

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF STEVEN SODERBERGH



EDITED BY  
R. BARTON PALMER AND STEVEN M. SANDERS

# **THE PHILOSOPHY OF STEVEN SODERBERGH**

Edited by  
**R. Barton Palmer  
and Steven M. Sanders**

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

Copyright © 2011 by The University Press of Kentucky

Scholarly publisher for the Commonwealth,  
serving Bellarmine University, Berea College, Centre College of Kentucky,  
Eastern Kentucky University, The Filson Historical Society, Georgetown College,  
Kentucky Historical Society, Kentucky State University, Morehead State  
University, Murray State University, Northern Kentucky University, Transylvania  
University, University of Kentucky, University of Louisville, and Western  
Kentucky University.  
All rights reserved.

*Editorial and Sales Offices:* The University Press of Kentucky  
663 South Limestone Street, Lexington, Kentucky 40508-4008  
www.kentuckypress.com

15 14 13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The philosophy of Steven Soderbergh / edited by R. Barton Palmer and Steven M. Sanders.

p. cm. — (Philosophy of popular culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8131-2662-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Soderbergh, Steven, 1963—Criticism and interpretation. I. Palmer, R. Barton, 1946— II. Sanders, Steven, 1945—  
PN1998.3.S593P55 2010  
791.4302'33092dc—22

2010036022

This book is printed on acid-free recycled paper meeting  
the requirements of the American National Standard  
for Permanence in Paper for Printed Library Materials.



Manufactured in the United States of America.



Member of the Association of  
American University Presses

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

*R. Barton Palmer and Steven M. Sanders*

## Part 1. Knowledge, Truth, Sexuality

Knowledge, Truth, and Thought Experiments in *Schizopolis* and *sex, lies, and videotape* 13

*David Rodríguez-Ruiz*

Love, Truth, and the Medium in *sex, lies, and videotape* 29

*Yannis Tzioumakis*

Amplified Discourse and Desire in *sex, lies, and videotape* 51

*Murray Pomerance*

## Part 2. Temporality, Intertextuality, Genre

Alain Resnais Meets Film Noir in *The Underneath* and *The Limey* 69

*R. Barton Palmer*

Consciousness, Temporality, and the Crime-Revenge Genre in *The Limey* 91

*Geoff King*

Intertextuality, Broken Mirrors, and *The Good German* 107

*Andrew deWaard*

Remade by Steven Soderbergh 121

*Aaron Baker*

## Part 3. Self-Reflexivity, Self-Centeredness, Autobiography

Philosophical Reflections on Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka* 145

*Ivo Ritzer*

Responsibility and Self-Centered Narration in *Erin Brockovich* 159

*Andrew Patrick Nelson*

*Schizopolis* as Philosophical Autobiography 173

*Drew Morton*

#### **Part 4. Politics, Morals, Methodology**

Mr. Soderbergh Goes to Washington 197

*Steven M. Sanders*

Schizoanalyzing the Informant 213

*David Sterritt*

Competing Modes of Capital in *Ocean's Eleven* 231

*R. Colin Tait*

An Ethical Analysis of *Traffic* 247

*Shai Biderman and William J. Devlin*

#### **Part 5. Simulacra, Space, *Solaris***

The Philosophy of Space and Memory in *Solaris* 267

*Douglas McFarland*

*Solaris*, Cinema, and Simulacra 281

*Michael Valdez Moses*

Contributors 305

Index 309

# INTERTEXTUALITY, BROKEN MIRRORS, AND *THE GOOD GERMAN*

*Andrew deWaard*

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

—Walter Benjamin, Thesis V in  
“Theses on the Philosophy of History”

