THE PHILOSOPHY OF STEVEN SODERBERGH
The Philosophy of Popular Culture

The books published in the Philosophy of Popular Culture series will illuminate and explore philosophical themes and ideas that occur in popular culture. The goal of this series is to demonstrate how philosophical inquiry has been reinvigorated by increased scholarly interest in the intersection of popular culture and philosophy, as well as to explore through philosophical analysis beloved modes of entertainment, such as movies, TV shows, and music. Philosophical concepts will be made accessible to the general reader through examples in popular culture. This series seeks to publish both established and emerging scholars who will engage a major area of popular culture for philosophical interpretation and examine the philosophical underpinnings of its themes. Eschewing ephemeral trends of philosophical and cultural theory, authors will establish and elaborate on connections between traditional philosophical ideas from important thinkers and the ever-expanding world of popular culture.

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INTRODUCTION

R. Barton Palmer and Steven M. Sanders

Not Orson Welles Redivivus

Orson Welles was twenty-six when, having given himself a crash course in filmmaking, he directed and starred in *Citizen Kane* (1941). If its peculiar artistry and penetrating dissection of American culture went underappreciated at the time, the film has long since been recognized as one of the masterpieces of the national cinema. Steven Soderbergh was the same age when his initial directorial effort, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), for which he also wrote the script, received, among other accolades, the coveted Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Even at twenty years remove, Soderbergh’s first film arguably remains the most influential independent film ever made. Because it is in many ways a minimalist production, however, it seems unlikely to rival *Citizen Kane* in the pantheon of greatest American movies.

But, much as *Citizen Kane* did for Welles, *slv* established Soderbergh as a wunderkind whose writing and directing talents were already fully formed. Also like Welles, Soderbergh seemed in no need of a lengthy apprenticeship in the business. Both directors instead began their careers at the top, a mixed blessing that in each case created expectations that, as subsequent events have proved, were difficult to fulfill.

But there the comparison between Welles and Soderbergh, made by many during the height of *slv’s* popularity, begins to break down. Unlike *Citizen Kane, slv* aroused no controversy within the industry; its politics were interpersonal, not national, and its stylizations were subtle, not ostentatious, suiting a limited budget form of cinema more dependent on talk than spectacle. Following the commercial/independent (or, in the now popular expression, Indiewood) model established earlier in the decade by filmmakers such as the Coen brothers and Jim Jarmusch, *slv* combines an intelligible, essentially melodramatic narrative with art house themes. The
film is especially marked by a deeply probing approach to complex character that uncovers at least partly unfathomable motivations, the result, in large part, of Soderbergh’s enthusiasm for the international art cinema of the postwar era in general and for French New Wave director Jean-Pierre Melville in particular. The film’s critical and commercial success, moreover, meant that Soderbergh was not an enfant terrible who would bear watching and close handling. He was instead established as a major player in the expanding commercial/independent sector of American filmmaking (slv was not, as is commonly thought, a true independent film since it received preproduction financing from Point 406, the home video and independent production unit of Columbia Pictures).

Perhaps more important, the release of slv inaugurated a distinct and enduring phase in New Hollywood filmmaking. Its distribution by then fledgling Miramax established that company as a force to be reckoned with, while Soderbergh, it quickly became apparent, was the advance scout for an emerging second wave of independent-minded filmmakers, who, it was widely (and, as it turns out, correctly) thought by many industry executives, could exploit the huge box office potential exposed by the theatrical exhibition of slv (which earned more than $100 million by the middle 1990s). This group of writer-directors comprises many who are now famous and established Hollywood insiders, including Quentin Tarantino, David Fincher, Paul Thomas Anderson, David O. Russell, and Spike Jonze, all of whom have eagerly pushed the accepted limits of Hollywood production during the last two decades.

They constitute an informal movement that can justly be termed, in the phrase of Sharon Waxman, as the “rebels on the backlot,” a group that firmly secured the profitability of the commercial/independent sector pioneered by earlier arrivals on the scene, especially the Coens, Jarmusch, and, more distantly, John Sayles and John Cassavetes. It is certainly true, as Waxman observes, that by “2001 a true community of young film artists had emerged from the final decade of the twentieth century.” Chief among them was Soderbergh, who in the first decade of the twenty-first century has established himself even more strongly as an insider. In Waxman’s only slightly hyperbolic phrase, he has managed to “bend the risk-averse studio structure” to his will, a reshaping of the industry in which Tarantino and company have likewise played significant roles in Indiewood filmmaking. These filmmakers, however, have not found themselves in a self-destructive struggle with the studio system that, for Welles, eventually meant margin-
alization and exile; instead, despite occasional forays into artistically driven detours from commercially successful models (detours of which Soderbergh has made more than his share, as the essays in this volume make clear), they have found ways to remain central players in the industry.

The now-hallowed directors of the Hollywood renaissance in the 1970s, such as Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, were largely, if not exclusively, the products of recently established film schools. In contrast, the so-called backlot rebels are largely throwbacks to an earlier career model, gaining a position within the industry by following a number of different paths, especially screenwriting. Soderbergh's passion for films developed in early childhood, inflamed by his college professor father, a cinema buff who taught at Louisiana State University. Soderbergh spent his youth screening as many classic films as he could get his hands on—and learning to make his own with borrowed or well-worn 8 and 16 mm equipment. Unlike the Coens, he found himself drawn less to Hollywood and much more strongly to the international art cinema. He was especially fascinated by the art cinema's “approach to character,” which made such filmmaking “more rigorous and interesting.” With its roots in his own experience with a failed romantic relationship, \textit{slv} succeeded because of the screenwriter-director's talent for the rapid, convincing establishment of character, as well as his ability to write dialogue that offered a cast of then largely untested unknowns (Peter Gallagher, Andie MacDowell, James Spader, and Laura San Giacomo) the opportunity to create compelling “talk cinema.”

In his subsequent career, the aspects of which are well chronicled in the different chapters of this volume, Soderbergh at first rejected following the Indiewood model he had exploited so successfully in \textit{slv}. His next film, \textit{Kafka} (1991), could hardly have offered a more striking contrast. With its dark visuals reminiscent of German expressionism, its postmodernist anti-biography approach to producing a biography of sorts for the Prague-born writer, and its pervasive European sensibility, \textit{Kafka} did not attract much of an audience, and in fact it deeply disappointed many of the enthusiasts of \textit{slv} who expected more of the same. Only in \textit{Full Frontal} (2002) and \textit{Bubble} (2005) has Soderbergh again offered anything like the character-intensive melodrama of \textit{slv}. But these films were not easy for audiences to like, featuring as they did a deeply abstruse aspect (including a questioning of the boundaries between story and frame) and an aleatory approach to plot (with the dialogue all reportedly improvised as actors worked from a rough outline).

One of the most salient features of Soderbergh's career, in fact, has been
its consistently predictable unpredictability. With the commercial failures of Kafka, King of the Hill (a nostalgic 1993 biopic based on writer A. E. Hotchner’s memoirs), The Underneath (a 1995 neo-noir reshaped as art cinema), Schizopolis (an idiosyncratic 1996 comedy that offers something like a Joycean meditation on language), and 1996’s Gray’s Anatomy (essentially a filmed monologue), Soderbergh was able to rescue his career with the comic neo-noir Out of Sight (1998), a film in which experiments with nonlinear narrative were married to a star-driven adventure story (the engaging performances of George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez certainly did not hurt the box office, which was impressive). Soderbergh’s return to “bankability” was ratified by the critical and popular success of two films from 2000: Traffic (an impressive, often melodramatic, but craftily stylized meditation on the war on drugs) and Erin Brockovich (an even more conventional message picture, featuring a star turn by Julia Roberts). His recent films have oscillated from the very experimental (the aforementioned Bubble and Full Frontal) to the astute cultivation of a commercial “franchise” with a difference (the Ocean’s films [2001, 2004, 2007]). Just released are another small-budget art film obviously not intended for general audiences (here the model is more Ingmar Bergman than Alain Resnais) titled The Girlfriend Experience (2009), featuring “adult film” star Sasha Grey, and a more mainstream project, The Informant! (2009), a dark political comedy in the vein of the Coen brothers film Burn After Reading (2008), starring the very bankable Matt Damon, one of the bigger Hollywood stars who, through their work for the Ocean’s series, make up Soderbergh’s current stock company.

A Philosophical Cinema

Like the Coens and David Lynch, among others, Soderbergh furthered the development of an American art cinema with its European-type stylistic and thematic preoccupations, such as a privileging of character over narrative, self-conscious stylistic display and visual exuberance, and a deep, often disturbing engagement with the problematic aspects of the human condition. In the postmodernist manner, his films take a variety of cinematic forms and consistently challenge the viewer in their engagement with the difficulty of obtaining secure knowledge, the perhaps pointless quest for frameworks of understanding, the role of memory in determining consciousness, the false optimism of therapeutic culture, the often fruitless attempt to distinguish appearance from reality, and the constant search for justification and
redemption. This involvement with problems of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics leads one to speak quite naturally of Soderbergh’s philosophical cinema, and these issues are apparent in the readings of his work provided by the distinguished scholars who have contributed to this volume. They have subjected Soderbergh’s oeuvre, from his brilliant debut through his recent films, to reflection and analysis. In addition to introducing general readers and intelligent non-specialists to Soderbergh’s story lines, approach to filmmaking, and philosophically salient themes, they have provided readers with the first systematic investigation of Soderbergh’s philosophical cinema. Topics explored in this volume include truth, knowledge, and sexual ethics in *sex, lies, and videotape*; the heritage of Enlightenment thought in *Schizopolis*; time, identity, and redemption in *The Limey* (1999), *The Underneath*, and his other neo-noir films; altruism in *Erin Brockovich*; memory in *Solaris* (2002); personal identity and problems of the self in *Kafka*; appearance and reality in the television series *K Street* (2003); and Kantian ethics and agency in the *Ocean’s* films and *Traffic*.

**Knowledge, Truth, Sexuality**

With *sex, lies, and videotape*, Soderbergh became one of the most successful and controversial of the independent directors who rose to prominence in America during the 1980s. As befitting its critical success, the film raises numerous philosophical questions about rationality, truth, and self-knowledge. In “Knowledge, Truth, and Thought Experiments in *Schizopolis* and *sex, lies, and videotape*,” David Rodríguez-Ruiz explains the philosophical background of questions about truth, knowledge, and justification using *sex, lies, and videotape* and *Schizopolis* to illustrate thought experiments and imagined scenarios. After describing Soderbergh’s concern with trust and truth, his criticism of protocols, rhetoric, brainwashing, and dishonesty, Rodríguez-Ruiz turns to a critical discussion of the sources of knowledge, the problems of empirical knowledge and evidence, and philosophical issues of skepticism, dogmatism, and the goals of epistemology. In “Love, Truth, and the Medium in *sex, lies, and videotape*,” Yannis Tzioumakis focuses on the mediated form through which the four main characters of the film acquire knowledge of self and others through the narratives they create with the help of Graham’s video camera. He then explores the nature of this indirect knowledge by raising issues influenced by Jean-François Lyotard’s position in *The Postmodern Condition*. Combining themes from the philosophy of sex
and the philosophy of language in “Amplified Discourse and Desire in *sex, lies, and videotape,*” Murray Pomerance explores sexuality as experience and linguistic subject and how feeling and language are related, developing the idea of openly articulating one's sex as verbal communication. He argues that *sex, lies, and videotape* is about more than sex; it is about speaking about sex and about what speaking about sex can look like to attentive viewers as the videotape enables the observation of conversation by fascinated outsiders.

**Temporality, Intertextuality, Genre**

In “Alain Resnais Meets Film Noir in *The Underneath* and *The Limey*,” R. Barton Palmer explores the ways in which two of Soderbergh’s neo-noir films meditate on the connections between time and self-understanding, drawing equally on Henri Bergson’s theory of the “duration” of human consciousness (as mediated by the international art cinema of Resnais) and the peculiar treatment of “pastness” that is a central element of film noir. A key element in this merging of influences is the Bergsonian concept of intuition, the flash of insight that the flow of consciousness sometimes produces, offering the possibility of a deep knowledge of self. If the main character in *The Underneath* (a remake of the classic Robert Siodmak noir film *Criss Cross* [1949]) remains trapped in his past and in the perdurable version of his self, his counterpart in *The Limey* (based on a Lem Dobbs original script) shows how the past may be transcended. Geoff King’s complementary analysis in “Consciousness, Temporality, and the Crime-Revenge Genre in *The Limey*” illustrates Soderbergh’s ingenious deployment of the crime-revenge genre to explore several issues related to temporality and our experience of its different modes. His essay explores the ways in which the structure and editing regimes of *The Limey,* in tandem with mainstream genre conventions, render what Soderbergh has described as the “nonlinear” nature of human thought processes. In “Intertextuality, Broken Mirrors, and *The Good German,*” Andrew deWaard explains how Soderbergh’s morality play about historical guilt is a rich assemblage of style, theme, and philosophy. He argues that *The Good German* (2006) “is experienced as a multiplicity of mediations; Soderbergh is not just shining a light into the abyss of American war crime complicity but taking his camera with him and editing the footage together into a nonlinear, intertextual blend of history itself.” In “Remade by Steven Soderbergh,” Aaron Baker addresses the philosophically problematic aspects of cinematic remakes. Taking his cue from the philosopher Noël Carroll,
Baker identifies the creative agency that Carroll has argued is the criterion of art by examining Soderbergh’s remakes of *Criss Cross*, *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), and *Solaris*. Focusing on Soderbergh’s remakes allows Baker to make a strong case that the filmmaker has been able to appropriate and refashion narrative and formal elements from other films to tell the stories in his own voice, thus indicating the presence of a unique style characteristic of the artist.

**Self-Reflexivity, Self-Centeredness, Autobiography**

Artistic self-centeredness and autobiography offer many options for the filmmaker to use his or her own life in the formation of narrative reality. Soderbergh has dramatized this interest and made it concrete in his exploration of the ways his personal identity is tied to his identity as a filmmaker. Although Soderbergh is not a philosopher, *Kafka*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Schizopolis* are richly philosophical because they reflect the filmmaker’s ideas about the nature of identity, how identity can break down, and whether it can be recovered. In “Philosophical Reflections on Steven Soderbergh’s *Kafka*,” Ivo Ritzer considers aspects of Soderbergh’s self-reflexivity and points out Soderbergh’s multiple allusions and cross-references to film history. He then draws on the idea of paranoia as cultural metaphor as a means of reading *Kafka* as a dispute over the status of creativity and personal identity. He analyzes the complex relation of Franz Kafka’s life and oeuvre to Soderbergh’s adaptation of biographical facts and literary motives and exposes Soderbergh’s displaced explorations of his own life in the film. In “Responsibility and Self-Centered Narration in *Erin Brockovich*,” Andrew Patrick Nelson examines the film’s style and thematic concern about a corporation’s responsibility to the people its activities have harmed, an individual’s responsibility to his or her community, and a mother’s responsibility to her children and argues that there is a fundamental tension in the film between its form and content: between a “self-centered” narration and a narrative about altruism. He concludes that one consequence of this self-centeredness is that, “in a sense, nothing in *Erin Brockovich* exists independent of Erin Brockovich—an odd result for a film ostensibly about the plight of a community suffering at the hands of a duplicitous corporation.” Taking a view antithetical to those critics who panned the film *Schizopolis*, Drew Morton argues in “*Schizopolis* as Philosophical Autobiography” that through an intricate web of intertextual references, the film offers the viewer an autobiographical account of Soderbergh struggling with his identity as a filmmaker. Morton supplements this
account with an interview he conducted with Soderbergh in 2008, giving the reader a rare opportunity to read what the filmmaker had to say on this and other important topics.

**Politics, Morals, Methodology**

Soderbergh’s treatment of philosophical issues in both politics and ethics can be found in many of his films. In “Mr. Soderbergh Goes to Washington,” Steven M. Sanders provides a commentary on one of Soderbergh’s lesser-known works, his ten-episode HBO series *K Street*. He argues that the series raises philosophical issues about the paranoid style in contemporary politics, which he traces to skepticism and the perennial problem of finding some criterion for distinguishing between appearance and reality. In “Schizoanalyzing the Informant” David Sterritt rejects the view that, despite its apparent light tone, Soderbergh’s portrayal of a personable mythomaniac is simply a corporate caper movie. Instead, he argues that the film offers “a philosophical investigation of . . . the ethical dimensions of everyday living in a world pervaded by the amorality of modern business.” The apparently smooth surface of *The Informant!*, then, constitutes an important element of a penetrating critique of “terminal decay in a self-obsessed society” that has collectively abandoned “the Socratic concept of the examined life.” In “Competing Modes of Capital in *Ocean’s Eleven,*” R. Colin Tait offers a multifaceted reading of *Ocean’s Eleven*, a film that, according to Tait, “consciously exploits the cachet of the original” even as it makes important modifications to it. The film’s depiction of the solidarity of the eleven, Tait argues, “allows the protagonists the best of both worlds, affording them love and money at the end of the film.” Shai Biderman and William J. Devlin look at Soderbergh’s Academy Award–winning film *Traffic* in “An Ethical Analysis of *Traffic.*” Using Kant’s ethical theory to clarify the problems faced by the film’s four main characters, they argue that Kant cannot provide convincing solutions to the problems the film’s protagonists face. Instead, they opt for a Sartrean ethics of individual decision to deal with the moral dilemmas found in *Traffic*.

**Simulacra, Space, Solaris**

Soderbergh’s 2002 remake of the Andrei Tarkovsky science fiction classic, a complex meditation on memory and loss, leads Douglas McFarland to argue that the conjunction of strangeness and intimacy that permeates the film has
its antecedent in Augustine’s phenomenological recasting of Platonic recollection in Book X of The Confessions. McFarland then challenges Soderbergh’s treatment of the protagonist’s ultimate choice in “The Philosophy of Space and Memory in Solaris.” In “Solaris, Cinema, and Simulacra,” Michael Valdez Moses writes about Solaris as a locus of problems of authenticity. He argues that cinema is an artistic medium that purveys images and representations but never offers an authentic or original version—there are only copies. In Moses’s view, no artist can be truly “original” because all creation is part of a kind of “system” in which dreams circulate more or less freely and are recycled in ever evolving and changing circumstances. Soderbergh’s film, Moses argues, is about the remaking and recirculation of the “dreams” of others who turn out to be remarkably like oneself.

Notes

Part 1

Knowledge, Truth, Sexuality
In *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and *Schizopolis* (1996), the main characters are put in situations where they are deprived of crucial information or simply deceived by others, and they need to find out the truth about their circumstances in order to take control of their lives. Despite the main characters’ sharing the same need for knowledge, there are striking contrasts in the way they get access to the information they need to know: for some characters knowledge is difficult to obtain, for others knowledge seems impossible, and for still others knowledge comes too easy. In *slv* Ann Bishop Mullany (Andie MacDowell), for example, believes that her husband is cheating on her—“conjecture and intuition,” he says—and she has to find out the truth by making sense of a small number of clues: her husband’s stories, a few telephone calls, and a pearl earring she finds on the rug. *Schizopolis*’s Fletcher Munson (Steven Soderbergh), however, discovers firsthand that his wife is having an affair when, by some unexplained phenomenon, he gets to live the life of the man who happens to be his wife’s lover.

The situations presented in both films—whose screenplays were written by Soderbergh himself—also show a series of contrasts between adequate and inadequate ways of justifying one’s beliefs, between valid arguments and subtle fallacies, sound advice and psychological manipulation, people who lie all the time and people who are utterly frank. From the third-person perspective, that is, as spectators, we are allowed to see who is lying and who is telling the truth. At certain moments, Soderbergh even lets us take an unconventional look beyond the daily rituals of his characters. From the
characters’ perspectives, on the other hand, acquiring knowledge sometimes requires efforts that exceed their abilities or means. This variety of vantage points, contrasts, and circumstances in which the characters search for knowledge provides valuable tools for discussing some of the central questions of epistemology. What does it take to know something? What kinds of evidence and justification are required in order to separate conjectures and intuitions from real knowledge? What is knowledge? Do we have a privileged access to some truths (perhaps about ourselves and our immediate reality)? Are there grounds for skepticism that we can never rule out?

Soderbergh’s early films not only raise these challenging epistemological questions but also put them in everyday contexts that make them especially relevant. In later films, such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Traffic* (2000), and *The Good German* (2006), Soderbergh presents individuals who need to fight against biased and corrupt institutions so that important truths can be revealed and justice is achieved. The value of honesty and truth and the dangers of becoming victims of misinformation and meaningless rhetoric are recurring themes of Soderbergh’s films. This concern with the value of truth and the empowering nature of knowledge invites questions about what counts as knowledge and how we acquire it in the first place. This chapter examines Soderbergh’s approach to two extreme stances that epistemologists usually try to avoid, namely, radical skepticism and dogmatism. The epistemological views that emerge from both *Schizopolis* and *slv* provide a complex yet commonsensical picture according to which knowledge is neither as easy to obtain as dogmatists believe nor as unreachable as skeptics would argue.

Another interesting aspect of Soderbergh’s films is how some seemingly inconsequential scenes, especially in *Schizopolis*, can be seen as examples of “thought experiments.” Thought experiments, or the contemplation of imagined situations and possible cases, are some of the oldest tools used by philosophers and among their most favored. Many of Plato’s dialogues, for example, address imagined situations like the following: if there were a ring with the power of making one invisible, would people willingly do the right thing even if they could wear such a ring and get away with anything? As we can tell from this example, one of the reasons thought experiments have been so widely used is that there are many cases in which performing an actual experiment would be either impossible or unnecessary—in the latter case because we are dealing with conceptual issues. Daniel Dennett, to take a more recent example, asks us to imagine a brainless body that picks up information from its surroundings and transmits it via radio signals to
Knowledge, Truth, and Thought Experiments in Schizopolis and sex, lies, and videotape

a remote brain in a vat. The question, in this case, is whether the self, or “I,” is located where the brain is or wherever the brainless body is. “I” seem to be looking at a car on the street, but “my” brain is in a lab somewhere else registering that information. Where is this “I” then? Presumably, answering these kinds of questions helps us make our concepts clearer as we apply them to situations we have not encountered before. In the case of epistemology, imagined situations have mainly been used to challenge proposed theories of knowledge. One of the goals here is to discuss the challenges that Soderbergh’s “thought experiments” also represent for theories of knowledge.¹

The Appearance/Reality Gap and the Prospects of Skepticism

A discussion of the broader philosophical context of the appearance/reality divide should precede any examination of the epistemological issues in Schizopolis and sex, lies, and videotape. The appearance/reality divide is arguably the most fundamental distinction for philosophy—both historically and methodologically. Historically, the first recorded philosophical statements in the Western tradition recognized that things are not always as they appear and prompted a search for the underlying nature of reality. Methodologically, the distinction between appearances and reality is at the heart of most philosophical subdisciplines. In epistemology specifically, the main questions of the field can be defined in terms of our knowledge of, or cognitive access to, reality. How do we get cognitive access to reality? What counts as having such cognitive access? And so forth. Such questions, as many epistemologists have pointed out, presuppose a positive answer to a more basic question, namely, do we in fact have cognitive access to reality? The task of showing why the arguments for a negative answer to the latter question are mistaken is part of the project of refuting skepticism. Given the importance of this project for traditional epistemology, a few clarifications are in order.²

First, there are different interpretations of what the skeptical challenge is. Notice that, as framed in the previous paragraph, the task of refuting skepticism is not to show that we do have cognitive access to reality but to show in what ways the arguments to the effect that we don't have cognitive access to reality are mistaken. The difference between both tasks is subtle but important. Proving that the arguments for skepticism are flawed may require, for example, showing that the skeptics’ standards for what counts as knowledge are unreasonably high. On the other hand, proving that we do
have knowledge, without relying on any previously acquired information, is a much more difficult goal to reach, if it is possible at all.

Second, there are different degrees and kinds of skepticism. The degrees of skepticism can range from the view that we have poor knowledge to the view that we have no knowledge whatsoever. As to the different kinds of skepticism, they can be specified in terms of the domains or aspects of reality to which we are said to have limited or no cognitive access. For example, one might be a skeptic about our knowledge of the distant past but not necessarily about our knowledge of things we can perceive with our senses. A widespread kind of skepticism to which I pay special attention below is relativism, understood as the view that every person or society has its own interpretation of reality and there is no way to objectively determine which interpretation is the best one.

Finally, there are different arguments for skepticism. Since what matters for present purposes is how Soderbergh’s films argue for or against skepticism, there will be no need to review the traditional skeptical arguments here. Nevertheless, to help appreciate the unusual character and the relevance of Soderbergh’s thought experiments, we can address an important aspect of the traditional arguments for skepticism, namely, how they typically use imagined situations to make their cases. Consider, for instance, René Descartes’s “evil genius” and dream arguments. In his search for a secure foundation for knowledge, Descartes decides to put on hold all his beliefs and keep only those that he cannot doubt. Instead of evaluating each of his beliefs individually—obviously an impossible task—Descartes evaluates the sources of his beliefs. A primary candidate source of indubitable beliefs is sense perception. When you directly perceive something, it is hard to doubt that you do perceive it. However, Descartes asks himself, haven’t I had dreams in which I seem to be at home sitting by the fire? I seem to perceive that I am sitting by the fire now, but how do I know that this is not just another dream? A further candidate source of indubitable beliefs is reason. Reason seems to give us the best models of certain beliefs. How can I doubt, for example, that two plus three equals five? Well, argues Descartes, suppose there is an “evil genius,” or some kind of superpowerful being, that makes you believe a falsehood every time you perform a mathematical operation. How can you be so sure that there is no such evil genius manipulating your reasoning?3

According to a relatively recent response to skepticism, some skeptical possibilities can be rejected basically for being irrelevant in normal contexts.
In order to rightfully claim that one has knowledge one needs to be able to rule out certain possibilities that would challenge one’s claim. But one doesn’t need to refute absolutely every imaginable possibility. Fred Dretske illustrates this point with the following imagined situation:

You take your son to the zoo, see several zebras, and, when questioned by your son, tell him they are zebras. Do you know they are zebras? Well, most of us would have little hesitation saying that we did know this. We know what zebras look like, and, besides, this is the city zoo and the animals are in a pen clearly marked “Zebras.” Yet, something’s being a zebra implies that it is not a mule and, in particular, not a mule cleverly disguised by the zoo authorities to look like a zebra. Do you know that these animals are not mules cleverly disguised by the zoo authorities to look like zebras?4

According to the relevant alternatives theory, in a normal context one does know that the penned animals are zebras, even though the available evidence (e.g., seeing them at a distance, reading the “Zebras” sign) is not enough to exclude the possibility that they are painted mules. In normal contexts, the latter possibility is not one we need to consider. Similarly, the “evil genius” possibility, which Descartes spent so much effort trying to refute, can be rejected for being irrelevant or farfetched.

The same charge of being farfetched could be made against most of the skeptical possibilities brought up in films contemporaneous with Schizopolis. Several American films from the 1990s explore the topic of appearance and reality and make the case for having some skepticism about what we take to be commonsense knowledge. The topic as such, of course, is hardly new. Situations involving mistaken identities and plots in which an illusory world is created for a character but destroyed at the end are some of the oldest tricks in film and literature. What is distinctive in films such as Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998), The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998), and The Matrix (Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski, 1999) is how they make us question reality as a whole, how they raise the possibility that everything we think we know is nothing but an illusion, or a dream, or the product of a masterfully elaborated hoax. A typical feature of these and similar films from the same years is that they tend to use science fiction scenarios to make their cases; that doesn’t necessarily make them less amusing, but it is easier to regard them as mere farfetched possibilities. Soderbergh’s Schizopolis,
in contrast with these science fiction examples, brings skepticism to more quotidian scenarios.5

Skepticism about Others

The situations and places shown in Schizopolis are perhaps among the most common situations and places one can find in suburban life and professional environments: people chatting at the office, neighbors greeting each other on the street, couples talking at home after work, and so forth. Yet the movie offers a fascinating radiograph of our own world—a mirror image that, to a considerable extent, raises worries and doubts about the things we take for granted in our daily lives, especially about our dealings with others as mediated by language. Schizopolis presents a world in which we are allowed to see what is behind the conventionalisms of language (in a couple’s conversation, or a funeral speech), how spoken language can be superfluous (for Elmo Oxygen [David Jensen] and his lovers), how the truth can be manipulated with language (at Fletcher Munson’s workplace), and how language can be used to manipulate people (by Mr. Schwitters [Mike Malone] and his team). The world of Schizopolis is a bizarre world in many ways, but the similarities it shares with our own world remind us how, underneath the routine exchanges of everyday life, there can be hidden desires, fears, and idiosyncratic views that affect the way we perceive everything. Consider, for example, the following dialogue between Fletcher and his neighbor. The first time we see them talking from their respective sides of the street we hear the following:

Fletcher: Is your wife coming over tonight, ’cause her big ass always leaves me satisfied.
Neighbor: Nice of you to mention her, she enjoys sex with you much more than she does with me.
Fletcher: I’m sure she says that to all the men in the neighborhood.
Neighbor: You may be right about that one.
Fletcher: I’ll see you later.

During the last third of the movie, we see the same scene again, but this time Fletcher speaks in Japanese and from his neighbor’s answers we learn that they are talking about a game. At that point it becomes clear that the first conversation was probably a projection of what Fletcher would have
liked to say and hear. Except for the unusual character of the topic, the first dialogue proceeds in a completely normal fashion and takes place in a completely ordinary setting. With this combination of familiarity and oddness, we are allowed to take a look behind the world of appearances in which these neighbors live and, most importantly, we learn something about our own world. In our world people don’t speak so openly. Thus, by presenting such a contrast with our world, in a setting that otherwise is too familiar to consider irrelevant, Schizopolis plants a seed of skepticism: it makes us wonder how much of what we think we know about ourselves and about others is only part of a world of appearances.

Schizopolis is full of moments when people are utterly frank and when we get to hear their inner thoughts and know about their most sincere intentions and feelings. Consider the speech made at the funeral of Fletcher’s former boss: “Lester Richards is dead. And aren’t you glad that it wasn’t you? Don’t you wish you felt something? How many men here are attracted to Shelly, his lovely wife? She’s available. And how many women wish that their husbands would drop dead and leave them a big fat insurance policy? Hell, it’ll be years before we figure out what Lester’s death really means so let’s forget the blah, blah, and go have a drink. Amen.” Even reporters and politicians tell things as they see them instead of giving people the usual shallow and formulaic statements. Here is one of the news reports: “The investors plan to enclose the entire state with an all-weather roof and turn it into the world’s largest shopping mall. When asked for comment, a White House spokesperson would only say ‘Well, at least we didn’t sell it to the fucking Japanese.’” To be sure, there is also a lot of lying going on in Schizopolis: someone is spying on the workers at Fletcher’s office, Mrs. Munson (Betsy Brantley) cheats on her husband with her dentist, several women in the neighborhood cheat on their husbands with Elmo Oxygen, and the company Fletcher works for apparently dedicates itself to deceiving people. These instances of dishonest relationships and practices—when juxtaposed to the scenes in which we see the masks fall off and people talk frankly—mark a sharp contrast between appearances and reality and accentuate the urgency of determining whether, how, and to what extent we have knowledge. If we consider the way Schizopolis answers these questions, particularly with regard to Fletcher’s case, we will see that the movie does more than just plant a seed of skepticism. Perhaps it also lets the seed grow a few roots.

Fletcher’s discovery that his wife is cheating on him is, to some extent, thanks to a series of lucky accidents. His wife’s lover drives a car just like
Fletcher’s, and one day he happens to park it close to Fletcher’s car. Fletcher is curious, so he decides to follow the man, who is in fact his unknown rival, and the pursuit leads him to his own house. Interestingly, in *slv* it is also in part by accident that Ann discovers that her husband is cheating on her with none other than her sister: it is by accident that her sister leaves an earring in Ann’s bedroom, and it is by accident that Ann finds it. This raises worries concerning our chances of ever discovering the truth of our circumstances. If knowledge depends on such lucky accidents, it is quite likely that most of the time we will be deceived.

The way Fletcher finds out the truth about his wife presents a further complication. It makes knowledge seem out of reach for most of us. Fletcher effectively has to become another person in order to know that his wife is cheating on him and, most important, how she feels about her life and their relationship. Obviously, we can’t suddenly become other people or get inside their heads. Thus, the standards for knowledge—particularly for knowledge of what other people really think—are set beyond our capabilities.

There is a bit of irony in how Soderbergh presents this difficulty. He reminds us that people wear masks and disguise their true feelings and intentions (for which Fletcher’s rehearsing faces in front of the mirror is a good metaphor). He lets us see what the world would be like if people let their masks fall off, and then he implies that the only way to truly understand even those closest to you is to wear the mask of another person, to become the person whom the one you want to understand decides to trust.6 Evidently, at least with regard to the possibility of understanding others, the picture presented in *Schizopolis* evokes a sense of skepticism. But what is the extent of this skepticism? How deep can its roots grow? Before we can find answers to those questions, we must address other epistemological dilemmas that could be seen as adding to the themes of skepticism in *Schizopolis* and *slv*.

**What about That Music in My Head?**

The examples discussed so far raise doubts about the epistemic value of testimony; they may make one hesitant about taking at face value what other people say. And yet a great deal of our knowledge depends on others. Almost everything we know, we know in part because others have told or taught it to us. But just being told by someone is not a sufficient reason for believing anything. Even if nobody lies all the time, how can you tell that what they say is true? If you can’t trust your own family and friends, whom
can you trust? One could entertain such paranoid thoughts for a while and, in a similar way to what Descartes proposed, set out to establish the foundations of one’s beliefs based only on what one can directly verify. One could, for example, decide to distrust others but still trust one’s senses. A little scene in *Schizopolis*, however, gives us a hint of how difficult this is. In one of his solitary moments at the office Fletcher throws a piece of paper to the trashcan and hears music come out of nowhere. He throws another piece of paper and again hears the same music (which, we later learn, is the music Dr. Jeffrey Korchek [also played by Soderbergh] hears all the time). The philosophical puzzles that can be discussed in relation to this seemingly trivial incident are huge. First of all, it involves the problem of induction that philosophers have been discussing for centuries. Moreover, it involves the equally difficult problems of identifying bona fide sources of evidence and determining the requirements for knowledge.

If you start to hear music out of nowhere, it might be helpful to ask other people whether they hear it too. But remember that, at least for the sake of argument, you decided to distrust other people. How do you know you are not just imagining things? Are you justified in believing something based on some faculty that nobody else has? In an often cited thought experiment Keith Lehrer raises a similar problem for externalist theories of justification. According to one such theory, one is justified in believing something if the source of one’s beliefs is reliable, that is, if it produces true beliefs most of the time. But, and here is the polemical part, you don’t need to be aware that the source of your beliefs is reliable; it just needs to be reliable in order for you to be justified in forming beliefs based on, or produced by, that source or mechanism. This theory presents the following dilemma. On the one hand, we want to say that small children and nonhuman animals have some kinds of justified beliefs or knowledge, even though they don’t have any awareness of the reliability of their belief sources. Doesn’t your dog know that you have just arrived home when it sees you and smells you? On the other hand, if no knowledge of the reliability of one’s sources is required for the justification of one’s beliefs, then it seems that a person could start forming beliefs out of nowhere and be justified in doing so. Here is how Lehrer illustrates the latter problem. Suppose there is a person, call him Mr. Truetemp, with the special ability of detecting the temperature of a room with a high degree of precision. Just as Fletcher suddenly finds himself hearing what music is being played at a distant place, Mr. Truetemp finds himself “feeling” that the room is at, say, 72.3 degrees Fahrenheit.
According to Lehrer, even if Mr. Truetemp possessed that special ability, he has no justification for his beliefs about temperatures unless he verifies that he indeed has the ability in question. But how can one verify the reliability of one’s faculties?

Without pretending to read too much into it, we can also use the trash-can scene to illustrate the problem of assessing our faculties. To assess the alleged faculty in Lehrer’s example would be easy: if most of the time the room temperatures are not what Mr. Truetemp says they are, then his supposed faculty is unreliable. Lehrer’s point is not that Mr. Truetemp would not be able to acquire some knowledge about the reliability of his faculty. His point is that without such knowledge Mr. Truetemp has no justification for saying anything about room temperatures. But the problem of assessing our actual faculties is deeper than that: the only thing we have to assess our faculties is the faculties themselves. Forget our paranoia about everybody’s being a selfish, mask-wearing liar. Suppose we are all as forthright as possible and we are trying to determine whether our hearing is reliable, whether it captures real features of the world. We throw a piece of paper to the trash-can and hear some music. We do that a hundred times and always hear the same music. Each of these times we are using our hearing to obtain data, but our hearing is the very faculty we are trying to assess. What is the problem with that? For some epistemologists there is no problem at all. Any kind of assessment we make needs to rely on our faculties, and that is the best we can hope for. For others there is an embarrassing kind of circularity here, one that would force us to admit a kind of relativism.

Do You Think This Is Some Sort of Weird Coincidence?

There is a brief scene in slv in which Ann goes to a bar and a guy tells her “okay this is too much, you are wearing red, I’m wearing red, that’s quite a coincidence wouldn’t you say?” Near the end of the movie Ann goes to the bar again and the same drunken guy tells her “okay you’re wearing blue, I’m wearing blue. Do you think this is some sort of weird coincidence? I don’t think so; I think it’s something more.” After all the trouble that Ann had to go through, the drunken guy’s joke—at least in the context of our discussion—can turn into a fastidious challenge to the reasoning process that led Ann to conclude that her husband was cheating on her with her sister.

The crucial piece of evidence for Ann is an earring she finds on the rug while she is cleaning up her bedroom. She had been in her sister’s apart-
ment and remembered that her sister had lost one of her earrings. When Ann finds the earring the camera zooms in, and as it stays with her—for exactly thirty seconds—we can see that she is immersed in thought, putting all the pieces of the puzzle together. She could have thought that her sister lost her earring on a previous visit to Ann's house but not necessarily while being with John (Peter Gallagher). Or she could have thought that her husband's mistress had earrings just like the ones Ann's sister owned. That would have been quite a coincidence but a possible explanation nonetheless. In a small town it is not so farfetched a possibility. How does Ann rule out these possible explanations? From our perspective, we know that John and Ann's sister have been together; we have seen them together. But from Ann's perspective (considering the information that is made available to her), does she have enough evidence to know? How much evidence is enough for turning a conjecture into knowledge? At what point can we say that she knows about the affair: when she first has the "strong feeling" that she was being betrayed? When she finds the earring on the rug? When Graham, a recovering pathological liar, tells her? Should we say that even though she is justified in believing that her husband cheated on her, she doesn't really know because she didn't actually see her sister and John together? Does she need to become her spouse's lover, as happened to Fletcher, in order to "really know"? What do we ever "really know"?

