experiments with digital filmmaking and High Definition technologies, most notably *K-Street* (2003), *Bubble*, *Che*, and *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009). His most recent features – *Contagion* (2011), *Haywire* (2012), *Magic Mike* (2012), *Side Effects* (2013), and *Behind the Candelabra* (2013) – continue this recent digital preoccupation, applied to a variety of distinct genres.

Soderbergh is an interesting object of study if only for the fact that he is the only contemporary mainstream filmmaker who affords himself the creative and financial freedoms to take such huge risks. Nominated for both *Traffic* (2000) and *Erin Brockovich* (2000), Soderbergh is only the second filmmaker in history to compete against himself and win (and lose) for the Best Director category at the Academy Awards. This significant achievement, in addition to multiple awards for his actors, was the decade-long fulfillment of the promise made with his debut, *sex, lies, and videotape*, which won the Audience Award at Sundance, the Palme D'Or at Cannes, the Independent Spirit Award for Best Director, and the Academy Award for Best Screenplay. Awards and prestige are only half the story, though, as what enamours Soderbergh to the studios – in contrast to the Michael Bays and James Camerons of the industry, or the bloated budgets of the 1970s' 'movie brat' generation – is his consistent ability to be on time and on budget.

Both a celebrated artisan and a savvy businessman, Soderbergh cashed in some chips amidst his successful run of films from *Out of Sight* to *Traffic* and established his own production company, Section Eight Productions, with his new partner in crime, George Clooney. From 2001 to 2009, Section Eight not only provided Soderbergh and Clooney more control over their own productions – as long as they continued to deliver massive global box office with the *Ocean's* trilogy – it also allowed them to facilitate production deals for challenging Hollywood fare from some like-minded directors: *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002), *Insomnia* (Christopher Nolan, 2002), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), *A Scanner Darkly* (Richard Linklater, 2006), and *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2007), amongst others. In addition, Clooney directed his first films through Section Eight: *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002) and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005). Soderbergh's documentary fixation exists in his producing role as well, including *Who is Bernard Tapie?* (Marina Zenovich, 2001), *Tribute* (Chris Currie and Rich Fox, 2001), *Playground* (Libby Spears, 2009), *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* (Marina Zenovich, 2010), and *His Way* (Douglas McGrath, 2011). In this regard, a comprehensive analysis of

Soderbergh would need to include more films than his already large body of directorial work.

To return to our question of why Soderbergh has been underexplored by contemporary film scholarship, then, we posit a second answer, in addition to the fact that he is too inconsistent: he is too complex. Thirty films, even more productions, a dizzying array of forms, styles, and themes – we are faced with the dilemma of how to approach such a complex figure. In the early days of this book's planning, we developed a series of different outlines and potential critical frameworks as we evaluated how best to construct a methodology to analyse the director's work. Reviewing these proposed structures should provide further insight into just how complex Soderbergh is as an object of study, as well as a suitable overview of the many factors at play in the director's career.

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Steven Soderbergh?: Methodology and its Discontents

> I want John Huston's career. I want a lot of movies over a long period of time. And then we'll go back, if we want to – I don't want to, but somebody else can – and sort it all out.
>
> <div align="right">Steven Soderbergh[3]</div>

> [Soderbergh] is another director of obvious significance, though of exactly what kind I remain uncertain. I cannot seem to get a firm grasp on his films.
>
> <div align="right">Robin Wood[4]</div>

One avenue of exploration to attempt 'a firm grasp' on Soderbergh's body of work would be a film-based, chronological assessment that uses in-depth textual analysis of each individual film, the standard methodology for most director-focused studies. Soderbergh has far too many films for this type of approach though; the result would be a limited survey and each chapter's analysis would suffer without the opportunity to establish larger patterns between films. A selective focus on Soderbergh's key films would be another strategy, one that reads larger issues into certain films:

1. *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989): preoccupation with film and video apparatus, contribution to American independent film
2. *Schizopolis* (1996): experimental urge, mastery of key creative roles
3. *Traffic* (2000): political resonance, networked narratives
4. *Ocean's Eleven* (2001): blockbuster impulse, high-concept celebrity
5. *Bubble* (2005): digital and industrial impact
6. *The Informant!* (2009): global vs. local
7. *Contagion* (2011): synthesis of all these concerns

However, this approach would minimise the importance of his other films – including our personal favourites, *Out of Sight* and *The Limey* – and take away from our belief that, for Soderbergh, the whole is greater than the sum of its many, many parts. Instead, a system of stages in the director's career was established:

1. Early success and experimentation: *sex, lies, and videotape* to *Schizopolis* (1989–1996)
2. Indiewood renewal: *Out of Sight*, *The Limey*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Traffic* (1998–2000)
3. Section Eight Productions (2001–07)
4. Blockbuster: *Ocean's Eleven* to *Ocean's Thirteen*
5. Esoteric: *Full Frontal* to *The Good German*
6. Digital: *Che* to current (2008–12)

These stages seemed forced and arbitrary for such a wide-ranging body of work, however, and many of the director's films cross these boundaries and do not fit so neatly into such categories. Setting aside a chronological organisation, formal patterns present themselves as a useful point of departure, as they play such a prominent role in the director's oeuvre. As one of the few contemporary filmmakers who often performs multiple key creative roles on his films, Soderbergh's 'alter-egos' and pseudonyms provide a convenient categorisation:

1. Peter Andrews (his father's first and middle name): Director of Photography
2. Mary Ann Bernard (his mother's maiden name): Editor
3. Sam Lowry (the hapless hero of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* [1985]): Screenwriter
4. Section Eight (military term for discharge due to mental instability): Producer[5]

Formal structures would provide a suitable jumping off point; a specific focus on editing, for example, could lead into a fruitful analysis of the director's preoccupation with memory and consciousness. But again, a formal schematic is too limiting, even if it is broadened to include the digital, industrial, and performative ways in which Soderbergh is experimental. Genre is another potential organising principle, but this would prove as unwieldy a list as the films themselves: noir, crime, comedy, political, period, melodrama, biopic, social problem, documentary, docudrama, psychological, and thriller, not to mention the various combinations and hybrids, of which most of his films are to some degree.

Conceptual and thematic organisation proved to be the only way to comprehensively cover all the issues we wished to include, but this presents its own problems. Typically, following the money is a useful enterprise, and the ways in which Soderbergh's films are financed and/or distributed is a valid categorical tool:

1. Blockbuster: Warner Brothers, Universal Studios, and 20th Century Fox – *Ocean's* trilogy, *Out of Sight*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Solaris*
2. Indiewood: 'mini-majors' like Miramax, Warner Independent, and USA – *sex, lies, and videotape*, *Kafka*, *King of the Hill*, *The Underneath*
3. Independent: Artisan, Jersey Films, IFC, Northern Arts, Relativity Media, Nick Wechsler Productions – *The Limey*, *Gray's Anatomy*, *Haywire*, *Magic Mike*
4. Socially-conscious: Participant Media – *The Informant!*, *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *Syriana*, *Contagion*

In this scene in *sex, lies, and videotape*, the camera zooms into a static-laden screen, then cuts to the 'live' events as they were being recorded, revealing Soderbergh's signature preoccupations with complex editing, imperfect cinematography and shifting temporalities.
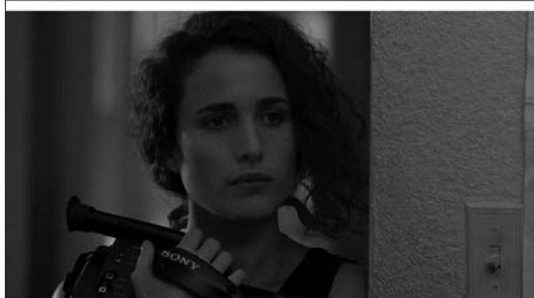
5. Television: HBO and Showtime – *Fallen Angels* (1993–95), *K-Street*, *Unscripted*
6. Digital: Magnolia Pictures, 2929 Entertainment, and HDNet – *Bubble*, *The Girlfriend Experience*