## **The Blend of History**

In an interview a few years before beginning production on *The Good German* (2006), director Steven Soderbergh related his formal and stylistic promiscuity to his desire to make an innovative “leap” within the medium of film. Soderbergh is searching for “another level,” and one idea he has is to tell a story spanning the entire twentieth century and then “cut it up into ten ten-minute sections. You pick a year from each of those decades. In each year, let’s say the 1930s decade, you shoot in the aesthetic of *The Great Train Robbery*. In the teens, you shoot in the style of D. W. Griffith. In the twenties, you shoot in the style of the silent films. Each section is done in the aesthetic of that period” (quoted in Richardson). Four years later, the trans-historical spirit of just such a formal undertaking would be realized with *The Good German*. If Soderbergh were to have continued that train of thought for his dream project, listing styles according to decade, surely he would have chosen the sultry American film noirs of the forties.<sup>1</sup> *The Good German* certainly focuses its brazen pastiche on 1940s-era film noirs such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *The Third Man* (Carol

Reed, 1949), but like the noirs themselves, the cinematic lineage goes back further and continues down the line as well. Film noir is intimately tied to German expressionism, so perhaps we can assume Soderbergh would have chosen this style for the twenties and thirties, before returning stateside for the noirs. From there, *The Good German* skips over to the seventies for a neo-noir, *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), which is itself nostalgically set in the thirties. The penultimate stop on Soderbergh's history travelogue is the nineties, in which *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) would reinvigorate the use of black-and-white cinematography within Hollywood and begin a minor resurgence in Holocaust memorial, affixing it (some would say appropriating it) as a key site for American trauma and rebirth. Spielberg himself would use a multitude of forms, styles, and genres in his self-described "authentic" (quoted in Russell 78) portrayal of the forties, so perhaps we can imagine that when Soderbergh arrived at his tenth decade and tenth style, the first of the new century, he chose *neo-meta*. This decade would be *The Good German*.

Midway through the film, there is a brief exchange between Jake (George Clooney) and Levi (Dominic Comperatore), a disabled Jewish Holocaust survivor and shop owner. "What happened to you?" asks Jake, to which Levi responds, "An experiment, to see if you can transplant a bone from one man into another. It turns out you can't. . . . How about a camera? Rolleiflex. The old ones used to turn the image upside-down in the viewfinder. Little mirror sets it right." This offhand comment is of little relevance to the film's plot but is an explicit, literal embodiment of the central intertextual tension in the director's work: Soderbergh's philosophy of history is predicated on polyphonic mediation. Levi's suggestion to "turn the image upside-down" in order to "[set] it right" operates on two levels. Formally, Soderbergh emulates and simulates myriad cinematic styles and forms, the 1940s film noir of Michael Curtiz in particular, "transplanting" these cinematic methodologies from one era into another. Thematically, Soderbergh performs a deft intertextual and intermedial negotiation of mediated history. Levi's innocent sales pitch—"How about a camera?"—has been the prolific American director's continual refrain for twenty films over twenty years. Soderbergh, occupying the role of director of photography, as well as director and editor, presents the "POV of a DOP" in a distinctly intertextual assemblage of style, theme, and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> *The Good German*, a morality play about historical guilt, is experienced as a multiplicity of mediations; Soderbergh is not just shining a light into the abyss of American war crime complicity but tak-

ing his camera with him and editing the footage together into a nonlinear, intertextual blend of history itself.

Francis Fukuyama's unfortunate declaration of "the end of history" was premature, to say the least, but rather than a "triumph" of liberal democracy at the end of the twentieth century, might we instead ponder the "triumph" of information communication technology, digital networks, and vast cultural industrial production? Ours is an era of unparalleled access to the documents and artifacts of history, as well as the means to interact with them in art and culture. Surely the end of history is yet to be written, but the writing of history itself has morphed, taking on the form of polyphonic dispersion: "the blend of history." Benjamin's famed angel of history—for whom a storm "irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward" (Thesis IX)—is now thrust forward by the last century's gramophone records, magnetic tapes, magazines, videotapes, and film reels. The new century brings digital debris, and the angel of history is awash in a sea of ones and zeroes. Nevertheless, the angel of history as a metaphor is limited by its linearity. Time itself may be a physical, linear constant, but history certainly is not; it is a variable, a battleground, a montage. Rather, Benjamin's lasting insight comes in an earlier thesis, quoted in the epigraph, in which he proclaims the true picture of history to be a momentary flicker, evoking the apparatus of cinema. But how can it "threaten to disappear irretrievably" if it appears only for a brief moment? Perhaps Benjamin had it backward and we should "turn the image upside-down in the viewfinder" to rewrite his maxim: every image of the present that is not recognized by the past as one of its own concerns threatens to reappear ad infinitum.