There are several issues at stake here. Some of them involve the tasks of spelling out criteria for distinguishing between (a) legitimate evidential links versus mere coincidences, (b) beliefs that are true by accident versus beliefs that amount to knowledge, and (c) alternatives that are relevant when considering possible explanations of a fact versus possibilities that we can ignore without begging the question. But we can see how the above train of thought could bring more skepticism and further dilemmas. Trying to explain the "obvious" difference between a simple coincidence and a good argument leads us to question whether we do have knowledge after all. At some point we would like to say "she just knows." The challenge for epistemologists is to identify precisely that point at which a belief turns into knowledge. On the one hand, it would be problematic to accept knowledge based on "strong feelings." John has a point when he asks his wife to imagine someone in court saying, "Your honor, I'm just positive the man is guilty, I just can't place him at the scene, but I have this strong feeling." On the other hand, it seems that one can always question the available evidence and suggest alternative explanations. Not all of them are equally good, obviously,
but the fact that there can be more than one possible explanation is all that radical skeptics might need in order to make their point.

Soderbergh’s films do not solve all the dilemmas they raise, and, of course, we shouldn’t expect them to do so. But one of the many merits of both *Schizopolis* and *sex, lies, and videotape* is how they acknowledge the challenging aspects of our epistemic condition while reminding us of the risks of ignoring such challenges. The latter point leads to the argument that the skepticism in both movies is a moderate, and probably useful, kind of skepticism.

**Soderbergh’s Approach to Skepticism and Dogmatism**

Despite the seemingly chaotic narrative of *Schizopolis*, the movie has a basic structure that corresponds to the perspectives of its main characters. Some of the scenes that, during the first third of the movie, we see from Fletcher’s point of view are later presented from his wife’s perspective. Is Soderbergh suggesting that, as in Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), individuals have their own perspective on matters and there is no way to find out the truth? Is he saying that, since people always seem to be trapped in their own way of thinking, there is no reality beyond what each person believes and everything is an illusion? Two key examples in *Schizopolis* show that he is not.

First, the death of Fletcher’s former boss, Lester Richards, shows that there is at least one aspect of reality from which we cannot escape, namely, our biological nature. According to the Nameless Numberhead Man (Eddie Jemison), anyone could see Lester’s death coming: “The guy ate like hell, had chronic insomnia, high blood pressure, and some symptoms of diabetes.” It is more than ironic that the head of a company whose scheme was to sell books and deliver speeches that “contain nothing that can be confirmed or denied” dies of a heart attack caused by things he could have prevented if he had paid more attention to the medical facts and, of course, had acted accordingly.

Second, by allowing us to see what happens “backstage” at Fletcher’s workplace *Schizopolis* exposes relativism instead of arguing for it. The movie shows how those who seek to manipulate others are aware that one of their best tools is an ambiguous language that avoids being confronted with facts. This idea is best illustrated by the instructions Fletcher receives for writing Mr. Schwitters’s speech: “It should be lengthy enough to seem substantial, yet concise enough to feel breezy; it should be serious, but with a
slight wink; it should lay out a new course of action but one that can change
direction at any moment; if you must mention facts and figures don’t do so
directly; the general thrust should remain embedded in one’s mind forever,
but specific words should be forgotten the moment they are heard; it should
contain nothing that can be confirmed or denied; it should be on my desk
Friday morning.”

The last part of the instructions Fletcher receives—“it should be on my
desk Friday morning”—adds to the movie’s characteristic sense of humor, but
it also alludes to an important point for our discussion: very often power is
maintained by creating illusions, but power itself is real. Fail to follow your
boss’s instructions and you will pay the consequences. That is exactly what
happens to John in sv. The guy who thought he could always get away with
lying gets a reality check when his boss fires him for not taking care of his
clients. Of course, who has power may depend on arbitrary arrangements
in our societies and, in that sense, power can be illusory; but its effects can
be just as real.10

To sum up, even though Schizopolis—and, to some extent, sex, lies, and
videotape—may encourage a degree of skepticism, especially about our
knowledge of others and of the information we obtain from them, these
movies also remind us that there are aspects of reality that we cannot deny. In
particular, they remind us that nature is real and power is real. Thus, while we
may disagree about the ultimate nature of reality and how limited our grasp
of it is, it is hard to deny that there is such a thing as a reality independent
of our conceptions of it. The skepticism presented in both movies, in other
words, is a moderate kind of skepticism. It consists of a healthy mixture of
common sense and cynicism, which might be the right recipe for avoiding
the opposite extreme, which would be dogmatism.

Notes

I thank my wife Ariza Torres-López for comments on an early draft. I also thank
and respectfully dedicate this essay to Enrique Pineda Barnet, inspiring filmmaker,
teacher, and friend.

1. For Plato’s discussion of the ring example, commonly known as the Ring of
Gyges, see Plato, The Republic (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 38–69. Dennett’s
thought experiment can be found in Daniel Dennett, Brainstorms: Philosophical Essays
discussion of the use of thought experiments in philosophy, see Michael DePaul and


5. I don’t mean to imply that this topic is first treated in film in the 1990s; I mention examples from this decade to consider the immediate context of Soderbergh’s Schizopolis. Other examples from the same decade that explore the topic of appearance and reality or make allusions to it are Total Recall (Paul Verhoeven, 1990), Twelve Monkeys (Terry Gilliam, 1995), Sphere (Barry Levinson, 1998), Sliding Doors (Peter Howitt, 1998), Being John Malkovich (Spike Jonze, 1999), Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999), and Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000). Two interesting examples of non-American films are La Cité des enfants perdus (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1995) and Abre los ojos (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997). Vanilla Sky (Cameron Crowe, 2001) is a second-rate remake of the latter film. For discussions of science fiction in film, see Steven M. Sanders, ed., The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2008).

6. Some epistemologists argue that there is a distinction between knowing a fact and knowing a person or a place. Similarly, there is a distinction between “knowing that” and “knowing how.” The latter is a kind of ability, whereas the former kind of knowledge has to do with having information. Here, to simplify the discussion, I am assuming that knowing a person can be understood in terms of knowing facts about that person.


LOVE, TRUTH, AND THE MEDIUM IN
SEX, LIES, AND VIDEOTAPE

Yannis Tzioumakis

Arguably the most important scene in *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) takes place approximately ten minutes before the end of the film, when Ann Bishop Mullany (Andie MacDowell) grabs Graham Dalton’s (James Spader) video camera, points it toward him, and challenges him to talk about himself. Prior to that moment in the narrative, the only person behind the camera had been the current object of its gaze. Graham has been using the camera as a tool for sexual gratification as over the years he lost his ability to get an erection through human contact. Instead, he has videotaped a number of women talking about their sex lives and histories, occasionally persuading them to masturbate for the camera. These tapes then became the source of his solitary sexual pleasure, as he removed himself completely from the normative world of heterosexual relationships.

Ann’s pointing the camera toward him, however, marks the beginning of the end of Graham’s “personal project” (as he calls it). He is forced to deal with his “problem” (as she calls it). Her penetrating questions and the camera lens push Graham to “reconnect.” The starting point for this psychological movement is Graham’s realization that he does not know who he has become after a painful breakup with a woman some nine years in the past. He confesses his total lack of knowledge about himself to Ann and to the camera, and then she welcomes him into a microcosm of individuals who are “connected,” in the sense that the actions of any one in the group affect the lives of the others. This web of relationships makes possible the solution of complex personal problems and brings self-knowledge.

Such a relationship between subjects, one that facilitates (self-)knowledge acquisition and spiritual and psychic progress, however, stands at
Yannis Tzioumakis

odds with certain influential philosophical positions regarding the status of knowledge in the contemporary (Western) world. More specifically, it seems to go against a thesis that was advanced by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his 1984 study *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. If the main objective for at least three of the four key characters in the film (Graham, Ann, and her sister Cynthia [Laura San Giacomo]) is to utilize this mode to acquire knowledge about themselves so that they can eventually reach a state of emancipation and live fulfilling lives (as the film’s end seems to suggest), then the film offers a quite contradictory message about the acquisition of self-knowledge. It is contradictory because, according to Lyotard, knowledge in contemporary societies has ceased to be determined and legitimated by grand narratives such as “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning [and] the emancipation of the rational or the working subject” (xxiii). Instead, these narratives of legitimation have fallen from grace as technological and scientific advancements have gradually transformed knowledge into a commodity. This transformation means that knowledge has “cease[d] to be an end in itself” (4–5) that could ultimately be utilized for the progress of humanity and, instead, has been driven (and legitimated) by a different agenda.

On the other hand, however, and despite its opposition to the notion of the decline of the grand narratives, the mode of self-knowledge acquisition that the film endorses stands in complete agreement with a set of different arguments advanced by Lyotard. Specifically, Ann's belief in the interconnectedness of individuals (“Everybody who walks into your life is affected. I’m leaving my husband because of you. You’ve had an effect on my life”) sounds like a more simplistic description of the French philosopher’s proposition that “a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that are now more complex and mobile than ever before” (15). This view, which Lyotard explicitly posed to counteract Jean Baudrillard's position that the social bond had already been in the process of dissolving into “a mass of individual atoms,” is critical of a bleak postmodern perspective that seeks to lament the loss of a “paradisically represented ‘organic’ society” (15).

In light of these selective and often paradoxical philosophical views that the film seems to subscribe to, the present chapter sets out to examine the manner in which knowledge (and especially self-knowledge) is produced, legitimated, and acquired by the characters in the narrative of Soderbergh's film through the prism of Lyotard's philosophy. Although the film seems
to adopt a partly critical stance to questions of postmodernism in the ways it deals with questions of knowledge acquisition, it has nevertheless been widely greeted by scholars as a film that offers a clear representation of a postmodern society, and thus as a key example of postmodern cinema. A reading of the film using Lyotard’s philosophical propositions as elaborated in *The Postmodern Condition* permits us to extrapolate the strong contradictions that characterize Soderbergh’s debut film, in effect questioning its unproblematic acceptance as an example of postmodern cinema.

**Lyotard and Film**

Lyotard’s work has exercised considerable influence (for some critics unjustifiably so) on philosophical debates on postmodernism. His arguments nonetheless have found little resonance in film studies, mainly because he focuses primarily on the status of scientific knowledge and its two principal functions, research and dissemination through teaching (4), subjects that, at first sight, have little relevance to major film studies theories and debates. Thus, although film scholars like Annette Kuhn and Tania Modleski have used Lyotard’s concept of the decline of master narratives to account for the pessimistic messages of recent science fiction films and for the gradual loosening of structuring principles of cinema such as masculinity and patriarchy (Hill 100), most work about questions of postmodernism and/in cinema has assumed different directions.

Instead, film critics and scholars have turned mostly to thinkers like Andreas Huyssen, Fredric Jameson, and Jean Baudrillard, who saw a number of their philosophical propositions finding a more direct and obvious application in film criticism. For instance, Huyssen’s discussion of pop art and its mixing of elements, styles, and genres understandably found support from film critics who could start accounting for the increasing examples of films that displayed a certain “eclecticism” in terms of use of visual style (Hill 99). Furthermore, Jameson, who has also written on film specifically, proved a major influence in studies of postmodernism and cinema. His discussion of the “nostalgia film” as a “particular practice of pastiche” that encourages audiences “to seek the historical past through [their] own pop images and stereotypes about that past” captured a distinct trend in global cinema, the beginning of which was characterized by well-known mainstream films such as *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), and *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) (see Jameson 23–25) and
which has arguably intensified in more recent years. Similarly, Baudrillard’s strand of philosophical thinking, with its emphasis on simulation and simulacra and the manner in which images and signs have ceased to be grounded in reality and increasingly have been functioning completely outside real referents (Hill 98), also found direct application in film criticism, though it was mostly utilized to critique developments in television.

The emphasis on questions of style that all these positions implied made their adoption by film criticism much easier than Lyotard’s philosophical propositions. And yet The Postmodern Condition can offer ways of approaching film texts that could extend beyond questions of the decline of grand narratives and how these are dealt with in the narrative universe of a given film or film genre. Lyotard’s preoccupation with questions of legitimation of (scientific and narrative) knowledge in contemporary Western societies can be utilized in order to examine how (and why) narrative journeys in American films assume particular trajectories, how the film protagonist reaches by the end of the film a state of character transformation that is primarily defined by the acquisition of self-knowledge. How is this knowledge obtained and how is it legitimated, if it indeed is? Addressing such questions is useful for demonstrating that Lyotard’s approach to postmodernism can have a particularly constructive application for film criticism, especially for a strand that is primarily concerned with questions of narrative.

Knowledge and the Process of Its Legitimation

Lyotard argues that the organization of knowledge in contemporary Western societies has been radically transformed under the development of new technologies, especially computers. While in earlier social formations knowledge was characterized by its “use value,” in the latter half of the twentieth century it has become increasingly commodified, which raises a number of questions about its production and dissemination. Given the increasing “exchange value” of knowledge and its indispensability to “productive power,” it is conceivable, Lyotard argues, “that the nation-states will one day fight for control of information just as they battled in the past for control of territory, and afterwards for control of access to and exploitation of raw materials and cheap labor” (5).

Not surprisingly, this new status of knowledge has effected major repercussions on existing public powers (such as government) and civil institutions (such as universities) that have traditionally been the key ac-
tors in producing and disseminating knowledge. In light of the decline in the traditional use of knowledge “for its ‘educational’ value or political (administrative, diplomatic, military) importance,” and its potential utilization as currency (“payment knowledge” and “investment knowledge” [6]), it is imperative, for Lyotard, that civil society redefine its relationship with knowledge and its new status. This redefinition is especially important because the question of knowledge in Western societies is also intricately linked to the question of ethics and politics, which means that changes in the organization of knowledge will necessarily affect the organization of political and justice systems, the very core of what constitutes a society (8).

Given the stakes in this redefinition process, it is understandable that questions of the legitimation of knowledge—especially of scientific knowledge—acquire particular significance. This is because legitimated scientific knowledge, which is judged according to the criterion of truth, can (and will) become the basis for ethical and political considerations that are judged according to different, culturally determined, criteria. And, with science “more completely subordinated to prevailing powers and, along with the new technologies, in danger of becoming a major stake in their conflicts” (8), one could easily see why the process of both the legitimation of knowledge and also the “legitimation of the legislator” needs to be reexamined. As Lyotard put it, “who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided” are two sides of the same question (9).

The exacerbated problems with legitimation that scientific knowledge has had to deal with in recent times, however, have been largely restricted specifically to this type of knowledge. This is because there is another type of knowledge that has survived the recent radical transformations that the advance of technology has brought in and yet has not faced legitimation concerns. Narrative knowledge, according to Lyotard, does not answer to the criterion of truth and therefore does not depend on it for its legitimation (as scientific knowledge does). Instead, narrative knowledge allows the coexistence of a variety of language games (deontic statements, interrogative statements, evaluative statements, etc.), which necessarily means that it answers to criteria other than (just) truth, such as efficiency, justice, happiness, beauty, and so forth (19–20).

However, as these criteria do not offer the possibility of an externally verifiable truth (as the denotative statements for scientific knowledge do), legitimation is achieved through the narrative itself. As Lyotard argues, different forms of narrative perform different, though very particular, functions
(myths bestow legitimacy on social institutions, successful and unsuccessful heroes represent positive and negative models, and so on), which allow the society in which these narratives operate “to define its criteria of competence and to evaluate according to these criteria what is performed or can be performed within it” (20). In other words, not only do narratives legitimate what they tell, they also carry in them their own legitimation—by their mere existence as narratives. In this respect, narrative knowledge does not have to concern itself with the recent developments in the field of knowledge, as scientific knowledge does.

Following this outlining of the properties of narrative knowledge, Lyotard moves back to scientific knowledge and argues that, despite its dependence on the criterion of truth, scientific knowledge has always resorted to narrative knowledge for its legitimation, especially to major narratives that have had their origins in the Enlightenment: the emancipation of humanity (the subject of narrative as a hero of freedom) and speculation (the subject of narrative as hero of knowledge) (31–32). It is the decline of these master narratives as agents of knowledge legitimation that marks, for Lyotard, the shift from modernity to a new perspective that has been labeled the postmodern condition. This is because the decline or erosion of the former grand narrative makes the relationship between science and the other main societal spheres (justice, politics, art) problematic. The problem is that scientific knowledge ceases to have a clearly defined historical objective, and consequently its legitimation is usurped by “interlocutors involved in ethical, social and political praxis,” that is, subjects located outside the realm of science (39–40). On the other hand, the decline of the grand narrative of speculation as a road to the legitimation of knowledge suggests that knowledge cannot be contained within a clearly defined “weave of encyclopaedic net” (39), and as a result it becomes fragmented, with the borders between previously well-established fields of science in constant flux. This brings about the pessimistic view that no subject is (or will ever be) in a position to master all these fields of knowledge that were previously perceived as unified, and in effect justifies the postmodernist view of a fragmented world.

Although Lyotard’s focus in *The Postmodern Condition* remains on the status of scientific knowledge, it is his views on questions about processes of legitimation in general and narrative knowledge and its (non)legitimation in particular that are relevant here, as well as his view that the social bond has not dissolved into a mass of social atoms but has instead metamorphosed into “flexible networks of language games” (15). Specifically, this chapter
examines the ways in which self-knowledge is produced and acquired by the four main characters in *sex, lies, and videotape* and the processes of legitimation that underwrite its acquisition. Irrespective of its status as non-scientific, this chapter will argue that knowledge acquisition is still determined by a strong emancipation “master narrative,” one that is congruent with other equally strong structuring principles, especially heterosexuality and patriarchy, that have characterized Western societies. This argument immediately questions the unproblematic reception of *slv* as an exemplary case of postmodern film and proposes instead a reading that sees the film as having certain links with modernity.

Beyond questions of the survival or death of the grand narratives, the examination of the processes of knowledge acquisition and legitimation in the narrative of *slv* raises some interesting issues with regard to the process of character transformation that traditionally occurs at the end of a classical narrative. Perhaps contrary to the expectations of the film’s spectators, who might have assumed that the film’s celebrated independent status was a blueprint for an assault on classical narrative conventions, my analysis demonstrates that the film’s narrative adheres closely to the classical rules, especially in terms of character transformations at the end of the narrative, which are markedly clear. However, the logic of the narrative that makes these transformations possible is very much the product of a knowledge production and acquisition process that finds legitimation not in a clear cause and effect (as classical narratives do) but in the flexible network of language games in which the four characters are participants and that allow seemingly implausible transformations to occur. As a result the narrative is permeated by a strong sense of contradiction given the fact that, according to Lyotard, those flexible networks “may seem far removed from modern reality” (17).

**The Postmodern Text?**

If there have been two main frameworks within which *slv* has been approached critically, these have been as a paradigm-shifting film for what critics have called contemporary American independent cinema and as an example of postmodern cinema. And if the former interpretative framework can be easily detected in the views of scholars such as Greg Merritt, who argues that “no movie in the sound era has had a greater importance on indie cinema . . . than *sex, lies, and videotape*” (312), and Geoff King, who calls
the film “a milestone in the development of the indie sector as we know it today” (261), the latter framework is somewhat more prosaic though no less concrete. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard include the film in a list of sixty key examples of American “postmodern films” and offer a synopsis that firmly labels the film as postmodern from the outset: “Every scene involves sexuality in some fashion, most containing intimate conversations about personal and sexual life. The mood of postmodern despair and futility is summed up early in the film as Ann Mullany (MacDowell) confides to her therapist that she has been obsessed with images of garbage for a week. ‘Garbage. All I’ve been thinking about all week is garbage. I mean, I just can’t stop thinking about it’” (Boggs and Pollard 274).

Although the authors do not include in their synopsis any other signifier of postmodernism, “despair and futility” are taken here as signs of a meaningless existence. This state could potentially have been the outcome of the decline of faith in grand narratives as elaborated by Lyotard (Ann Mullany’s life is not driven by a particular force or objective and therefore her mind is occupied by problems not grounded in reality). However, Boggs and Pollard’s study of postmodern cinema does not seem to take into consideration Lyotard’s propositions as central to the debates on postmodernism and cinema, opting to leave him out of the circle of “the European intellectual fathers of postmodernism” that for them includes Lyotard’s contemporaries: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Baudrillard (Boggs and Pollard 18). In this respect, despair and futility are perceived as signs that reflect a more general, “strongly pessimistic turn in social and political life,” which, for the authors, is also associated with postmodernism (18).

In The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study of Films and Directors, Peter Hanson takes a completely different approach to questions of postmodernism and the film. Rather than dealing with questions of character representation, Hanson isolates the film’s fragmented narrative, which he calls “the most accessible kind of cinematic postmodernism” (22). The constant intercutting between characters’ actions not only accelerates the pace of storytelling in a film that is heavily dependent on dialogue but also creates links between characters for the spectators’ pleasure. Although this approach to narration is not particularly unusual, what differentiates Soderbergh’s presumption that viewers can and will play along in this narrative game” (22–23). This allows the filmmaker to utilize other conventions that further fragment the narrative, especially the film’s celebrated shifts in temporality, without incurring any risk of alienating the
Love, Truth, and the Medium in sex, lies, and videotape

For this reason, Hanson concludes, “the idiom of the film is inherently, not superficially, postmodern” (23). Although Hanson’s examination of the links between postmodernism and the film in terms of aesthetics offers an interesting approach, arguably the most influential reading of the film as a postmodern text was provided by Norman K. Denzin in a book published in 1991, shortly after the theatrical release of the film. Like Boggs and Pollard, Denzin looks at questions of character representation but takes his cue from the work of Baudrillard. According to his view, slv and When Harry Met Sally . . . (Rob Reiner), which was also released in 1989, can be seen as “field guides to yuppies,” films that address issues and concerns for a particular demographic of the population that emerged during the Reagan years (108). Characterized by very specific practices, habits, and attitudes that permeate every aspect of their lives (from the clothes they wear to the kind of jokes they make), characters in such films are “postmodern simulacra for whom sex ‘has become a free standing item, related to nothing else’” (Champlin, qtd. in Denzin 108). In this respect, if the cure for Graham’s impotence and his immediate reconnection to the social world at the end of the film sound implausible, this is because the conceptualization of the problem (of sex) has taken place within very specific parameters and completely detached from anything material, “the fantasy outcome of the perfect therapy session,” as a review of the film appropriately put it (Kehr, qtd. in Denzin 111).

This line of inquiry eventually leads Denzin to argue that the film is about truthfulness as the only way that people can achieve real (heterosexual) connection. With Graham and Ann having retreated from sexuality because they harmed their partners by lying to them (Graham) or were harmed because they were lied to by their partners (Ann), it takes the complete and utter removal of the web of lies that surrounded both characters’ existence for them to reconnect and be intimate. However, this is a simplistic solution to a complex problem, especially as it is achieved through the help of the video camera, which is constructed as a truth-revealing medium, irrespective of the fact that it is a gendered medium (Denzin 113). Only in front of its lens can the various women from Graham’s past and present feel comfortable enough to tell the truth about their (sex) lives and be themselves. In this respect, truth is enabled by and equated with the medium of video while the actual diegetic world as captured by Soderbergh’s camera is permeated by lies and an all-around inability to communicate, until Graham’s video, that is, comes and makes truth and intimacy possible.
Knowledge, Self-Acquisition, and Character Transformation

Lines of critical inquiry that perceive *slv* as postmodern could potentially have focused on several other aspects of the film as signifiers of a postmodernist perspective. However, the film does not embrace postmodernism, at least not as forcefully and unequivocally as existing studies might have us believe. An examination of the film’s narrative in terms of the way the four main characters acquire knowledge about themselves demonstrates clearly the film’s departures from an unmitigated postmodern perspective and stands to confirm Lyotard’s view that the various accounts that have advocated the dissolution of the social bond have indeed been somewhat exaggerated.

The first scene of the film raises immediately the issue of self-knowledge acquisition and its legitimation problems. As Graham takes a break from driving to freshen up, Ann is first heard and then seen talking to her therapist about the issues that occupy her mind. Despite the seemingly relaxed environment, Ann’s concerns are about garbage producing cans and the families of airline fatalities, concerns that clearly displace the focus from her own personal problems. When prompted by her therapist to think that “the object of [her] obsession is invariably something negative which [she has] no control over,” Ann accepts readily that obsessing about negative issues is part and parcel of being unhappy (and therefore in therapy). It is clear then that psychoanalysis is represented from the start at best as a tool that helps people deal with the fact that their lives are (and will be) permeated by a profound sense of unhappiness and at worst as a pointless exercise that will certainly not teach the patient, in this case Ann, anything significant about herself, not to mention help her become happy.

A couple of scenes later Graham and Ann meet for the first time. Ann’s husband, John (Peter Gallagher), used to be very close with Graham during their college years but have drifted apart as Graham retreated from social interaction following a traumatic break-up and John emphatically embraced marriage, a career in law, and a yuppy lifestyle. In between the opening scene and Graham and Ann’s first encounter, however, the spectator finds out that John is cheating on Ann with her sister Cynthia, while the latter explicitly expresses feelings of a chronic antipathy for Ann, whom she sees as reserved and reticent, especially when it comes to sexual matters. A second scene with Ann and her therapist seems to confirm this as Ann gets embarrassed when prompted to talk about masturbation. Upon meeting her for the first
time, Graham immediately puts Ann on the spot, asking her personal and penetrating questions about her views on her marriage. Ann’s conventional responses (she likes the security of it and the beautiful home she and John made) in tandem with her concerns about the complete lack of sex between her and John that she confesses to her therapist paint a pretty clear picture for the spectator about why Ann is not happy. Her life choices of marrying John and giving up her work are presented as the root of the problem, with sexual reticence being presented as a secondary but interrelated factor.

Several scenes later and after helping Graham find a house to rent while staying in Baton Rouge, Ann and Graham have a cozy lunch in a café, where they share certain intimate thoughts with each other. In a character-bending fashion, Ann goes first, admitting that sex is overrated and that it tends to become too big a determinant in relationships. She also professes that women and men practice sex for different reasons and have different views on the subject, while efforts to collapse these profoundly different views have been causing her considerable confusion. Graham seems to understand Ann’s concerns, offering her a neat quote that summarizes her point well (“Men learn to love the person they are attracted to and women become more and more attracted to the person that they love”). On the other hand, he takes Ann by surprise, revealing to her that he is impotent. After the initial shock Ann asks questions about the way he handles this issue, but Graham refocuses on Ann by telling her that the potential self-consciousness his problem creates for him pales in comparison to Ann’s own self-consciousness, which stems from a deep-rooted phobia of being constantly watched by people. Ann admits that this is indeed true, and, in this respect, Graham’s observation, which occurs after a series of penetrating questions to Ann in earlier scenes, becomes the first step in terms of self-knowledge acquisition that all the main characters will eventually experience (starting with Ann). This first step toward self-knowledge has immediate repercussions. In the third and final scene between Ann and her therapist, which is directly after the scene in the café, Ann is certainly more upbeat. Intrigued by the “character” that Graham turned out to be, she once again verges on understanding that it is her marriage to John and what this entails that keeps her from a fulfilling life, a result that the hours she had spent in therapy had been unable to uncover.

Following this scene there is a sizable section in the film that focuses on Graham’s videotapes and his encounter with Cynthia. While Ann believes she has found a kindred spirit (and potentially the person who can show the way toward self-knowledge and eventually happiness), in one of her visits
to Graham's house she discovers his videotape project. Shocked and disapproving, Ann leaves Graham and asks her sister, who in a previous scene had demonstrated an interest in meeting him, not to get in touch with him. Ann's refusal to explain the reasons behind her sudden severance of ties with Graham, however, acts as an even stronger motivation for Cynthia to visit him, especially as she suspects that the reason must have been related to sex. Without fear or reservations, the “extrovert” Cynthia (as Ann has described her in an earlier scene) does visit Graham and immediately agrees to become his latest video interview subject.

The interview scene consists of Cynthia responding to two specific questions that Graham asks her: when her first sexual experience took place and when she saw a penis for the first time. With previous scenes having constructed her as a sexually confident woman, it is not surprising that Cynthia is not only infinitely more comfortable than Ann in talking about sex but also cherishes the opportunity to have a meaningful dialogue (constructed as monologue through the use of the video camera) about it. This is particularly important because her sexual encounters with John are represented as void of any meaning for her. As she admits to John in a later scene when she decides to break off their affair and he resists it by trying to stay and talk, “John, we haven't got anything to talk about,” and he reluctantly agrees. Her video interview scene thus provides Cynthia with her first concrete step toward self-knowledge, which in this case is her realization that her affair with John does not offer her any meaningful outlet for her emotions. Instead it is Graham's camera and direct questions that afford her such an opportunity. Although the spectator is denied access to the whole interview, the scene that follows shows a smiling and seemingly relieved Cynthia leaving Graham's house.8

Like Ann's encounter with Graham in the café, Cynthia's video interview has immediate, though very different, repercussions. The subsequent scenes show her having a very intense sexual encounter with John that makes all their previous encounters pale by comparison. Seemingly completely satisfied and covered in sweat she discharges John by asking him to leave in order to enjoy this newfound intensity on her own. Two scenes later, while with Ann at the bar where Cynthia works, John calls her to ask for sex, and it is the first time in the narrative that Cynthia rejects John. Although at this point she is reluctant to end their affair completely, this refusal is another step toward self-knowledge, which in Cynthia's case is the end of a life that is characterized by meaningless (apart from that one occasion)
sex and lies that partly prevent her from having a good relationship with her older sister.9

Cynthia’s first rejection of John and the guilt she starts feeling over her sister are conveyed in the first of a small cluster of three scenes that are extremely important in terms of characters’ acquisition of self-knowledge. The second of these scenes involves Ann and John in their bedroom. As Ann cannot sleep she decides to finally confront John about his suspected extramarital activities. Her direct questions, however, do not faze John, who first uses legalistic jargon to demonstrate that Ann has no evidence and then lies by bringing up work pressure as an excuse for his lack of interest in sex with Ann, in order to inflict a sense of guilt on his wife. His strategy seems to work as Ann does indeed feel guilty, apologizes, and states that “[she has] just got all this time on [her] hands and [she] just sits around thinking all these, like, intricate scenarios; and then [she doesn’t] want to waste all [her] time in them so [she] believe[s] in them.” As she confesses these thoughts to John she takes her place next to him in bed, marking the first instance in the narrative when John and Ann show affection for each other. A clearly relieved John asks her if therapy helps, to which Ann is quick to admit what spectators have already known from the opening scene of the narrative, namely, that it is utterly ineffective.

While Ann’s admission of creating scenarios in her mind momentarily sidetracks her from the road to self-knowledge, emancipation, and the fulfilling life that her encounter with Graham initiated, John’s lucky escape from his wife’s interrogation does not seem to create a step toward his own self-knowledge. The third and final scene of this cluster sees him at Cynthia’s bedroom, responding in utter shock to the news that Cynthia has made a videotape with Graham. After admonishing Cynthia for making the tape, admitting that he could understand neither Graham’s project nor the fact that Graham does not have sex with the women he tapes, and finding out that Cynthia trusts him less than she trusts Graham, whom she had met only once, John seems to momentarily come to grips with the problems of his own life, namely, that he is “the second and first lowest form of human life,” the second because of lying to his wife and the first via his profession as a lawyer. This realization, however, is being severely dented by his decision to ask Cynthia for sex anyway, which gives Cynthia her final motivation to end their affair. By the end of the scene, John comes to agree that the end of the affair is indeed a good step since things have started getting complicated. For Cynthia, however, things have gotten “real simple.” Breaking up with John
will now allow her to stop living in a lie, to improve her relationship with her sister, and potentially to find a relationship where sex would be meaningful.

With Cynthia being the first of the main characters to reach a stage of emancipation and be completely transformed relative to her situation at the opening of the film, and with John firmly standing on the opposite side, the narrative enters its climactic section, which revolves around Ann and Graham’s final stages of self-knowledge acquisition as well as the price John has to pay for not being able to acquire self-knowledge through his interactions with Ann, Cynthia, and Graham. The catalyst for this final act is Ann’s discovery of Cynthia’s pearl earring in her and John’s bedroom, which confirms for Ann that her suspicion of John’s extramarital affair with Cynthia is not a scenario she created because she has time on her hands but a concrete reality. Her response is to go to Graham, admit what she should have admitted from the very beginning, that her life is bad, and ask to do a videotape. Although Graham has reservations about whether Ann is in a normal frame of mind, Ann’s questioning of the term *normal* in association with Graham convinces him to videotape her.

Ann’s video confession, however, is withheld by the narration. An ellipsis in the narrative brings the scene forward as Ann and Graham are getting ready for sex, a narrative component that suggests that the video session functioned therapeutically not just for Ann but for Graham too. Another fast forward brings Ann back to her home, where she confronts John once and for all and asks him for a divorce. Upon the news that Ann has also made a videotape, John leaves immediately for a showdown with Graham. He throws Graham out of his own house and plays Ann’s videotape, which was made in the previous scenes but the content of which has not been revealed until this point. In this respect, John is the last character who comes to acquire self-knowledge because Ann and Graham’s encounter took place earlier in the narrative.

Although the scene starts with John watching a videotape on Graham’s television, with the grainy image of Ann ready to respond if she ever cheated on her husband, a cut brings the action back to “real” time and the spectator finally starts witnessing Ann’s response. With the problem of her marriage being resolved, Ann’s focus now moves to sex and her relationship with her sister, which in her mind are related (Ann thought of cheating on John with Graham but would not act on that thought because it was something that Cynthia would do). As Graham reminds her that he is incapable of embarking on a sexual relationship with her, Ann starts questioning the conditions
of his impotence. According to Graham, the source of his impotence has been pathological lying and the nonverbal expression of feelings that made it difficult for people to relate to him. For him, this situation has fully justified his long-standing absence from social/sexual relationships, even though he now admits that he eventually changed his conduct and he does not resemble the person he once was.

Ann, however, is not convinced. She picks up on a Freudian slip Graham makes and starts quizzing him about Elizabeth, the woman with whom Graham traumatistically broke up in the past and who is seemingly responsible for Graham's protracted problematic state. Gradually, Ann reveals the many cracks and fissures in Graham's account of himself, pushing him to uncharted territory in terms of self-knowledge acquisition: If he is not a liar anymore, why is he still impotent? If he came back to Baton Rouge to see Elizabeth and get “a sense of closure, a resolution of some sort,” as he puts it, how can he justify the videotapes to her? How could he convince her that he is a changed person when he is still making videotapes? Would he not continue to be a liar if he decided not to tell Elizabeth about the tapes?

Graham's responses to the barrage of Ann's questions become progressively erratic as he feels increasingly uncomfortable. It is at that point (almost eighty-three minutes into the film) that the sequence mentioned in the opening lines of this chapter occurs. Ann picks up the video camera and points it toward Graham, pushing him further to take stock of his life and use the opportunity offered to him to also reach a form of emancipation. The ensuing dialogue holds the key to understanding the film's approach to questions of self-knowledge acquisition and legitimates the way in which Ann and Cynthia have already reached the desired stage of character transformation that usually marks the end of American film narratives. It is worth citing the extract in its entirety:

**ANN:** Why do you tape women? Why?

**GRAHAM:** What? What? What do you want me to tell you? Tell you why? Why? Ann, you don't know who I am. You don't have the slightest idea about who I am. Am I... should I... I supposed to recount all the moments in my life leading up to this moment and just hope that it is coherent? And it makes some sense to you? It doesn't make sense to me and I was there! I don't have the slightest idea of who I am. And just to be able to explain
it, to you! And why? Tell me why? Why do I have to explain myself to you?

ANN: 'Cause maybe I can help you.

GRAHAM: Help me with what?

ANN: Your problem.

GRAHAM: My problem? Do I have a problem? You know, I look around me in this town and I see John and Cynthia and you and I feel comparatively healthy.

ANN: You've got a problem.

GRAHAM: You're right. I've got a lot of problems. But they belong to me.

ANN: You think they're yours but they're not. Everybody that walks in that door becomes a part of your problem, anybody that comes in contact with you. I didn't want to be part of your problem but I am. I am leaving my husband and maybe I would have anyway but the fact is I that I am doing it now. And part of this is because of you. You've had an effect on my life.

GRAHAM: This isn't supposed to happen. I spent nine years structuring my life so this didn't happen.

Following this dialogue Ann approaches Graham and starts touching him. After they kiss and before embarking on what seems likely to be sexual intercourse, Graham switches off the camera. This is followed by John switching off the television, revealing to Graham that he had sex with Elizabeth back on the day when she and Graham were a couple, and then John leaves. In a move that clearly signals his character transformation, Graham destroys his videotapes and throws them out of his house and life. The last three scenes then mark the results of all the characters’ transformations in the film:

1. After losing his wife, John also loses his job and—as a consequence—his yuppie lifestyle, in short, all things that defined him as a character at the beginning of the narrative. The loss of his job is a direct result of his lying and of his affair with Cynthia because on two occasions he prioritized sex with Cynthia over meeting with his client.
2. Ann gets a job and on Cynthia’s request agrees to rekindle the relationship with her sister by allowing her to contact her in her new workplace. With the lack of a professional occupation, a
troubled relationship with her sister, and a problematic marriage being the key problems in Ann’s life, the end of narrative finds her transformed in all three areas. A shot of a happy Cynthia confirms that she also wants to build a meaningful relationship with her older sister.

3. Graham and Ann get together as it starts raining, a piece of narrative information that could suggest that they are ready to face any problems as a couple. This meeting confirms that Graham has overcome his impotence and his problem of relating to people, especially persons of the opposite sex, marking the complete character transformation of the last of the four main characters.