Again this appeared too prescriptive, but also inaccurate, as many of his productions involve companies from across the spectrum; for instance, *Erin Brockovich* was produced through Jersey Films but distributed by Universal Studios and Columbia Pictures. Many of Soderbergh's films blur the lines between these divisions of production, and many exhibit elements of one within another. *Solaris*, though large in budget, is humble in its arthouse aspirations; *sex, lies, and videotape*, though small in scale, went on to gross twenty times as much as its budget. The economic realities of contemporary Hollywood are far too complex for such a reductive categorisation.

Confronted with these many tensions, we developed a series of binaries with which to grapple the many dualistic forces within Soderbergh's work:

1. Independent vs. Mainstream
2. Experimental vs. Traditional

3. Form vs. Function
4. Art vs. Commerce
5. Reality vs. Artifice
6. Insider vs. Outsider

This schematic appeared the closest to what we hoped to accomplish, as it would allow us to explore the many formal and thematic concerns within a larger framework, and mix a variety of critical approaches along the way.

Concurrent to the planning and writing of this book, we were honoured to be included in an edited collection entitled *The Philosophy of Steven Soderbergh*, the first substantial book to deal with the director from a scholarly perspective. Its solution to the Soderbergh complexity dilemma is the formation of wide-ranging thematic clusters:

1. Knowledge, Truth, Sexuality
2. Genre, Temporality, Intertextuality
3. Self-Reflexivity, Self-Centeredness, Autobiography
4. Politics, Morals, Methodology
5. Simulacra, Space, *Solaris*

Due to the nature of a collected work such as this – sixteen individual authors working independently on individual films – each essay exists as an island, with bridges formed after the fact by the editors' introductions and categorisation. All of these essays are highly refined, insightful analyses (which we will refer to throughout the rest of this book), and we cannot recommend the book enough. However, a series of individual arguments and analyses paints a fragmented mosaic of the director. As appropriate as a mosaic structure is in this case, with a director as fragmented as Soderbergh, only a dedicated, comprehensive study can hope to connect the multitude of dots that Soderbergh's prolific career has established. Rather than a series of islands, then, we hope to construct an ecosystem out of these many concerns, fostering a space of diverse interaction. Instead of choosing one of the proposed structures, we opted to put them all in contact with each other, in an effort to produce a holistic picture of the director.

The idea of an intertwined, multifarious methodology seemed appropriate for a director whose work is so multifarious itself. At the risk of descending into *too* convoluted an analysis, potentially confusing the reader, we have structured the book in a very regimented manner, as a series of nested dialectics. The book is divided into three parts, each of which contains three chapters, each of which orients around three main points in dialectic tension. The relation between chapters and parts is also dialectical, so the groupings of chapters speak to each other (e.g. the tension between chapters one and two produces chapter three), as do the overall parts (Part Three is the result of Parts One and Two). With this structure, we are provided with the freedom to establish larger patterns among the films and issues, yet are contained within a distinct trajectory. Juxtaposing this wide array of factors and characteristics together in an attempt to fully capture the many contradictory elements in his career, we realised the third and final answer to our question of why Soderbergh has been largely ignored by contempo-

rary film scholarship. In addition to being too inconsistent and too complex, he is too paradoxical. There is no solving a problem like Soderbergh, only revelling in the problem's many contradictory impulses. A method embracing this paradox is necessary.