### **Steven Soderbergh, Intertextual Auteur**

Not since the self-righteously self-reflexive days of the French New Wave has there been a provocateur of *ciné-écriture* quite like Steven Soderbergh. While Quentin Tarantino may hold the crown as postmodern poster boy and master of *playing* homage, his collage-by-numbers approach remains fixed on the surface, content to merely steal and remix with an unmatched panache. Soderbergh, on the contrary, plunges into the depths of technologically mediated subjectivity, projecting his stories from behind the camera and *through* the camera. Quite literally, as the cinematographer on many of his films, Soderbergh's visions are textbook examples of "form = func-



tion.”<sup>3</sup> There is no divorcing style from content in any of his outings. Often explicitly embodied in a diegetic camera, the recurring motif of mediation and cinematic subjectivity is seen throughout the entirety of this camera man’s oeuvre.

In his breakthrough debut, the Palme d’Or–winning *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), Soderbergh’s preoccupation with the camera is channeled through the character of Graham (James Spader), a traumatized Gen-Xer who persuades women to confess their sexual histories on videotape. Soderbergh’s nonlinear editing signature makes its first appearance here as well, with a cross-medium flashback structure juxtaposing grainy videotape with polished film, accompanied by a schizophrenic soundtrack overlaying dialogue with disjunctive aplomb. *Full Frontal* (2002), billed as the “spiritual sequel” to *sex, lies, and videotape*, would rekindle this dichotomy while pushing the meta to its limit: converging stories set in Hollywood reveal the film-within-a-film structure to be contained within yet another film. Partnering with HDNet, Soderbergh turned the traditional release-pattern strategy on its head with his high-definition digital video experiment *Bubble* (2005) (see Tait). Pairing together his most recent outings, we get *sex, lies, and digital videotape* in the form of *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009), a cerebral yet intimate experimental film featuring adult film star Sasha Grey, and *Che* (2008), a 258-minute bio-epic about Ernesto “Che” Guevara, shot on the “revolutionary” RED One digital camera. Other formalist provocations of mediation include remakes that are more akin to remixes—*The Underneath* (1995), *Solaris* (2002), *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001)—and adaptations that bear little resemblance to their source material—*Kafka* (1991), *King of the Hill* (1993), and *Traffic* (2000). Transtextually, Soderbergh will borrow a character, such as Ray Nicolette (Michael Keaton) from *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino, 1997) for *Out of Sight* (1998), or borrow footage from another film, such as the deft usage of a young Terence Stamp from *Poor Cow* (Ken Loach, 1967) in *The Limey* (1999).

*Schizopolis* (1996), the director’s “magnum failed opus,” for which he was director, writer, editor, photographer, and performer of multiple characters, was critically destroyed but Criterion Collection–enshrined; it pushed the limits of schizophrenic timelines, camera trickery, and absurdist humor to a point far beyond any reasonable viewer’s attention span (the film grossed \$10,580).<sup>4</sup> Failure is not an uncommon theme in Soderbergh’s career—a fair number of his films have failed to recoup their budgets or impress critics. On the other hand, when he is entrusted with a big budget, Soderbergh deliv-

ers: *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Traffic*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), and *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007) collectively pulled in at least \$2 billion at the box office, and that's not considering DVD and ancillary sales, which often amount to the lion's share of a film's revenue.<sup>5</sup> When he fails, he fails spectacularly, but by the same token, when he makes a blockbuster, he makes a *block-busting* blockbuster that affords him the opportunity to experiment on other projects. The size, scale, and success shift from film to film more dramatically in his work than probably any other contemporary director's does, but what has never diminished is Soderbergh's dedication to visual experimentation and stylistic craftsmanship.