**The Contradictions of the Postmodern Text**

Given the overwhelming nature of these character transformations, it is not surprising that film scholars and critics like Denzin and Kehr have raised questions of plausibility and labeled the end of the narrative as “the fantasy outcome of the perfect therapy session.” As a critic for the *Village Voice* put it in terms of the remedial powers of video technology, “Video may be evil, but what about the way Cynthia’s confession liberates her? How about its therapeutic effects on Ann? How did Graham come to his disillusionment if not by means of his camera?” (Brown 56). Using Lyotard’s approaches to knowledge, we might be able to understand questions like these as thinly disguised efforts to foreground issues of legitimation of narrative knowledge, especially in terms of problematizing the unquestioned acceptance of such complete character transformations by the sizable audience who made this small independent film an unmitigated success.

Although both reviewers and academic critics focused considerable attention (understandably perhaps, given the centrality of the word *videotape* in the film’s title) on the questionable role of the video camera as the catalyst in the production of self-knowledge and the articulation of truth (with all the problems this entails), I would like to suggest here that the video camera is actually a secondary concern in the characters’ quest for self-knowledge, one that would eventually lead them to emancipation and a fulfilling existence. It is a mere narrative gimmick that even Soderbergh himself suggested he wanted to use because of the increasing prominence of video technology in American culture toward the end of the 1980s (cited in Denzin 113). I would like to argue instead that the primary medium in this process is the
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connecting tissue that brings together the individuals in the narrative (as Ann explains it to a confused Graham), a concept that corresponds neatly to what Lyotard has called the “flexible networks of language games.” It is such a network that spectators see in full play in slv.

In Lyotard’s view, every individual is located “at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits . . . through which various messages pass” (15). Irrespective of background, education, age, class, gender, and so forth, individuals have a power, however limited, to participate in such circuits as senders, addressees, or referents of messages, which often provoke “adjustments” to the system that governs them and which increase their performance and productivity. In Lyotard’s words, “The novelty of an unexpected ‘move’ with its expectant correlative displacement of a partner or group of partners, can supply the system with that increased performativity it forever demands and consumes” (15). According to this logic then, every individual is in a position to make a statement that will affect other individuals who are members of the same network—addressees who necessarily will undergo a “displacement,” an alteration of some kind” that affects them not only as addressees and referents but also as potential senders (15). This presupposes that the flexible networks in which individuals participate are permeated by the principle of agonistics, which makes the creation of new, unexpected moves the main objective of the participants/players.

If one accepts that the characters in the film represent such a flexible network, one could see how knowledge (self-knowledge in particular) is generated, and Ann’s explanation to Graham in the key scene of the film is indeed the gist of Lyotard’s proposition. Graham’s arrival and participation in the existing micro-network that includes Ann, John, and Cynthia and the specific language games he immediately adopts (strong, direct interrogative statements that unsettle accepted and conventional behavior in the existing network and enable participants to confront particular issues that had hitherto compromised their lives) are certainly unexpected moves that displace the rest of the main characters, especially Ann. However, this displacement, which Ann experiences as the addressee of Graham’s move, changes her own position as sender of messages and eventually fosters the adoption of specific language games that will lead her out of marriage with John, before she herself adopts Graham’s language games to help him out of stalemate.

By applying this method, one could demonstrate that the narrative of the film and especially the steps toward self-knowledge acquisition the four characters undertake are direct results of unexpected moves, of language
games that transcend the various limits imposed on the network participants by institutions and/or the environment in which the players operate and which, according to Lyotard, often “restrict the inventiveness of the players in making their moves” (17). In this respect, Graham’s role has been no less than instrumental because his original location is outside accepted social norms (“I used to be a pathological liar; I used to express my feelings non-verbally and often scared people who were close to me”) and his unusual project of taping women talking about sex and masturbating in front of the camera certainly stands as a deviant practice, especially during the 1980s and early 1990s—the conservative times of the Reagan-Bush administrations in America. Free from the limitations of powerful social institutions, Graham is in a position to make the all-important first unexpected move that sets in motion displacements in the rest of the characters, starting with questions that transcend accepted decorum and make Ann uncomfortable and his inviting Cynthia to make a videotape, literally seconds after meeting her.

Ann’s more intimate confessions in the café and Cynthia’s immediate acceptance of the invitation to make a tape with a stranger (irrespective of her “extroverted” character) mark their modified status as senders who are now ready to engage in unexpected moves that have direct repercussions and pave the way for new moves. Their moves also cause countermoves, which Lyotard calls “reactional” responses and thus not strategically good moves (16). John’s moves are representative examples of such countermoves. This is especially evident in the scene when Ann confronts him about his suspected infidelity. Although John has the opportunity to select the appropriate language statement and start his own journey to emancipation, he nonetheless chooses to counteract Ann’s interrogative statements with negation based on lies. It is his inability to make unexpected moves that preclude his character from reaching the stage of liberation the other characters are striving for, and of course he pays the price for it.

On the other hand, Ann mounts the courage to potentially lose the security and the great home that she cited as good reasons to subscribe to the institution of marriage by confronting John about his suspected infidelities, while Cynthia, who prior to her interview seemed to rejoice in being spiteful toward her sister, starts feeling guilty and embraces (or succumbs to) a Western moral code that certainly discourages sex with a married partner. Furthermore, when Ann finds the evidence that justified her suspicion of her husband’s extramarital affair, she finds herself in a position where she suddenly can “talk about sex” openly and then makes one of the videos that
had shocked her so deeply in earlier scenes. Finally, all the displacements and alterations that Ann underwent allow her in a very brief narrative time to master Graham’s language game in order to be able to address him with an unexpected move as a sender. Graham’s response, “This isn’t supposed to happen. I spent nine years structuring my life so this didn’t happen,” is certainly indicative of the extent of the displacement Ann’s adopted language game can achieve.

If any of these narrative developments and character transformations struck spectators and/or critics as questionable or even implausible, they nonetheless are the results of self-knowledge production and acquisition processes that are completely and utterly legitimated. Knowledge is produced as a result of unexpected language moves from participants in a flexible network of language games. The result of these moves is an adjustment to a system that has been underperforming, with the adjustment designed to increase the system’s performativity. A problematic marriage is dissolved and a more promising (still heterosexual) union replaces it; a bad familial relationship is rectified and the institution of family receives a renewed justification; liars and cheaters are removed from the network; life can now continue on solid ground for the three remaining participants that are in search of a fulfilling existence. These are indeed the contradictory messages of a film that on the one hand occupies itself with a still strong quest of liberation and emancipation while on the other it subscribes to the concept of flexible networks of language games “where the rules allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance” (Lyotard 17).

Works Cited


Notes

1. Lyotard's book was published originally in 1979 after being commissioned by the president of the Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec.
2. See for instance Denzin (esp. 109–14); Boggs and Pollard 273–74; Hanson 22–23.
3. For scholars who view Lyotard’s influence as unjustifiable see in particular Stam 755.
4. On the definition of American independent cinema see King; Holmlund and Wyatt; and Tzioumakis.
5. The film is not actually discussed in the main body of Boggs and Pollard’s study.
6. For instance, the story is a small, local narrative that features hardly any other characters than the four protagonists; Graham's “project” can be seen as the building of a database of information about people (not unlike the databases Lyotard talks in his book) to which only he has access; and the negative representation of the grand narrative of psychoanalysis as a method of therapeutic intervention, especially as opposed to the positive representation of video confession as an alternative—all these could be approached as signifiers of postmodernism.
7. The dialogue has been transcribed from the DVD Region 2 version of the film, distributed by MGM Home Entertainment in 2004. All other dialogue quoted in the chapter is from this source.
8. In a later scene we see another brief section where Cynthia states something the spectator is already aware of, namely, that Ann and John have stopped having sex.
9. The fact that Cynthia might be longing for a more meaningful relationship with Ann can be seen in the first scene at the bar, when Cynthia seems to feel guilty after having a small argument with Ann about the birthday present she bought for their mother.
The sociologist Simmel sees showing and hiding, secrecy and publicity, as two poles, like yin and yang, between which societies oscillate in their historical development. I sometimes think I see that civilizations originate in the disclosure of some mystery, some secret; and expand with the progressive publication of their secret; and end in exhaustion when there is no longer any secret, when the mystery has been divulged, that is to say, profaned.

—Norman O. Brown, "Apocalypse"

**The Revelation of Speech That Touches Itself**

When a speaker speaking is visible to us, we can have the opportunity to carefully observe two aspects of her enunciation at once, the productive animation of interpretable sound—which involves breathing, glottal articulation, shared language, expressive intonation, linguistically meaningful interruptions and pauses, and so on—and self-regard. When the speaker regards herself speaking, she makes a tiny display of her sense of what it means to be a speaker in a certain context, what it means to have a certain attitude toward one's listener(s), what it means to be creating or at least emitting a speech, and what it means to be using time and space for this particular purpose rather than any other (all of which are discussed with brilliance in Erving Goffman's *Forms of Talk*), and she makes still another tiny display of how she holds what it is that she is saying in some measured and appreciative
way. The speaker, then, displays not only what she is saying but also what, for her, it is to be a speaker saying in such a context and, further, what it is to be a speaker saying this. Speakers are audiences for themselves; they hear themselves and react to what they are saying as they are saying it. With the greatest vocalists of cinema, one has a continuing and always surprising sense of this: Richard Burton, Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, James Dean, Marius Goring, Cary Grant, William Holden, Judy Holliday, Jessica Lange, Roger Livesey, Marilyn Monroe, James Stewart.

This self-regard is worth some consideration, if only because sociolinguistic study has typically limited its focus to speakers’ speech acts per se and because speakers’ attention to their own speeches—their hearing themselves say exactly this and what they do as a result of that hearing—has received far too little study. This exact self-consciousness is interesting enough when speakers discourse about cheese, baseball, the presidential election, the weather, and a new pair of shoes, but when the subject is sex and sexuality—an official state secret—the discourse becomes more interesting still: interesting, I feel obliged to emphasize, not because of exactly what it contains but because any of its contents can be interpreted as esoteric material, material purposefully held away from public view, and thus the content of an internal mystery. As a speaker tells the story of his sex, he confronts the arcaneness of this mystery and perhaps begins to open it out to a kind of public view, if not scrutiny. So it is that sex talk is very exciting.

That in the most general and abstract terms I have a sex life is already definitive or presumptive public knowledge: that I touch myself or other people, that I have intercourse, that I fantasize, that I appreciate watching images of sexual behavior onscreen, that I understand “dirty” jokes. None of that is especially revealing, or perhaps even minimally revealing, since I am nothing other than human and humans tend to do these things. Perhaps I might confess (the fiction that) I enjoy having sex with coconuts (or with a first edition of My Life and Loves by Frank Harris), this being a relatively infrequent occurrence in our society (as counted statistically) perhaps only because the mass media advertise and encourage certain other, and more conventional, configurations and delights: in such a confession I merely become a figure in a comparably rare compilation—my habits are distinctly unlike the habits of the multitude. Yet they are definitively habits, and habits that produce the sorts of outcomes and apotheoses that anyone might “normally” expect. Even having sex with coconuts or Harris’s prose (whatever this could mean), as a general image, is hardly informative or even provocative
and merely counts me among the many who have a sexual life of some kind, albeit a relatively nontypical one (like poor Dr. Doug Ross [Gene Wilder] in Woody Allen’s *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask* [1972], who has taken to sheep). The patent fact that a person is sexual isn’t one of the secrets of sexuality then (although young people, as yet not adept at sex and thus clumsy and self-conscious, tend to think it is, just as those who are inexperienced in any social act find the act adventurous in itself and an occasion for fear and loathing [see Goffman’s *Relations in Public*]). The secrets of sexuality have to do with interaction, what I can say that might come across to you, what you can say that might come across to me. And they invoke the pleasures and feelings that are not directly knowable, indeed that are particular to a body in which I cannot find habitation—a space I can only imagine.

I know, for example, dear reader, that you will read these words, and I can presume, if I wish to, that you are just like me: that in reading them you will experience just what I do when I read them: yet you are not me, and I have no basis at all for concluding you are susceptible to the same responses. What is false about *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976), for example (false but necessarily false, else the film could not be constructed according to its plan), is that when Dr. Szell (Laurence Olivier) fiddles with Babe’s mouth (Dustin Hoffman), trying through his alternating use of probes and oil of clove to discern from the helpless innocent whether “it is safe,” Babe takes his speech, his question compounded with his torture as he asks it, to mean exactly and only what Szell himself believes it means. In real discourse there is considerably more ambiguity, as screenwriters such as David Mamet and Stephen Gaghan have shown. Of course in *Marathon Man*, for the speech between Szell and Babe to be more sophisticated and philosophically penetrating, more dubious, more involved with its ideologies, would divert the film away from its action and waylay the audience. Better the solipsism that allows for quick and unreflective readings, a solipsism you are certainly tempted to fall into as you read this.

Further: one of the possibilities in addressing one’s sex is that one can be outering desire, asking for what one wants. One’s language becomes a map of one’s body as one sees it, and one’s syntax and emphases, the music of one’s urgency, become a way of marking that map. We may imagine how in modernity, with the rapid pace of social circulation, the population of migrating strangers, and the enthusiasm of electricity, desire is itself in a race, and how language must modify itself in order to be articulate. For me
to solicit what I want when space and situation are utterly fluid means for me to change direction as I speak, to be, as it were, incoherent—incoherent, at any rate, as measured by premodern conventions. My speech may break up, may hesitate. My hesitations, indeed, instead of denoting embarrassment or timidity or composure or modesty, may be signs of the precision with which I attempt to exteriorize every nuance of passing feeling.

For you to recount your sexual experience to me presents an occasion in which I can apprehend something of your sense of being alive as it is manifest to you—to the degree that our language makes it possible for you to find codes of description or analysis that I can access. However, for you to accomplish this recounting not only through language I share but also in my physical presence, so that I can sit or crouch to watch you doing it, for you to do this in front of my face, for me not only to watch you now but also to record you through some visual system so that later, when you have gone, I can watch again, privately, with a “you” who is no longer you, is in some way to show me not only what you do to “have” a “sex life” but also what you become in regarding this, how you watch yourself having sex, how not only sex generally but your sex in point is something that you are conscious of, the consciousness of which you are willing to hand over, or try to hand over, to me. To the extent that you invoke both sexual pleasure and the attending “me” in a single breath, you perform a kind of masturbation that is revelatory and that, further, is revelatory to the specific person watching. What might happen—as in the case of, say, Jean-Claude Brisseau’s Choses secrètes (2002)—when this masturbation is performed onscreen, in front of an audience of unknown size and composition, an explicit vous?

Hidden Melody

In 1989, something roughly like this was the deep subject of slv, a first film from the as-yet-unheard-of and, for such a subject, remarkably young (twenty-five-year-old) Steven Soderbergh. The plot of the film, such as it is, conforms somewhat too neatly to the formula for a certain kind of revisionist family melodrama, in which awkward sexual relations obtain between friends and relatives in what might be thought an “extended” marriage. Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice (Paul Mazursky, 1969) comes to mind as a forerunner, as does Carnal Knowledge (Mike Nichols, 1971) and even Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Mike Nichols, 1966). The family melodrama is always some kind of play upon the incest taboo, which is to say, a problematic
Amplified Discourse and Desire in *sex, lies, and videotape*

concatenation of pleasurable desire and blood relation. In *slv*, a young man named Graham (James Spader), who almost always wears the same clothing, drives off to visit his old (presumably college) buddy John Mullany (Peter Gallagher), who is now an ambitious young lawyer living a creamy life with a rather repressed but conventionally beautiful wife, Ann Bishop Mullany (Andie MacDowell), and at the same time secretly liaising with her irrepressible, even nymphomaniac sister, Cynthia Patrice Bishop (Laura San Giacomo). The visitor enters the bees' hive. The impeccably polite, even gracile Graham has a past he does not wish to reveal, and also a particular and intriguing obsession: he likes to interview women about their sexual experience. On the surface—a place from which, in cinema as in sex, one wishes as swiftly as possible to retreat to the engagements of greater depth yet a place to which, in cinema as in sex, we are confined—this is a tale about rather limited and constrained marital sex (Ann is full of the most awkward proprieties), liberating extramarital sex (Cynthia is insatiably hungry), the lies involved in John's contrivances of appearance before his wife and old friend, and the videotapes Graham must use to record his conversations. He travels around with a shoe box filled with such tapes, indeed, each one neatly labeled with the subject's name and the date of the encounter—“DONNA—11 DEC 86 1:07:36 . . . BETTY—18 MARCH 86 0:15:57 . . . GLADYS—15 APRIL 86 3:12:10 . . . JOAN—2 APRIL 87 1:21:52 . . .”—and although we are not privy to their contents—the interviews being confidential not only within but also around the diegesis—we may safely presume he has hours and hours of confessions very much like the explicit ones we do get to witness being caught and preserved, in this film. Ambitious John—it almost need not be said—for all his sexual fulfillments is desperately hungry and thus jealous of Graham and his camera, especially when he comes to learn, very late in the film, that his wife is one of those “innocents” who have submitted to the process. Ann, for her part, is terrified. Cynthia is nothing if not curious, as though the camera is Graham's penis, an appendage filled with feeling and containing a penetrating eye that knows all.

To go a tiny step further (a step Soderbergh does not take or directly intimate, yet one which is profoundly implicit in this setup and profoundly evocative of the filmmaker's status as an educated young American born in the year of the first Kennedy assassination [interestingly, although his father was dean of education at Louisiana State University, Steven did not go to college]), Graham is a young Krapp, sharing in this blossom of youth with Samuel Beckett’s aging hero a fascination for taped records of the past: for
cataloging them, bearing them like talismans into the future, indeed navigating according to their contents, as though the tapes contain the absolute limit of a history and a topography. Krapp’s memory is not an independent organic unity jogged into action by the presence of his tapes; it is the tapes themselves, more than copresent and coterminous with them, actually embodied in and iconized by them as perduring mechanical substitutes for evanescent fleshly presence. The memory function of the intelligence has been metallicized, but on sound tape only, so that with Krapp, as he ponders his way through a difficult present moment to link himself with his own past, he hears echoes of his own voice recorded long ago, “Memorable equinox . . .,” and the rather tinny sound—which in productions of Krapp’s Last Tape is made available onstage through an aged tape recording machine—thus constitutes not an index of the memory but the memory come back in all its fullness. Graham makes videotapes, and we can imagine him in his solitary moments not merely listening to his subjects tell him about their sexual lives but also watching them as they do this telling. Perhaps he sits as he watches, naked, even playing with himself, or perhaps he merely breathes. Unavailable to his performers now, except perhaps in their own memories or imaginations, he is become the silent absent audience in front of whom, one day recorded on the cassette label, they fiddled with themselves in order to discover the melody that had been hiding somewhere, far inside.

It would be a misreading if we concluded that Graham is an inquisitor, or that he is positively desirous of entertaining the confessions that his subjects make. And they are confessions, offered in the transparent little booth produced by the focal length of his lens; he is nothing other than their priest of carnality, holding himself with stolid dignity and utter calm, drinking only water—having only water or tea to offer guests who come into his apartment—and regarding them with an unjudgmental reserve, as they discover his tapes and slowly penetrate his world to learn what it is that he does with people and his camera. One could say he is something of a camera himself, John van Druten’s Isherwood—“I am a camera, with its shutter open, quite passive. Some day all of this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed” (Isherwood 15)—that his ultimate purpose is to capture and store the revelations these women finally and irrepressibly feel the desire to make, as though it has suddenly become evident to them, now, here, in the apartment he has rented with the gently swinging screen door and where there is almost no furniture on the polished hardwood floor, and poised on the precipice of speech, that all their lives they have held a raison
d'être and forming principle locked inside and inviolable, yet also away from the air, and may have the freedom to release and even adore it, to see themselves releasing it, to be undone. He is a priest the way Michael Logan is a priest in Hitchcock's *I Confess* (1953), Spader reincarnating the sweet and silent Montgomery Clift whose knowledge transcends both information and experience.

Cynthia comes to Graham looking for a physical encounter and is first a little ashamed and then a little abashed to find that if sexuality was ever present in him it has been rarified into a strict and comforting celibacy. When she finds the camera and asks what it is for (treating it rather like a sex organ), and when he calmly tells her, we see born the idea not so much that she can play out her desire through exhibition as that she can learn to talk about a matter that has long been at the center of her sense without ever having been brought to articulate consciousness. Graham tends not to manipulate the camera during the conversation but to focus it and leave it to its own hunger; the camera draws Cynthia's pose and chatter in, insatiable but also gentle, and she finds that she can shift and pause, settle into positions upon Graham's old couch, very much as though a spirit of sorts has entered her and is slowly coming to terms with the interior shape of her youthful body. She is sitting with a tall glass of iced tea, in very short shorts and very high leather boots, ready to describe her first sexual encounter. "My first sexual experience or the first time I had intercourse?" She grins, breaks into a self-conscious laugh. He smiles politely, his eyes narrowed to focus. "I was . . . eight . . . and, uh, it's just the kind of thing that . . . you know . . . I was eight years old and, um, Michael Green, who was also eight, asked if he could watch me take a pee, and I said he could if I could watch him take one, too. So . . . we went to the woods behind my house, and I was feelin' that he was chickenin' out 'cause he kept saying, 'Ladies first.' And . . . I pulled down my little panties and . . . urinated . . . and . . . he ran away before I even finished." Turning into herself, laughing with embarrassment, touching her knee. "When," Graham asks directly but without drama, "did you finally see a penis?" There is a high, even tone on the soundtrack, a musical interposition to cue our attention or else the sound of a train passing miles away. "Was it what you expected it to be?" He slides down to the floor, looking up at her. "Umm . . . no, not really, I . . . I didn't . . . I sort of picture it, um . . . I didn't think it would have . . . um, veins or ridges or anything, I just thought it would be smooth like a test tube." We see him on the floor now, his oaken brown hair parted in the middle and long, the soft hardwood behind and
under him, his buttoned black cotton shirt, his hand holding up his head. His eyes are open and moist, drawing in the light, and his lips are parted so that she may fill his mouth with her words and he may taste them. “It’s weird thinking about it now . . . ,” she lies down, drawing her knees up and looking away, “the . . . organ itself”—she is spreading her hands apart, as though to try to hold an invisible object in the space in front of her—“seemed like a separate thing, and . . . a separate entity to me. I mean, when he finally pulled it out and I could look at it and touch it I completely forgot that there was a guy attached to it. I remember literally being startled when the guy spoke to me. . . . He said my hand felt good. . . . Then I started movin’ my hand and then he stopped talkin’.” In the next moment, after a jump through time, we see her leave, silently, becalmed. A silver sports jacket covers her back, and her long hair drapes over it like that of a rock star.

Deliciously for our developing sense of an expansive and intensive moment, Cynthia makes circumlocutions, both in her own voice and through attribution in the voices of her characters. The recollected Michael Green demurs, “Ladies first,” rather than coming more directly to what he must want, the treasure of her revelation and the liberation of his own; “Ladies first” as in an exercise of etiquette, as in self-deprecatingly allowing her to pass through a doorway before he does, when what is transpiring is the production of a genital show-off. Sex as metaphor. Or: “I didn’t sort of picture it . . . I just thought it would be smooth like a test tube,” says she, and yet, surely, that organ was not really like a test tube, not glassy, nor transparent, but, in a way that Cynthia does not choose to specifically articulate, fleshy, pink, and shaped: sensitive, not objective. “He said my hand felt good . . . and then he stopped talkin’,” she summarizes, instead of describing what he—or it, as she insists—felt like in her hand that felt so good. Hers is a description that works at describing, that struggles to come to terms with the moment it is producing, and that in this way also becomes a tease and a sop to the imagination. But if we try to picture what Cynthia is picturing on the screen of her memory, we lose sight of the picture that is being presented to us directly now, her blushing face, her hands spread as though to hold a substance of indefinable shape and magnitude. The pleasure and excitement she feels now echoing in her memory is that substance. It is true that in this film we see women speaking their sexuality, not men, and that even the sexual feeling men might conceivably speak is referred to by the female speakers only obliquely; this an emphatic support for and restatement of a more general attitude in Western culture, thoroughly biblical,
that sexual experience is a woman’s idea typically foisted on the innocence of males. The innocence of males, whose purest pursuit is knowledge, not pleasure. Perhaps it is a latent homophobia of Soderbergh’s—although also one widely shared in the culture of his audience—that leads to the elision of male pleasure as a spoken fact: we are given instead Graham’s silent absorption with the women who speak to him, a purely phallic response. The link between the phallus and the mouth is perhaps too evocative to be hinted at, especially when the oral component of that formula involves the deeply sublimated art of language, or lingual play. Later, when Graham is watching Cynthia’s tape naked upon his couch, we see a look of loss and regret pass across his face, as though, through the agency of the video and that of his own nakedness, a certain terminal impasse has been reached, an impossibility confronted by the perfection of a desire, yet also a desire that is unspoken, unvoiced, unmouthed by him. “Do you think I am pretty?” she is saying from the tape, “Prettier than Ann?” In a more trivial film, Graham would have been trying hopelessly to masturbate to the impenetrably cold televised image, an image that would have collapsed to pointless electronic static in direct address to the call of his bloody desire (as we might imagine it). Media as inhuman, media as the end of sexuality.

But here a far more intoxicating and elusive relation exists for us, since the coldness of the video fails to mask the honest truth that Cynthia, a siren for the technovisual age, has been able to reveal and address her sexual presence only in front of this camera. Far more than a man who cannot release himself with people and who needs the pornography of the image, then, Graham is a man surrounded by ghosts, whose release makes sense only in the presence of a highly energized, yet also intractable (and highly capitalized), form. He does not need the image, he needs contact; but she needs to be imagined, and imaged, to be true. We cut directly to Cynthia in bed with John, both of them caught in a sweaty (that is, labor-intensive) orgasm, but it is a reduced sexuality, a cheap reproduction of the more exciting, surprising thrills she got while that lens focused upon her. Graham’s romantic swell is love of the image and what only the image can bring and do.

**Amplification**

It is worth saying that videotape is an amplification of unmediated, situated experience. By “amplification” I refer to a process through which the audience for a performance is systematically expanded, a development with surefire
economic outcomes, to be sure, but also one that reduces the audience to an aggregation of persons less and less sharing background characteristics and more and more participating in the directness of a mass-produced moment. For highly amplified performances, the audience must be projected as possessing a random and diffuse mixture of educations, genders, ages, experiences, nationalities, cultures, and so on. The more amplified the audience, the less distinct it is in terms of any particular variables. And the more amplified a performance, therefore, the less distinct, personal, situated, and complex it can afford to be, since it must appeal at once to so widely diverse a population. To be on videotape in front of someone in a room is already to be far more amplified than simply to be with that someone, although it is also true that in a world riddled with broadcasts and opportunities for broadcasting, even unmediated behavior can start to take on the cast of performance for camera, this at least in part because people are always behaving as though they could be photographed with their images widely disseminated: videotaping is in the cultural fabric, whether one is doing it or not. What is interesting about slv is partly that Graham is actually using a camera and actually retaining videotapes, that the invocation of the idea of videotaping and of amplified culture is so blatantly and directly presented through videotaping in fact.

Because Cynthia’s discussion of her sexuality is on tape, it has a curious quality of being open to widely disparate appreciations. The more amplified material comes to be, the more ambiguous. The idea that she is a complete person, and thus in some respects unique, runs against the grain of the process through which her personhood is being manifested: she is sufficiently like anyone who would be capable of watching and understanding the tape that a kind of effacement of individual personality has been achieved upon her; further, this “anyone capable of watching” is less a whole person residing in some gathering somewhere than selective features that are echoed around the world. A principal feature of the amplified audience is its familiarity with previously highly amplified material designed for this exact audience: experience beyond watching the screen is diminished or negated in favor of what has already been widely shared, a fascination for screens. Cynthia thus looks remarkably like all other creatures look on television, with her consciousness of the presence of a camera, her orientation to the viewer’s capacity to see her, her concentration on appearance rather than action. Capitalism achieves this effacement routinely, of course; the flesh-and-blood woman becomes a cipher subject to the principle of mechanical
reproduction. But this film takes such an equation a step further. Not only is Cynthia become a television personality; the fulcrum of the plot turns on her opening herself to the lens not as a whole person but only as someone who possesses sex and sexual experience, and therefore just as much as she has become generally conditioned by this medium so, in specific, has her sexuality. Cynthia’s sex is a television personality. Or at least, it is posed and shaped for consumption exactly in the sort of way that is required if it is to be apprehended (and presumably enjoyed) by viewers who are at a distance. She must speak her sex with an amplified voice.

And it is for this reason that when words come from Cynthia about her desires and secrets, the words are so strangely, even surprisingly, comprehensible. By spreading the corpus of herself for the camera, she at once reduces and expands it, losing features of the sex that might stimulate her unique being in place and time, in order that, to the end of stimulating others, she might concentrate on features that are already known. She does not, indeed, tell us anything we do not already know. The two hands she holds out, that seem to be grasping something, remain her secret, since they are the part of her body that she does not talk about as sexual. Even when she openly states that she touched her young friend’s penis, it is the penis that enters her discourse, not her hand or hands and the role they played in doing manipulation. Cynthia’s manipulation remains in her closed territory. Or: in telling us about her sex, through videotape, she withholds manipulation.

One might go so far as to suggest that the videotape itself is manipulative, exactly as Cynthia is apparently not. Every pause she makes, every catch of her breath, every sigh is purely pornographic, in the precise sense that it follows a strict and at the same time taboo formula, a formula institutionalized and yet criminal, a formula we must not refer to and yet one we all refer to. While Cynthia’s language—anybody’s language—might conceivably become a body itself, while Cynthia’s sex—anybody’s sex—might cohere exactly in the words and their linkages, their copulations, now instead her words are only the forms of clothing, pure fashion. She talks about sex but does not talk her sex. (This is a way of lying.)

Sex, Talk, and the Individual

We all take ourselves to be unique even at those moments when it is most palpably clear that in important ways we are not. A man reads his morning paper in a café, invested entirely in his interpretations and discernments,
his concerns, his way of navigating the dangers of the social world by using the articles he is reading as charts. How clever, how informed, how tasteful, how perspicacious he is, even though there are millions of newspapers just like this one, all printed the same and flung out to the far corners of space so that other “individuals,” millions of them, can read the same constructions, offer the same interpretations, sail along the same exact routes.

There is perhaps no individuality so swollen and emphatic as is to be found in the audience for amplified performance. Perhaps it is the case that, unrelentingly aware of a palpable shallowness that can be detected onscreen due to the (producer’s) need for an image to be appealing around the world, around the world and to virtually any observer, we sense our diminution in every glance we take, our reduction to a kind of verisimilitude, and therefore labor to reconceive ourselves as solitary, valuable, independent, and creative paragons. “I see what nobody else sees,” even though I gaze at the same images, images mechano-chemically duplicated, works of art in the age of reproduction. The sense of individualism, indeed, as one watches in the midst of vast multitudes, is itself a by-product of the amplification through which the image is spread, a resultant of a process that is instigated by a feature of the amplified image and that uses the power of magnifying and typifying reality to persuade us that in appreciation we are alone with ourselves. Might we even conclude that the very sense of aloneness and idiosyncrasy, of oneness, of discrete separation from the crowd is a symptom precisely of amplified imagery, that before amplification the image so absorbed us that we were unaware of our discrete selves?

Or: if the amplified production does not specifically foster this widely held hallucination of being apart from the crowd, neither does it perform any action to thwart or dispel it. If we talk of the personal through a medium designed to amplify what we say, the content of our discourse becomes suddenly popular and flat. So, in Slv, a new sort of public sex is born, detached in a way from the embodied experience of those who related it, even as it occupies them bodily; even their bodies become public property. If Graham protests at the point when Ann gathers up his camera and points it at him, demanding, “Tell me why, Graham. Why?”; if he blusters, “Ann, you don’t even know who I am; you don’t have the slightest idea who I am,” it is only because he hasn’t fully accommodated himself to the new—and quickly knowable—body he possesses by way of his videotaping, a body that is instantly known by everyone who can see. She does know who he is, even as he knows the women on his tapes. But when he speaks to her we see that he
has also been living in a dream of the past, using his camera quite assiduously but pretending to himself that these images—shot in a medium that makes possible extremes of dispersal—are just for him.

**Ann**

Having learned that her husband and Cynthia are, as she bitterly puts it, “fucking,” Ann accosts Graham. “My life is shit. Just shit. Nothing’s what I thought it was. John’s a bastard. Let’s make a videotape.” She sits for Graham and they begin, but instead of listening and watching we proceed to her house, where John is anxious at her disappearance. When she finally arrives, he is panicky. She says—with all the bluntness that comes with absolute certainty of the moment—she wants out of the marriage, and he forces her to admit that she made one of those “damned” videotapes for Graham. He drives to Graham’s in the middle of the night, wakes the young man, throws him bodily onto the veranda, and sits inside to watch his wife’s tape in sanctimonious wonder. In a powerful continuity shot, we see the wounded Graham huddling on the dimly lit veranda while through the sheet he has put up over his front windows as a curtain the silhouette of the ghostly visitor inside mimics his posture. Ann says on the tape that she’s not sure she’s ever had an orgasm, as John, occupying Graham’s “place” as audience, listens with chagrin. We get a close shot of the TV screen. Her eyes wide open, her lips sealed, an expression of sincerity and sadness suffusing her features, in an image where the color is blued and washed out. She looks down. The hand-held camera moves around her. “Have you ever thought about having sex with someone other than your husband?” says Graham’s voice off-camera, a little tinny. John, in close-up, smiling ruefully: “Here we go.” She waits a long moment. “I’ve thought about it.” “Did you act on it?” asks Graham, but now the voice isn’t tinny, and we aren’t watching the videotape. Soderbergh’s camera is slowly dollying from behind Ann’s back to show Graham leaning against his wall actually interviewing her for the tape, in past time; this a beautiful reflection of the abstraction of sexual feeling from chronological temporality. She hasn’t, no, because that’s how Cynthia thinks, and Ann hates it when she has feelings that Cynthia has.

This is a live conversation now, the videotaping camera completely withdrawn from the framing. She is watching him watching her with open, honest eyes. “What other men have you thought about?” he asks very quietly—so quietly, in fact, that we have the sense of being in a sepulcher—and in even,
cultured, professional tones, and she smiles a little before saying, in no sense not obviously, “I thought about you.” He hasn’t moved on the floor, one knee raised, an elbow resting upon it, his eyes fixed upon her. “Have you thought about me?” When he says “Yes,” she smiles with genuine happiness. What did he think? “I thought about what you would look like having an orgasm.” (Soderbergh has thought about what Graham would look like telling Ann this.) He seems to be on the verge of tears. She touches her hair. “I’d like to know what I’d look like having an orgasm. Can you do that? Give a woman an orgasm?” He can, yes. “Would you do that for me?” No, he can’t. “Can’t or won’t?” He can’t because he won’t. A macro-close-up of the tape slowly unwinding in its cassette, time slowly moving. The actual time in which these two are sharing life, as we watch. Two things are suddenly apparent. That presence in time is implicitly and fully erotic. And that every performance for camera—Ann for Graham’s camera but more generally and fulsomely MacDowell and Spader’s performance for Soderbergh’s—is presence in time. In that complex sense, every film shot has its eroticism while at the same time being a discursive recording of events in historical relation. Through the agency of “interviews” for “camera” about “sex,” slv metaphorizes the more general condition of all cinema, in which real moments are played for camera in an aspiration that opens, blossoms, and folds again. That film is made by people who pretend to be the figures we see, while at the same time being present not only as but also with and through those figures, makes it, possibly, a lie. If we retract ourselves a little, believing (or wishing) that lying is wrong, perhaps we neglect to appreciate that when it illuminates, lying is always a miracle. “I was a pathological liar,” confesses Graham. “Lying is like alcoholism, you’re always recovering.” (And this has to be told on film.)

Images such as we see in this film, both onscreen and on the screen within the screen, are not merely amplifications. They are also touchstones to something powerful and always recharging. “The face,” said Claude Lanzmann to Jean-Michel Frodon about cinema’s difference from other art forms, “is something that is totally incompatible in any other context. Faces, trees, nature” (Frodon 99). In film, the face is everything, waiting, wanting, knowing, doubting, and all this through the slow and even unwinding of time.

Beyond Sex, beyond Lies, beyond Videotape

Ann presses Graham to tell why he is impotent, why he will not make love to her, why he will not give her the orgasm on camera so that she can see
herself having an orgasm. He says, “I used to express my feelings nonverbally, and I scared people who were close to me.” Soderbergh cuts to a shot of the lens, the red power light dimly glowing behind it. Thus, at once, we see the device that might empower Ann to free herself and a simulacrum of the device Soderbergh is using to show it and to show MacDowell “being” Ann, the device that engenders the lying, as it were, and through which, as in a bowl, our performances may swim. But that red light: the camera in the picture is turned on, filming Soderbergh’s camera that is making this film, and Soderbergh behind it—making a videotape Graham may keep and label but one that he does not show to us in this film. Since Graham is the voice of wisdom here, we must heed what he says. He was nonverbal in his expression of feeling. And he was able to be. To put this differently: feeling is inherently, originally, historically prior to language. Through the sexualizing of language came the civilization in which Graham was ultimately able to live with his friends without causing them trepidation. Yet all this self-diagnosis does not use language to reach the heights of poetry, to make the words flesh. First, the flesh must become language in and of itself; and so Ann goads and bullies and confronts Graham, seizing his camera, tracking him, quizzing him about his past, about his problem, about how her life has been affected by him, until she can approach him silently, and draw him onto the sofa, and leaning upon him begin to love what he has become, through the touch of her lips and hands. He gets up and walks to the camera, turns it off, and we are back to John staring at brilliant blue static on the monitor’s cold screen.

Let me return to Lanzmann’s observation of the centrality of the face in film. The face in film is a central reason why literature cannot be translated directly to the screen. If film has the face in the way that literature has the word, then in film, the word has taken a face. The body having become language, it can only speak itself, and the names we give to bodies, their “characterizations,” are the lies that make performance, and thus filmmaking, possible. In all our wanderings through cinema, as we convince ourselves the actors are hiding behind the masks they present to the lens, we remain vulnerable to forgetting that no one is hiding at all. The actors are here, alive, speaking the innermost truth of themselves, call it their sex, to the camera as we wait. And in the end, it is perhaps we as watchers who are hiding, in the riddling envelope of the dark.
With genial thanks to Adrian Martin.