Dialectics, as a method of reasoned argument in search of truth using the conflict of opposing forces, dates back to at least Ancient Greece, and is generalised as a process that produces a synthesised viewpoint: (hypo)thesis plus antithesis equals synthesis. As one of the basic foundations of philosophy, the dialectic method is deceptively simple yet immanently complex. For Slavoj Žižek, the dialectic is an explicit *acknowledgement of contradiction*. 'Far from being a story of its progressive overcoming,' Žižek claims as his thesis in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), 'dialectics is for Hegel a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts – "absolute knowledge" denotes a subjective position which finally accepts "contradiction" as an internal condition of every identity.'[6] It is our contention that Soderbergh's body of work represents an acute opportunity to investigate such a contradictory cinematic condition through the dialectical method.[7] In short, Soderbergh's oeuvre is *paradox in praxis*.

Part One – 'Author, Brand, Guerrilla' – is comprised of three different analyses of authorship that explore the different ways in which Soderbergh creates film. Chapter one is a traditional auteur analysis, looking at the conflicting characteristics of Soderbergh's cinematography, narrative, editing, and performance. The overall result of this multi-faceted style produces what we call a 'dialectical signature.' Chapter two considers extratextual factors of Soderbergh's filmmaking practice, outlining the issues of finance and fame that must be negotiated by the 'sellebrity auteur.' Soderbergh and Clooney's production company, Section Eight, provides a suitable example of this economic position in filmmaking. In chapter three, we look at the legacy of Third Cinema and find elements of 'guerrilla,' 'imperfect,' and 'minor' filmmaking within Soderbergh's vast body of work.

Part Two analyses the role of the detective in Soderbergh's body of work, exploring three particular varieties of detective characters and formal strategies that concern 'History, Memory, Text'. Chapter four investigates the 'schizophrenic detective' in *The Limey*, and its accompanying themes of nostalgia, memory, and influence. *Solaris* and its 'psychoanalytic detective' are the focus of inquiry in chapter five, where issues of temporal, psychological, and societal trauma are rendered bare onscreen. Chapter six is concerned with history, and explores the 'intertextual detective' that mediates the past through cinema in *The Good German*, a film that embodies the many interrelated factors at work in Soderbergh's oeuvre.

Part Three – 'Crime, Capital, Globalisation' – contains three genre-based arguments and is concerned with the form and socio-economic-political meaning of Soderbergh's crime films. In chapter seven, the classification 'New Crime Wave' is given to the broad resurgence of Hollywood crime films during the 1990s, and Soderbergh's unique 'anti-crime' iteration within it. A close reading of *Out of Sight* illustrates the alternative values system that Soderbergh proffers with his criminal characters. Contextualised by the heist film genre, chapter eight reinterprets the *Ocean's* trilogy as an allegory of capital which produces a utopian undercurrent to its blockbuster caper. Chapter nine isolates a unique cycle of films utilising networked narratives, docudrama, and themes

of social justice that we term the 'global social problem film.' We outline this sub-genre's characteristics and iconography in *Traffic* (the first film in the cycle), *Syriana*, *The Informant!*, and *Contagion*.

In addition to this regimented trajectory, structured by nested three-part dialectics, the subtitle of the book acts as an overarching thematic. 'When I finished the script, I did not know what I was going to call it,' Soderbergh recalls about his debut film. 'I asked myself how someone like Graham, direct and honest, would describe the film. And I thought about these three words, which by the way seem to summarize all the themes of the film, which are also the themes of modern America: the selling of sex, the practice of telling lies, and the invasion by the video.'[8] Twenty years later, we can imagine Graham updating this triad for twenty-first-century America: indie sex, corporate lies, and digital videotape.