From within Soderbergh's overarching visual and stylistic thematic of cinematic subjectivity, we can locate a narrower preoccupation: the power of mediation on the process of history and memory. Along with the video-neurosis and mediated trauma of the aforementioned Graham, we could add protagonists such as Aaron (Jesse Bradford), the starving Depression-era adolescent of *King of the Hill* whose hunger and disorientation are rendered with increasingly subjectivized fisheye lenses and high-speed film stock (which results in slow-mo "streaking" of the colors within the film), as well as Wilson (Terence Stamp) from *The Limey*. Soderbergh's dexterous discontinuity editing, in conjunction with chameleonlike cinematography and a fresh take on the crime caper (the same formula that renewed Soderbergh's box office potential in the previous year's *Out of Sight* and would lead to box office pay dirt with the *Ocean's* trilogy), results in *The Limey* offering up a complex character study in repressed guilt and relived trauma. A bookending flashback structure reverses the viewer's expectations, and subjective memories are given new temporalities, including bleached, flared film stock for impossible memories and the aforementioned *Poor Cow* footage to poach an imaginary past.<sup>6</sup>

Chris Kelvin (George Clooney) is another traumatized protagonist for this list. His journey to Solaris finds him not only sharing a bed with his dead wife but confronted with the realization of his own complicity in her suicide. The film's psychodrama plays out as the titular planet presents Kelvin with various moments of his past, building composites of his loved one out of his own subjectively tainted memories. Needless to say, one of the central ongoing preoccupations throughout Soderbergh's work is the unique power of temporal mediation, particularly as it pertains to historical trauma rendered through cinema. What would the result be, then, when this time-traveling "Man with a Movie Camera" set his sights and fixed focal length lenses on the century's most pivotal trauma, the Holocaust?

### **Intertextual Past and Presence in *The Good German***

Adapted from Joseph Kanon's novel released in 2001, *The Good German* is set in Berlin during the Potsdam negotiations immediately following the Allied victory in the European theater of World War II. Jake, a war correspondent previously stationed in Berlin, returns to Germany to cover the conference and seek out his lost love, the German Jew Lena (Cate Blanchett), who is currently being prostituted by Tully (Tobey Maguire), an American racketeer soon found murdered. The titular "Good German," Lena's husband, Emil (Christian Oliver), holds the proof that a German scientist being granted amnesty by America is a war criminal, having employed slave labor at Camp Dora in order to produce the V-2 rocket. Jake is drawn into the American cover-up, as they race to capture the German scientists for Operation Overcast/Paperclip before the Soviets can. The plot appears to refer to the lives of Arthur Rudolph and Wernher von Braun, German scientists who were successfully expatriated to America to work for NASA but who never stood trial for their complicity in activities at the Mittelbau-Dora/Mittelwerk concentration camps. Guilt is a thematic motif both on an individual level, as revealed in Lena's personal tale of survival and betrayal, as well as collectively, as the American whitewashing of war criminals is rendered bare.

Before considering how *The Good German* blends so many forms, styles, and genres, we might first analyze the peculiar production manner Soderbergh used to create the film. Not content to merely set the film in the 1940s, Soderbergh sought to produce the film as if he was actually in the 1940s, using the equipment that would have been available to him on a studio back lot at the time: fixed focal-length lenses, boom mics, rear projection, and incandescent lighting. The luxuries available to contemporary filmmakers—zoom lenses, wireless mics, computer-generated imagery, complex lighting rigs—were forbidden on set, and as a result, Soderbergh forced himself to explore the constraints of the classical Hollywood style. The lack of wireless mics, for example, meant that actors had to clearly enunciate and crisply deliver their lines, resulting in very direct, presentational performances unlike the intimate, Method-influenced acting popular in current American cinema. Limiting himself to camera techniques of the time, Soderbergh shot with a single camera, often eschewing close-ups and reverse shots in favor of master shots that create a different dynamic for staging and character interaction. Shorter lenses, which mean a wider field of vision, emphasize this more theatrical space, as does the stiff, disciplined camera movement.