**Works Cited**


Part 2

TEMPORALITY, INTERTEXTUALITY, GENRE
ALAIN RESNAIS MEETS FILM NOIR IN THE UNDERNEATH AND THE LIMEY

R. Barton Palmer

Abstraction and Backbone

Questioned during a postproduction interview about the “very complex chronological structure in The Limey [1999],” Steven Soderbergh’s somewhat oblique answer was to call attention to the models he followed: “My whole line while we were making it was, ‘if we do our job right this is Get Carter as made by Alain Resnais.’” Such a film would “spell big box office,” the director went on to predict, because its “certain amount of abstraction” (an important element of which was the film’s unconventional treatment of story time) would be complemented by a “backbone” that was otherwise “so straight.” Soderbergh was not proven wrong. The Limey went on to do excellent business for a niche release with no major stars (but a duo of performers well known from Hollywood’s past, Terence Stamp and Peter Fonda). And the film garnered a host of nominations for the Independent Spirit Awards.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, however, was not impressed by Soderbergh’s efforts to evoke the filmmaking of two noted European auteurs. Get Carter, an arty and shockingly violent revenge thriller, was made in 1971 by British director Mike Hodges, and the film is often cited as one of British cinema’s best. Like a number of Hodges’s other films, including the noted and controversial Croupier (1998), Get Carter engages complexly with the conventions of classic film noir, a Hollywood (and also British) film type that Soderbergh himself had explored in two earlier projects, The Underneath (1995) and Out of Sight (1998). These earlier Soderbergh films likewise engage the thematic possibilities of an unconventional ordering of plot elements, in their own way connecting to a style of filmmaking
pioneered by Resnais in the 1950s. The French director remains one of the most famous and revered figures of postwar art cinema, as important to the development of film art as giants like Orson Welles, Jean-Luc Godard, and Akira Kurosawa. Soderbergh’s self-conscious evocations of the cinematic past, however, by no means elicited universal acclaim. And yet the neglect of the Academy (the film received no recognition) may be safely taken as a backhanded endorsement of *The Limey*’s particular artistry. Reviewers, to be sure, were taken slightly aback by the film’s mixture of violent action of a generically familiar if updated variety and art cinema stylizations and themes that recalled an earlier era. However, most, like Janet Maslin, writing in the *New York Times*, grudgingly conceded that Soderbergh had managed to integrate these diverse elements effectively: “The filmmaker’s technical experiments do intrude, but they suit the meticulously hard, distant tone of the material.”

Maslin, however, is quite mistaken in her view that art cinema elements in *The Limey* are only “technical experiments” (emphasis added). Soderbergh’s engagement with both Resnais and the film noir as exemplified by *Get Carter* goes much deeper, reflecting not only the director’s view of human experience but also his conception of the particular qualities of the cinema as a narrative art form. An honored figure from the French New Wave era (though his filmmaking defies any easy placement within a particular movement), Resnais, especially in his early career, became famed for films that focus on ontological problematics, often never revealing for certain whether the stories they ostensibly tell are “real” within the context of the world that the film only seems at times to establish for certain. But Resnais’s insistent reformulation of cinematic conventions offers broader possibilities as well, and this is the reason why his body of work has exerted so much influence on the directors of succeeding generations, such as Soderbergh. Resnais’s films, as Soderbergh suggests, feature “abstraction” in the sense that they prevent viewers from adopting the easy Aristotelianism proffered by the standard commercial product, which depends on a satisfying emotional identification with characters involved in a story world that demands a limited investment of belief.

In the traditional Hollywood film, compelling action, building in a series of causally linked episodes through the onset of conflict through to a dramatic resolution, is what is meant to hold the attention of viewers by providing them with a pleasant experience of their own emotions. In such an aesthetic, characters can be two-dimensional, their “arcs” (to invoke the
industry term) defined by goals ("through lines") rather than the vicissitudes of consciousness or contradictory personality traits.

With his films focusing on what critic Emma Wilson terms “questions of memory and forgetting” rather than action per se, Resnais finds himself, as does Soderbergh in some of his projects, more fascinated by the exploration of a character’s inner mental life, what is conventionally termed the stream of consciousness.4 “What I am interested in about the brain,” Resnais writes, “is that faculty we possess of imagining in our head what is going to happen, of remembering what has already happened.”5 As theorist Gilles Deleuze has recognized, Resnais’s views of consciousness and time can be traced to Henri Bergson’s notion of the durée or duration, the way in which, as Deleuze explains, “the past coexists with the present that it has been; the past is preserved in itself, as past in general . . . at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past which is preserved . . . [a] duration [that] is subjective, and constitutes our inner life.”6

In The Limey, Soderbergh follows Resnais closely in what Deleuze calls that director’s “Bergsonism.”7 The inner life of the film’s main character, Wilson (a career criminal memorably incarnated by Stamp), takes shape according to Bergson’s understanding of duration, in which consciousness can be most usefully metaphorized as thread rolling into a ball, with an individual’s memory always trailing behind and with each new moment increasingly collective, defined by the never ending succession of past moments that it must incorporate, even as the imagination works prospectively to construct possible futures. In one striking sequence from The Limey, Soderbergh exemplifies the interruptive aspect of prospection as Wilson, encountering a man he intends to kill, visualizes two different ways that his bullets might hit him, but these imaginings never play out as Wilson’s intentions suddenly shift. At such important junctures in the action, the editing patterns of The Limey reflect the double movement of consciousness, which is essentially a sort of accumulation process. With each passing moment memory becomes more supplied with recollection-images and increasingly enriched by prospection. For the filmmaker, who must trade in a linear if contrapuntal mixture of images and sound, such a flow (never strictly speaking simply a multiplicity) can be suggested only by representation, which is never adequate to its object for the simple fact that, to follow Bergson’s line of argument, consciousness is never an object as such but is defined (another inadequate term) by an unending interpenetration of its constantly evolving elements.
To be sure, *The Limey* offers a crime thriller narrative that takes shape objectively in the tradition of *Get Carter* (with its minimalist dialogue and strictly exterior approach Hodges’s film reveals little about the eponymous main character, least of all his thoughts and perceptions). Like Carter, Wilson is also a character defined in large measure by his “through line,” which is the traditional one that consists in the character solving a mystery and in the process revenging a wrong that character suffered. But, in stark contrast to Hodges’s film, *The Limey* also dramatizes at key moments the swirl of Wilson’s consciousness, which is fashioned to correlate complexly with the exterior action that embroils him. And so the film comes to trace a movement parallel to, yet contrasting with, its conventional plotting; these interior and exterior lines of action intersect most tellingly in the film’s conclusion. Without willing it precisely, Wilson finds himself caught up in a trajectory of self-understanding through his encounter with those “recollection-images” that do not “deliver the past to us,” as Deleuze points out, but only “represent the former present that the past ‘was,’” therefore constituting a present absence marked by a poignancy of loss. Appropriately, Soderbergh’s film is distinguished on every level by its profound nostalgie for a past beyond recovery that somehow endures, especially in the 1970s pop tunes by The Who and Donovan that dominate the soundtrack and in the deeply resonant presence of Stamp and Fonda, former stars who, visibly aged and now slipped from popularity, recall memorable films from the youth cinema of that same era, what Fredric Jameson has termed “the long 60s.” Their characters in *The Limey* are obsessively backward-looking, always “thinking of the time when I was loved,” as the line from Donovan’s “Colours,” oft-quoted or referred to in the film, puts it.

Such bittersweet nostalgie, of course, is a traditional topos in the Western literary tradition, from François Villon to Ernest Hemingway, and the insistent durability of the past stored in recollection-images is a view of the imagination that has a long history in Western thought. (For example, critic James Monaco, speaking of Resnais, traces it back as far as the seventeenth century, to English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and that thinker’s obsession with “decaying sense” as the defining feature of memories.) And yet this understanding of the imagination as defined by a past that is always already present has through the considerable influence of Bergson become a central element in the modernist conception of memory, with the necessary connections of this mental activity, as he conceives it, with two other features of consciousness: (1) the fact that memory along with perception...
constitutes a duration subject to the intervention of intuition, which is (2) the form of knowing proper to it. It is intuition, as Deleuze points out, that “leads us to go beyond the state of experience [which is duration] toward the conditions of experience.” But, to quote Deleuze again, the end of that process is not in “concepts” as such (as in some kind of movement from particular to general) but rather toward “a concept modeled on the thing itself, which only suits that thing.”

Such a view of the inner life, as reflecting the true nature of lived experience in time, is by its nature dynamically narrative (even if it can never be divided up into units discrete from one another, as in the traditional concept of event), for it presupposes a never stable establishing of connections between time-marked images that in consciousness come to possess their own particular pattern of linear unfolding. Imagined as a narrative element, Bergsonian intuition would figure as something like an Aristotelian anagnorisis or recognition, but with one crucial difference. Any such moment of seeming psychological completion, however apparently summative, would necessarily lack finality. It should be shown, in other words, to possess no sense of determining character once and for all, occurring, as it must, within the flux of a duration that ends only with the death of consciousness. Because of its suitability for storytelling, Bergsonism has an obvious substantial utility for filmmaking of the kind pursued by Soderbergh in The Limey, in which the director’s interests are not only interior, defined by perception and recollection-images that can lead to intuition (Resnais), but also exterior, defined by the movement that ends in stasis, which is the point beyond further action (Hodges).

However distinct these approaches might seem, their compatibility, as Soderbergh must surely have sensed, is surprisingly deep, especially when the exterior form of action derives from the film noir tradition. A focus on the intersection of past, present, and future, on the one hand, and on the search for (or reclaiming of) identity, on the other, is arguably the most characteristic feature of film noir. These films thematize the problem of time (that is, the past is never past) as the essential feature of a lived experience, but they do not dramatize the workings of consciousness. Instead, following the arc model that shows character emerging from a series of events, the film noir finds an essential plot complication in the intersection of lines of action identified with the past, on the one hand, and the present, on the other. Noir films characteristically focus on their protagonists’ “dark pasts,” which are frequently explored in some form of backward turning that is motivated
by a present crisis. In film noir, something (or someone) is always coming “out of the past.” This backward turning may be found in the arrangement of story events, whose forward movement is interrupted by the filling in of some bypassed gap, or it may figure as an element of characterization, with the protagonist narrating what has gone before and thereby demonstrating the apparently ineradicable presence of the past within the protagonist’s own thoughts. And so the crisis the typical noir story develops can be resolved (or at least explained) only by a return in some sense to the past and to the postponed difficulties it insistently bequeaths to the present.

In a vaguely Bergsonian sense, the present in noir films is always already contingent, its apparent solidity subject to sudden, thoroughgoing disruptions that are connected somehow to what has been left behind but are not, as the story begins, in any sense finished. Upon its reappearance, the past cannot be escaped, and, worse yet, it often finds renewed force because the present seems doomed to repeat it. In Hodges’s film, Carter himself incarnates the past that erupts into the present of the criminals he intends to hunt down in order to avenge his brother’s death. More important, perhaps, he finds it impossible to transcend his own past, to find any way beyond the destructive moyen de vivre that has hitherto defined him, as the necessity to avenge his brother’s killing forces him to return to his criminal roots.

Thus noir characters like Carter cannot avoid the fatal entanglements they themselves have chosen because in the end these answer to their nature. They find themselves impelled toward restlessness, duplicity, and the blind pursuit of self-interest. Customarily lacking a moment of reformative turning, the film noir juxtaposes the false promise of a future with an unstable present borne relentlessly backward, effectively trapping the protagonist between times. And so the noir protagonist can only live out the division of his self between what is and what has been, gazing, but only gazing, the rootedness and singularity of the everyday time that others inhabit, a contrast starkly drawn in both Get Carter and The Limey, films that situate their main characters in milieus dominated by ordinary citizens who seem to live happily and profitably in an ever-receding present not haunted by dark memories.11

In The Limey, Soderbergh engages deeply with these conventions, but he abandons film noir’s characteristic pessimism by holding out the possibility (if in a somewhat ironized form that reflects the necessary instability of self) that Wilson might reconcile his past and present, in the process perhaps achieving both moral and psychological wholeness. In short, as
he has suggested, Soderbergh remakes Hodges's crime narrative a spiritual journey à la Resnais, with its conclusion (of the ambiguous, undecidable sort favored by the French director) in a moment of knowing. Wilson's coming to understand himself follows the model of Bergsonian intuition explored in a number of Resnais films, including *Hiroshima mon amour* (Hiroshima, My Love) (1959) and *Je t’aime, je t’aime* (I Love You, I Love You) (1968).

For Bergson, as for Soderbergh, it is the self that preeminently presents itself as an object that can be grasped better by intuition than by the more analytical intellect (more or less the capacity traditionally designated in the Western tradition by the term *reason*). Only intuition mobilizes the sympathy that allows the global comprehension in itself of an object presented to a consciousness that in its constant state of flux (the way in which the mind is always, as it were, between times) would otherwise preclude understanding. Dramatically, Soderbergh stages intuition as an epiphany, as that moment of cumulative clarification (not a sudden, unexpected flow of insight) that follows Wilson's discovery of the last puzzle piece of the mystery he must solve: how his daughter Jenny died and who was responsible for her death. Throughout the narrative, Wilson has been “the seeker,” who, as proclaim the lyrics of *The Who* song of that title featured obsessively on the film's soundtrack, has been looking for “the key to fifty million fables.” Ironically, the truth Wilson has been after leads him to find something else within, not only the answer toward which the narrative successfully builds (with its exploration of those innumerable fables) but also in consciousness itself. As he comes to intuit, Wilson is in an important sense the very betrayer whose punishment he has been obsessively pursuing. And this is something that, in its most profound sense, he seems to have known all along but has simply been unable to grasp.

**Time and Self as the Underneath of Character**

*The Limey*, as noted earlier, is hardly the first Soderbergh film to attempt a rich, resonant melding of film noir and cinematic modernism. The film's themes and formal approach are most interestingly anticipated by *The Underneath*, which is a remake of one of the best known of classic films noirs, Robert Siodmak's *Criss Cross* (1949). And it is true that Soderbergh's noirish *Traffic* (2000) and *Out of Sight* also feature substantial achronicities (departures from linear chronology) even if these films do not use the rapid-fire editing found in *The Limey* to explore either the stream of consciousness or
the complex notion of moral character. *Traffic* and *Out of Sight*, in fact, also seem heavily indebted to the practice of narrative deconstruction popularized by Nicolas Roeg, an enthusiast, like Soderbergh and Resnais, of the arty thriller (e.g., *Performance* [1970] and *Don't Look Now* [1973]). Roeg too is a filmmaker obsessed, as one critic puts it, with the “use of editing to challenge received notions of the relationship between past, present and future.” Roeg has often referred to his formal approach, which involves the deliberate, anti-Aristotelian dismantling of narrative linearity, as “deconstruction,” a term that Soderbergh, as we shall see, has made a part of his own critical vocabulary.

In both *Traffic* and *Out of Sight*, Soderbergh follows Roeg in deploying jarring disjunctions and withholding key bits of information, making for a puzzling semicoherence that is resolved only at film’s end. His intention is to play with the audience-pleasing possibilities of disrupting linear narrative, providing interest and mystery by refusing to set up a clear progression from beginning to end. In *Traffic*, he goes even further in this direction by deploying several different storylines, which, with extended intercutting creating at times the effect of parallel action, are resolved by a conclusion that demonstrates how these plot threads intersect, illustrating the complexity of the social problem which it is the film’s avowed intention to dissect. Such intricate interlacing perhaps shows the influence of other art cinema directors. Most notable among these is Robert Altman, who popularized this approach in such films as *Nashville* (1975) and *A Wedding* (1978) and who deployed it to perfection in *Short Cuts* (1993). These projects can be usefully compared to his less well known *Images* (1972), a film that displays a more substantial indebtedness to Resnais’s Bergsonism. Roeg’s deconstructive approach to creating narratives that are compelling in their mysteriousness has influenced not only Soderbergh but also other contemporary directors, including most prominently Ridley Scott and Quentin Tarantino. Though he likewise finds himself drawn to a Roegian play with story linearity in a number of his films (including such popular projects as the *Ocean’s* series [2001, 2004, 2007]), it is only in *The Limey* that Soderbergh’s interest in chronological deconstruction has been substantially connected to modernist meditations on how consciousness is shaped by memory and prospection, involving a never ending process of making sense from those diverse elements continually presencing themselves in the mind. Formally speaking, this piecing together of meaning is reflected in the ways in which *The Limey* preeminently and *The Underneath* to a lesser extent find themselves defined
by the self-conscious citation of other texts and by an engagement with noir conventions. This intertextual nexus constitutes a hermeneutic durée of sorts in which the present text is enriched, even haunted, by a series of absent presences. *The Limey* even incorporates extended sequences from Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1968) that are, within the story world, presented undecidably, as either Wilson's memories of the distant past or the narrator's supplying of back story (as a young actor Stamp starred in Loach's poignant story of the British working class). For cineliterate viewers, however, these citations also establish an interesting link between Loach's famed exploration of a career criminal whose incorrigibility ruins his chances for a happy family life and Soderbergh's treatment of the same theme. Within the story world, these citations establish an entrapping personal past for Wilson (whose destructive criminality endures from youth to old age), while this theme finds its extratextual reflection in a continuing tradition of representation, with Stamp in maturity playing (and playing out) the same kind of role he had assayed in youth. In typical noir fashion, the passages from *Poor Cow* evoke both a past, which Wilson only problematically comes to understand and transcend, and a cinematic tradition (British New Wave realism, one of the high-water marks of the international art cinema of the postwar era) to which Soderbergh intends connecting but which itself is a present absence, a moment of collective cinematic memory now contained in and evoked by these filmic "recollection-images."

Such a pervasive exploitation of the possibilities of intertextuality reflects more than just Soderbergh's personal approach to filmmaking. The creative recycling of antecedent texts and themes is a general feature, Richard Martin suggests, of nineties neo-noir, the important genre to which both these Soderbergh films belong. It was in this decade, in Martin's view, that New Hollywood filmmaking witnessed "the consolidation of film noir's status as one of the mainstays of contemporary American genre criticism," a development within film culture that made the noir heritage available to filmmakers as a series of reference points that can be easily engaged. It is certainly evident in both *The Underneath* and *The Limey* that "the postmodern neo-noirs of the nineties are more overtly allusive and more playful in their intertextual references than the films of the eighties." Such connections to classic noirs are established by extended reference (*The Limey's* creative imitations of *Get Carter*, among other noir films; *The Underneath's* revisionist remaking of *Criss Cross*), but these films also offer more pervasively, as Martin makes clear, a "revival" of the "complex structures that characterized many of the
early films noirs.” These now become “further generic markers of noiresh-
ness,” and Soderbergh plays with those markers in his own neo-noir films.13

In a sense, this intellectual and cinematic project seems to have begun ac-
cidentally, as Soderbergh, at a point of impasse in his career, was approached
by Universal to work on the film that eventually became The Underneath.
The studio was interested in remaking the classic Siodmak film noir Criss
Cross, to whose pulp novel source they continued to hold the film rights.
With the neo-noir cycle in full flourish after its inauguration with Lawrence
Kasdan’s Body Heat in 1981, such a remake would have hardly been unique,
and it would have had substantial commercial prospects. At first, Soderbergh
signed on only to do the script, but he soon developed a greater interest in
the material and worked out a deal to direct. What most appealed to him
was the main character, Michael (Peter Gallagher), who, he confesses, was
“more like [him] than any other character in my other films.” Michael’s
principal quality was that he was, in true noir fashion, “incapable of living
in the present” and a directionless and impulsive loser who finds himself
condemned by his inability to transcend past experiences, the fecklessness
of which he can only repeat and, reengaging with the wreckage of what he
once was, in the process bring destruction upon himself and others.14 The
Siodmak version, Soderbergh found, offered little insight into the relation-
ship between the main character and the femme fatale with whom he twice
becomes embroiled. And so he determined to show “what that relationship
was about . . . what he had left and what he was trying to correct” when the
man returns home after an attempt to escape past diffi  culties and, inevitably,
the two former lovers then reconnect to their mutual ill fortune.15

To deepen his version’s exploration of Michael’s character, Soderbergh
says that he attempted to put on fi lm the nonlinear workings of conscious-
ness, as he reported to Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret: “Every time
something happens to us, we think about a similar experience in the past
and we imagine the consequences in the future. There is a constant back
and forth. Our minds are totally non-linear.”16 However much he evokes
Resnais’s practice with this commentary, in The Underneath Soderbergh
does not follow him in deploying complex montage sequences employing
very brief shots that are either character oriented or objective—or, in some
cases, both sequentially. In Resnais, rapid montage is sometimes used to
evolve a character’s stream of consciousness with its constant, involuntary
shifts from past to present to prospective future, as Soderbergh suggests in
his interview with Ciment and Niogret. But sometimes in Resnais’s films
the contrasts in the apparent temporal values of individual shots are true achronicities, that is, they are carefully calculated departures from chronology deployed by a narration that is committed to certain rhetorical aims (such as making the plot into more of a puzzle for the reader, putting into question the “reality” of the story, defining characters from the outside by juxtaposing different aspects of their experiences, and so forth). In other words, Resnais occasionally follows the path more thoroughly explored by Nicolas Roeg. As noted earlier, one of the interpretive difficulties encountered in a Resnais film, in fact, is that the perspective of any given shot, whether it is subjective or objective, is often undecidable.

Despite Soderbergh’s avowed Bergsonian intention, *The Underneath* offers departures from linear chronology and standard editing practice solely as a strategy to define Michael from the outside. From the classic in medias res flashback structure that he found in Siodmak’s film (where the flashback supplies necessary back story), Soderbergh initially designed a complexly orchestrated montage of segments from four temporal levels, each marked by its own particular visual look, and he eventually decided on a tripartite contrast among the distant and recent pasts with the present. It was Soderbergh’s intention that this visual program would deepen the viewer’s sense of Michael’s character, a clue that the film was exploring his “underneath,” an aesthetic aim that furnished the film with its release title. And yet for some reason Soderbergh steered clear of interior approaches to characterization in *The Underneath*, just as he avoided situating the film within a complex intertextual framework. The film’s evocation of the past is largely confined to registering the evident homology of the three periods of Michael’s life, each of which is marked by failure of one kind or another. This oversimplification of effect may be one reason why Soderbergh, in the final analysis, was quite disappointed with *The Underneath*; he regards it as something of a failed project. And this may be why *The Limey* was subsequently constructed to connect much more obviously to a different kind of contemporary cinema, one in which Soderbergh would not have to be concerned, as he was in the case of *The Underneath*, that viewers, thinking they were watching an entertaining thriller, would not understand his intention to get beneath the surface of things. It was a matter of balance.

**An Indiewood Cinema**

Soderbergh’s admission that, in making *The Limey*, Resnais and Hodges were his guides reveals not only his thematic interests (in the brutal world of film
noir and the nature of consciousness) but also his increasingly firm grasp of the double aesthetic then on its way to emerging as the essential quality of what is arguably the most significant area of contemporary independent filmmaking, so-called Indiewood productions. These are films in which, as critic Geoff King puts it, “Hollywood and the independent sector merge or overlap.” In King’s view, Indiewood films like The Limey offer “an attractive blend of creativity and commerce,” though, he acknowledges, some within the industry regard such productions as riven by “duplicity and compromise” because, it is argued, “the ‘true’ heritage of the independent sector is sold out, betrayed, and/or co-opted into an offshoot of Hollywood.”

Significantly, the decision to make the film more accessible for a general audience reflected business (“big box office”) rather than artistic concerns. Soderbergh’s first version was more heavily stylized and “deconstructed,” as he put it, in the art cinema tradition despite his expressed intention to compromise from the outset.

This willingness to make a film that audiences did not find too difficult to follow and enjoy was by no means a sellout on Soderbergh’s part. It reflected instead a hard-earned wisdom. His debut effort, the truly low-budget independent production sex, lies, and videotape (1989), had achieved an outstanding financial and critical success. As a result, Soderbergh found himself immediately afterward commanding the commercial wherewithal to embark on two very personal projects (reflecting his diverse reading interests) that could in no way be misunderstood as sequels. The film drew heavily on the personal experience of the director/screenwriter, who has routinely confessed that its quartet of troubled characters all embody different aspects of his own self at a time of extended crisis.

Kafka (1991) and King of the Hill (1993), in contrast, were radically different (pseudo) biographical projects that afforded Soderbergh the opportunity to indulge and develop his skills in creating effective screen versions of other times and other customs: turn-of-the-century Prague, where Kafka’s authenticating location sequences were shot, and Depression-era America, nostalgically recreated by the cinematography and art design in King of the Hill as an appropriate background for A. E. Hotchner’s memories of a bittersweet childhood. Both releases disappointed the expectations of viewers and critics that Soderbergh would continue the witty, idiosyncratic exploration of contemporary relationships that had made slv so popular. His debut film was successful in large part because it featured affecting melodramatic elements that were in the process of becoming standard fare in the
era’s independent “warmedies” (poignant comedy-dramas such as Cameron Crowe’s *Elizabethtown* [2005], Jim Jarmusch’s *Broken Flowers* [2005], and Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* [2003]) as well as so-called “smart films” that focus with considerable irony on dysfunctional white families (such as Wes Anderson’s *The Royal Tenenbaums* [2001] and Tamara Jenkins’s *The Savages* [2007]). It is worth noting that, in tracing the inextinguishable love that Wilson bears for his dead daughter, *The Limey* too offers its own brand of affecting melodrama; Wilson’s search for a kind of posthumous reconciliation with Jenny recalls the similar narrative in *Broken Flowers*, in which an unreconstructed male chauvinist (Bill Murray) finds himself propelled into revisiting past romantic relationships in hopes of connecting with the son he may have sired.

Soderbergh’s filmmaking has in recent years come to oscillate radically between commercial big-budget, star-driven projects that any one of a number of talented young directors could have shepherded through production (*Erin Brockovich* [2000] and, most notably, the *Ocean’s* franchise) and intensely personal projects (like *Gray’s Anatomy* [1996] and *Che* [2008]) that are clearly extraordinary—or arguably even unexampled with the broad ambit of independent filmmaking. Between these two extremes lie a number of important Soderbergh films that can claim to be true hybrids, carefully balanced between their deployment of well-established commercial conventions and what Geoff King aptly terms “markers of ‘distinction’ designed to appeal to more particular, niche-audience constituencies.” A careful negotiation between personal, expressive, artistic interests and the seat-selling requirements of an industry dependent on continued profitability has made it possible for Soderbergh to pursue an extended career in Hollywood, to become, seemingly against the odds, an insider of sorts. If *The Underneath* does not go far enough in engaging with “markers of distinction,” if it moves too far in the direction of the popular, this is not the case with *The Limey*. The final versions of both films may have been produced by a process of simplification designed to make them appealing to contemporary filmgoers, but that process seems to have gone too far in the case of *The Underneath*. Reviewing the film for the *New York Times*, Caryn James found its chief virtue to be the quite traditional Hollywood one of portraying characters in an interesting and sympathetic manner: “The best parts of the film revolve around Michael and Rachel, and the vivid complexity of that relationship makes the film more than a genre remake.”

The Indiewood film, as King suggests, customarily depends on a narra-
tive form that proves easily understandable because of its dynamic plot and its engagement with genre. Providing a point of stability for the viewer, such a backbone can then be personalized by stylistic and thematic elements that render the film more idiosyncratic, less simple to interpret or appreciate to be sure, but not inaccessible. Many noted Indiewood films, like The Limey, seem evocative in particular of a cinematic modernism that focuses on questions of form and of subjectivity. Such films provide stylistically interesting representations of round, even enigmatic characters whose experiences raise key issues about modern life. For Soderbergh (and this is a crucial point) these modernist approaches, which themselves, of course, have become something of a convention, are not tied simply to attracting a niche audience with a taste for art cinema complexity. As his frequent experiments in form, theme, and style make clear, cinematic modernism also possesses a compelling personal appeal for him as a writer/director, perhaps illustrating a central point about film history noted by theorist Gilles Deleuze.

**A Cinema of Time-Images**

Deleuze describes the medium’s shift during the postwar era from action-images to time-images, from a cinema based on editing patterns designed to impart energy to an unfolding narrative to a cinema that is less teleological and more meditative—a cinema that is more invested in exploring the nature of self and consciousness than in displaying its unlimited potential to animate the succession of still photographs that are its essential raw materials. Such time-image filmmaking, according to Deleuze, especially deploys the editing process to achieve layering effects that emphasize contrasts between subjective and objective reality, either probing (or poeticizing) the innerness of characters, and hence revealing the occulted meanings of a world that the action-image presents as simple surface. No longer bound by traditional Hollywood forms of shot breakdown designed to propel the narrative, time-image editing also welcomes the interruption of the ordered succession of present moments by shots that evoke the past or imagine a future even as they move between showing (the workings of consciousness) and telling (with the narrator moving between different points of the story for rhetorical reasons of one kind or another). As in The Limey, such a disruption of linearity problematizes, while it does not obliterate, chronologically oriented forms of narration, building key moments of temporal complexity in which the succession of images moves vertically in order to deepen meaning in-
stead of horizontally in order to continue the narrative’s movement toward conclusion. For Deleuze, an exemplary filmmaker in this tradition is Alain Resnais, and it is fitting that, in his meditations about the time-image, extended discussions of Resnais occupy a prominent place.

As suggested above, cinéastes like Resnais and Soderbergh turn time-imaging in two quite distinct but potentially complementary directions: not only evoking modern views of mentalité itself but also making viewers aware of the made nature of the filmic artifact by foregrounding the filmmaker’s decisions to intercalate images with different time and perspective values. Modernist films of this variety are thus metafictional or illusion-breaking in the sense that they call attention to the fictionalizing process that has produced them, but, somewhat paradoxically, they are also deeply realist in their representation of a consciousness not otherwise accessible to the conventional exterior methods of commercial filmmaking. They are films that, to put the matter simply, speak meaningfully about the human experience even as they self-consciously reflect on cinematic art as both a personal and an institutional practice; this doubleness also obviously suits the doubleness of successful Indiewood productions, in which a somewhat obtrusive artiness (especially the invoking of other films as a frame of reference) must enhance rather than obscure an engaging narrative committed to a deep, unconventional portrayal of character.

Because they are sharers in these modernist traditions, it is hardly surprising that Soderbergh found himself attracted to Resnais. But an additional point of contact is that Resnais and Soderbergh are moralists, makers of films in which the quest for self-understanding customarily leads their characters to face difficult moral questions. Emma Wilson, speaking of the particular moralism at the heart of Resnais’s filmmaking, makes the point that his films “show protagonists attempting to piece together a narrative of their lives.”21 This is a representational and philosophical impulse that has also dominated Soderbergh’s oeuvre from the beginning. In its own melodramatic fashion slv centers on the project of self-understanding, a piecing together in which representations and their interpretation—the sex tapes that notoriously figure in the narrative—come to play a central, if unintended, role as each member of the film’s quartet of characters struggles with the question of how to live. We might add that, formally speaking, Resnais’s films are often also pieced together, with the famous Hiroshima mon amour ostentatiously betraying its genesis as a documentary project that was subsequently framed by a fictional romance between a Japanese man and a French journalist. In-
terestingly, Resnais’s politics, his interest in what Wilson terms the “traumatic subjects of the twentieth century,” including the Holocaust, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan, European colonialism, and torture as a violation of basic human rights, find rough equivalents in Soderbergh’s explorations of postwar politics (The Good German [2006]), the smug hypocrisies of the so-called “war on drugs” (Traffic), revolutionary anticolonialism (Che), and the immorality of big business and FBI investigatory procedures in The Informant! (2009).

It says something about Soderbergh’s abiding artistic (as opposed to commercial filmmaking) interests that, as he confessed in his interview about The Limey, his initial version of the film pushed too far toward the radical undecidability and even unreadability that are the hallmarks of Resnais’s approach in such acclaimed, if notoriously difficult, films as L’Année dernière à Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad, 1961) and Muriel ou le temps d’un retour (Muriel, or The Time of a Return, 1963). The director admitted that “my first version [of The Limey] was so layered and deconstructed even people who had worked on the movie didn’t understand it. So I had to start working back to find a balance, which I did through screenings for friends.” In any case, during the preparation of the final cut the strong personal vision taking shape in The Limey, already scaled back, had to be accommodated even further to commercial realities. But this accommodation involved no “duplicit[y]” on Soderbergh’s part, as critics hostile to the Indiewood project might argue, though there certainly is “compromise.” In a previous project, the director had tried and failed (not artistically, but commercially) to be a Resnais within the context of Hollywood filmmaking.

Compromise was made necessary by his unfortunate experiences with more radical departures from accepted norms in Schizopolis (1996), which certainly lacks an obvious “backbone,” with, as one critic puts it, “its very plot open to conjecture” (the kind of comment that Resnais’s films have often provoked). Schizopolis, we are told, left the “impression that the film is a series of barely interconnected sketches,” and this impression lifted only after repeated, sympathetic viewings. Such an experience is one that many of the necessarily persistent admirers of Marienbad and other Resnais films certainly share. Obviously, The Underneath moved too far in the other direction, with its principal virtue an effective dramatization of the main character’s romantic entanglement and his feckless response to the existential imperative to make a life.

In Soderbergh’s search for a more effective balance between competing
aesthetics, Hodges’s *Get Carter*, which features a generically conventional story line, provided a significant model. Tellingly, not long after the release of *The Limey*, *Get Carter* was remade (Stephen T. Kay, 2000) as a strict action film with Sylvester Stallone in the title role made famous by Michael Caine. More poetic and meditative than its remake (qualities that, along with the basic elements of the plot, were imitated in *The Limey*), Hodges’s version is a classic early neo-noir thriller (in the tradition of *The Killers* [Don Siegel, 1964] and John Boorman’s *Point Blank* [1967]): the film’s main character, an underworld tough, indulges in appallingly brutal violence in order to avenge his brother’s murder. In the memorable penultimate scene, Carter forces the sole surviving murderer to choke down a bottle of whisky before he puts a bullet in him. This gesture forces the man to experience for himself precisely what he had done to Carter’s brother before arranging an “accidental death,” thereby bringing the narrative full circle through a repetition that, momentarily at least, seems thematically significant and poetically just—a conclusion that Soderbergh imitates, if with significant changes, in *The Limey*. Hodges’s ending, however, is in the final analysis deeply ironic, not a conventional endorsement of the hero’s ability to fulfill his mission and right the wrong that gave the narrative its forward motion. Laughing sardonically after his triumph against all odds, Carter himself is gunned down by a hidden sniper for reasons that are never fully explained, and it is this final revelation of even his inability to really change himself or his world that provides a fitting coda to the film’s otherwise gloomy meditations on the absence of any morality or human purpose that might be thought transcendent.

**A Movement of Consciousness**

Like his generic predecessors in both *The Killers* and *Point Blank* and the impotent protagonists of the film noir tradition more generally, Carter finds it impossible to master and escape from the cycle of violent retribution that seemingly provides the only meaning of his life. *Point Blank*, interestingly enough, delivers its own extensive homage to Resnais, and the film, which bears more than a substantial similarity to *The Limey*, is not surprisingly a particular favorite of Soderbergh’s (as the director confesses in the voiceover commentary he furnished for its DVD re-release). *Point Blank*, as I wrote in 1992, “uses its narrative framework as a point of departure for a complex and finally pessimistic meditation on memory, time, identity, and desire.” Boorman’s pessimism about the possibility of meaningful action, it must
be said, runs even deeper than Hodges's. As it turns out, *Point Blank*'s protagonist, Walker (Lee Marvin), is denied even the satisfaction of revenge. The bulk of the film consists of the narrative of his apparent resurrection after being shot several times and then abandoned at Alcatraz, its prison now in ruins and the island itself deserted. But this tale of violent self-justification has by most critics been understood as an unfulfilled wish, as what Walker would have wanted to do had not the bullets pumped into him by a faithless partner and betraying wife not condemned him to die alone and unavenged.\(^{25}\)

In the manner of Resnais, what seems real (because it consists of photographic images) turns out to be only imagination since the action it depicts is manifestly impossible, with the deep irony that this information is communicated by the same succession of images. Representation lies, but exposes the lie. To be more precise, it is actually undecidable if this apparently imagined story, otherwise so compelling in its hard-colored, light-of-day realism, is either subjective (that is, if it shows us what Walker intended as life drained from him) or objective (if it is the film's narrator doing the imagining by offering us a version of what might have happened had Walker not died on Alcatraz). In either case, the inability of Walker to change anything about his undeserved fate is thoroughly noir, a striking reductio ad absurdum of this genre's obsession with human incapacity, venality, and self-entrapment. Walker, in the film's closing moments, finds himself once again on Alcatraz, repeating the trajectory of his supposed experience, but this time he resists the tempting blandishments of an untrustworthy erstwhile partner, withdrawing instead into the prison's shadows as the film's final images pointedly depict him as absence. Perhaps this time Walker learns the lesson not to trust anyone. But it is all a mirage; this time, in fact, never comes. In this harsh world, there are no second chances. *Point Blank* achieves a chilling equipoise between stasis and movement, between death and action, between fulfilling generic demands for action and undercutting the ontological underpinnings of all that seems to unfold. The film's revenge narrative offers, in short, either wish or supposition. Much the same might be said of Resnais's more radical productions, especially *Marienbad*, in which, as in Soderbergh's *Schizopolis*, elemental formal questions (what exactly happens? are the actions depicted fantasy or reality?) are raised but never answered.

Soderbergh's invocation of Resnais in *The Limey*, at least in the much revised final release form, is not nearly as radical as Boorman's extensive
Alain Resnais Meets Film Noir in *The Underneath* and *The Limey* 87

homage to the French director; *The Limey* certainly does not offer an impossible narrative nor does it suggest the possibility that what happens to Wilson is pure wish fulfillment. Like Walker, it is true, Wilson also experiences an inability to change what has passed even while discovering its underlying truths. Walker solves the case of his betrayal and shooting, disposing of all those responsible, and this is a task that Soderbergh’s Wilson accomplishes as well. But to what end? Wilson’s daughter Jenny is already dead before he embarks on the quest to learn how she died (the judgment that her death was accidental he rejects out of hand). Wilson can and does find out what happened and why Jenny had to die, but, like Walker, he can only follow in the footprints she has left behind. He of course also proves unable to reverse the course of time.