By 'indie sex,' we refer to the way 'independence' and 'indie' have by and large become mere markers of distinction, and valuable marketing properties within contemporary American culture, the film industry in particular. Sex sells, and so does independence. 'Indie sex' can also refer to Soderbergh's debut, which combined both elements, and to two of his most brilliantly crafted sequences: the non-linear sex scenes featuring his muse (George Clooney), with Jennifer Lopez in *Out of Sight* and Natascha McElhone in *Solaris*; we will analyse both scenes in depth. 'Corporate lies' is fairly self-explanatory, but Soderbergh works to expose them and promote social justice in a variety of ways: with a linear melodrama and an endearing performance by Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*, through a complex, globe-spanning networked narrative in *Syriana*, using digital cameras and real politicians in the faux-documentary *K-Street*, profiling the controversial enigma that is *Che*, utilising satire and enjoyable retro absurdity in *The Informant!*, and simulating a global pandemic with a networked narrative in *Contagion*. Finally, we have 'digital videotape,' which has come a long way since the 'primitive' video used in Soderbergh's debut. An early-adopter, Soderbergh has used the latest digital cameras throughout his career, from mini-DV on *Full Frontal* to the 'ultra high definition' RED One camera on *Che*, *The Informant!*, and *Contagion*. The apparatus of cinema and video is a recurring diegetic motif within his body of work, emblematic of the way mediation occupies a central role within American society.

Because Soderbergh is too inconsistent, too complex, and too paradoxical, critical analysis of his work requires a wide-ranging investigation into underlying assumptions of concepts as diverse as authorship, independent cinema, genre, capital, globalisation, trauma, and history. We move in and out of these concepts, returning to them throughout the book from different perspectives. We also approach the films in the same way, which might get repetitive at times, as we briefly recap certain scenes or ideas in an effort for chapters to be able to stand on their own. In order to avoid lengthy plot descriptions and jump right into the films at any time, we have appended an in-depth filmography to the end of the book and would suggest all but the most serious Soderbergh-philes begin there, if only to briefly browse through the dozens of films that he has directed and produced. We have also set up a website at www.cinema ofstevensoderbergh.com that contains an extended filmography along with clips and

full-colour images to accompany the scene analyses we will enact over the course of the book. It is a large corpus that we take as our subject matter, and we will not be offering any biographical trajectory or plot summaries as we go. There is little time to explain the rules of the game; we're going 'all in' on an analytic heist.

With such a diverse, multivalent object of study, *The Cinema of Steven Soderbergh* aims to provide not just a critical overview and interpretation of Soderbergh's career, but a 'criminal' investigation into many of the central concerns that colour both Soderbergh's oeuvre and the contemporary cinematic culture at large. Just as Soderbergh bets big when that perfect hand comes along, exploiting his creative and industrial connections for each new project, we intend to use Soderbergh to perform our own theoretical 'heist.' We are encouraged by Theodor Adorno to commit such an act: 'Dialectics as a philosophical mode of proceeding is the attempt to untie the knot of paradoxicality by the oldest means of enlightenment: the ruse.'[9] For us, Soderbergh is not just a prolific author and purveyor of the long con; he is a fertile site in which to witness and examine the circulation of some of the key cultural, social, aesthetic, and technological ideas of the last two decades. He is not merely the quintessential auteur *of* our time, but the quintessential auteur *for* our time, and all its noisy, incomplete, digital fragmentation.

Notes

1   Spike Jonze his satirical eccentricity, P.T. Anderson his disciplined formalism, David Lynch his nightmarish symbolism, Christopher Nolan his darkened subjectivity – we could go on, but the point is well established: most contemporary American directors stick to what they know. Admittedly, they do this very well, but rarely do they venture beyond their wheelhouse, at least in comparison to Soderbergh.

2   Ty Burr, '*Solaris* Remake is a Space Odyssey into the Human Heart,' *Boston Globe*, November 27, 2002, D1.

3   Anthony Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh: Interviews*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 106.

4   Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan – and Beyond* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003), xxxviii–xl.

5   It should be noted that Soderbergh has also acted as producer and executive producer on many other films outside of the Section Eight enterprise.

6   Slavoj Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso 1989), 6.

7   We acknowledge that the application of the dialectical method to a filmmaker's *oeuvre* is not in itself unique or necessarily new; for an example, see James Monaco's application of this method to François Truffaut's work in *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 47. Rather than the systematic methodology that we apply, Monaco's comments refer mostly to a possible 'pleasure' for Truffaut in having his films received in dialectical opposition.

8   Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh: Interviews*, 20.

9   Theodor W. Adorno. *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 141.