The opening credits sequence of the film uses archival footage, mugging for the camera, film production clapboards, and a visible projector gate to *frame* this film as an exercise in formalism.

Add soft-edged wipe cuts and a 1.85:1 ratio (1.33:1 on DVD, representing Soderbergh's original vision) to this list of archaic production techniques and *The Good German* is a curious beast in a contemporary multiplex; the initial intent for the film was even more bizarre. According to Kenn Rabin, archivist for the production, the "original plan for the film was that every shot would be digitally placed over archival footage. So that literally, the film would be 'shot' in 1945 Berlin; the actors would be green-screened over archival" (quoted in Bernard 334). Budgetary constraints prevented such a (potentially disastrous) undertaking, relegating archival footage use to rear-projection scenes, but the "millions of feet of archival footage" Rabin found were assembled into a computer database, virtually constructing a version of Berlin-in-ruins that Soderbergh and his crew, particularly the art department, could study and emulate. The advantages of modern-day technology were not completely renounced but instead *blended* together in a technical hybrid of past/present and fact/fiction.<sup>7</sup> In a testament to this unique blend, what little archival footage was actually utilized for rear-projection scenes in *The Good German* included unused location film shot by Billy Wilder for *A Foreign Affair* (1948), a film noir about a femme fatale (played by Marlene Dietrich, a clear source of inspiration for Cate Blanchett's sultry, deep-voiced Lena) suspected to have ties to Nazi war criminals in postwar Berlin.

Which brings us to the key intertexts of *The Good German*: the film noir classics *Casablanca* and *The Third Man*. Soderbergh is not so much slyly nodding to *Casablanca* as he is wildly waving his arms in homage. The promotional poster for *The Good German* is a direct recreation of the poster for *Casablanca*, replacing Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman with George Clooney and Cate Blanchett, just as the film does. Beyond this mere paratextual homage, however, lies a far deeper engagement with the Michael Curtiz classic. One of the most iconic scenes in Hollywood history, if not *the* most iconic, the conclusion to *Casablanca* is lifted by Soderbergh for his own finale, complete with rainy runway setting and identically framed getaway plane: "Blanchett is wearing an Ingrid Bergman cloche hat and Clooney is desperately trying to think for the both of them" (Hoberman). But whereas *Casablanca* ends on a timeless, romantic note of patriotic sacrifice, *The Good German* ends with Lena's somber confession: she identified twelve Jews to the Gestapo in order to save herself. Tully foolishly contributes to

the burgeoning criminal underworld, Jake inadvertently participates in the American whitewashing of suspected war criminals, and Lena cooperates in the Holocaust; the problems of three little people do amount to a hill of beans in this uncensored world of postwar moral relativism.

While the film does share numerous formal similarities with Hollywood studio productions of the 1940s, *The Good German* also deviates from this style in certain ways we can attribute to the influence of another key intertext: the 1949 British noir *The Third Man*. Unlike the softer three-point lighting of *Casablanca*, *The Third Man* is rendered in heavy chiaroscuro, with high contrast between its rich blacks and blasted whites, with cast shadows the size of buildings. We can trace this influence back to a longer lineage of other urban-based black-and-white films: the Kammerspiel movement classic *The Last Laugh* (*Der letzte Mann*, F. W. Murnau, 1924), the late German expressionist grit of *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), and the war-ravaged Italian neo-realism of *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, Roberto Rossellini, 1945), to name but a few of the seminal texts. The extreme canted angles of *The Third Man* (and German expressionism before it) are seen in *The Good German* as well; a particularly poignant composition has Lena at a low, canted angle with the camera tracking back and framing her against an enormous poster of Stalin.