In his evocation of Wilson’s moral journey (a key Resnais element), Soderbergh departs from both *Get Carter* and *Point Blank*. Wilson in fact achieves redemption of a sort from the cycle of violence in which he seems to be trapped beyond any hope of escape; this occurs through the seemingly involuntary synthesis of painful memories prompted by his sympathetic understanding of a crucial present moment. As he is about to exact vengeance on Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda), the man who, as he now confesses in a desperate act of self-preservation, killed Jenny, Wilson recognizes that this killer is in fact his secret sharer, yet another selfish exploiter of the love and affection of those to whom he has become connected. Wilson cannot pass the generically requisite final judgment on a man who *in extremis* confesses to identical faults of character. Now painfully aware of the full price that his criminal career has exacted from the daughter who dared to love him but refused to accept his criminality, Wilson acknowledges that he too bears responsibility for Jenny’s death, and so he lets Valentine go free. Present and past, hitherto presented disjunctively, connect meaningfully for the first time. Wilson’s acting on that connection provides the external correlative that he has now intuited an essential quality of his own self.

And yet Soderbergh does not allow viewers to understand this movement of consciousness as an action that completes the arc of Wilson’s development, somehow delivering him to a concluding stasis. Instead, it is revealed in Bergsonian fashion as paradoxically durable and impermanent. In the film’s coda, Wilson finds in his embrace of Jenny’s friends some solace for his loss, in what seems to be the cathartic reflex of his inner transformation. And yet these melodramatic encounters are presented subjectively, not objectively, as memories of the recent past rather than as actions. They figure,
that is, as elements that have already assumed their places within the durée of Wilson’s consciousness, as he sits on the plane that will take him back to his native England. Despite the painful expiation just experienced for past wrongs, Wilson seems about to resume a life as a criminal outsider whose defining qualities are self-deception and evasion. Accounting for his most recent incarceration, he tells the inquisitive woman seated next to him that he had spent the last nine years “on an oil rig in the North Sea” but that he “shouldn’t have even been there. It was these other lads what should have been there in my place.”

Even though Wilson still finds it easy to slough off any responsibility for what he has made of his life, it is clear that he experiences a moment of moral clarity (accompanied by the ability to choose what he deems right) that is denied noir predecessors like Carter and Walker. The film’s coda is ambiguous in that, in yet another homage to Resnais, it seems to incorporate not only a remembering (the softening of Wilson’s violent trajectory in the affectionate mourning for Jenny he finds himself able to share with her friends) but also a forgetting (as the moment of recognition seems to deliver him back to his accustomed self, completing the entrapping circle of his experience).

Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. This (in)conclusion seems poignantly evocative of Resnais, whose moving, if unconventional love story in *Hiroshima mon amour* ends with the woman movingly acknowledging her pain for a lover lost fourteen years earlier during the war. And yet she seems determined to reject the importance of this arc of memory, which was prompted by her encounter with the devastated Japanese city and her erstwhile lover, who helps her interrogate the meaning of the horrifyingly transforming experience of seeing such unimaginable devastation. In fact, her tale at an end, the woman disavows any responsibility for the excursion into a past that seems heavily laden with pathos, insisting on the randomness and hence inconsequentiality of the inner pain that she has put into narrative form. Is she now telling the truth? Has she undergone a transformative anagnorisis in the Aristotelian sense? Has Wilson?

Writing of Resnais’s film, Emma Wilson observes that “*Hiroshima Mon Amour* does not let us organize its information easily; we are assaulted by images, both painful and pleasurable. We navigate without a map or structure.” To be sure, Soderbergh does much the same in *The Limey*, although his avowed intention to accommodate his vision of human experience to the demands of Indiewood filmmaking makes the film more readable—as
well as more invested in providing a fictional experience that viewers would find emotionally satisfying. But only conditionally, of course. For the signal quality of *The Limey* remains its refusal to avoid undecidability. Though the mystery of Jenny’s death is in fact solved and the question of responsibility resolved, Wilson endures as an enigmatic presence caught, like his noir predecessors, between a present moment of loss and a past overflowing with its insoluble difficulties and missed chances. *The Limey*’s final image, presented clearly as Wilson’s memory, is of his younger self in the scene from *Poor Cow* that is quoted several times in the film. Loach’s camera finds the character we now know as Wilson playing a guitar for his lady love (who is only glimpsed offscreen) and offering a rendition of the poignant last verse of “Colours.” Turning backward toward a moment of ostensible plenitude (including the fact that this character is seen to be as yet unincarcerated), Wilson recalls that younger self singing “freedom is a word I rarely use, without thinking of the time that I was loved.” This innocent attestation ironically predicts the existential condition that, as a result of his continuing imprisonments, will haunt Wilson for the rest of his life. With this heavily freighted image, Soderbergh gestures equally toward film noir’s obsession with the untranscendable past and toward Resnais’s refusal to see human experience, both individual and collective, as in any sense disconnected from what once was.

**Notes**

5. Quoted in ibid., 1.


15. Soderbergh quoted in Kevin Lally, “Soderbergh’s *The Underneath* Brings 90s Style to Film Noir” in *Steven Soderbergh,* ed. Kaufman, 84.


20. As discussed in Deleuze, *Cinema 2*.


22. Ibid.


CONSCIOUSNESS, TEMPORALITY, AND THE CRIME-REVENGE GENRE IN THE LIMEY

Geoff King

Steven Soderbergh has described The Limey (1999) as “Get Carter as made by Alain Resnais,” a conjuncture of revenge movie genre and art cinema conventions that gives a good impression of where the film lies in the wider cinematic spectrum.\(^1\) The structure and editing regimes of The Limey are manifestations of Soderbergh’s most explicit attempt to render what he terms the nonlinear nature of human thought processes, a dimension addressed more fleetingly in narrative and formal devices employed elsewhere in his work. This chapter offers an analysis of the manner in which this is achieved in The Limey, in combination with the use of more commercially mainstream and accessible genre dimensions.\(^2\)

In its underlying story, the narrative designed to be reconstructed by the viewer, The Limey is conventional enough in its employment of conventions associated with the revenge drama, a format that can be understood as one subcategory within the broader territory associated more generally with crime genres. The plot has Wilson (Terence Stamp), a career criminal recently released from jail, traveling from London to Los Angeles in search of answers and/or vengeance following the suspicious death of his daughter, Jenny, supposedly in a car crash. It transpires that she was involved in a relationship with a wealthy rock music promoter, Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda), a figure whose shady dealings include the laundering of drug money. She was killed by Valentine, we find out during the climax to the film, while threatening to turn him in to the police. The narrative has two main threads: the “external” plot-based quest for revenge, combined and increasingly en-
tangled with the “internal” process through which Wilson comes to terms with aspects of his past and his relationship with his daughter.

The plot has a number of elements in common with *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971), the British forebear cited by Soderbergh, which features Michael Caine as the eponymous hero, a similarly implacable avenger, in this case traveling the shorter distance from London to the northeastern town of Newcastle to investigate the death of his brother (in another faked car accident). In both cases, the victim posed a threat of exposure to a nest of criminals and corruption. A daughter figure performs as an emotional lynchpin in each case. In *Get Carter* this is the daughter of the brother, although with hints that she might in fact be the central character’s daughter, a teenager exploited by the sex industry. Both features reach their climax on a beach, although amid the contrasting settings of California’s Big Sur, in the case of *The Limey*, and a bleak, coal-blackened industrial landscape in *Get Carter*. The British film is far more externally focused than its successor, with little to suggest any process of self-reflection on the part of Carter.

The latter point is related directly to the areas of greatest difference between the two films, at the levels of narrative form and editing regimes. *Get Carter* is broadly conventional at both levels while *The Limey* is marked by a number of striking nonlinear departures rooted in the more subjective treatment given to some of the narrative events. These will now be examined in turn in greater detail, before being considered in relation to comments Soderbergh has made about the nature of consciousness and some of the work of his other cinematic pole of reference, the French art cinema director Alain Resnais.

**Narrative Nonlinearity**

If the underlying narrative substance of *The Limey* is familiar/conventional material, both in relation to the crime-revenge drama and to Hollywood norms more generally (in dimensions such as its focus on the experiences of a small number of goal-directed central characters), it is the mode of presentation that marks the film as more distinctive. A good way to express this difference is through the use of terminology adopted from Russian formalist literary criticism, as most prominently applied to film narrative by David Bordwell. A distinction can be made between the underlying storyline, or *fabula*, and the manner in which narrative elements are actually presented onscreen, the *syuzhet*. The *syuzhet* provides the material through which the
viewer is encouraged to assemble an understanding of the fabula, a process that can be more or less clear cut. At its simplest, the two might be identical, a story being presented in all its details in linear sequence from start to finish. At its most complex, the viewer might have to work very hard or even be unable to construct the fabula from a more complex or nonlinear syuzhet. Most films, in practice, lie somewhere along a continuum between these two extremes.

Get Carter, for example, while broadly conventional in its narrative strategies, does not present a storyline that simply unfolds in sequence. This is true of the immediate present tense of the narrative, the events of Carter’s visit to Newcastle, but important background material—the explanation of the key drivers of the plot—comes from earlier events, the nature and significance of which are uncovered by Carter and presented to the viewer, in retrospect, as a result of his investigations. This is itself entirely conventional both for mainstream narrative features in general and particularly for work that includes an explicit focus on investigation or detective work of one variety or another. The viewer is, typically, encouraged to reconstruct the full underlying story from a range of sources of information. These include events that are directly enacted on screen, in either what is understood to be the present tense or what are clearly marked as flashbacks to past events, or through material generated “secondhand” via conduits such as discussions among characters and documents or other artifacts that appear onscreen.

One of the features that marks The Limey as a considerable departure from the norms associated with mainstream/commercial cinema is that much of this kind of material is to some extent loosed from its moorings, a process that starts in the opening moments of the film. The first words of The Limey are voiced against a black background that follows the logo of the distributor, Artisan Entertainment. The voice may immediately be recognizable to some as that of Terence Stamp, in the lead role, or will soon be attributable to that of his character, saying, “Tell me . . . Tell me . . . Tell me about Jenny.” Convention would lead the viewer to expect this to be the voice of a character from within the fiction, but it might also function, in this opening location, as a kind of invocation, a calling for the telling of a story, directed toward the film itself. The lines are, in fact, from close to the end of the fabula, the point at which Wilson confronts Valentine on the rocks beneath his beach house, as indicated (but only appreciable in retrospect) by the sound of waves in the background. In the syuzhet, they are followed by a credits sequence depicting the arrival of Wilson in Los Angeles, a
hard-edged “iconic” impression being given to the character through his appearance, posture, and expressions and the lyrically commentative musical accompaniment of “The Seeker” by The Who. The sequence that follows merits consideration in some detail as an example of the broader texture of the film adopted by Soderbergh as an expression, at least in part, of a particular understanding of the nature of human consciousness.

The credits end with Wilson established at a motel and the provision of one key piece of narrative background via a document, a newspaper clipping with the headline “Woman Dies on Mulholland” (a woman who might be assumed, correctly, to be the “Jenny” of the opening lines), along with the return name and address on the back of the envelope in which it appears to have been mailed to him. A reaction shot of Wilson reading the latter is followed by a shot of the same character clearly in a different location (and facing in the opposite direction), speaking the name that appears on the envelope, that of Eduardo Roel (Luis Guzman). A corresponding shot of Roel follows, as would be dictated by the dominant norms of continuity editing regimes, and up to this point the sequence seems entirely mainstream/conventional in character: the transition from Wilson’s arrival to his meeting with Roel, as part of a quest for information about “Jenny,” having clearly established motivation via the newspaper clipping and the name on the envelope. The shot of Roel is fleeting, however, and followed by a return to the close-up image of the envelope as grasped by Wilson in the motel (an apparent shift back in time) and a shot of Wilson sitting on a plane with an intent expression on his face, and then back to the reaction shot of Wilson-looking-at-the-envelope. The image of Wilson on the plane might be expected at this point also to be a flashback, given the fact that we have recently seen his arrival at the airport and that airplane noise is audible in the background at the motel.

Continuing the sequence, Wilson-at-the-motel lifts his head (from the envelope) and stares intently, which is then followed by a shot, located in the interior of a car, of a hand holding a black-and-white photograph of a young woman, and a return to the image of Wilson’s stare (creating the impression that the hand holding the picture is his and that the woman is likely to be both “Jenny” and the woman who died on Mulholland). Next comes a shot marked more overtly as “subjective,” a bluish-background-tinted image (contrasting with the warm yellows/browns of the motel shots of Wilson) of a young girl standing on a beach and looking into the camera, a light shining somewhat oddly on her face and a wind-chime effect on the
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soundtrack further marking a sense of dissonance and greater separation from the preceding shots (the chiming actually begins quietly under the preceding shots and continues for a short while afterward). A return to Wilson in the motel is followed by another shot of him on the plane, closer to the character than the previous example, and then back to the girl on the beach (accompanied by what appears to be an adult humming, a sound of the kind that might be used to comfort a child) and a sepia/monochrome-toned image of what appears to be a slightly younger version of the same girl, again looking into the camera but in this case through the opening of an interior door. Next comes a shot of Wilson sitting in a chair at his motel and then a cool-toned shot of what might be taken to be an adult version of the girl, in the passenger seat of a car as seen from the outside (the silhouetted face of the driver can be identified in retrospect as the distinctive profile of Roel/Guzman), followed by a shot that confirms that it was Wilson holding the photograph of the young woman seen in the earlier car and a return to two additional shots of the protagonist in the motel room chair. The humming sound continues across each of the shots following the one on the beach. A slightly longer-held shot then follows of Wilson traveling in the rear of a car at night and arriving by taxi at what proves to be Roel's home, at which point we revisit his speaking of the latter's name and the subsequent reaction shot from Roel. Wilson then introduces himself to Roel ("you wrote me about my daughter," firmly establishing Wilson's relationship with the girl/young woman), who invites him inside, and for the first time a single thread appears about to be followed in greater substance. "Who done it then? . . . Snuffed her," asks Wilson bluntly, in a sequence at the house that appears to occur shortly after his arrival.

In retrospect, the details of the opening of the film up to this point are entirely comprehensible, but this is likely to be far from the case on first viewing and certainly not during the process of unfolding. At the end of the film, we see Wilson on the plane once again, an image that recurs on numerous occasions throughout the running time. At this point, as he engages in conversation with a fellow passenger, it becomes apparent that all of these shots represent Wilson's return to London, rather than his outbound flight to Los Angeles. The entire fabric of the film can, at this stage, be taken to represent his subjective recollection of the preceding events, those of both the immediate past in Los Angeles and earlier fragments of memories relating to his daughter. In some cases, as suggested above, the past-tense memory status of the material is clearly marked, most obviously in the different visual
tones of the material representing Jenny’s childhood and most conceretedly in sequences that include a wider range of Wilson’s past experiences via footage taken from the Ken Loach film Poor Cow (1968), in which a younger Stamp plays a criminal with whom the central character becomes involved while her husband is in jail (this footage is presented in sepia-toned black-and-white, clearly to mark its past status in the diegesis and to match some of the material featuring Jenny as a child, although the original was in color). The temporal distance at which such material is located from the film’s present tense is such as to make its status easily recognizable. More challenging are the shorter term temporal shifts enacted by the syuzhet without any such clear marker points.

Editing Continuity/Discontinuity

The Limey includes many examples of the latter in which Soderbergh seems deliberately to flout and play with established conventions of continuity and the relationship between sound, image, and temporal (and geographical) location. The interchange between Wilson and Roel that follows the opening sequence outlined above is one example. A conversation ensues in which Roel presents to Wilson the “official” version, accepted after a police investigation, that Jenny died in a car accident, the cause of which might have been her driving too fast in an excited state of mind late at night on the winding roads of the Hollywood Hills. A broad impression of continuity is established in the dialogue but across a number of shifts of locale. Some dialogue is presented as occurring at or outside Roel’s home, some while that character is driving Wilson back to his motel, but movement occurs backward and forward in time and location while the conversation appears to follow a single developing thread. An even more overt example of this phenomenon is found in a later sequence in which Wilson talks to one of Jenny’s former friends, Elaine (Lesley Ann Warren). In this case, the scene switches between Elaine’s home and a nearby waterfront development. The continuity of dialogue that is maintained across these two spaces appears at times to be very precise, with a word-for-word proximity between comments made in one time/place and the other. Jenny was embarrassed by him as a child, as a result of his regular imprisonment, Wilson suggests, in the waterfront setting. “Not embarrassed,” replies Elaine, in the same location. At this point we cut to her home, where Wilson, appearing to follow directly from her interjection, suggests “ashamed” instead. “Not ashamed,”
counters Elaine, again in the same location, before adding “disappointed,” but this time back at the waterfront.

This is a direct and quite radical undermining of familiar continuity conventions and, it could be said, the particular construction of the nature of existence that they imply (in which basic relationships between time and space appear objectively to be clear cut and unproblematic). Sequences such as these cannot easily be resolved at the time without an abandonment of the usually strong expectation that closely continuous face-to-face dialogue should exist in the same space and time. A similar effect is employed in a sequence in which Wilson tells of the intimation of Jenny’s death he had felt at the time, during his most recent prison sentence. What might elsewhere, more conventionally, be a passing sound bridge—a brief continuity of dialogue that eases the passage from one scene into another—is developed into a major aesthetic principle around which significant parts of the film are constructed and that is likely to create considerable disorientation for the viewer. This is a clear marker of the dimension of the film that pulls in the direction of more philosophically oriented art cinema of the kind associated with figures such as Resnais, as is the use of the flash forward, a much more radical and unusual device than the flashback. The latter can be integrated without trouble into the classical Hollywood style of narration, its status usually clearly indicated and its presence easily motivated via devices such as subjective memories or the objective recalling of past plot elements by characters. The flash forward, “the syuzhet’s representation of a ‘future’ fabula action,” is declared by Bordwell to be “unthinkable in the classical narrative cinema, which seeks to retard the ending, emphasize communicativeness, and play down self-consciousness.” By contrast, the flash forward in the art film, Bordwell suggests, “flaunts the narrative’s range of knowledge (no character can know the future), the narration’s recognition of the viewer (the flashforward is addressed to us, not to the characters), and the narration’s limited communicativeness (telling a little while withholding a lot).”

In this respect and others, I suggest, The Limey occupies something of a middle position. In the experience of first viewing, as the film unfolds, some of the flash forwards—for example, the initial presentation of Wilson’s first meeting with Roel—are quickly recognizable as such and might seem to locate Soderbergh’s production in relation to the art cinema territory outlined by Bordwell. The status of others, particularly some that have an extreme reach across the length of the film—for example, the line we hear
at the beginning and the early shots of Wilson on the plane—is far less clear cut, however, and unlikely to be apparent even to the attentive first-time viewer until their final articulation toward the end. And when such viewers do reach the end, scope is provided for a more fully motivated understanding of both kinds of flash forward, as indicated above, in the suggestion that the film represents Wilson’s subjective reconstruction of events. Contrary pulls seem to exist between dimensions of the film that lean toward the more and less “arty” ends of the scale.

Viewers of *The Limey* are likely to become habituated to some of the disorienting strategies employed by Soderbergh as the film progresses. New expectations are likely to be generated in response to the repeated use of similar devices, as would be suggested by an inferential model of narration of the kind proposed by Bordwell, according to which the viewer is understood perceptually to process representational material and to elaborate its meaning on the basis of available schemas. If parts of the classical Hollywood schema do not seem to apply, or appear in some ways to be undermined, a new schema might implicitly be generated as a working model, to some extent at least, to make allowance for what become regular departures from the norm. Soderbergh seems at times actively to play with any such expectations, however, particularly in one major set piece during a party at Valentine’s luxury home in the Hollywood Hills. Wilson stands outside next to a swimming pool, staring in through the windows at the oblivious figure of Valentine. We are then given a head-on shot of Wilson walking slowly but intently inside, followed by a cut back to the previous perspective of his stare from outside. Next comes what is clearly marked as a subjective point-of-view shot of Wilson moving inside the building, followed by a repeat of the previous interior shot in which he is viewed from the front. A group of shots follows, in which he is seen to pull out and aim a gun, but then another return to Wilson watching, in a slightly closer shot, from outside. Back inside, a combination of shots marked as subjective and objective climaxes in Wilson shooting Valentine in the chest. At this point Soderbergh cuts back outside to where Wilson walks toward the building. The logic of the film up to this point encourages an assumption that the previous interior shots have constituted a flash forward to action that is now about to take place in the present tense. We see Wilson walking inside and pulling out his gun again, without any cuts back to the outside. The impression seems to be that the previously forecast action is now happening in the present tense of the film, but the outcome is different, the shot this time catching
Valentine in the elbow. Soderbergh then cuts back to Wilson entering for a third time. On this occasion, the sequence is coded as more “real,” the background noise of the party rendered sharp and clear in a manner that draws attention to the extent to which it had previously been muffled. The implication is that the first two versions were works of Wilson’s imagination and that this is the real event. Valentine is shot in the head, but the cut that follows shows him still to be fully intact, with Wilson headed off by Roel. All three versions of the shooting prove to have been subjective fantasies, but their status shifts during the unfolding of the sequence, with the viewer constantly being asked to interpret and reinterpret along the way, a mode of engagement that would usually be associated with the art cinema end of the spectrum. A close auditor may notice on repeat viewing that the first series of interior shots and those depicting the second time Wilson lifts his gun are accompanied by the background sound of breaking waves, marking a temporal and spatial relationship with the moment at which he really confronts Valentine on the beach, but exactly how that might be understood (and how likely it is to be identified by more than a very small minority of viewers) remains open to question.

Motivating Departures from the Norm: “Doing Time”

Two further sources of motivation are available for the disorienting temporal schemes employed by the film, one relating to the specifics of narrative subject matter, the other to the more personal expression by the filmmaker of his own understanding of the nature of consciousness and the experience of time. At the level of narrative content, the elements of temporal fragmentation built into the film can be read as a reflection of the past experiences of Wilson, a figure whose life is presented as having been marked by regular periods of imprisonment (or of “doing time,” in the English vernacular that forms part of the subheading of this section). As he puts it himself, “I watched her grow up . . . in increments.”

The experiences of Wilson might be taken to be exceptional, but to the extent that they can be considered to provide motivation for the formal qualities examined above they appear to be viewed by Soderbergh as more widely representative. The filmmaker has himself articulated an understanding of the nature of consciousness that finds embodiment in some of the temporal structures and editing regimes of The Limey, although the following quotation is from an interview given in 1995, some years before the making
of the film, in relation to the perceived failure to achieve a similar effect in one of his earlier films, *The Underneath* (1995):

Our existence is reflected in the film in the sense that our physical bodies go through life in a chronological, linear way from birth to death, while in the mind it’s different. Every time something happens to us, we think about a similar experience in the past and we imagine the consequences in the future. There is a constant back and forth. Our minds are totally non-linear. It seemed interesting to try to express that in film. I had been dreaming of making a film where there would be no end to the dialogue, where the last sentence in a scene would lead to the first sentence of the next scene. It would have been like one uninterrupted conversation that would cut across the three temporal levels, a verbal flow analogous to the interior monologue. I tried but I did not succeed.7

This comes close to a description of what Soderbergh achieves in some respects in *The Limey*, perhaps encouraging a more open reading than my suggestion that the events of the film can, by the end, be read as an expression of Wilson’s post facto reconstruction. Soderbergh’s suggestion here is that the kind of “back and forth” manifested in the editing of *The Limey* is a more continuous and ongoing facet of mental experience, rather than something imposed in retrospect. This approach does not seem able to account for all of the devices employed in the film, however, such as the flash forwards that seem prescient rather than imaginative (that is to say, the ones that are subsequently shown to be realized in exactly the same manner as they are first presented, as contrasted with the unrealized projections relating to the shooting of Valentine at the party).

The broad outlines of Soderbergh’s perspective on the manner in which time is experienced in the mind—and, as a result, the subjective dimension of the way we engage with past, present, and projections of the future—resonate with the work of a number of philosophers and other theorists. These range from the writings of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to contemporary scientific theories of the workings of the brain, each of which include notions relating to coexistence within consciousness of successive pasts and presents.8 An obvious point of reference for this chapter, given the inclusion of Resnais at one end of the cinematic spectrum cited by the filmmaker, is Gilles Deleuze,
himself heavily influenced by Bergson. Resnais is one prominent example cited by Deleuze of what he identifies as a particular tendency in postwar art cinema in which the emphasis is put on the dimension of time, rather than that of movement (the latter associated by Deleuze with prewar and more mainstream forms of production).9

The films of Resnais, most notably L’Année dernière à Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad, 1961), offer uncertainties of space and time that are more complex, and sometimes irresolvable, than anything found in Soderbergh’s film. Marienbad appears clearly to be the source of the play with continuity of dialogue across discontinuities of space and/or time employed in The Limey, but the former is a more radically disorienting work. A fundamental uncertainty remains at the end of Marienbad in relation to the memories claimed on the part of the male narrator, who tries to convince a woman that they met at the same luxury hotel the previous year. In some instances, a reasonably clear relationship seems to be established between his present tense commentary and sequences featuring the woman in the past scenes of which he claims detailed knowledge. But she denies the existence of any such past, and his discourse shifts from strong insistence to periods of doubt and uncertainty of his own, suggesting, perhaps, the creation of an implied subjunctive tense on the part of Resnais. The overall tenor and texture of L’Année dernière à Marienbad—chilly, austere, slippery, and overtly enigmatic, with a camera that tends to slide in and out of scenes and a distanced, although at times strident organ accompaniment—are very different from those of The Limey.

If the disorienting editing regimes employed by Soderbergh are designed to give an impression of the subjective experience of temporality, they also have the effect of providing an experiment in the potency of aural continuity and a demonstration of the centrality of dialogue to our understanding of sequences that might otherwise be confusing. Continuity at the level of sound goes a long way toward smoothing over the discontinuity of location, signaled visually. A number of other strategies are also employed to ensure continuity and/or coherence across some of the different sources of imagery considered above, including sound effects such as the chiming/humming that accompanies sequences associated with Jenny’s childhood in the more distant past and the image color coding noted earlier (a device used in many of Soderbergh’s films to help the viewer to distinguish between different temporal and/or spatial locations, notable examples including The Underneath, Out of Sight [1998], Traffic [2000] and Solaris [2002]).10 The
effect is to place different moments much more clearly and unambiguously than is the case in Marienbad.

If we return to the early sequences from The Limey outlined near the beginning of this chapter, a whole universe of difference is apparent between this film and Resnais’s. For all of the brief dislocations in time and space, the viewer is taken quite clearly, within a couple of minutes, from Wilson’s arrival at the motel to the delivery of unambiguous and important plot information by Roel. And it is only a short while after this, with a few more flashes forward and back, that Wilson gets stuck into producing some of the serious mayhem that might be expected of the generic territory, when he is beaten up by and then massacres a group of criminal associates with whom Valentine had been involved. There is some disorientation, particularly when the editing regimes of the film are compared with the mainstream or Hollywood norm, but it is brief and localized. A broader level of doubt is not encouraged at the level of the fundamental nature of how different characters and other narrative elements relate to one another, and it is the revenge-thriller dimension of the film that is most apparent throughout the running time, a dynamic that is sufficiently strong, clear, and familiar to propel the viewer across any moments of temporal confusion.

In philosophical terms, The Limey offers nothing that could really be described as ontological uncertainty (about the nature of reality) or epistemological doubt (about our ability to access reality)—the kinds of dimensions that might be read into an example such as Marienbad. The viewer has good grounds for assuming, from the start, that any localized confusions or sources of disorientation will be ironed out, as proves to be the case. Even if every somewhat unconventional device is not fully motivated or comprehensible, on a point-by-point basis, a broad rationale is provided by the development of what is presented as the “subjective” dimension of the film, the interior experiences of Wilson in relation to the history of his relationship with Jenny. The interior and exterior/revenge plot dimensions are fully integrated by the end of The Limey, when Valentine reveals that he killed Jenny, inadvertently as far as we can tell, in a struggle that followed her threat to telephone the police in anger at his criminal involvement. The similarity of this situation to one regularly undergone by Wilson in the past—numerous occasions, we are told, when Jenny as a child made a similar threat to try to make him stop thieving—is sufficiently chastening to make him walk away from his intended victim, just when Valentine is at his mercy. A degree of exploration of interior processes of memory and consciousness is central to the
narrative, in other words, which gives motivation to the formal departures detailed above, but it is not a dimension that is explored in any detail in its own right. Which is far from surprising. The final element that needs to be taken into account in an understanding of exactly how the film approaches such issues is the location of *The Limey* in the industrial dimension, a key conditioner of the stance of any feature-length production.

**Nostalgic Return**

*The Limey* is, in several respects, a good illustration of recent contemporary American independent cinema, particularly the variety of independent cinema that became institutionalized in the period from the late 1980s and early 1990s and with which the term has subsequently been most strongly associated. The blend the film offers of conventional and less conventional ingredients is typical of the territory, particularly in its use of a familiar genre framework within which to offer some more distinctive touches. Soderbergh’s work to date has encompassed a range of positions, from clearly “indie” films such as *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *Schizopolis* (1996), and *Bubble* (2005) to more mainstream productions such as *Out of Sight* and the *Ocean’s* series (2001, 2004, 2007), and many that occupy positions in between. *The Limey* is one of the clearest manifestations of his declared desire to offer a revival of the more innovative, relatively mainstream production associated with the Hollywood Renaissance period, usually dated to the period of approximately a decade from the late 1960s. Other reference points from this period cited by Soderbergh in relation to *The Limey* include *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), another revenge drama, and *Petulia* (1968), directed by Richard Lester, a filmmaker identified by the former as one of his idols, a text also marked as distinctive by its use of flash forwards. The films of the Hollywood Renaissance were themselves directly influenced in many cases by the European art cinema of the time. For *The Limey*, then, the mark of art cinema can be understood to exist to some extent at one remove, via the mediation provided by an earlier generation of American films.

A parallel can be suggested here between the situation of the film (and its more immediate progenitors) and the role played by the fictional figure of Terry Valentine. Valentine is revealed to have made his fortune by the astute packaging and promotion of 1960s pop music, a process that has some resonances with the manner in which particular elements of 1960s art cinema were drawn upon in some of the films of the Hollywood Renaissance.
and, in turn, by some later work associated with the independent sector. A general tendency in both cinematic instances has been for the influence of art cinema to be relatively superficial, tending to be restricted to the use of striking stylistic touches within still largely conventional formats, as is the case with *The Limey*. In one reflective moment given to Valentine, he muses that “the 1960s,” as the marked object that has passed into legend, really amounted to little more than a year and a half (“it was just ’66 and early ’67, that’s all it was”), a dream place “that maybe only exists in your imagination.” The Hollywood Renaissance is in some ways a similarly lost and mythologized object from the perspective of contemporary filmmakers such as Soderbergh (commentators and former participants argue over the exact period to which the term can accurately be applied, although it is not usually reduced to quite such a short period as Valentine’s version of the 1960s).

Soderbergh would position himself in a manner very different from that of Valentine, of course, as a figure who seeks to bring back some of the qualities associated with the earlier period, rather than one who directly exploited (and, it is implied, played a part in sullying) the original phenomenon. An element of nostalgia can be identified in both cases, however, akin to the nostalgia for a lost past experienced by Wilson (one that never really was, most of the time, because of his absences while doing time in jail). It is, perhaps, a nostalgic treatment of time and consciousness, and some of the formal devices through which this can be evoked, that most strongly characterizes *The Limey*: nostalgia on the part of both the central protagonist and the filmmaker, two dimensions that are brought overtly together in the sequences from *Poor Cow* that can be read as both internal narrative flashback substance and intertextual reference (even if *Poor Cow* is not quite the kind of 1960s or 1970s film to which homage most obviously is paid in *The Limey*). It is notable that *The Limey* ends with a sequence from Loach’s film rather than its own new material, one in which Stamp’s character, Dave, sings somewhat hesitantly and plays guitar (the humming used earlier in *The Limey* in association with Wilson’s memories involves the same song, although in a rendition not taken from *Poor Cow*). The song itself, Donovan’s “Colours,” is distinctly nostalgic, the extract included in *The Limey* referring to “the time, when I was loved.” It is part of a montage sequence in *Poor Cow* that plays over what is presented as a “happy interlude” in the life of the protagonist, Joy (Carol White), which gives it the status of a kind of second-order nostalgia that seems a fitting note to accompany Soderbergh’s conclusion to *The Limey*. 
Consciousness, Temporality, and the Crime-Revenge Genre in The Limey

Notes


2. Some elements of this chapter, particularly two sections relating to the disjunctive editing regimes of The Limey, draw on an argument made previously in Geoff King, American Independent Cinema (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 142–44.

3. For the major example, see David Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film (London: Routledge, 1985).


5. Ibid.


11. For more on this in general, see King, American Independent Cinema.

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 1903 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.¹ 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 re-invigorate 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. *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-
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). 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. 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.

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. 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 media- tion 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). 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 Manichaean 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 übertext 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.”

Apres 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


**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.

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.
Creative Agency

From the perspective of aesthetic philosophy, Noël Carroll points out that early in the history of film questions arose about its ability to qualify as art. Film’s use of photography to show objective reality was regarded as preventing its function as an expressive medium.1 The early prominence of what Tom Gunning has called the cinema of attractions (films such as the Lumière brothers’ popular actualités) confirmed for critics of cinema’s aesthetic capability its tendency to reflect rather than create. Even a critically praised film such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920) was valued for the expressive creativity of its writers, actors, and set designers but not for the film itself.2

This skepticism about the artistic potential of cinema has since been discredited, but such reappraisal has required the demonstration of filmmakers’ intention and control. As Carroll puts it, “Art as the expression or articulation of thought or feeling requires . . . control.” While he accepts that creative control by filmmakers is always limited, and in fact all “artists have to negotiate compromises,” Carroll nonetheless maintains that film art can be achieved with “sufficient” rather than total control. Sufficient control in Carroll’s estimation is “enough . . . for the filmmaker to project intentional content—i.e., to express thoughts and feelings.”3

Because the corporations that control Hollywood filmmaking privilege profit over art, auteur analysis aimed at valuing the work of American filmmakers must identify instances of such creative agency. As Carroll suggests, critical focus on style helps demonstrate the director’s control over a film, identifying the patterns by which formal properties (narrative, editing, cinematography, mise-en-scène, acting, sound) add to its meaning. Carroll defines style as demonstrating filmmakers’ control by allowing them “choices
to realize . . . the expression of thought and/or affect.” He sums up his argument by concluding, “No control, no style, no art.”


This eclecticism in Soderbergh’s movies would appear to invalidate a claim to the distinctive style typical of film authorship. Moreover, one might point to his more commercial projects as evidence of a lack of creative integrity in his work. However, I would argue for the importance of analyzing Soderbergh’s films for reasons that do not entirely discount these critiques but rather show how the variety of his work and the commercial viability of some of his films are in fact prominent aspects of his distinctive style. On the one hand, Soderbergh’s movies merit a closer look because of his insistence on what David Bordwell calls “art-cinema narration” characterized by complexity and a respect for the audience that have too often been lacking in the American cinema during his career as a director. Yet another reason for my interest in Soderbergh’s work specifically concerns the Soderbergh movies that have made large amounts of money, in particular *Erin Brockovich, Traffic, Ocean’s Eleven*, and *Ocean’s Thirteen*. Rather than regard these movies as simply part of a strategy of making commercial projects to finance more personal films, one could also see them as combining the utopian resolve of Hollywood narrative—an optimistic determination to overcome injustice or inequality—yet contextualized by representation of some of the social determinants of these problems so that they resonate with large audiences but without capitulating to a condescending blockbuster recipe of high concept, digitally enhanced violence, and commodified synergy. In other
words, even Soderbergh’s most commercial movies offer the complexity and critical challenges to viewers found in his art films.

An additional characteristic of Soderbergh’s films supports an assertion of authorial control: his hands-on involvement in various aspects of their production. Besides directing, he has written five of his features, edited seven, and done the cinematography for eleven, including every project since Traffic. Soderbergh’s contribution to these important aspects of the filmmaking process has resulted in a large degree of thematic and formal continuity across his apparently diverse range of movies. He consistently builds stories around outsider characters who are alienated from a world that values wealth, power, and self-interest. Resolution of the conflicts involving such outsider protagonists rarely takes the form of the neat, individualized responses typical of Hollywood. Although he adopts the style he feels fits the topic at hand, and his style therefore varies as much as his subjects, the form in Soderbergh’s films often breaks through the fourth wall of invisibility to create a discontinuity that communicates the unconventional thinking of such marginalized characters, sets up critical distance for the viewer, or uses self-reflexivity, allusion, or realism to comment on a particular narrative situation.

**Four Soderbergh Remakes**

Four of Soderbergh’s films (The Underneath, Traffic, Ocean’s Eleven, and Solaris) remake earlier movies or television programs. Remakes fit the pattern in his work toward balancing commercial and creative considerations. They exemplify the tendency in contemporary Hollywood to pre-sell, in other words, to generate profits by recycling stories that have already demonstrated their marketability. Yet remakes have also allowed him to accept the aesthetic challenge that Thomas Leitch describes when he stated about the successful remake, “The original film was outstanding—otherwise why bother to remake it at all?—yet the remake is better still.” Understood this way, remakes fit with Soderbergh’s use of allusion to appropriate and refashion narrative and formal elements from other films to tell the stories in his movies.

This creative use of allusion and the remake responds to Bordwell’s idea of belatedness. Measuring themselves against the entire history of cinema, filmmakers are liable to experience an anxiety of influence. Although he did not attend film school, Soderbergh belongs to a generation of directors
who have had access to such history through its endless recycling on home video and DVD. Soderbergh's use of allusion and remakes demonstrates his knowledge of film history. Such knowingness ingratiates him with those in the audience who recognize the re-use of earlier films and therefore feel like privileged insiders, creating what Bordwell calls “a pop connoisseurship that demands film references as part of the pleasures of moviegoing.”