But the influence of *The Third Man* is felt in more than just cinematography. There is the setting: postwar Vienna was divided into four districts, one for each occupying power, just as Berlin is in *The Good German*. A key location—the dramatically lit, labyrinthine sewer system—is borrowed for Emil’s hideout. But most significantly, we have the character of Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten), the writer of pulp Western novels, who arrives in Vienna and is enmeshed in a convoluted mystery when attempting to seek out an old friend, just as Jake, a journalist, arrives in Berlin and is led astray searching for Lena. A diverse range of media is encountered by each media practitioner: Holly attends a play, listens to a lecture, sneaks into a cinema, watches a slideshow, listens to a jukebox, and is the special invited guest of a book club, while Jake listens to a radio broadcast of the peace conference, learns about Hiroshima from a newspaper, is offered a camera, and watches a newsreel of Stalin, Truman, and Churchill. There is even a rendezvous at the “kino” (cinema). Each film carefully highlights the constant mediation that is at play; Holly renders this self-reflexive motif explicit when he proclaims that he is writing a new book, a murder mystery called *The Third Man*, which will “mix fact and fiction.” A third man of a different sort is also detectable within Soderbergh’s trans-historical mash-up. While few reviews

of *The Good German* failed to make the connection to *Casablanca* and *The Third Man*, another key intertext has, to my (and Google's) knowledge, been completely missed: *The Devil Makes Three* (Andrew Marton, 1952).<sup>8</sup> Consider this familiar plot: American soldier returns to bombed-out German city after the war to seek out woman who has become jaded barmaid at sleazy nightclub and is selling her "company" in order to survive. In *The Devil Makes Three*, the woman, Wilhelmina (Pier Angeli), is the only survivor of a family of "good Germans" who saved Capt. Jeff Eliot (Gene Kelly) when his plane was shot down over Munich. A hint of moral relativity and the complexity of war is glimpsed when Wilhelmina expresses hatred toward the Americans, who were the perpetrators of the air raid that killed her family. The film is then pushed into action mode when a gang of Nazis on motorcycles attempt to reorganize the Third Reich by retrieving "Nazi booty," and Gene Kelly as Eliot must save the day and win the girl, with nary an opportunity to sing or dance in the entire film. Still, *The Devil Makes Three* is an intriguing postwar film, not least because its climactic chase scene is filmed inside the ruins of the Berghof, Hitler's house in the Alps (Miller). Without knowing if the strangely similar plot set-up was a conscious theft or not, one wonders if Soderbergh perhaps seeks to pay tribute to this charming, forgotten film and historical document.

I catalog this multitude of references and homages in *The Good German* not to engage in some parlor game of intertextual source finding but in an effort to map the multi-meta-generic structure of the film which I believe is at the root of Soderbergh's philosophy of history. How appropriate then, that the final, key intertext at play is *Chinatown*, a film seen by both John G. Cawelti and Fredric Jameson as the marker of a new breed of genre film. For Cawelti, it is the exemplary case of "generic transformation" and "generic exhaustion" (198), while for Jameson it represents a debilitating "metageneric production" (84). It is fitting that noir is used as the site for this generic discussion, for noir remains a contested term, its constitution as style, genre, or mode never finalized, its formulation already at a distance, its discovery a retroactive act by French critics. For Richard Gilmore, in his exploration of *Chinatown*, this means that "American film noir was always neo-noir" (119). *The Good German*, then, in also naming its protagonist Jake, and also marring him with a symbolic facial wound, can only be seen as a reflection of a reflection of a reflection—"neo" three times removed. Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown in postwar Berlin too. And as Lena's femme fatale informs us, for our purposes referring to the meta-generic abyss the film finds itself in: "You can never really get out of Berlin."

## Broken Mirrors

In a promotional interview for *The Good German*, Soderbergh wondered what films of the 1940s would have looked like if filmmakers in Hollywood were not constrained by the Production Code. If they had had the creative freedom to explore sexuality and violence, how different would their depiction of the war have been? This is the central pivot point of *The Good German*, which recasts this classical Hollywood 1940s visual style with contemporary permissiveness: Tully aggressively engages in graphic, rear-entry sex with Lena, Jake is savagely beaten on numerous occasions, and crude language is used throughout the film. “It will be interesting,” Soderbergh pondered, “to see if people can wrap their minds around the *blending* of these two ideas” (“Interview,” emphasis added). If box office and critical reception is any indication, the answer was a resounding no, but the historical intervention remains. Upon its release, *Casablanca* was received as blatant propaganda; less than a year previous it had been seen as a way to bolster support for America’s entry into the war, with *Variety* pronouncing it “splendid anti-Axis propaganda” (*Variety* staff). A simplistic tale at such a time is understandable, but what about that *other* contemporary black-and-white Hollywood Holocaust film that pastiches film noir?

A veritable academic cottage industry has arisen since the release of *Schindler’s List* to decry and condemn the social and historical irresponsibility of Spielberg’s opus. We needn’t rehearse such criticisms here, save the simple fact that Spielberg is unable to present the Holocaust as anything but spectacle. Because Spielberg is so enchanted with the power of his own cinema, he renders the Holocaust as a struggle between two powerful German men, shot in beautiful chiaroscuro, relegating the Jews to the role of extras in this Manichaeian struggle between good and evil. This is history devoid of any nuance, perpetuating the reductive myth of the Good War, but because Spielberg is a master of emotional manipulation, *Schindler’s List* has been the recipient of countless awards and is used as teaching material in classrooms. *The Good German*, on the other hand, is a cold, methodical lesson in mediated history. Lacking any emotional chemistry between its characters, it is unsurprising that the film failed to attract an audience.

The popularity of *Schindler’s List* lies not only in its fairy-tale method of storytelling but in its meta-cinematic method of filmmaking as well. Conflicting elements of film noir, Italian neo-realism, and newsreel documentary constitute its style, but generically, recent critics have reinterpreted



it as everything from a “historical epic” (Russell) to a “repurpos[ing] of the biographical film as a modernist form” (Burgoyne 103). Caroline Joan Picart and David Frank even locate elements of the horror film. If we pair *Schindler’s List* with the other hugely popular historical film of the nineties—Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991), a conflation of fact and fiction and media representation at breakneck speed—then we witness the ascendancy of the “postmodern history film” (Rosenstone, 12) to the mainstream. In coining this term, Robert Rosenstone accounts for how film perceives “history as vision” (15), an audio-visual rendering not comparable to that of the written word. This postmodern form of delivery “changes the rules of the historical game” (15), but those rules have now been set for at least a decade, if not considerably longer. If our conception of history is heavily shaped by cinematic representation, especially popular postmodern incarnations such as *Schindler’s List*, then *The Good German* remains a sober reminder that there is a heavy price for such unquestioned mediation.

To be clear: Soderbergh does not reside in some trivial, self-reflexive, postmodern hall of mirrors; he operates in the long, labyrinthine, endless maze of history, which after a century of increasingly rampant audio-visual production is now littered with the refuse of countless broken mirrors. Soderbergh is less interested in telling a postmodern historical story than he is in curating its multiple refractory transmissions. By conflating elements of the cinematic thirties, forties, fifties, and seventies and contrasting that conflation with the historical *über*-text of the nineties, *The Good German* does not present different times in history, or history’s progression, but history *as* time, as a temporal simultaneity and collapse. Unfortunately, the critical reception of the film has for the most part inaccurately reduced *The Good German* to mere pastiche and empty style, rather than the neo-meta utilization of pastiche and style to channel the multiplicity of cinematically mediated representation. Perhaps, *in time*, this historical injustice will be “set right.”