However, the danger of such a film education for a director is that, the more one knows about movies, the higher the self-imposed standard to do something new and innovative. Bordwell sums up this burden when he writes, “With your career wholly in your own hands, facing the competition of past and present, how could you achieve something distinctive?” Just as he has adopted and modified genre in films like Kafka, The Underneath, Out of Sight, The Limey, and Ocean's Eleven, Soderbergh uses allusion and remakes not only to attract audiences with the familiar but also to take advantage of the assumption that the invocation of earlier movies has given him license to modify them. Genre confirms audience expectations as to what kind of film they are watching, but it can also run the risk of boring viewers by simply recycling conventions. Soderbergh responds to this problem in The Underneath, a remake of Robert Siodmak's 1949 thriller Criss Cross, with subjective narration and a mise-en-scène more reliant on suburban banality and the symbolic use of color than on noir shadow and urban mean streets.

The Underneath tells the story of Michael (Peter Gallagher), a compulsive gambler who returns home for his mother's wedding three years after running away from gambling debts, only to be drawn by his attraction for his former wife, Rachel (Alison Elliott), into a disastrous robbery with her new husband, Tommy Dundee (William Fichtner). Except for that narrative starting point and the common noir theme of destructive desire—summed up by the scene of Michael hospitalized after being shot in the robbery—Soderbergh introduces a whole new set of narrative and formal choices. These include a complex temporal structure, suburban mise-en-scène, and stylized color to represent the world of the film as an expression of Michael's alienation and the emotionally destructive effects of his bad choices. Soderbergh referred to this revision of the visual conventions of noir when he stated, “I told my collaborators: no wet pavement, no huge shadows, no hats, no smoke. That's not what I was looking for. So we spent our time talking about colors and space.”

The banal mise-en-scène, and the stultifying jobs Michael held (selling sporting goods before he left and working as an armored car driver with his
new father-in-law, Ed [Paul Dooley] after his return) help explain his alienation and disconnection from the world and people around him. We see a tongue-in-cheek reference to Michael’s unease when he is reading self-help books with titles like *Self-Esteem: A User’s Guide* and *Say Hello to Yourself* as he waits for Rachel to call or for the heist to happen. A green tint colors the present-tense sequences when the robbery takes place, suggesting his belief that quick money will solve his problems: a mistaken conviction that has taken Michael from gambling he couldn’t afford to a botched armed robbery in which he is shot and Ed is killed. Such color symbolism is reinforced by a shot of the money tinted in the same shade of green as it is being counted at the armored car company just before the heist. A similar use of color functions in the shades of blue in stained glass and on the walls in Michael’s mother’s house, at the employee lounge of the armored car company, inside the house he shared with Rachel when they were married, and in the early evening light as he and his ex-wife meet secretly to plot the renewal of their relationship. As green implies a hope that money will bring the meaning his life lacks, these shades of blue similarly express the depressed emotions that his bad choices create for Michael and for those close to him who occupy these spaces.

*The Underneath* failed to earn back even its $6.5 million production budget. Its stylized use of color and the narrative’s movement back and forth in time probably confused some viewers. Soderbergh has acknowledged that, as he was shooting, “even my film crew didn’t understand” the story. James Naremore pointed to the ambiguity that resulted from Soderbergh’s modification of the noir original when he wrote that “throughout, *The Underneath* keeps its audience slightly off balance, joining the conventions of historical film noir with the more complex modernism of a New Wave director like Alain Resnais.”

Viewed from a commercial perspective, Soderbergh’s second remake, *Traffic*, appears to have been motivated by a common pattern in Hollywood of redoing foreign films that have had limited distribution so as to increase their audience and profitability with the addition of bigger production budgets, increased marketing, and wider release. In the case of *Traffic*, its model was a BBC miniseries, *Traffik*, that was shown on public television in the United States in 1990. Yet, rather than simply repackaging the British miniseries for a larger audience, Soderbergh adjusted its analysis of the international business of illegal drugs by adapting it to show the impact of drug smuggling on Mexico and the United States.
To achieve this shift, producer Laura Bickford, screenwriter Stephen Gaghan, and Soderbergh changed the story from the original BBC production’s focus on Pakistan as a source of poppy production to Mexico since, by the time the film was made, most of the illegal drugs entering the United States were coming through its southern neighbor. Traffic shows that stimulating the drug trade has been a side effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The 1993 pact made the border more porous, and, because it removed tariffs protecting small farmers and thus reduced agricultural jobs in Mexico and because it promoted the construction of maquiladora factories that undercut industrial production in the United States, it increased the attraction of the drug economy for those displaced by globalization in both countries. Commenting on the impact of NAFTA, Jeff Faux has written that “on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border labor market competition has kept wages down. . . . By wiping out small Mexican farms that could not compete with heavily subsidized U.S. agribusiness, NAFTA also expanded the pool of unemployed young people that provides the narco-traffickers with recruits.”13 The idea that legitimate work is a less viable alternative to the illegal drug economy is emphasized repeatedly in Traffic: Mexican soldiers protect the cartels, Benicio Del Toro’s Tijuana cop character earns just $316 per month, and the incentives for young African American dealers in inner-city Cincinnati are described by one character as “an unbeatable market force . . . you can go out on the street and make $500 in two hours.” Scenes set in Mexico show us drug-transporting men who exemplify how, in the era of “free trade,” with the loss of government crop subsidies and the competition of transnational corporations, in the words of Curtis Marez, “local economies in Mexico . . . provide . . . few opportunities for survival other than drug production.”14

One scene from Traffic in particular makes direct reference to the impact that globalization has had on the illegal drug trade. After he is arrested for selling narcotics to two undercover San Diego cops, Eduardo Ruiz (Miguel Ferrer) tells the officers that the dealer he works for gave up importing strawberries because drugs were more profitable. He then berates the police for the futility of their efforts, telling them, “NAFTA makes things even more difficult for you, because the border’s disappearing.” While the film emphasizes the U.S. government’s failed interdiction efforts, Traffic also demonstrates the importance of addressing the strong demand in the United States by highlighting the addiction of middle-class teenagers in suburban Cincinnati. The film implies that the escape of drug use is a response by these
young people to the pressure they face to achieve the same level of success their parents have and maintain their social and economic privilege in an increasingly competitive, globalized world. This alienation is made evident in the scene in which Caroline (Erika Christensen), the sixteen-year-old daughter of the U.S. drug czar, Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), speaks to a social worker (Viola Davis) after she and her friends have been arrested for drug possession:

**Social Worker:** In school?  
**Caroline:** Yes.  
**Social Worker:** Private?  
**Caroline:** Yeah.  
**Social Worker:** How are your grades?  
**Caroline:** Third in my class. . . . I get all A’s.  
**Social Worker:** What else do you do?  
**Caroline:** I’m a National Merit finalist . . . math team, Spanish club, vice president of my class, . . . volleyball team.  
**Social Worker:** Do you want to tell me what you’re doing here, Caroline?

From the perspective of the social worker, the achievement in school that Caroline describes should preclude the lack of hope that is often a cause of drug use, yet the teen’s weary tone and depressed body language as she lists her accomplishments suggest that such intense pressure to achieve—and how she sees that hard work as just leading to the unhappy money- and status-driven lives of her parents—explain her desire to escape by getting high.

Soderbergh called *Traffic* his “$47 million Dogme film” and used hand-held camera, available light, and (ostensibly) improvisational performance in an attempt to present a realistic story about illegal drugs. He prepared by analyzing two political films made in a realist style: *Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) and *Z* (Constantin Costa-Gavras, 1969), both of which he described as having “that great feeling of things that are caught, instead of staged, which is what we were after.”¹⁵ The complexity of multiple story lines and an ensemble cast came from the BBC miniseries, something critic Julie Salamon pointed out when she wrote that “both are layered works, cross cutting multiple scenarios, each intended to illuminate yet another ruthless and Byzantine aspect of the international drug business.”¹⁶

Soderbergh also retained from the BBC series the story about the ad-
dicted daughter of a high government official responsible for fighting illegal drugs to emphasize the importance of addressing the causes of addiction. Yet while the British production had room for long statements about the importance of treatment, Soderbergh’s film, with less than half the screen time, had to make more efficient use of a scene on a government jet in which Michael Douglas’s drug czar, after his staff shows a lack of ideas, asks angrily, “Why is there no one from treatment on this plane?” The question fits with Marez’s critical characterization of U.S. drug war policy as “focused on military and police actions at the relative expense of education and treatment.”

Whereas *Traffic* emphasizes both economic inequalities exacerbated by globalization and government ineffectiveness as determining factors in the problem of illegal drugs, at the same time Soderbergh ultimately chose to preserve the movie’s commercial viability by avoiding the more explicit social critique of a film like *Battle of Algiers*—even if its real locations and handheld camera work were a stylistic influence—in favor of staying within the parameters of the Hollywood social problem film. As Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy point out, the social problem film has to “deal with controversial matters very much on the surface, . . . with discretion.” Therefore, *Traffic* ends with a resolution made up of individualized responses: the Robert Wakefield character gives up his high-profile position to pay greater attention to his daughter, and the principled cops played by Benicio Del Toro and Don Cheadle keep doing their jobs, despite the murders of their partners, out of commitment to their disadvantaged communities. As a result, the early concerns of Barry Diller, the head of USA Networks films that financed *Traffic*, that the movie would not succeed commercially as “a $50 million art film, about drugs . . . [with] sequences in Spanish . . . with so many actors you needed a scorecard” proved unfounded. By offsetting its narrative and stylistic complexity with the appeal of stars (Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Benicio Del Toro, and Don Cheadle), good reviews, and Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actor (Del Toro), Best Director, and Best Film, *Traffic* grossed more than $200 million. With an even bigger budget and lineup of stars than *Traffic*, Soderbergh’s third remake, *Ocean’s Eleven*, marked his strongest move yet in the direction of commercial cinema. His own proclamation that it was “just a big wind-up toy,” which he was nonetheless happy to make “because entertainment is a good thing,” fit the expectation that marketing big-budget movies requires portraying them as not asking viewers to question the status quo such films represent. Yet,
if one considers that Soderbergh changed the Sinatra Rat Pack original to allow eleven robbers to get away with $150 million, that he foregrounds the aesthetic nature of the heist and justifies that crime with vilification of the casinos’ owner, Terry Benedict (Andy Garcia), for his ruthlessness and greed, then his *Ocean’s Eleven* becomes an allegory of the growing gulf of class difference in supply-side America and the role of the movies in affirming or critiquing it. In the Production Code–regulated conclusion of the well-known 1960 original directed by Lewis Milestone, the robbers lose the stolen money when it inadvertently burns up in the coffin where it had been hidden. By drastically altering the ending, Soderbergh refers to the earlier movie through what Noël Carroll calls an “expressive device”: an alteration of original story that indicates the remake’s different interpretation of the meaning of the robbery.  

Although the fantasy of stealing $150 million (and cutting the take eleven ways) is about as viable a response to the problem of wealth inequality in America as buying a lottery ticket, it offers a striking, if only symbolic, reaction to what economist Edward Wolff describes as “a clear shift in national income away from labor and towards capital, . . . since the early 1980s,” implicitly interrogating the role of entertainment in distracting the vast majority of Americans who have been disadvantaged by that change. Terry Benedict therefore embodies what contemporary Las Vegas represents: the consolidation of wealth in American society. The casino where the robbery takes place, the Bellagio, and the Strip’s other new megacasinos with international themes, were built in the 1990s by entrepreneurs such as Steve Wynn (the real-life model for Benedict) with junk bonds like those corporate raiders employed to acquire companies and eliminate jobs. With its art gallery and upscale restaurants, the Bellagio is part of a diversification strategy in Las Vegas to earn increasing profits from nongaming sources. And yet the appeal of such amenities, like gambling itself, is fueled by the fact that both offer consumers escape from the reality of diminished opportunities for upward mobility within an American economy of stagnant wages, increasing outsourcing, and devastating layoffs. Jacob Hacker points out that “between 1979 and 2003 the average income of the richest Americans more than doubled after adjusting for inflation, while that of middle-class Americans increased by only around 15 percent.” Richard McGowan has documented that during the same period revenue from gambling in the United States exploded, from $1 billion to more than $70 billion. Within a postindustrial, globalized economy, gambling increasingly appears to of-
fer the best way, in the words of Jackson Lears, “to get ahead . . . in a world where work no longer seems reliable.”

With eleven major characters to set up, the exposition in *Ocean’s Eleven* by necessity has to be economical. Nonetheless, each of the robbers comes with some indication that they embody the disaffection created by the increasing division of American society into haves and have-nots, whether it be a criminal past, lack of work, or entrapment in a job in which they find themselves unappreciated or unrewarded. Even the bankroll behind the job, a former casino owner named Reuben Tishkoff (Elliott Gould), wants revenge against a new economy in which corporate moguls like Benedict can use the financial muscle of consolidation to push him out. As Benedict, with his three casinos and hundreds of millions in assets, refers to the horizontally integrated corporate control of mass entertainment, the eleven thieves succeed in robbing him using storytelling, performative, and guerrilla technological skills that symbolize the independent film sensibility that Soderbergh instills in the project, which eschews violent spectacle in favor of good writing, skilled acting, and the subordination of star power within an ensemble story. Early in *Ocean’s Eleven* Soderbergh makes reference to this independent aesthetic. After the opening scene in which Clooney is interviewed and released from prison by a parole board, the next sequence begins with a helicopter shot across water, tilting up to show the bright lights of Atlantic City. This shot imitates the similar imagery and camera movement used in the opening titles to identify films distributed by Miramax, the company most responsible for making independent film commercially viable, a project in which *Ocean’s Eleven* has its own role to play.

Soderbergh conceals the social commentary and self-reflexivity of *Ocean’s Eleven* behind expensive production values and familiar genre conventions, increasing the project’s box office viability. His fourth remake, *Solaris*, was a tougher sell because it more radically upset audience expectations for both a science fiction film and a George Clooney star vehicle. Instead of battling spaceships, light sabers, or aliens emerging from the chests of crew members, *Solaris* is an introspective and character-based film. Its complex narrative structure foregrounds form, denying viewers the pleasure of easy readability. And yet important aspects of the project were determined by commercial considerations: most important, the participation of Clooney and of James Cameron as producer, and the displacement of what Jonathan Rosenbaum calls the original Soviet film’s “meditative poetry” on art and science in favor of a love story about a psychiatrist,
Chris Kelvin (Clooney), who is sent to a space station where, as he discovers, a nearby planet has the power to bring his dead wife Rheya (Natascha McElhone) back to him. But this shift toward a more conventional form of story did not alter the film's expressive minimalism, perhaps its most striking and unusual feature.²⁷

Flashbacks to key moments in the lovers’ relationship emphasize Clooney’s charm, humor, and physical appeal—and include a brief nude shot. But Solaris is generally slow moving, with little dialogue or action for long stretches; this languor emphasizes the power of subjective experience for Kelvin. Solaris also strikingly returns to the formalist emphasis of Soderbergh’s “smaller” films. After the pop/jazz/funk pastiche of David Holmes’s score that kept the fast-paced narrative in Ocean’s Eleven moving forward, Soderbergh chose the haunting Brian Eno–inspired synthesizer music of longtime collaborator Cliff Martinez to communicate the feeling of isolation in outer space. Similarly, Jonathan Romney has suggested that Solaris production designer Philip Messina’s careful attention to the futuristic decor of the space station makes as much of an impression as the narrative itself: “textures and elegant details . . . show that the accoutrements of lifestyle follow humanity even unto the depths of the galaxy: you may find yourself remembering the film for a certain metallic sheen on Clooney’s pillow, or the strange ice tray edging around his bed.”²⁸ Like Soderbergh’s other experiments with stylized alienation, Solaris failed to reach much of an audience. But surely the director could not have thought that Clooney’s star appeal and Cameron’s imprimatur would offset the movie’s carefully calculated formal and thematic challenges, which would prove daunting for any but the most dedicated fans of independent filmmaking.

Creative and Commercial Motivations

Despite the failure of either The Underneath or Solaris to achieve much in the way of box office or critical success, Soderbergh’s four remakes demonstrate his interest in reconciling artistic and commercial forms of filmmaking. As production and marketing budgets have pushed the average cost for a Hollywood film above $100 million, studios are increasingly interested in remakes with “pre-sold” stories that audiences know and have proven they will pay to see. While The Underneath and Solaris were too focused on subjective realities that communicated through stylized form to appeal to many viewers, Ocean’s Eleven’s updating of the conventional crime
film aspects of the Rat Pack original to present a fast-moving and stylish critique of the consolidation of wealth in American society and *Traffic’s* use of an ensemble cast and a realist style to describe the complexities of the business of illegal drugs in the age of globalization both show that remakes can both thematize important issues and prove entertaining for general audiences.

Besides his ability to develop both the commercial and creative aspects of the remake, Soderbergh also remakes the conventions of Hollywood cinema by creating films that are both character and star driven at the same time. The participation of George Clooney, Julia Roberts, Cate Blanchett, Brad Pitt, Michael Douglas, Benicio Del Toro, Matt Damon, and Catherine Zeta-Jones has undoubtedly helped him get his films made and seen, yet Soderbergh has also been able to modify the practice in Hollywood by which, in the words of Richard Maltby, “the commercial imperatives of the star system require that stars are always visible through their characters.”29 This modification has been achieved by harnessing the revenue potential of stars to get films on screens and therefore to audiences that might not otherwise see them, while also asking the stars for performances that support complex characters and stories, often within ensemble casts.

The commercial security afforded by the participation of high-profile actors, who are often interested in displaying their acting skills by appearing in more character-centered films under an acclaimed director, has made several of Soderbergh’s films containing challenging film and social issues more bankable. In describing the ways in which *Erin Brockovich* differed from the conventional big-budget Hollywood film, Soderbergh acknowledged the importance of having Julia Roberts—whose films had earned $2 billion worldwide—in the lead role:

*Erin Brockovich* . . . is an aggressively linear reality-based drama about a twice-divorced mother of three who is living at a very low end income level[,] who talks herself into a job answering the phone and ends up putting together a case against a large California utility company that results in the biggest direct-action lawsuit settlement in history. She’s played by Julia Roberts—if you’re trying to sneak something under the wire, by which I mean an adult, intelligent film with no sequel potential, no merchandising, no high concept and no big hook, it’s nice to have one of the world’s most bankable stars sneaking under with you.30
As if to establish the commercial viability they bring to the films, Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*, Michael Douglas in *Traffic*, and George Clooney in *Solaris* and *The Good German* each initially refer in their roles to the traits that made them stars. For example, Roberts's role in Soderbergh's film foregrounds the unself-conscious sexuality associated with her since *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990). Charlotte Brunsdon writes of Roberts's character in that breakthrough performance that “although Vivian is working as a prostitute for most of the film, the dominant presentation of her is as naturally not-a-hooker.” Brunsdon details how Vivian's care with money (she saves it for rent, while her roommate spends it on drugs), her seemingly natural laugh and smile, and her uncontrived use of her appearance and sexuality were all traits that made the character—and by extension Roberts—endearing to audiences. As Brunsdon puts it, “Even though Vivian works as a prostitute, she is unconscious of the power of her beauty. . . . She might be a hooker outside, but she's clean inside.”

This image of Roberts as sexualized but fundamentally moral and honest was further developed in roles after *Pretty Woman*. Contrary to what Roberts biographer James Spada calls the “serial mankiller” label that came from tabloid coverage of her real-life relationships, even her characters in films such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1997) and *Runaway Bride* (Garry Marshall, 1999), who initially appear to manipulate men, turn out to be honest and caring. In another film made just before *Erin Brockovich*, *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), Roberts plays a movie star character who seems to have had an identical film career and who by story's end displays the familiar warmth and genuineness. Such moral integrity and concern for others are the traits that Soderbergh used to promote audience identification with the Erin Brockovich character and her cause; she succeeds in revealing a utility company's legal responsibility for water contamination and helps hundreds of plaintiffs obtain compensation.

Good looks and compassion are traits that audiences associated with Roberts and that the real Erin Brockovich had used effectively in her legal work, creating a close fit between the star and her historical referent. On several occasions in the story, Roberts's Erin uses low-cut tops and short skirts to disarm male characters, particularly the employee of the local water authority whose permission she needs to access documents important to the case against PG&E (Pacific Gas & Electric). Moreover, it is only because Roberts’s character contrasts herself to the lawyers more focused on their careers than their clients, and is thus able to convince
prospective plaintiffs of her sincerity and concern, that they agree to join the class action suit.

However, because *Erin Brockovich* is a story about a complex legal case and the tragic impact of environmental contamination, Roberts had to demonstrate a greater level of intelligence and verbal acuity, as well as more emotional depth, than in most of her previous roles. Since her stardom had been built on a combination of sexuality and a down-to-earth warmth and directness, audiences may have not expected her to effectively play a role in which she helps prosecute a complex legal case. Such a role would seem to have required the brains and toughness more characteristic of performers such as Susan Sarandon or Kathy Bates. Besides the need for greater focus and resolve, Roberts also had to augment her unself-conscious sexuality and warmth conveyed in the past through her vibrant smile with quiet empathy for the utility’s victims. This emotional depth in Roberts’s performance is best established in the scenes in which she talks with Donna (Marg Helgenberger), whose family has had numerous health problems as a result of contaminated water.

The conversations between the two women appear mostly in close-up and shot/reverse shot figures, with Erin initially asking a few questions and later presenting Donna with the painful truth of PG&E’s role in her family’s medical problems. For most of these scenes, Erin just listens intently to Donna, with Roberts using her body, facial expression, and voice to convey the concern that her character feels. After explaining in their second meeting that water contaminated by PG&E is the cause of Donna’s medical condition, Erin watches, leaning forward and with her shoulders slumped, as Donna rushes outside to get her two daughters from the backyard pool. Jump cuts linking quick shots of Donna’s husband throwing rocks at the nearby PG&E plant and screaming and dropping to his knees in pain preface the two women’s next meeting. In this exchange, Donna tells Erin about her recent diagnosis of cancer and breaks down, pleading, “You’ve got to promise me we’ll get them!” Soderbergh cuts to a close-up of Roberts, who with moist eyes nods shakily and responds quietly, “Yeah.”

In addition to such emotional empathy, Susannah Grant’s script called on Roberts to display the character’s intellectual ability by delivering a convincing account of the details of the case, as when she upstages the highly paid attorneys by demonstrating her ability to recall the names, family histories, and medical conditions of all 634 plaintiffs. Another exchange with the lead attorney refers to Erin’s possession of intelligence as well as attractiveness.
After she presents him with consent forms from all the plaintiffs and with internal PG&E memoranda admitting culpability in poisoning groundwater, he asks incredulously, “How’d you do this?” To which Erin replies sarcastically, “Seeing how I have no brains or law expertise . . . I just went out there and performed sexual favors.” Her sarcastic response makes reference not only to the lawyer’s assumption that an uneducated, single mother would not possess such organizational and investigative skills but also to audience surprise when Julia Roberts goes beyond the limitations of her star image to represent the intelligence of the Erin character.

**Traffic Redux**

Much as Soderbergh did when he cast Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*, in *Traffic* he cast Michael Douglas, and in *Solaris* and *The Good German*, George Clooney, in roles that use but also go beyond the traits derived from their star images. His reputation for successful collaboration with star actors served Soderbergh well in making *Traffic*, as Douglas accepted the use of a deglamorized visual style emphasizing handheld camera and available light as well as reduced screen time within an ensemble story involving thirteen major characters necessary to represent the complex social, political, and economic issues that impact the flow of illegal drugs between Mexico and the United States. In shooting *Traffic*, Soderbergh acted as his own cinematographer, filming most of the movie with a small crew. Such a guerrilla style allowed shooting to move quickly and keep actors focused, helping Douglas maintain the emotional intensity needed for his character. Soderbergh explained that “there were a couple of key emotional scenes where we were moving so quickly that it enabled him [Douglas] to stay right there, and there would be a break of two minutes between one angle and the next. I was really impressed, performance-wise[,] at how readily he fell into the low-key naturalistic approach that I was trying to maintain. It’s not a movie star performance. It’s a very secure performance, and it comes from someone who doesn’t have to show off anymore.” The emotional intensity of such a character-based performance became increasingly visible as Douglas’s Robert Wakefield learns more about how the “war” on drugs is mishandled by both the Mexican and U.S. governments. The poise and self-assurance associated with Douglas’s star persona erodes as Wakefield realizes the futility of his high-profile position—such as during the meeting on the plane when none of his staff can address the issue of treatment—while...
he must simultaneously confront his daughter’s addiction. When we first saw Douglas still working as a federal judge, he had assertively corrected a defense attorney in a drug trial, and a short time later we heard him boasting to Caroline and his wife Barbara (Amy Irving) of his appointment as drug czar and his “face time” with the president. These early scenes showed the confidence and control that Douglas had displayed in roles from *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987) to *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995). Even in his well-known parts in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) in which that control was undermined, those narratives moved toward its reassertion and the punishment of the female characters responsible for challenging it. Conversely, in *Traffic*, the addiction of Wakefield’s daughter contributes to the subversion of his patriarchal control, and he responds to her need for him to play a more compromising, supportive role.

One sequence that exemplifies how the Wakefield part asked Douglas to move beyond a starlike self-assurance and control and submerge himself in the character occurs when, in search of his missing daughter, he goes with Caroline’s boyfriend Seth (Topher Grace) to an inner-city Cincinnati neighborhood where the teenagers have bought drugs in the past. Their dealer (Vonte Sweet) threatens Wakefield with a gun and refuses to give him any information on the whereabouts of his daughter, leaving Douglas’s character so distraught that he can only react weakly to the circumstances in which his daughter’s addiction has placed him. Although he eventually locates Caroline strung out in a cheap hotel, this experience makes clear to Wakefield the necessity of understanding the causes for her addiction. He therefore regards as futile his position as a federal official leading a war on drugs almost exclusively focused on interdiction and prosecution, seeing it as tantamount to what he calls in his resignation speech “waging war on our own families.”

**Solaris**

Like Roberts in *Erin Brockovich* and Douglas in *Traffic*, George Clooney in *Solaris* initially refers to his star image before modifying it to meet the needs of his character. Soon after his arrival on the space station, we see Kelvin’s dreams about the early stages of his relationship with his wife Rheya; the sense of humor and charm associated with Clooney are foregrounded in those dream images. From the middle 1990s, when he gained attention from
his role as Dr. Doug Ross in the highly rated television hospital drama ER, Clooney has frequently played attractive, charming—but transgressive—male leads. In Clooney’s case this rebelliousness has been defined both by criminal parts in films such as Out of Sight, Three Kings (David O. Russell, 1999), O Brother, Where Art Thou? (Joel Coen, 2000), and the Ocean’s series through publicity about his bachelor lifestyle and political involvements.

However, in Solaris, Clooney’s charm and confident self-assertion quickly disappear as Rheya materializes in his cabin on the space station where he has been sent to assess the psychological problems of the crew. Initially, he can neither understand nor accept her presence, and his decision to expel Rheya from the ship and out into space only compounds the guilt and depression he feels from their past failed relationship and her suicide. Even in the happier flashback scenes, in which we see the couple falling in love and find a plausible explanation for Kelvin’s desire for her return, Soderbergh planted hints of the psychiatrist’s inability to understand his wife. For the scene in which they first notice each other on a commuter train, the director asked Natascha McElhone to choose a random prop to hold. McElhone selected a doorknob, a prop that Soderbergh described as “open ended” as to its meaning, and as we see it from the perspective of the Kelvin character, its indeterminacy foreshadows his subsequent confusion and impatience with her emotions when she becomes depressed.33 This lack of understanding on the part of Clooney’s character offsets the agency implied by his attractiveness and charm shown early in the relationship, as well as by his professional skill as a psychiatrist to solve the problems of the other personnel on the space station. Kelvin’s confusion sets him up instead to accept the solution to his emotional distress offered by Solaris: it can materialize his desire and bring Rheya back to him. As another example of Soderbergh’s tendency to offset the conventions of heroic agency with the character subjectivity of art cinema, Kelvin’s choice to remain on Solaris because the planet can provide him with a second chance in his marriage is more an affirmation of the power of internal desire than the objective action that generally defines the performances of male star actors.

The Good German

Clooney’s roles in Solaris and The Good German fit the pattern that his career has taken toward balancing sexy, outlaw heroes with less glamorous parts in films such as Syriana (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), Good Night, and Good
in which larger forces complicate his character’s individual agency. As an acknowledgment of this more political dimension to his work, Clooney told an interviewer that Soderbergh sent him John Garfield films to watch to prepare for the role of Jake Geismer in *The Good German*. Most relevant about Garfield for Clooney’s role was the former’s experience of paying a high price in his professional and personal life when he was blacklisted for his political beliefs. Based on Joseph Kanon’s 2001 novel, *The Good German* tells a similar story of how the political pressures of the cold war neutralized Geismer’s ability to fight for human rights.

*The Good German* is therefore another of Soderbergh’s films that, like *Traffic* and *Solaris*, remakes and/or alludes to earlier films and incorporates unconventional performances for star actors as a variation on the norms of Hollywood filmmaking. Employing the language of the high-concept pitch parodied by Robert Altman in *The Player* (1992), Cynthia Fuchs refers to *The Good German* as “Double Indemnity meets *Casablanca,*” thus implying the noir fatalism with which Soderbergh subverts the patriotic optimism of Curtiz’s 1942 film. In *Casablanca*, previously independent, noncommitted—“I stick my neck out for nobody”—Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) reluctantly involves himself on behalf of former love Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) and her Resistance leader husband Victor (Paul Henreid) to help them escape the Nazis. *The Good German* sets up roughly the same narrative situation, as Geismer must decide whether to help Lena Brandt (Cate Blanchett) and her husband Emil (Christian Oliver) escape the dangers of postwar Berlin. Yet in Soderbergh’s film self-interest overwhelms the larger good as defined by justice and the rule of law.

Unlike Ilsa, Lena is not torn between love for the American protagonist and the moral imperative of supporting a noble husband. Instead, she is simply a woman victimized by war, forced to prostitute herself in order to survive and, worse yet, a self-proclaimed “Nazi Jew” who betrayed twelve other Jews to the Gestapo during the war to avoid going to a death camp herself. When Lena pulls a gun on Jake in a scene that recalls Bergman’s attempt to get the letters of transit from Bogart in *Casablanca*, it is to protect her own plan of escape from Berlin, not to help her husband evade capture. And while Ilsa’s love for Rick would never allow her to really shoot him, we can’t be sure of Lena since she has already killed Sergeant Tully (Tobey Maguire), another ex-lover who tried to get in the way of her escape.

If Bogart’s Rick Blaine embodied the strong individual who stood for the heroic efforts of the United States to fight Nazi tyranny, in *The Good German*
Americans are either ineffectual like Geismer or self-interested to the point of criminality. Congressman Breimer (Jack Thompson) and Colonel Muller (Beau Bridges) so much want to get V-2 missile designer Franz Bettman (David Willis) back to the United States to start making cold war weapons systems that they’ll lie about his Nazi past using slave labor and kill anyone who tries to interfere. They therefore murder Emil Brandt, who has documents to prove that thirty thousand slave laborers died in Bettman’s underground V-2 factory. Tully, who works the black market with the hope of earning enough to escape Germany with Lena, is equally self-interested and almost as violent—if less sophisticated—prompting Cynthia Fuchs to describe him as representative of “the ugly American . . . mucking about in world affairs.”

Cloney’s presence in *The Good German* fit with Soderbergh’s practice of establishing star power, but, as in *Solaris*, together the director and actor went on to deconstruct its superficial celebration of heroism in favor of more complex characterization. In contrast to Bogart’s white dinner jacket in *Casablanca* or the elegant suits of *Ocean’s Eleven*, Clooney here wears a standard issue wool U.S. Army uniform. Patches stitched on the breast and sleeve say “War Correspondent” as if, since his investigation is always a step behind the action throughout the film, we have to be reminded that the character has a profession that he is capable of doing. As in *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *Syriana*, Cloney looks heavy and tired, an appearance that fits the Jake character, who spends much of the film reacting too slowly and getting beaten up several times by the characters whose plans he tries to understand or interrupt. Even when Jake fights back, in the scene in which he kills an assassin sent by Colonel Muller to murder Emil, Geismer’s success is only temporary, as Brandt stumbles out into a crowd where another hired killer finishes the job. Besides his contrastive reference to Bogart in *Casablanca*, the injuries Clooney gains as result of his beatings (represented by the bandage on his ear) set up a second allusion used to define his character, this time to another noir investigator named Jake. Jack Nicholson’s Jake Gittes in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) also sustained the physical and emotional pain of being unable to fully understand or stop the bad guys, and his bandaged nose symbolized that failure.

**Hollywood Utopia**

Jake Geismer’s failed plan to save Lena recalls Richard Dyer’s important observation about the utopian quality of most Hollywood films. Dyer explains
Hollywood’s appeal as its ability to successfully represent what most people want and need (abundance, energy, excitement, relationships, community) and its conservatism as a failure to acknowledge the role of inequalities of social power in complicating the attainment of those goals. \(^3\) \(^7\) The Good German rejects such utopian assumptions, just as Soderbergh’s most commercial films (Erin Brockovich, Traffic, and Ocean’s Eleven) conversely offer more optimistic endorsements of the viability of the legal system or the possibility of subverting greed and exploitation if you are smart and creative enough. Maybe their upbeat endings are the price Soderbergh has had to pay for the studio resources that have allowed him access to those large audiences. But, consistent with the variety in his movies, Full Frontal, Bubble, Solaris, The Good German, Che, The Girlfriend Experience, and The Informant! retain the art film alienation found in his early work. Even with the enormous success of Traffic, Erin Brockovich, and the Ocean’s films, Soderbergh still makes movies that fit the anti-utopian mindset he described in an interview after the release of Kafka in 1991: “By nature I am more pessimistic than optimistic, which is not a typically American attitude.” \(^3\) \(^8\)

If, as Dyer asserts, the problem is not the utopian outcomes themselves but Hollywood’s oversimplification of how they can be achieved, Soderbergh’s most commercial films respond by retaining the complex, character-based stories about social injustice typical of almost all his movies. These films also offer the pleasure of overcoming inequality characteristic of the “just” resolutions that are typical of mainstream Hollywood narratives. He therefore moves toward a synthesis of the commercial appeal of Hollywood and the more critical nature of art or independent cinema. This synthesis responds to Dyer’s assessment of what utopian cinema lacks and at the same time gains impact from the access to audiences that it makes possible. Such a skillful combination of commercial appeal and critical analysis communicated by the manipulation of style not only provides evidence Soderbergh’s possession of the “sufficient” control and intention that Noël Carroll regards as sine qua non for film art; it also demonstrates a strategy for perpetuating the director’s creative vision in a film industry that rarely values those insights.

Notes

2. Ibid., 20.
3. Ibid., 24.
4. Ibid., 25.
5. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 25.
10. Ibid., 23.


36. Ibid., 2.


Part 3

SELF-REFLEXIVITY, SELF-CENTEREDNESS, AUTOBIOGRAPHY
The filmic is that in the film which cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented. The filmic begins only where language and metalanguage end.

—Roland Barthes

The films of Steven Soderbergh form a cinema of disparity. His consistency appears in his inconsistency, with the themes in his various works quite divergent. His first two films, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) and *Kafka* (1991), are especially distinct from one another, as from a restrained intimate melodrama Soderbergh moves to an extremely stylized art-thriller. The disparity in Soderbergh’s oeuvre is a double one. It has to be conceived horizontally as well as vertically: horizontally, as appears from across a series of projects, and vertically, paying attention to the heterogeneity within any one movie. This aesthetic strategy makes his work quite a fertile ground for philosophical interrogation.

**Self-Reflexivity**

Soderbergh’s films call attention to the nature of the cinematic image without disavowing the requirements of a comprehensible narrative. So *Kafka* is both a fantastic and spectacular story, even as the film broaches issues relating to the character of cinema. This is above all achieved by a discourse on cinema’s mediality, on concretion and abstraction, especially as conveyed by the use of color and black-and-white photography. The film makes interesting points
about the disparity between heterogenic images by hybridizing the visible. The shift between the two modes of representation occurs when Kafka enters the castle for the film’s showdown. This shift has two meanings. On the one hand, the generic mode shifts from mystery thriller to action adventure along the lines of James Bond movies. In Kafka, the eponymous hero is an inert man, more of a witness than a man of courage—but a man with a license to kill. But by entering the castle, Kafka steps into the age of modernity.

While Kafka is a sensitive observer of a dawning modernity who writes down his observations, he does not have his monitoring straight. Kafka may be a tormented prophet creating disturbing visions of the coming age of the novel. “You despise someone like me,” the mad scientist tells him, “because you despise the modern. But you are at the very forefront of what is modern. You write about it, you document it. . . . Unlike you, though, I have chosen to embrace it.” The scientist acts as an executor of modernism’s dark side using state-of-art technology in order to fabricate a new kind of man. His aim is to gain full control over the human brain, exterminating all traces of individuality—a vatic image of coming totalitarian regimes: “A crowd is easier to control than an individual. A crowd has a common purpose. The purpose of the individual is always in question.” The whole issue of modernism and ideology versus modernism and imagination is summed up in Kafka’s response to his horrific discovery of the castle’s secret: “I’ve tried to write nightmares, and you’ve built one.” What Soderbergh addresses is the question of whether art can be held responsible for political consequences. Thus, Kafka refers not only to Kafka’s work but also to its interpretation as a forecasting of modernism. And so Soderbergh’s movie has to be regarded as a reading of readings, a lustfully layered metatext. In doing so it tends not to affirm the notion of Kafka’s work as an unknowledgeable critique of modernism but the assumption that his writing’s despair does the preliminary work for the transcendental acceptance of an inevitable fate. Resignation dominates when Kafka blends himself into modern society at the end of the movie. There is no way out of the labyrinth, no awakening from the nightmare.