### *Après nous, le deluge*

This French phrase comprises the foreboding final words of “*Casablanca*: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage,” Umberto Eco’s tongue-in-cheek lament for the innocence of unbridled, unconscious archetypal thievery. *Casablanca*, according to Eco, is not content with employing a select few archetypes. It uses them all: “it is not *one* movie. It is ‘movies’” (208). In the



wake of *Casablanca* and its intertextual ilk, cinema is bound to an extreme awareness in which both filmmaker and audience are conscious of such intertextual reworkings. Soderbergh is no doubt a sterling example of the “semiotically nourished authors [who work] for a culture of instinctive semioticians” (210). *The Good German* would perhaps be more appropriately titled *Casablanca 2.0*, updated with more explicitly graphic software and deprogrammed of its Production Code. Along with the rest of Soderbergh’s body of intertextual work, *The Good German* shows that Michael Curtiz’s iconic classic (and the type of meta-film it represents) is not just all movies but all *future* movies as well. We need not mourn this loss of originality; rather, we should consider it as historical instruction. Let us revisit our rewritten Benjaminian aphorism and consider Soderbergh’s proposition: every image of the present that is not recognized by the past as one of its own concerns threatens to reappear ad infinitum. How about a camera?

## Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 253–64.
- Bernard, Sheila Curran. *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger and More Dramatic Nonfiction Films*. 2nd ed. Burlington, Mass.: Elsevier, 2007.
- Burgoyne, Robert. *The Hollywood Historical Film*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008.
- Cawelti, John G. “*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films.” *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P/Popular Press, 2004. 193–209.
- Eco, Umberto. “*Casablanca*: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage.” *Travels in Hyperreality*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. 197–212.
- Gilmore, Richard. “The Dark Sublimity of *Chinatown*.” In *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Ed. Mark T. Conard. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2006. 119–36.
- Hoberman, J. “Nostalgia Trip.” *Village Voice* 5 Dec. 2006. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-12-05/film/nostalgia-trip/>.
- “Interview with Steven Soderbergh about “The Good German.”” *The Good German* Web site. Oct. 2006. <http://thegoodgerman.warnerbros.com>.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Kehr, Dave. “You Can Make ’Em Like They Used To.” *New York Times* 12 Nov. 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/12/movies/12kehr.html?emc=eta1>.
- Miller, Frank. “The Devil Makes Three.” Turner Classic Movies Web site. <http://www.tcm.com/thismonth/article.jsp?cid=154952&mainArticleId=154931>.
- Picart, Caroline Joan, and David A. Frank. *Frames of Evil: The Holocaust as Horror in American Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2006.

- Richardson, John H. "The Very Boring Life of Steven Soderbergh." *Esquire* Aug. 2002. [http://www.esquire.com/ESQ0802-AUG\\_SODERBERGH](http://www.esquire.com/ESQ0802-AUG_SODERBERGH).
- Rosenstone, Robert A. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Russell, James. *The Historical Epic and Contemporary Hollywood: From Dances with Wolves to Gladiator*. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Tait, R. Colin. "Piercing Steven Soderbergh's Bubble." *The Business of Entertainment*. Ed. Robert Sickels. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2009. 179–93.
- Variety staff. "Casablanca." *Variety* 2 Dec. 1942. <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117487980.html?c=31>.

## Notes

1. *The Good German* would be Soderbergh's fourth (neo-)noir, following *The Underneath* (1995), *Out of Sight* (1998), and *The Limey* (1999), or sixth if you count the films directed by his apprentice, George Clooney, *Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002) and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), on whose sets he no doubt had considerable influence.
2. "POV of a DOP" means "point of view of a director of photography."
3. Rather than litter his credit sequences with his own name, Soderbergh uses the pseudonym Peter Andrews (his father's first and middle names) when also assuming the position of director of photography. Soderbergh also takes on the pseudonym Mary Ann Bernard (his mother's maiden name) when editor, and Sam Lowry (the hapless hero of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* [1985]) when screenwriter.
4. Not millions of dollars, just *dollars*, according to [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com).
5. Soderbergh was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for both *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*; he won for *Traffic*.
6. Soderbergh's cinematic craftsmanship includes chemical experimentation, in which he manipulates the physical film stock: bleaching, overexposing, and "flashing" were used on *Kafka*, *The Limey*, and *Traffic*.
7. The film was not actually shot on black-and-white film stock either. Photographed in color stock, the footage was digitally altered to match the grainy black-and-white archival footage.
8. My thanks to Keir Keightley for this insight.