The transition from the old Europe to modernity and the other way around is signalized by the switch from black-and-white to color images and then back again. It is a moment of shock that breaks with supposed social foundations. The certain gets uncertain, the secure becomes insecure. Soderbergh notes, “I liked the idea of opening the door and, all of a sudden, allow[ing] the foundation that had been established between the first 77
minutes to crumble at our feet, given the feeling that something was going to happen.” He notes further that “nowadays, the convention for using black and white is to reference a dream, a fantasy, the unreal. I liked the idea that in this case it would be the opposite. The more I thought about it the more I thought that certain story elements would be more forcefully expressed in color, like the idea of the microscope, of the brain and the eye.” Originally, the plan was to shoot the movie entirely in black-and-white. “We did a test in black and white and it did not work at all,” Soderbergh states. “As a whole, the film expressed and intensified reality so it seemed to me that we had to go a step further in entering the castle. For this part I wanted a colorful range, strange, disquieting, and uncomfortable.”

Soderbergh hits the mark with his observation about alienating empirical reality as fully as possible in the movie. He stands in opposition to Fernand Léger, who has noted that “color is a vital necessity. It is raw material indispensable to life, like water and fire. Man’s existence is inconceivable without an ambience of color.” Instead Soderbergh is to be situated in the tradition of what Gilles Deleuze has called expressionism: “the precursor of real colourism in the cinema.” While black-and-white images heighten the impression of artificiality today, color usually denotes the experience of our common experience, reducing for the spectator the effect of looking at another, alien world. Soderbergh, however, does not use color stock to enforce cinematic illusion; his color images appear, in the words of Tom Gunning, “with little reference to reality, as a purely sensuous presence, an element which can even indicate a divergence from reality.” Of course, Gunning is not referring to Soderbergh here but speaking of early cinema. Yet Soderbergh uses color exactly in this sensual/sensational way: to signify unnaturalness and stress the contrived potential of his movie. Gunning’s remarks on the early cinema of attractions are reminiscent of observations made by Roland Barthes concerning color in photography. According to Barthes, color demolishes photography’s reality effect; it disrupts tactile immediacy. He regards black-and-white images as an emanation of the physical referent, while he stresses the artificial nature of color: “I always feel (unimportant what actually occurs) that in the same way, color is a coating applied later on to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph. For me, color is an artifice, a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses).” The use of color in cinema is not essentially a coding of color. It creates its own context independent from the material world. Soderbergh’s colored images work as a color image in a Deleuzian sense, soaking up materiality: “In opposition to a simply
coloured image, the colour-image does not refer to a particular object, but absorbs all that it can: it is the power which seizes all that happens within its range, or the quality common to completely different objects. There is a symbolism of colours, but it does not consist in a correspondence between a colour and an affect (green and hope . . . ). Colour is on the contrary the affect itself, that is, the virtual conjunction of all the objects it picks up. It is the color’s sensual material effect that is of importance here; colors do not necessarily need referents. Instead of symbolic signification there are primarily processes of infiltration at work creating color’s materiality from itself. While moving through light, color absorbs the surroundings, even the frame, constituting a transparent lucency. That is why colors have their own space of action, possibly working independently and separate from the space of pure representation. In Soderbergh they aim not at accuracy but at constituting attractions; they want to affect by their transforming qualities. Through color the cinematic screen forms a window to our emotions, letting us see the invisible: sentiment and sensation.

In the sixteen-minute colored sequence of Kafka Soderbergh gives his images a heavy patina. One is tempted to link this use to Paul Virilio’s idea of a post-historical color, a color of inversion, “the colour of transparency, of the gleam or brilliance of metal . . . and in the future it may be the colour of the stealth bomber, that is, an absorbent colour that has no reflection . . . a colour in reverse.” Kafka lets rubiginous and red-tinted compositions dominate the visible. These do not suddenly denote a higher level of mimesis redeeming dreary pictures. On the contrary, Soderbergh tries to go back to the age of the earliest color films. Edward Buscombe notes, “It has never been a question of what is real but of what is accepted as real. And when it first became technically feasible, color, it seems, did not connote reality but the opposite.” Just as the audience in the earlier days of cinema did not regard color films as displaying a realist aesthetic, but as expressing a sense of magic and fantasy, the viewer of Kafka is reminded that there once was a time when filmic reality would be conveyed in black-and-white by convention; a time when color drew attention to itself, diverting attention from the narration; a time when color seemed to form a radical break in the structures of perception and therefore caused unifying principles to collapse. A single meaning “might at once be pulverized, multiplied into plural meanings. Color is the shattering of unity.” Consider Julia Kristeva’s idea that color is the one entity escaping symbolization as well as representation. It is instead a force of fragmentation, a delegate of disruption, an agent of anarchy. Touch-
Philosophical Reflections on Steven Soderbergh's Kafka

As a consequence, there seems to be less need for interpretation in Kafka's color cinema than for the will to experience. From this it follows that feeling is meaning is the film's thinking. In a pre-oedipal economy of libidinal pleasure opposed to traditional logocentrism, it becomes necessary to shift the attention away from what the images connote within narration toward how they work on and within us. Perceiving cinematic codes is a corporeal experience of gaining the pleasure of audiovisuality primarily for the sake of audiovisuality. Instead of contrasting cinematic codes with equivalents in the "objective" world of experience, we may allow our desires to flow through the images themselves. And in this way the desiring self is absorbed in pure cinema. Jean-François Lyotard has described a very particular kind of passivity that matches the relationship between viewer and cinema: "The question of 'passivity' is not the question of slavery, the question of dependency not the plea to be dominated. There is no dialectic of the slave, neither Hegel's nor the dialectic of the hysteric according to Lacan, both presupposing the permutation of roles on the inside of a space of domination. This is all macho bullshit. . . . The passion of passivity which stimulates this offer is not one single force, a resource of force in a battle, it is force [puissance] itself, liquidating all stases which here and there block the passages of intensity." \(^{10}\) This submissive passivity conceived as a multiple drive is at work when we desire images and are not able to grasp them at the same time, setting free bursts of energy. There is no subject-object binary in cinematic pleasure but only incidents of intensity. They result from their powers to transcend signification and open up an illimitable gap of experience between screen and viewer that engulfs both: in a rhizome of conformations and colors. These are the ideas and experiences that the color sequences in Kafka engage.

**Intertextuality in Kafka**

A hybrid movie is composed of other movies. Or, as Steven Dillon writes, such films, of which Kafka is one, offer a "tour through cinematic memory."\(^{11}\) There are multiple allusions as well as cross-references and direct quotations to film history in Kafka: from Robert Wiene to Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, from Carol Reed to Orson Welles, from Fritz Lang to Terence Fisher. A criminal case about dead pit workers near the area of Orlac hints at Wiene's
Orlacs Hände (The Hands of Orlac, 1924); Kafka’s adversary is called Dr. Murnau. The score by Cliff Martinez hints at Reed’s The Third Man (1949), quoting Anton Karas’s famous zither theme while replacing the Austrian instrument with a Hungarian cymbal. The twisted camera angles and extreme chiaroscuro lighting hearken back to Welles’s The Trial (1962), a film adaptation of Kafka’s unfinished novel Der Prozess (The Trial, 1914–1915). Furthermore, some iconographic details come straight from Welles’s adaptation of that novel, including the hideout of the anarchists, which is based on the painter’s shed, or Kafka’s walk to the castle, which is modeled after Josef K.’s way to the scaffold. Finally, the laboratory within the castle is a mixture of the lab from Lang’s Metropolis (1927) and the ones featured in the early fifties horror movies produced by Britain’s Hammer Film Productions, in particular the one from Fisher’s The Curse of Frankenstein (1957). But above all Kafka is influenced by German expressionism. Soderbergh tries to resurrect the picturesque world of the cinema in Kafka’s lifetime. He links him to the images cultivated in movies such as Wiene’s Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920), Genuine (Genuine: A Tale of a Vampire, 1920), and Raskolnikow (Crime and Punishment, 1923), Karl Heinz Martin’s Von morgens bis Mitternacht (From Morn to Midnight, 1920), Paul Wegener’s Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam (The Golem: How He Came into the World, 1920), Arthur Robison’s Schatten—Eine nächtliche Halluzination (Warning Shadows, 1923), Karl Grune’s Die Straße (The Street, 1923), or Paul Leni’s Das Wachsfigurenkabinett (Waxworks, 1924). Kafka is cinema as cinemania: remembering reminiscence, reminiscence remembering.

The movie picks up the play with distortingly painted scenery, overlong shadows, and emphatically gestural acting, elements with their roots in German romanticism, an artistic tradition that emphasizes the unintelligible and the uncanny. Lotte Eisner observes about the generation of expressionists that “the hecatombs of young men fallen in the flower of their youth seemed to nourish the grim nostalgia of the survivors. And the ghosts which had haunted the German Romantics revived, like the shades of Hades after draughts of blood.”12 Deleuze has spoken of a specific kind of motion in the haunted screen of German expressionism, a radical acuteness so it “can claim kinship with a pure kinetics; it is a violent movement which respects neither the organic contour nor the mechanical determinations horizontal and the vertical; its course is that of a perpetually broken line, where each change of direction simultaneously marks the force of an obstacle and the power of a new impulse; in short, the subordination of the extensive to intensity.”13 This
means that the actualization of virtual forms (the intense and expressive) begins to preside over states of equilibrium (the extensive and “realistic”). Mimesis makes way for distortion. Soderbergh elevates this kind of artificial intensity to become the film’s most important guideline. His *Kafka* is expressionism in quotation marks, an ironic play with principles of the haunted screen. Therefore, the movie has to be regarded as a postmodern pastiche par excellence. Fredric Jameson defines the postmodern pastiche as a mode of utterance devoid of any political significance. In contrast to parody, the pastiche lacks subversive potential: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.” What once existed as discursive heterogeneity is reduced to unaccommodating stylistics. The pastiche results in “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the ‘neo.’”

Historical time gets turned into simulacra; the past no longer leads to a historical sense but exists only as an annihilated memory of texts. *Kafka’s* citation of miscellaneous cinematic traditions perhaps transforms the film into a postmodern artifact, which “randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles.” It is a paradigmatic “symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way.” It seems to be exactly this waning of history with which Soderbergh again and again lasciviously thematizes, in films from *The Limey* (1999) up to *The Good German* (2006). In Soderbergh, there are no mysteries left; everything is definite and distinct. Every scene is overlaid by memories about other scenes, from other movies, from other characters, from other worlds.

In diagnosing the age of postmodernism Fredric Jameson draws on the psychoanalytical concept of schizophrenia developed by Jacques Lacan. Schizophrenia is understood as a breakdown in the signifying chain of language, that is, in the jamming of the syntagmatic series of signifiers that constitute an utterance: “What we generally call the signified—the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance—is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have
schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers.” The result is a linguistic disorder, a debris of unrelated signifiers that brings about the end of a seemingly harmonious relationship between past, future, and present: “The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a two-fold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with one’s present: and, second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time.” When the signifiers lose their connection to each other, temporal continuity collapses. Historical time becomes a perpetual present: “If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time.”

Soderbergh’s *Kafka* explicitly manifests this concept of schizophrenia. The movie deals with the idea of paranoia as a cultural metaphor. It shows a difference between modes of cognition and the order of things, fostering a suspicion that is directed not only against the things but also against mental activity itself. Kafka’s writing is characterized by the assumption of unfathomable power structures controlling the destitute individual. The question is whether what seems to be apparent is actually true or if it is a mere illusion. Therefore, an atmosphere of permanent threat arises. Menacing potentialities trouble the subject’s gaze. Fear and despair encroach on thought as well as on action. Kafka’s prose is full of subjunctives, and Soderbergh tries to transfer his verbal phrasing to the screen. Paranoiac suspicion emerges from artificial visual images dramatically departing from classical Hollywood’s style of illusionist transparency—the containment of all signs of textual production. Soderbergh’s neo-expressionist style creates a critical allegory of capitalism, which is producing the schizophrenic paranoid and trying to gain control over him at the same time. Thus, the apolitical—according to Jameson—forms of postmodern pastiche are repoliticized by cinematic codes of obtrusiveness, the disturbance of illusory unity. *Kafka* is itself the return of the repressed, the schizophrenic distortion of classical Hollywood’s bourgeois realism, its unstable equilibrium of harmony: the experience of pure material signifiers deviating from norms of transparency, that is, the masking of a movie’s materiality, the repression of excess. This sense of
divergence reminds us of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the political potential of schizophrenia. They wonder, “Is it correct to say that in this sense schizophrenia is the product of the capitalist machine, as manic-depression and paranoia are the product of the despotic machine, and hysteria the product of the territorial machine?” Deleuze and Guattari stress the revolutionary potential of this question. They identify the schizophrenic as an anticapitalist metaphor: “The schizophrenic deliberately seeks out the very limit of capitalism: he is its inherent tendency brought to fulfillment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel. He scrambles all the codes and is the transmitter of the decoded flows of desire.” Of course, Deleuze and Guattari—like Fredric Jameson—do not speak of clinical entities but emphasize paranoid thinking as a possible disturbance in the order of hegemonic signifiers. The paranoid, they claim, “is not revolutionary, but the schizophrenic process—in terms of which the schizo is merely the interruption, or continuation in the void—is the potential for revolution.” \(^{17}\)

While Soderbergh’s Kafka shows an apparently paranoid protagonist, it is the process of his thinking mediated through expressionist and decidedly antirealist imagery that forms the center of the movie. Thus, the film can be regarded as a dispute over the status of creativity and problems of personal identity. The self seems to be unstable, dissolving between fact and fiction. The boundary dividing Kafka’s life from his work disintegrates; he seems to fall victim to exactly the opaque forces formulated in his writing. And yet the protagonist’s suspicion is verified at film’s end. It seems that there in fact is a conspiracy at work in Prague, as phantasmal powers actually try to eliminate individual freedom. But Soderbergh’s Kafka fails to fully realize any revolutionary potential. Although succeeding in stopping Dr. Murnau’s murderous experiments, his victory is ironically undermined. Life goes in Prague, and Kafka fits himself in the capitalist society again.Kafka is not a biopic. It is a thriller much in the tradition of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, who has defined the genre in his classic sextet: The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934), The 39 Steps (1935), Secret Agent (1936), Sabotage (1936), Young and Innocent (1937), and The Lady Vanishes (1938). Soderbergh’s film is the tale of an incriminated innocent who must prove that he has been wrongly accused. “I wanted to stick to the thriller and, in a way, Kafka was the protagonist only by accident,” Soderbergh said. His movie is a detective story, and the protagonist reminds one not so much of the historical Kafka but of Dashiell Hammett as seen through the eyes of Wim Wenders. For Soderbergh there are problems in a Kafka biopic as well as in a film version
of Kafka’s writing. He faces the same problems Wenders had concerning Hammett (1982): “I thought a biography of Kafka would be boring. As for Kafka’s books, they have certain faults as cinema material, as is evident in the cinematic adaptations I’ve seen. His works are grounded more on ideas than on events, which does not really work for the screen. As fascinating as Orson Welles’ The Trial is, it shows its limits. As reader, of course, I feel differently and am very interested in his themes.” Soderbergh found the solution by situating Kafka in an artistic ambience: “I thought the connection that Lem Dobbs [the screenwriter] established between Kafka and expressionism was pertinent, and that Doctor Murnau was a logical development of these ideas. His script seemed to escape all the traps of a biography and an adaptation, while keeping all that seemed interesting to me: the foreshadowing of Nazism by twenty years, the bureaucratic thinking leading up to the Third Reich, etc.”18 Yet Soderbergh’s staging often tends toward the hilarious. Kafka is full of physical comedy reminding us of the carnivalesque tradition in cinema repressed by the classic realist text. Dialogue is uttered disjunctively, especially by the two assistants who get assigned to Kafka after his advancement. They continually play with objects and form a kind of human perpetual motion machine, acting in conjunction and in conflict at the same time. Moreover, the character of Gabriele Rossman seems to be straight out of a Howard Hawks movie. She is a modern sister of Bonnie Lee from Only Angels Have Wings (1939), Marie Browning in To Have and Have Not (1944), or Dallas D’Allesandro in Hatari! (1962): a tough woman needing no protection from the male hero. Rossman acts resolutely, always aware that a shut mouth catches no flies.

Soderbergh’s movie juxtaposes the funny with the horrific. In this way, he paraphrases Kafka’s literary world: the Kafkaesque, that is, an infusible contradiction between the reality of individual experience and the reality of collective life, the existential angst of overpowering authorities threatening every bit of individualism. It is not dramatic action that dominates the film but spirit and sentiment, atmosphere and aura. Instead of aiming for logical composition, Soderbergh allows cinematic mood to overpower the visible. This temper seems to stem straight from Kafka’s prose. Life and art are short circuited. In the movie Kafka moves through a world gone to pieces: a madhouse where everything is in motion, fragmented and confusing. Thereby, he seems to meet the products of his creative imagination. The fictitious diffuses into the factual; the factual opens up toward the fictitious. As Geoff Andrew notes, the film is a “distillation of Kafka’s preoccupation with in-
dividuality, alienation, bureaucracy and oppression.” Soderbergh’s Prague appears to be filled with locations from Kafka’s writing: narrow corridors, overcrowded document dumps, dark attics, and unending staircases. A lot of figures (though not the names of those figures) derive directly from his stories: Eduard Raban is the protagonist in the tale “Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande” (Wedding Preparations in the Country, 1907–1908), Karl Rossman plays the leading role in Der Verschollene (Amerika, 1912–1914), and K.’s landlady in Der Prozess (The Trial, 1914–1915) is called Grubach. And the mysterious castle is a place of anonymous power in Das Schloß (The Castle, 1922), while the torture and experiments in the castle hint at the execution machine described in the story “In der Strafkolonie” (“In the Penal Colony,” 1914). Moreover, many details correspond to Kafka’s troubled life. The sculptor Bizzlebek stands in for his longtime friend Max Brod, whom Kafka advised to destroy all of his writings in case of his death. Soderbergh emphasizes Kafka’s difficulties with women as well as the novelist’s problematic relationship to his father. The author’s famous Brief an den Vater (Letter to His Father, 1919) is cited directly. Nevertheless, it is “Kafka” we see in Kafka; it is not Kafka: it is a virtual character, not the representation of a historical personage. In one especially self-reflexive scene, Inspector Grubach poses a question after mumbling, “Kafka. Kafka, Kafka. . . . Is that your real name?” He answers, “Yes. Why shouldn’t it be?” Of all the fragile identities presented in the movie, the title character is the most unstable.

**Toward a Minor Cinema**

Constituting a discourse on nonidentity and schizophrenia, Soderbergh’s Kafka asks to be read from a Deleuzian perspective. Deleuze and Guattari argue that three elements constitute what they call a “minor literature.” Such a literature contrasts sharply with a mainstream national tradition: “the first characteristic of a minor literature . . . is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization,” a deracination that casts it adrift. Such writing, as a result, is decidedly political, critically microcosmic. In minor literature “individual concern . . . becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating in it.” And yet this form of the political is inseparable from collective thinking: “What each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren’t in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement. . . .
But above all else, because collective or national consciousness is ‘often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down,’ literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of the collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.” Finally, of particular importance thereby is that a minor literature does not refer to a subject: “There isn’t a subject, there are only collective assemblages of enunciation.”  

Deleuze and Guattari do not see a vertical, that is, a dialectical operation at work in ideology but a form of specific systems working fluidly.

In this, a minority literature finds its potential for resistance. Kafka’s prose not only exterminates the subject; it also works antimimetically, being filled with lines of flight. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that such a writer “deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification.” Here there is a counterbalance to the postmodern loss of history mourned by critics such as Fredric Jameson, a compensation that gives the notion of apolitical pastiche a new spin toward the radical. Deleuze and Guattari describe, according to Jameson, a “whole new type of emotional ground tone” called intensity. It is exactly in intensities that a minor literature creates vibrating sounds devoid of any obligation to signify. In its mixture of Czech, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Prague German Kafka’s writing makes “the German language take flight on a line of escape” from its centripetal monologism, its tendency toward standardization. The result is that Kafka becomes “a sort of stranger within his own language,” simultaneously occupying a place both within its different systems and on its margins.

Similarly, Soderbergh’s film becomes a stranger within its own language, that of cinema. The pastiche assemblage of quotes and references to film history generates a schizophrenic line of flight from the constraints of mimetic representation or historically determined structures, including the monologism of classical Hollywood conventions. This expressiveness does not depend upon the language’s power to constitute and then refer to “the real.” It is a form of expression based on desire alone, and this desire is formed by the will to acuteness. Soderbergh’s minor cinema produces intensities attached to the cells of cinema like a virus, “where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.” To put this most simply, Kafka’s subversive quality depends on the supremacy of the sign over the referent, the stressing of self-contradictory elements in the filmic text via the intensive: the confusion of fact and fiction, the opening up to a figural excess, that is, the stylization of sight and sound. In Soderbergh’s Kafka pastiche, the world is a bricolage of texts, its
structure the form of a play that deterritorializes, dismantles, and perhaps points toward the disempowering of the seemingly unmovable powers of the classic realist text. Thus, the aesthetics of Kafka seem to possess their positive alternative exactly in their mobilization of negativity. Soderbergh’s displacement of logical signification causes a reversal of mimetic codes of representation initiating a play of signs down a syntagmatic chain of destabilization, which not only foregrounds the materiality of its construction but also liberates contradictions. The emphasizing of disunity creates a textual economy bringing about its own dissemination.

Notes

6. Deleuze, Cinema 1, 118.
7. Paul Virilio’s statements are made in the movie Une anatomie de la couleur (1996) by director Henry Colomer.
13. Deleuze, Cinema 1, 51.
15. Ibid., 19, 21.
16. Ibid., 26–27.
21. Ibid., 22.
24. Ibid., 13.
RESPONSIBILITY AND SELF-CENTERED NARRATION IN ERIN BROCKOVICH

Andrew Patrick Nelson

For the first time in my life I got people respecting me. Up in Hinkley, I walk into a room and everybody shuts up to hear if I got something to say. I never had that before, ever. Please, don’t ask me to give it up.
—Erin Brockovich

All about Erin

In response to my initial query about contributing to this collection of essays on director Steven Soderbergh, one of the editors provided me with the names of movies already spoken for, and of those titles still available. I noticed that one film was on neither list: Erin Brockovich (2000). I took this to be an honest oversight, and still do. But that innocent omission was to be the first of many I encountered while preparing this chapter. When speaking to others about the movie, the common response was “Soderbergh directed that?” It became an almost comic refrain, heard from even the most film-savvy of my colleagues and acquaintances. So let me reassure any doubting readers who did a double take at the sight of the title in this book’s table of contents: yes, Steven Soderbergh did direct Erin Brockovich.

Given this trend of misrecognition—anecdotal as my observations may be—it strikes me as prudent to begin my analysis of the movie by considering why, exactly, Erin Brockovich would tend to fall outside the perceived boundaries of Soderbergh’s body of work. Out of his diverse output, how is it that an Oscar-winning, crowd-pleasing, Julia Roberts–starring biopic that earned more than $125 million at the box office has become dissociated from its director?
Director Divided

It is tempting to think of Soderbergh as a bifurcated filmmaker, one whose career alternates between two distinct modes of moviemaking: idiosyncratic, low-budget, independent works often made with lesser-known or nonprofessional actors on the one hand, and stylish, high-priced, mainstream productions that feature big stars, production values, and set pieces on the other. A survey of the critical response to the director’s recent features reveals such thinking to be widespread. Soderbergh “loves to alternate between ambitious films with big stars, and experimental works shot for a million bucks or so”; “continues to alternate between slick, audience-friendly movies . . . and more experimental, riskier pictures”; is “a versatile and reliable director able to alternate big-budget crowd pleasers . . . with arthouse fare.”1 A part of the appeal of this kind of conceptual framework lies in its simplicity. It offers us a straightforward way of categorizing and organizing Soderbergh’s work. To which side does this movie belong? Personal project or commercial enterprise? A or B? These questions serve as a starting point from which we may begin to tease out, relationally, aspects of a particular movie’s theme, style, and meaning in the context of the director’s larger body of work.

Binary oppositions, of course, abound in all forms of humanistic inquiry—philosophy and film studies included. The “big questions” to which philosophy has devoted itself since time immemorial are predicated on pairings like good and evil, mind and body, reason and passion, man and woman. In Beyond Good and Evil, Friedrich Nietzsche identified this “faith in antithetical values” as the “typical prejudice” and “fundamental faith” of all philosophers.2 In a similar fashion, film scholars have sought to better understand their object of inquiry by means of ordered oppositions. André Bazin famously argues against holding cinema’s transition to sound as a fundamental break in filmmaking practice, asserting that the significant divide was instead between those filmmakers who put their “faith in the image,” favoring editing and other manipulations of the filmed event, and those who put their “faith in reality,” favoring depth of field and long takes of continuous action.3 Cinema itself is frequently divided into two distinct branches whose lineages stretch back to the dawn of the medium. As film scholar Robert B. Ray notes, “Film history’s conceptual neatness depends on its dual provenance in those great opposites, Lumière and Méliès, documentary and fiction.”4

The use of oppositions as a conceptual means of understanding abstract
and material relationships has increasingly come under fire, especially in scholarly circles. From Nietzsche through to the deconstruction of French philosopher Jacques Derrida to our present age of “posts”—postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and so on—binaristic thinking, and its underlying Aristotelian logic, has been widely scrutinized, charged with imposing upon complex phenomena simplistic, ordered relationships based less on observation and experience than a priori assumptions. More recently, critics have argued that, when used to classify and categorize the real world, binaries entail implicit values and judgments that are often ascribed unthinkingly to particular groups of people. Feminist critics have observed how the oppositions that suffuse not only philosophy but also literature and the arts—for example, activity/passivity, head/heart, sun/moon—are both gendered and hierarchical, with the feminine always subordinate. Scholars of race and ethnicity have argued that culture and the arts have participated in the West’s imperial and colonial project by popularizing, and therefore naturalizing, demeaning and dehumanizing representations of racial and ethnic “others.”

For its part, film studies, ever influenced by developments in cognate disciplines, has taken on board these critiques in its analyses—especially as they attend to the cinematic representation of gender, race, and class. Also, a renewed interest in cinema history has challenged the “conceptual neatness” of prevailing paradigms, locating affinities in filmmaking practice across established historical and generic boundaries. Yet, as the case of Soderbergh illustrates, binaristic thinking does persist in film discourse, in particular when it comes to classifying modes of film practice. The supposed divide in Soderbergh’s moviemaking also typifies one of the most enduring contrasts at the heart of cultural production: between art and commerce (or perhaps art and entertainment).

*Erin Brockovich* falls firmly on the commercial side of the ledger. It was produced by a major Hollywood studio, Universal, at an estimated cost of $51 million—$20 million of which went to star Julia Roberts, at that time the largest fee ever paid to an actress. The movie was number one at the U.S. box office for three straight weeks and went on to earn, again, more than $125 million. So why has it been forgotten as a part of Soderbergh’s oeuvre? After all, the director has made many mainstream pictures, a number of which were *more* commercially successful than *Erin Brockovich*. There is little sense that Soderbergh takes on commercial assignments solely in order to finance his personal projects, as Orson Welles famously did. When So-
derbergh decides to add another installment to the *Ocean’s Eleven* franchise he isn’t branded a “sellout” in the way that a filmmaker like Gus Van Sant is when he makes a conventional picture like *Good Will Hunting* (1997) or worse, *Finding Forrester* (2000). Soderbergh’s reputation for rotating between “crowd pleasers” and “art house fare” is an accepted, even celebrated, part of his directorial signature. It may be, then, that *Erin Brockovich* fails to meet some other criterion, perhaps one that unifies Soderbergh’s body of work.

**Auteur or Metteur?**

Although moviemaking is a collaborative activity, the supremacy of the director endures in both popular and scholarly discourse (as evidenced by the book you hold in your hands). If “faith in antithetical values” is the “fundamental faith” of philosophy, then faith in the director may well be the fundamental faith of film studies. In many ways, cinema’s status as art depends on the premise that films, or at least some films, are the product of an artist. To speak of filmmakers as the “auteurs” (from the French for author) of their movies implies a single, unique authorial personality that is able to transcend the material circumstance of an individual movie’s production. Auteur directors are often associated with a particular genre (e.g., Douglas Sirk and the melodrama, Alfred Hitchcock and the thriller), while those less easily pigeonholed generically are identified with recurring themes (e.g., Howard Hawks and masculine camaraderie).

Thus far, it appears that the defining characteristic of Soderbergh’s directorial personality is his pattern of alternating between mainstream and independent productions. Such a split would seem at odds with the singularity implicit in theories of film authorship. One of the original ideas behind an “auteur theory” of cinema was to propose an explanation for how certain directors were able to express themselves on celluloid in spite of the strictures imposed by the rationalized production methods of the Hollywood studio system. In contrast, many filmmakers successfully adapt their filmmaking to suit the demands of different genres and modes of production, but they are seldom considered authors (or have books dedicated to their careers). The French critics who originated the ideas of cinema authorship had a term for such filmmakers: *metteur en scène*. Is this, perhaps, a more accurate description of Soderbergh? Is he an expert craftsman able to conform to the demands of a diversity of filmmaking traditions and conditions, innovative and creative but not necessarily an artist? In his review of *Erin Brockovich*,
critic Todd McCarthy writes, “Soderbergh is working in a manner closer to that of the top directors of the old studio era than anyone has in years . . . impressively adjusting his style according to the demands of his eclectic material.” At the same time, there is a sense that Erin Brockovich is missing something that is usually found in Soderbergh’s work. Other reviews claim that the director “restrains some of his bolder impulses,” like the inclusion of flashbacks and jump cuts, or that the “moody discontent” of his previous pictures “surfaces only occasionally.”

It may be that, for Soderbergh, the measure of a tale is in its telling, with narration taking precedence over narrative. Put another way—a way that draws on a familiar opposition—form is favored over content. While Soderbergh’s ability to navigate back and forth between different modes of film practice is a testament to his ability as a filmmaker, common to “experimental” films like Schizopolis (1996) and mainstream works like Out of Sight (1998) is a deep awareness of and conscious play with cinematic conventions, both aesthetic and thematic. Is Bubble (2005), for example, really any less knowing a take on a familiar screen scenario than is Ocean’s Eleven (2001)? Solaris (2002) may have left many viewers disappointed that Soderbergh and star George Clooney didn’t bring the same hip verve to the space opera as they did to the heist film, but it’s not difficult to apprehend that the duo were attempting to make a film in the minority science fiction tradition of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), eschewing technological fetishism and space battles in favor of ruminations on humanity’s place in the universe.

Bear in mind that positing an emphasis on narration over narrative as a key element of Soderbergh’s authorial personality does not invalidate our thinking of him as a bifurcated filmmaker. Binaries, to the chagrin of many, turn out to be stubborn things, as is their accompanying terminology. It is difficult to speak of gender without using words like man and woman, just as it is difficult to write about race without words like black and white. However “loaded” they may be, those are the words commonly used in our shared vernacular to describe the material attributes of particular groups of people. Similarly, the boundaries between documentary and fiction, independent and mainstream, or art and entertainment may be blurred and inexact, making those terms ultimately inaccurate. Those binaries persist, however, in part because they are rhetorically useful, if only as a starting point. What films that confound expectations—consider Full Frontal (2002), a low-budget feature with major Hollywood stars (who agreed to
do their own make-up)—help to remind us is that we are often dealing not with outright opposites but rather points on a continuum—in this case, a continuum across which a particular filmmaker operates, bringing to each project a distinctive approach.

What appears to be lacking, or restrained, in *Erin Brockovich* is Soderbergh’s characteristic formal consciousness. As we shall see, the movie’s plot is entirely conventional, and yet its conventionality is not subject to any inspection. What, then, is the restraint of Soderbergh’s artistic tendencies in service—or favor—of? In the larger context of his body of work, *Erin Brockovich* does stand out in one obvious way: it is an unashamed showcase for the acting talents of Julia Roberts.

**Ms. Brockovich Goes to Hinkley**

While Soderbergh is no stranger to working with some of Hollywood’s leading stars, none of his other films can be classified as a “star vehicle”—a film patently designed to not just promote but *elevate* a single, featured player. Moreover, the movie’s narrative undeniably has what we might charitably call “awards potential.”

The film is based on the true story of Erin Brockovich, an out-of-work, twice-divorced former beauty queen and mother of three. After a disastrous interview in which she attempts to pass life experience off as a job qualification, she is injured in a car accident through no fault of her own. Painted in court by the defense as opportunistic and careless, however, she fails to win any financial recompense. Desperate, Erin browbeats her cantankerous lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney) into giving her a job at his firm. She has no legal training of course, but makes up for the lack of it with plenty of sass and what seems like a limitless wardrobe of revealing, trashy outfits. Independently pursuing one of the firm’s pro bono cases, Erin journeys to the town of Hinkley in California’s Mojave Desert, where a family is refusing to sell their home to Pacific Gas & Electric, a large utility company that owns a nearby gas compressor station. Erin learns that both the family and the majority of Hinkley’s other residents have experienced a worrying range of health problems, from respiratory ailments to frequent miscarriages to cancer. After consulting with a university researcher and using her feminine charms to gain access to local water authority records, Erin links the residents’ illnesses to exposure to hexavalent chromium, a chemical used by the compressor station as an anticorrosive in its cooling towers. Ultimately, she
uncovers what appears to be a cover-up by PG&E of the accidental poisoning of Hinkley's groundwater. From there, she and Masry lead the fight for justice on behalf of the town's residents, all while balancing both the raising of her three children and a growing relationship with her new next-door neighbor, a pony-tailed biker named George (Aaron Eckhart). In the end, Erin & Company triumph over PG&E. As the movie's promotional tagline declared, “She brought a small town to its feet and a huge company to its knees”—to the tune of $333 million.¹¹

Tales that follow unlikely, fish-out-of-water protagonists as they battle the establishment and uncover conspiracies are, of course, common in Hollywood moviemaking. The seminal example is Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which Jimmy Stewart's idealistic young U.S. senator must confront government corruption and subterfuge. A more apposite comparison, however, might be made with *Norma Rae* (Martin Ritt, 1979), in which Sally Field's tough single mother leads the struggle to unionize the textile mill where she is employed. Field, who was to that point still best known for her work in the television comedy series *Gidget* (1965–69) and *The Flying Nun* (1967–1970), garnered widespread acclaim and an Academy Award (1980) for her performance. In much the same way, it was the Oscar-winning success of Roberts's turn as the eponymous hero of *Erin Brockovich* that marked the transition in her career from movie star to serious actress—a transition, it should be noted, that she had unsuccessfully attempted on a number of earlier occasions—in, for example, *Dying Young* (Joel Schumacher, 1991), *Mary Reilly* (Stephen Frears, 1996), and *Michael Collins* (Neil Jordan, 1996)—only to return to the comfortable generic confines of romantic comedies like *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1997) or thrillers like *The Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula, 1993).

The conventionality of the scenario of *Erin Brockovich* also extends to more topical concerns. In a post–*Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) era of climate change anxiety, it's easy to forget that the foremost environmental concerns of the 1980s and 1990s were pollution, radioactive waste, and other environmental poisons. Before *Erin Brockovich*, acclaimed movies like *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983) and *A Civil Action* (Steven Zaillian, 1998) dramatized the efforts of real, everyday folks fighting to expose the damage and illness caused by the improper handling and disposal of hazardous material by negligent corporations.

Is *Erin Brockovich* a case of an established yet constricted star enlisting a rising director for a conventional, topical, award-baiting (and potentially
But the question we need to ask is whether the prominence given to Roberts and her performance accounts for the uncharacteristically reserved direction detected by critics (and, thus, the movie’s occasional omission from Soderbergh’s body of work). Some imply as much. In his review, Thomas Doherty wrote, “Like Garbo’s directors, Soderbergh knows he is on the payroll to showcase the actress to maximum effect. Julia talking, Julia driving, Julia walking, Julia crying, Julia pissed off, Julia collecting dead frogs.”\textsuperscript{13} So did Soderbergh simply take the paycheck and allow himself to be subsumed in a star-centered movie? Or could it instead be the case that the director was embracing the possibilities offered by such a project?

Filming the $20 Million Woman

\textit{Erin Brockovich} is a movie about responsibility: a corporation’s to the people its activities have harmed, individuals’ to their community, a mother’s to her children. The heart of the movie is, however, the character Erin—and beat loudly, she does. Her domination of the movie was widely noted upon the film’s release, and not always admiringly. Richard Corliss, in a disparaging review in \textit{Time} magazine, opines that every other character in the picture “has one job: to endure Erin’s ballsy superiority.”\textsuperscript{14} Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, there is no disputing that the movie is all about Erin.

Although the movie is based on actual events, screenwriter Susannah Grant has fashioned them into a linear narrative that adheres to many of the time-honored tenets of Hollywood storytelling. Consider Erin’s motivation. As a caring mother, she is determined to make a better life for her children and shield them from the hardships she encountered in her own upbringing. She is also committed to obtaining justice for the wronged people of Hinkley, with whom she identifies. But note how these two goals, while serving as the basis for two lines of narrative action, are connected. It is out of concern for her children that Erin makes her last-ditch effort to acquire a job at Masry’s firm. When she begins investigating the Hinkley case, the first resident she meets with, Donna Jensen (Marg Helgenberger), points to family as the reason she doesn’t want to sell her home to PG&E: “I don’t wanna move. Uproot the kids? I’ve got a couple of girls. Honest to God, I don’t know if I have the energy. You know, I’ve been sick. Me and Pete both have.” Erin, like the vast majority of Hollywood protagonists, has multiple
goals, which create multiple lines of narrative action. Because these lines of action are causally linked, she is able to pursue both of her objectives simultaneously. Certainly, part of the challenge Erin faces is keeping her objectives balanced. Three-quarters of the way through the movie, Erin’s boyfriend, George, accuses her of being selfish and neglecting her family in favor of her work on the Hinkley case. He asks her to leave her job. She refuses, saying that, for the first time in her life, people respect her. When George asks about her kids, she tells him that she’s doing everything for them. “One day they’ll understand that,” she says. George leaves, and Erin’s workload begins to take a toll on her and her relationship with her children. But this conflict is quickly resolved. George returns, ostensibly out of concern for Erin’s children. After working through the night, Erin lies exhausted on a hotel room couch. Her son Matthew is seated across from her, looking at one of the documents she’s accumulated. She asks him to put it back in its box. He looks up from the paper.

Matthew: This girl is the same age as me. She’s one of the sick people?
Erin: She is, but, y’know, that’s why I’m helping her. We’ll get her some medicine and make her feel better.
Matthew: Why can’t her own mama help her?
Erin: Because her own mom’s real sick, too.

Matthew looks at his mother, puts the paper down on the desk, and heads for the door. He stops, turns back and says, “I’ll bring you back some breakfast. You want eggs?” Erin replies, “Eggs would be great.” Matthew smiles, then leaves the room. Erin’s eyes begin to well up, and she whispers, “Eggs would be perfect.”

By having Matthew make the connection between the Hinkley case and his mother’s life, the narrative both neatly resolves the conflict between its two lines of action and reaffirms the significance of Erin’s crusade. From there, the movie proceeds to its climax. As is typical in Hollywood movies, personal fortunes are tied to those of a larger community, so a change in the affairs of one results in a change in those of the other. As film scholar David Bordwell puts it, “The classical film makes history unknowable apart from its effects upon individual characters.” Victory for one is victory for all. The hero is able to fulfill the cliché of saving the day (for everyone) and getting the girl (for himself) because the story has been designed in such a
way as to make those goals one and the same. A financial settlement for the residents of Hinkley means for Erin the financial security of a corner office in Masry’s new practice.

For those keeping track, I have indeed just added “traditional Hollywood storytelling” on top of a “David-and-Goliath scenario” with “ecological topicality.” At this point, it is fair to say that the evident typicality of Erin Brockovich is a likely explanation for why the film strikes so many as an atypical effort for Soderbergh. Orthodox as the movie may appear, however, I believe that its commitment to Erin as the central, causal agent of the narrative is more significant than its conventionality might otherwise suggest.

What is noteworthy about Erin Brockovich in this regard is the degree to which the narration emphatically and systematically privileges its protagonist. More than simply providing a main character with whom we can relate and sympathize, the film’s narrative is entirely focalized through Erin. That is, our experience of the movie’s events is totally aligned with hers. She’s there from the movie’s opening shot to its closing credits. With the exception of a single, brief shot of an anguished Pete Jensen (Michael Harney) yelling at the PG&E plant, Erin is in every scene of the movie. We never leave her. Things happen in her absence, but we only learn about them when Erin does.

One morning Erin arrives at work to find Masry in a meeting with an unknown man in the firm’s boardroom. Erin’s view of the meeting from the outer office is obstructed, as is the viewer’s. The shot of the boardroom, taken from a distance, approximates Erin’s perspective. We don’t know what is going on; Masry hasn’t mentioned any meeting—at least not to Erin—nor were we shown any of Masry’s conversation with the mystery man prior to Erin’s arrival on the scene. As a result of decisions about what to show and how to show it, the viewer knows no more (or less) about what is happening than Erin does. When she angrily confronts Masry about the meeting—he’s taking on help from a larger law firm—her questions are our questions. This is the case throughout the film. The viewer’s knowledge is consciously restricted to Erin’s by means of deliberate formal choices. While those choices limit our knowledge, they also grant us insight to Erin’s interior state.

Both the first and the last thing we see in Erin Brockovich is a close-up of Erin’s smiling face. In every scene, the camera lingers on her—even when, conventionally, we might expect a cut away to another character or scene. Midway through the film, Erin, driving home from Hinkley, calls home on her cell phone. George answers and begins telling Erin about his day with her children, which included her youngest daughter, Beth, saying her first
word: “ball.” Initially, the scene cuts back and forth between shots of Erin driving and George at home in bed. The shots of Erin last longer, but the pattern of alternation is typical of a filmed phone conversation. The scene eventually settles on Erin. We continue to hear George’s voice, as he talks about the wonderment of experiencing someone’s very first word, but the camera holds on Erin and her reactions for nearly a minute. She listens intently, sighs, begins to cry, struggles to keep the phone to her ear, smiles, laughs, and the scene fades to black.

The movie is filled with moments like these, where we stay with Erin longer than might seem necessary. While these are undeniably opportunities for Roberts to emote—flash that winning smile, furrow her brow, hold back tears—they have the important function of cuing the viewer to what Erin is feeling. There is a consistent emphasis on Erin’s actions and, importantly, reactions. In a scene where Masry stands before the citizens of Hinkley in a hot, crowded school gymnasium and tries to persuade them to submit to binding arbitration (lest their case against PG&E stretch on for decades), Erin stands silently at the back of the room. Masry takes questions from the audience, but this dialogue is punctuated by shots of Erin and her reactions. Without speaking, she is still our guide to the scene. Her reactions serve as a kind of barometer of the atmosphere of the room.

For a mainstream film to focalize its narrative through a single character is not a new development. Consider a common contrivance in the horror genre: the main character is haunted by ghosts—but are the ghosts real, or is the character hallucinating? In order to have viewers question protagonists’ reliability or sanity, movies will frequently align our experience to theirs, limiting our ability to independently assess what is happening. We do not have access to what other characters see or experience. While this narration is restricting our knowledge, however, we sense that it is doing so with dramatic purpose. It creates suspense and mystery, and the story can build to a revelation. A second character sees the ghosts, providing independent verification that they are real. Or the film closes with a shot of the main character in a mental asylum, and we conclude that this character has been the victim of delusions all along.

While Erin Brockovich does have an investigative narrative, there is no pretense that there is a mystery. Paradoxically, Erin’s investigative activities are about acquiring enough evidence to prove what she already knows to be true: that PG&E poisoned Hinkley, then covered it up. Which begs the question: is it possible to account for the overwhelming deference to Erin’s character as anything other than the flaunting of Julia Roberts?
What I would like to suggest is that this is not simply the result of Soderbergh pointing the camera at Roberts and letting her “ballsy” performance carry the picture. That the picture, again, so systematically privileges its protagonist bespeaks a deliberate effort on the part of the filmmaker. What observations about how the movie plays to and exploits Roberts’s strengths—or forces her down our throats, depending on your perspective—overlook is how the possibilities offered by *Erin Brockovich* play to one of Soderbergh’s distinctive interests. As much as the movie has been considered a departure for the director—seeming to lack both the generic reflexivity and formal consciousness that characterize many of his other pictures—*Erin Brockovich* is perhaps the most forceful articulation of Soderbergh’s proclivity toward emphasizing character over other filmic concerns. Without sacrificing their causal role within the narrative, who characters *are* is often of greater interest than what they do—indeed, what they will do and accomplish is often a foregone conclusion. This is an integral aspect of Soderbergh’s concern with cinematic form and has been from the start of his career. When we strip away its Sundance hype and indie mythology, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) is ultimately a character study, a movie fixated on the capacities of two media, film and video, to represent the lives of their subjects. In the present case, we have established that while *Erin Brockovich* may, thematically, be a film about responsibility, formally, *Erin Brockovich* is a movie about Erin Brockovich—and decidedly so. There is, however, discord between these two aspects of the movie.

As detailed above, the film raises the possibility that Erin’s crusade is less about justice for the people of Hinkley or making a better life for her children than her own desire to be loved and respected. This view is dismissed, however. In fact, the narrative is very quick to resolve, even gloss over, potential conflicts between characters. Erin says that her children will one day understand her dedication to the Hinkley case, and as the later scene with her son shows, they do. She’s mad at Masry for taking on outside help with the Hinkley case, but he buys her a truck and everything is okay. Throughout the movie Erin sticks to her guns, doesn’t compromise, and other characters are won over to her way of thinking. But if the movie’s narrative rejects the notion that Erin is somehow selfish, what about its narration—its way of *telling* the story in such a way that Erin is the focus of our attention and the source of our knowledge? Consider Erin’s initial conversation with Donna Jensen. The scene takes place in Donna’s living room, and it is conventionally filmed in alternating over-the-shoulder shots. When
Responsibility and Self-Centered Narration in Erin Brockovich

Donna speaks about her hardships and not wanting to uproot her children, however, the scene focuses less on her despair than on Erin’s reaction to it. Erin’s kind eyes and sympathetic smile indicate that she sympathizes with Donna’s plight, thereby establishing the integral, personal link between Erin and Hinkley. Fine. What is conspicuous about this scene, though, is how it comes to be about Erin rather than Donna. The same thing happens when Masry addresses the people in the gymnasium. While he manages to win over the crowd, what is given precedence in the scene is not that result but Erin’s reaction to it—close-ups of her smiling approvingly. The film goes to great lengths to establish that Erin has walked a long and difficult road, but there is a difference between being a single mother and having brain cancer.

Although Erin Brockovich is, finally, a clear example of one of Soderbergh’s signature authorial tendencies, that tendency gets the better of both him and his film. Erin Brockovich takes us into the homes of the victims of PG&E’s negligence, yet we remain at a distance from them because the narration ultimately remains so forcefully committed to Erin. In this way, there is a fundamental tension in the film between its form and content: between a “self-centered” narration and a narrative about altruism. Unlike the engineered conflict between the movie’s two lines of narrative action, this tension is not resolved. In a sense, nothing in Erin Brockovich exists independent of Erin Brockovich—an odd result for a film ostensibly about the plight of a community suffering at the hands of a duplicitous corporation.

Notes


2. Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (London: Penguin, 1990), 34.


5. See, for example, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986).

7. See, for example, David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).


11. As a report in the September 2000 issue of the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* notes, the Hinkley case “remains controversial because most of the Hinkley exposures involved drinking Cr(VI) [hexavalent chromium] laced water. This route of exposure is widely believed to cause much less toxicity than inhalational exposures because Cr(VI) is converted to inactive trivalent chromium in the stomach. Many experts also claim that the exposures were too low to cause health effects, and that there are few data linking Cr(VI) exposures to the Hinkley residents’ symptoms. But others counter that there are too many gaps in the data on chromium to dismiss the Hinkley residents’ case,” Cheryl Pellerin and Susan M. Booker, “Reflections on Hexavalent Chromium: Health Hazards of an Industrial Heavyweight,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 108, no. 9 (Sept. 2000): A 407.


SCHIZOPOLIS AS PHILOSOPHICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Drew Morton

When I say that this is the most important motion picture you will ever attend my motivation is not financial gain but a firm belief that the delicate fabric that holds all of us together will be ripped apart unless every man, woman, and child in this country sees this film and pays full ticket price, not some bargain, matinee, cut rate deal. In the event that you find certain sequences or ideas confusing, please bear in mind that this is your fault, not ours. You will need to see the picture again and again until you understand everything.

—Steven Soderbergh in Schizopolis

Portrait of the Artist as Struggling Filmmaker

Upon his acceptance of the Palme d’Or for sex, lies, and videotape (1989) at Cannes, Steven Soderbergh facetiously quipped, “It’s all downhill from here.”1 Ironically, he had no idea how true this self-deprecating comment would be. Following the success of slv Soderbergh went on to direct screenwriter Lem Dobbs’s Kafka (1991). The film was a critical and commercial failure. After all, the hotshot director, newly assimilated into the Hollywood system, took an $11 million budget and shot a black-and-white art film. Moreover, the film was not a biography of famed author Franz Kafka (Jeremy Irons) but a fictional narrative constructed around the themes of Kafka’s writing, with Kafka as the main character. Kafka, investigating the death of a coworker, finds all clues leading to “The Castle.” At this point, Soderbergh jarringly shifts the film’s black-and-white visual aesthetic, owing much to German expressionism, into vivid color as Kafka discovers an alternate reality. Per-
haps due to these art cinema stylizations, *Kafka* grossed just over $1 million domestically.

Following the failure of *Kafka*, Soderbergh’s losing streak continued as he made one of the most overlooked films of his career, *King of the Hill* (1993), and the disappointing neo-noir, *The Underneath* (1995). Budgeted around $6 million, *The Underneath* grossed a mere 12 percent of its production budget domestically. The economic and artistic failure of *The Underneath* rattled Soderbergh, who, reflecting upon the production experience, remarked, “I was drifting off course. I’m sure there are tons of reasons, some personal and some professional. The bottom line was I sort of woke up in the middle of *The Underneath* and felt I was making a movie I wasn’t interested in.”

In the hope of revitalizing himself cinematically, Soderbergh enlisted some former classmates from Louisiana State University for the cast and crew of a film he envisioned to be “experimental . . . [it] may not draw a large audience, or no audience at all.” The film, budgeted at $250,000 and produced with donated film stock over a ten-month shooting schedule, became *Schizopolis* (1996).

Fragmented into three sections, the film is structured around the perspectives of three characters involved in a love triangle. The first segment takes the point of view of Fletcher Munson (Soderbergh himself), a corporate drone assigned to write a speech for his boss, the religious philosopher T. Azimuth Schwitters (Mike Malone). Meanwhile, Fletcher’s marriage is on the rocks. He rejects his wife’s sexual advances, only to masturbate once she has fallen asleep. Longing for another life, Fletcher finds himself jumping into the consciousness of Dr. Jeffrey Korchek (Soderbergh as well) during the film’s second segment. Within moments of his metaphysical transformation, Munson/Korchek discovers that Korchek is having an affair with Mrs. Munson (Betsy Brantley). Or, as Munson describes it, “I’m having an affair with my wife.” After a deadly encounter with some gangsters (Remember: you will have to see the picture again and again until you understand everything), Munson finds himself back in his own body as the third section takes the perspective of his wife, with her hearing all the dialogue coming from Munson or Korchek as a foreign language (Japanese for Munson, Italian for Korchek).

Soderbergh’s experimentation did not find a loving embrace from critics or audiences. Debuting at a “secret screening” during the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, critics turned on the very filmmaker that they had heaped praise upon seven years earlier. Janet Maslin, covering the film for the *New York Times*, wrote “*Schizopolis* is [Soderbergh’s] dithering midnight movie,
a linguistic experiment filled with exacting gibberish and feeble musings about communication. It winds up illustrating the very emptiness it mocks.” Despite the critical backlash, Soderbergh was anchored by the hope that the film would perhaps find a more loving embrace from the public. However, the public, like the critics, as Roger Ebert reflected, left the theater “with sad, thoughtful faces,” and the film went on to gross only $10,500.

Schizopolis is perhaps the most misunderstood film in Soderbergh’s oeuvre due to the fact that its central concern—identity, both personal and artistic—is not approached with the same “intense concentration on form” that marks many of his earlier films. In fact, Soderbergh’s approach to identity is shockingly personal. For a filmmaker whose approach to cinema has been described as “clinical detachment,” Schizopolis stands as the odd film out, a misunderstood film in a complex and far-reaching filmography due to its emphasis on surrealist comedy and stylistic flourishes. In the hope of offering a corrective and, in turn, coming to grips with Soderbergh’s own thoughts on personal and artistic identity, let me first place Schizopolis within a context of cinematic authorship.

The Problem of Cinematic Authorship

While the concept of authorship within film studies is far from a recent concern and is no doubt familiar to film lovers as well as film scholars, a brief summation will be helpful because the independent film movement and Schizopolis specifically complicate some of the fundamental questions pertaining to film authorship. The concept of film authorship has been present since shortly after the advent of the medium, with a notable example being D. W. Griffith's 1913 New York Dramatic Mirror advertisement, which announced that the man who was “revolutionizing Motion Picture drama and founding the modern technique of the art” was available for hire. However, this conception of the director as author changed significantly during the golden age of the Hollywood studio system (a period that lasted from roughly the 1930s to the early 1950s). For instance, legendary producer David O. Selznick described the role of a director at Warner Bros. in 1937 without the gleam of romanticism present in Griffith's promotion: “[The director is] purely a cog in the machine . . . [and is] handed a script, usually just a few days before he goes into production.”

The redemption of the film director as author regained traction in the French film culture of the post–World War II period. In 1948, Alexandre
Astruc wrote that “the cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression, just as all the arts have been before it. . . . After having been successfully a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a means of preserving an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel.” Thus, to Astruc, the evolution of cinema had taken it from being solely a work of mass culture to a means of more personal expression.

Astruc’s writing, along with the criticism of André Bazin, would exert tremendous influence over the critics of the budding film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. The young critics, including such future filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, and François Truffaut, quickly began to perform “mise-en-scène criticism,” which sought to analyze composition across a director’s body of films. In 1953, Rivette published a volume on Howard Hawks, and shortly thereafter, François Truffaut published his controversial essay “A Certain Tendency of French Cinema,” which denounced the tradition of quality (mainly based around literary adaptations) in favor of a cinematic cinema that moved beyond the director as merely a technician who essentially just filmed a novel or screenplay. This polemic led to the beginnings of the *politique des auteurs* or “author policy,” which sought to place the role of cinematic authorship with the director rather than the screenwriter or literary author, who were commonly considered the source of the film.

Truffaut’s polemic, no doubt aided by his international success as a filmmaker, quickly took root, most notably via the criticism of Andrew Sarris. Second only to Truffaut’s polemic, Sarris’s “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962” is perhaps the most influential piece of English language auteur criticism and led to the foundations of what would become a theory. Sarris, following in the footsteps of the *Cahiers* critics before him, sought to utilize the auteur theory as a means of reevaluating American cinema, tracing distinct matters of filmic style and “interior meaning” back to a specific filmmaker. For Sarris, a director must exhibit a distinguishable personality within his or her body of work to be considered an auteur. This distinguishable personality becomes defined when a director exhibits recurrent characteristics of style that appear over a body of films. This, in effect, can result in an interior meaning, to be unearthed by the auteur critic. The industrial context behind the production of *Schizopolis* helps to illustrate the idea of the director as
auteur. For instance, unlike the work of Sarris’s auteurs, *Schizopolis* was not made under the watchful eye of a studio but rather a production crew of only five people. Moreover, the film was written, directed, and starred Soderbergh himself in two of the lead roles. In the figure of the writer-director, one can begin to draw connections between the philosophies expressed in *Schizopolis* and Soderbergh the director.

In this case, the most appropriate theorization of authorship is to be found in Pam Cook’s essay, “The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-Garde Film.”14 Cook writes that small-scale productions, like *Schizopolis*, are exempt from the overwhelming power of the system and provide an outlet for the artist’s self-expression. It should be emphasized that Cook is not suggesting that this self-expression is merely personal; the reference is to *artistic* self-expression. In addition, she argues that self-expression is not so much marked by autobiographical information as by a form that stands in opposition to “the universal stereotypes of commercial cinema,” which in turn marks the work as “strongly autobiographical.”15 Drawing on Cook’s view, a limit must be drawn in this case at Soderbergh the director while, at the same time, supposing that his artistic preoccupations are in fact evident in *Schizopolis*. With this theoretical context established, we can begin our analysis of the interior meaning of *Schizopolis* in order to achieve a better understanding Soderbergh’s philosophy of identity, both personal and artistic.

**Schizopolis and Personal Identity**

As I indicated in my brief plot synopsis, *Schizopolis* is a film marked by such narrative devices as doppelgängers, parallel universes, and parallel time frames, all of which are put in the service of the film’s central focus on identity. However, as Soderbergh’s position within the film as both the auteur (as established in the prologue and epilogue) and as a succession of characters (Munson, Korcheck, and an unnamed Frenchman) demonstrates, identity as explored within *Schizopolis* is not a monolithic concept. My discussion of personal identity focuses on three areas given prominence in the film: language, personal action, and personal continuity.

**Personal Identity and Language**

While the adage “actions speak louder than words” is no doubt a key to our understanding of personal identity, perhaps Mark Twain’s rephras-
ing is more relevant to our discussion of Schizopolis: actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often. In an interview at the time of the film’s release, Soderbergh described Schizopolis as being concerned with “what I see as the gradual simplification and almost destruction of our language. We’ve gotten lazy with it, and it’s used to obscure instead of illustrate. So the struggle to keep life meaningful is getting more and more difficult.” Surely, to any viewer of the film, Soderbergh’s playfulness with linguistics, be it through the use of untranslated foreign language dubbing or through “Elmo Oxygen speak” (“Zygote. Tea house grain structure. Mellow rhubarb turbine? Jigsaw. Smell sign”), is a defining aspect of the film, but what can it tell us about Soderbergh’s views of personal identity?

The first act of the film, which covers the disintegration of Fletcher and his wife’s marriage during his attempt to finish his speech for Schwitters, is marked by a subjective interpretation of language. While Fletcher engages with his coworkers and boss in what, in comparison with his other interactions during this sequence, can best be described as normal language, his interactions with his wife are marked by a clinical, Beckett-esque chatter. Take, for instance, the scene in which Fletcher returns after a day of work and inquires about the evening’s dinner:

FLETCHER: Generic greeting!
FLETCHER’S WIFE: Generic greeting returned.
FLETCHER: Imminent sustenance.
FLETCHER’S WIFE: Overly dramatic statement regarding upcoming meal.
FLETCHER: Ooh! False reaction indicating hunger and excitement.

The vernacular in this segment is indicative of Fletcher’s subjective impressions of his interactions with his wife. Obviously, the interaction illustrated above and their other interactions in the first part of the film go a long way toward emphasizing the disconnect Fletcher has from his wife. However, the disconnect goes beyond the clinical treatment of modern marriage. For instance, Fletcher and Mrs. Munson’s vernacular is paradoxical in its utilization. While it appears to lay everything out for the listener (and viewer) by overwhelming day-to-day chit-chat with robotic efficiency, it also serves as a mask for their infidelity.

When analyzed from this standpoint, the minimal vernacular appears to be the latest step in the evolution of Soderbergh’s fascination with the link
he forged between deception and infidelity in *sex, lies, and videotape*. While *slv* engages the junction between language and action with an approach reminiscent of Eric Rohmer’s *Six Moral Tales* (1963–1972), by placing the subject’s words and actions under a microscope focused tightly on romantic hypocrisy, *Schizopolis* turns the screw once more by engaging with language as a mask for both language and action. In this sense, the interactions between Fletcher and his wife resemble the speech Fletcher is told to write—it should say something without saying anything.

While the interaction between Fletcher and his wife is no doubt clinical and detached, the viewer can understand and easily decipher it. On the other side of the film’s linguistic/romantic coin stand the relationships between Elmo Oxygen and his many mistresses. Unlike the minimal vernacular of Fletcher and his wife, Elmo’s vernacular is largely unintelligible to the viewer. While, through the progression of the film and repetition of specific phrases, we come to a basic understanding of the language (for instance, we come to equate a certain “smell sign” with “goodbye”), the bulk of “Elmo speak” lacks a connection between signifier and the signified. While Elmo’s vernacular lacks legibility with the viewer, it does share a common link with the minimalist patter of Fletcher and his wife as it is shared only between Elmo and his lovers. Whenever Elmo interacts with a male character (or a female character with whom he is not engaged in a sexual relationship), his vernacular, while eccentric, is relatively normal.

With these two examples of the film’s treatment and complication of language, it becomes obvious that Soderbergh’s preoccupations with the “destruction” of language are firmly linked to romantic relationships. This trend continues in the film’s third segment, which involves the relationship between Korchek, Fletcher, and his wife, from her perspective. As previously noted, Soderbergh overdubs each of his characters in an unsubtitle foreign language. Fletcher is overdubbed in Japanese, Korchek in Italian, and Soderbergh’s unnamed third character is dubbed in French. While this formal decision can come off as maddening to the first-time viewer, Soderbergh is essentially re-relaying the events of parts one and two to the viewer, allowing the reactions of Fletcher’s wife to serve as guideposts. Unlike the viewer, Fletcher’s wife is able to decipher her husband’s and lovers’ dialects, and, while she is able to interact with them, she is unable to address them in their own language (she speaks English).

Analyzing each segment of the film’s approach toward language and action makes it clear that despite auditory appearance, Soderbergh’s outlook
on romantic relationships, forged in slv. persists. Language is a cloud that distorts action and, by extension, identity. In Schizopolis, identity becomes a variable that is interpreted on a subjective basis due to the failure of language. This notion, in turn, shapes the narrative of the film. By allowing each character in the Munson/Mrs. Munson/Korchek love triangle to be provided with a narrational viewpoint, Soderbergh illustrates how simple actions are distorted by language and left for re-interpretation by the receiver.

Identity and Personal Action

Given the film's emphasis on language, it seems fitting that Fletcher is a speechwriter. This tie between language and social role is found throughout the film as characters are defined quite literally by their occupation or social role. Take, for instance, the fact that Fletcher's wife is never named on screen. Her identity (and screen credit) is defined by her relationship to Fletcher. Soderbergh treats Korchek's newfound love interest, also played by Betsy Brantley, similarly, as she becomes known as "Attractive Woman Number Two." This treatment, however, should not be misinterpreted through gender politics, as it is not limited to the female characters in the film. Fletcher's boss is simply called "Right Hand Man" (he serves as assistant to Schwitters) while his paranoid coworker is dubbed "Nameless Numberhead Man." This definition by occupation could be interpreted as an overwhelming force that relegates each character's ability to define him or herself by his or her own actions. However, as my analysis of personal choice and identity with regard to Fletcher Munson will show, those defined by their social role have much more freedom than the existentially impotent Fletcher.

Looking at the film as a whole, it seems fitting that Fletcher is given a common English name. Unlike the other characters in the film whose names match their social roles, Fletcher ultimately fails in his occupation as a writer. Throughout the film, Soderbergh shows us sequences of Fletcher, afflicted with writer's block, reading into a tape recorder while imagining his speech being delivered by Schwitters. Given the nearly impossible task of writing a speech that is designed not to "answer all questions but to question all answers," Fletcher finds himself escaping to the men's room to masturbate. During one such episode, a man seats himself in the stall next to Fletcher and removes his shoes to expose a pair of black-and-white striped socks (we later discover, via this visual cue, that the man in the other stall is the Man Being Interviewed). The man begins reciting the outline of his speech
(“enormous expansion, the absolute and essential role, public perception of reality, transcendent idea of reality, the collective unconscious, and the long, overdue, recognition of our own significance”), cueing Munson to start taking notes. Thus, Fletcher is able to finish his speech only after the Man Being Interviewed outlines it for him. This later becomes ironic when Fletcher introduces himself to Schwitters’s wife by saying, “I thought maybe your husband had mentioned me. I’ve been working for him the last few days . . . closely.” She quickly dismisses his collaboration by responding, “No . . . he’s been really busy writing this speech that he’s doing today.” Through this exchange, Fletcher’s incompetence is amplified. Not only was his speech lifted from someone else, but the speech is lifted (despite Schwitters’s and Right Hand Man’s praise of the speech) from Fletcher as well. This irony continues as Schwitters is shot by Elmo Oxygen before he can even deliver the speech, rendering Fletcher’s efforts even more fruitless. Through this progression, Fletcher is depicted as not only incompetent but also, if characters are defined by their social roles, meaningless.

Fletcher’s occupational incompetence also has ties to his sexual impotence. As previously noted, Fletcher’s assignment distances him from his wife’s sexual advances in favor of self-pleasure. This also is commented on in Fletcher’s interaction with Schwitters’s wife, in that he is unrecognizable to Schwitters, despite “working . . . closely” with him. Although, via his given name, Fletcher is defined by more than merely his occupation, he is ultimately incapable of controlling his own existence. On the other hand, Nameless Numberhead Man is defined purely by his occupation and is depicted as being rather paranoid and helpless. However, he, unlike Fletcher, is able to define himself above and beyond his social role by quitting his job, leaving his wife, and starting a more fruitful relationship with another woman.

The only effect the completion of Fletcher’s speech has is on his relationship with Mrs. Munson. However, this conclusion, as we shall see, is misleading. Just as Fletcher finishes his speech in the third act of the film (which follows Mrs. Munson’s point of view), Soderbergh breaks his formal exercise in overdubbing. The interactions between Fletcher and his wife shift away from the two-language format, and even from the minimal vernacular of Fletcher’s interpretations, to become normal speech. This formal shift seems to cue us to the fact that the language games that have distorted the relationships between Fletcher and Mrs. Munson have concluded and that they may be on the path of reconciliation. In one of the film’s concluding
scenes, we watch as Fletcher, Mrs. Munson, and their daughter sit at the dinner table. The phone rings and Fletcher goes to answer it, echoing the earlier scene in which Mrs. Munson receives a misdialed phone call. The camera stays on Mrs. Munson, her facial expression relaying to us that it may be a lover calling in the hope of setting up a rendezvous. Fletcher hangs up the phone and returns to the table, smiling politely at his wife, who smiles back. Through this final act, the film seems to relay to us that the completion of Fletcher’s speech has allowed for a reconciliation to take place and that his relationship is perhaps put back on the right path. This notion, however, is ultimately undercut by the film’s final scene.

Just as the scene concludes, Fletcher begins speaking to the viewer in the future tense. He says, “In three years, I will be hired by an ad agency for a lot of money to write copy for their biggest client, a cellular phone company. In five years, my wife leaves me for someone smarter, handsomer, and more emotionally demonstrative. In eight years, after getting drunk at a friend’s wedding reception in Anchorage, Alaska, I fall asleep in a snowdrift while walking back to my hotel. I’m discovered the following spring and successfully thawed. Until then, I wait.” This narration is delivered over a fast-motion shot of Fletcher sitting motionlessly in a shopping mall as the people around him move in rushing torrents. The narration and imagery not only relay to us that Fletcher’s relationship was futile but that he is incapable of asserting his own existence. He becomes frozen, not only literally in the snow but also in time and space, unable to either control his fate (after all, he’s narrating in the future tense) or gain rescue from the snowdrift. This final scene seems to sum up Fletcher’s character as generally powerless. However, Fletcher is capable of one very pronounced action within the film as he performs a metaphysical jump into the consciousness of Jeffrey Korchek.

Identity and Personal Continuity

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke claimed that memory is essential to personal identity:

> For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past
action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.  

Thus, to Locke, memory is essential to personal identity because it is indispensable for personal continuity. While Locke's view has been long debated, this notion of personal continuity via memory is the key to our understanding of Fletcher's use of Korchek, the doppelgänger, in Schizopolis. While the concept of swapping your life for someone else's would often appear to be liberating, Fletcher, as the Man Being Interviewed states, cannot escape his own nature, thus compromising his metaphysical leap.

The doppelgänger segment of the film, which supplies the point of view for the film's second act, begins as Fletcher emerges from a grocery store and approaches his car. He inserts the key in the driver's side door and quickly discovers he has approached the wrong car. As he approaches his real car, he gazes up to find a man in a track suit running toward him. The man, who we will discover is Dr. Jeffrey Korchek, looks exactly like Fletcher except for his clothing and a pair of spectacles. Fletcher decides to follow Korchek to his house and, while spying on the doctor, proceeds to transmigrate into Korchek. At this point, Fletcher/Korchek looks out the window to discover that Fletcher's car has disappeared and that he has not only jumped into another body but transported himself backward in time (as the phone call from Mrs. Munson that took place in act one will inform us).

This segment is somewhat slippery in terms of the rules and consequences of Fletcher's transmigration. We as viewers are not left with a definitive marker of where Korchek ends and Fletcher begins metaphysically. For instance, while Fletcher speaks through Korchek's mouth when he sees his wife/lover coming to the door, informing us that he's having an affair with his wife, he is still capable of going to work and performing complex dental procedures. The question of who, indeed, is taking action via Fletcher/Korchek is an ambiguous one, and the diegesis of the film does not provide us with a definitive answer. While it is clear, to borrow from Jason Wood's analysis of the film, that Fletcher is indeed an active presence within Korchek and that he has taken “all his problems and insecurities with him,” Korchek's identity, made evident by intimate knowledge of Korchek's family and his love of Muzak, still bleeds through.

What becomes clear through this transformation is that, to borrow the analysis of the Man Being Interviewed, there is continuity of memory in
Fletcher/Korchek; he “cannot escape his own nature” and must “reconcile himself to that nature.” Despite his best efforts to live the life of Korchek, Fletcher is drawn back onto the emotional rocks of a romantic relationship. There is a cosmic irony apparent in the fact that he cannot escape his relationship with his wife by transmigrating into Korchek because Korchek is having an affair with Fletcher’s wife. In fact, when Fletcher/Korchek finds himself with Mrs. Munson, he does his best to persuade her to leave Fletcher. The motives behind this are ambiguous at best. Does Fletcher assume that by having access to Korchek’s economic and social environment his marriage can be saved? As he tells Mrs. Munson, “I know I want you. I have all this money put away, it’s just sitting there.” Or does he assume that, by getting Mrs. Munson to leave Fletcher, when and if he transmigrates back he’ll be emotionally and romantically available?

I find it telling that during this exchange Mrs. Munson asks Fletcher/Korchek if he will be visiting Madame Rose the following day. As we discover, Madame Rose is a palm reader who informs Fletcher/Korchek that she sees “major changes . . . that will involve a woman . . . it will require a move . . . [and] drastic changes” in his life. She also adds that he has yet to meet this woman. From this point on, Fletcher takes a passive stance to Fletcher/Korchek’s lifestyle by following Madame Rose’s prediction and allowing it to become a driving force behind his fate. When he encounters a female patient, simply called Attractive Woman Number Two, who looks suspiciously like Mrs. Munson (like Soderbergh, Brantley plays her doppelgänger as well), he jumps headlong into infatuation. Overwhelmed by his passion and led by the belief that this will be the relationship Madame Rose has predicted, Fletcher/Korchek delivers an inappropriate love letter (“I would be the happiest man in my pants . . . accept my love, or at least let me pay you to accept it”).

Unlike his successful attempt in getting Mrs. Munson to move in with him, Fletcher/Korchek’s attempt to seduce Attractive Woman Number Two is met with a sexual harassment lawsuit. From the moment Fletcher/Korchek writes to Attractive Woman Number Two, Korchek’s life begins to unravel. His brother asks him for money to pay off a debt to a mobster, which ultimately ends in Korchek’s death and Fletcher’s transmigration back into his own body. This end result is due to Fletcher’s intervention in Korchek’s life. While Soderbergh and the diegesis of Fletcher’s transmigration are defined in ambiguous terms, it becomes clear in the film’s third act that when Korchek acts on his own accord (the second act, after all, takes
place in a parallel universe), he accepts a job in Miami and, presumably, calls Mrs. Munson for another liaison.

Judging from this course of action, Fletcher’s tendency to allow outside forces to control his destiny continues despite his transmigration. By surrendering his actions to the control of Madame Rose’s prediction, Fletcher is exhibiting an identity defined by Locke’s theory of personal continuity. Despite Korchek’s elevated socioeconomic means, Fletcher draws Korchek into the same romantic pitfalls that marked his own relationship. In the end, both his fate as Fletcher and his fate as Korchek are surrendered to outside forces: Korchek is killed by the gangster while Fletcher is left frozen in a snowbank, narrating his inescapable future to us and simply waiting for it to come to pass. In this sense, he has come to grips with his own nature and has reconciled himself to both it and his inability to affect his fate.

In Fletcher’s attempt to deal with his existential predicament we find a theme that runs through Soderbergh’s work, including his previous film, *The Underneath*. In that film, Michael (Peter Gallagher) attempts to take control of his life via self-help manuals but still finds himself the victim of fate. As James Mottram writes, “Soderbergh’s characters are often looking to third parties for reassurance,” and Fletcher and some of the secondary characters of *Schizopolis* are no different. Before he is given his promotion to writer, Fletcher’s job is to go interview followers of Eventualism, the New Age religion conceived by Schwitters. In one such interview, we are told by a woman that before she found Eventualism she would brush her teeth obsessively before finding “control.” However, as the scene progresses, Fletcher kisses the woman and one of her teeth falls out. Despite her claims and those of the tenets of Eventualism, she has not found control. In *Schizopolis*, Soderbergh’s view of individual identity is bound to personal continuity. Be it through transmigration or through New Age philosophy, characters who surrender their fates to outside forces are ultimately incapable of change.

**Schizopolis and Soderbergh’s Artistic Identity**

If Fletcher is incapable of altering his identity, what about Soderbergh the filmmaker? After all, Soderbergh the filmmaker is inherently part of *Schizopolis*, both from an extratextual standpoint (as star, writer, and director) and, as the film’s prologue and epilogue attest, within the text as well. Soderbergh’s career path, both before and after the production of *Schizopolis*, complicates his personal view. While Anne Thompson was correct when
she proclaimed to Soderbergh that “it’s difficult to find a thematic thread in your films; you’re a bit of a chameleon,” Soderbergh’s response comes off as rather puzzling: “Good. You know, there are two kinds of filmmakers. There are filmmakers who have a style. And they look for material that fits that style. I’m the opposite. I look at the material and I go, ‘Okay, who do I have to be to put this across?’”

Perhaps it is due to the lack of thematic unity across Soderbergh’s oeuvre that has discouraged critics and scholars (aside from Jason Wood and the authors included in this volume) from attempting to provide a study of Soderbergh as auteur. After all, his films have revolved around a diverse array of topics ranging from failing relationships (*Schizopolis*, *Full Frontal* [2002]) to slick crime genre exercises (*Out of Sight* [1998], *The Limey* [1999], the *Ocean’s* trilogy [2001, 2004, 2007]). However, Soderbergh’s implication that he is a filmmaker who lacks a style is puzzling. While he may not “look for material that fits” his aesthetic, he definitely has a style that offers a sort of continuity with regard to his artistic identity. As I’ve previously mentioned, Soderbergh’s aesthetic, which is often described with such adjectives as “clinical” and “chilly,” exhibits strong ties to the French New Wave in his use of colored filters, jump cuts, and narrative digressions (the latter two are strongly evident in *Schizopolis*).

**An Interview with Steven Soderbergh**

*Schizopolis* ends with a filmmaker (played by Soderbergh) providing answers to unasked questions (“Footlong veggie on wheat”) in front of an empty auditorium. On 8 October 2008, I had the opportunity to ask Soderbergh about his view of *Schizopolis*, his aesthetic practices, and, to borrow from Pam Cook’s view of authorship, the self-expression in the film. While this more interactive form of interview may run counter to the Dadaist tradition of *Schizopolis*, I assume this form will be less puzzling and more productive.

*Drew Morton*: *Schizopolis* seems to be, obviously, the odd man out in your filmography, both stylistically and with regard to narrative focus. What, in your career or personal life, pushed you to embark on this project?

*Steven Soderbergh*: While I was making *The Underneath*, I experienced a sensation of total stasis. I felt that the film wasn’t going to work and I was wondering if I wanted to continue to make films. Of course, it wasn’t because I didn’t want to make films anymore but that I didn’t want to make that film. I wanted to get back to the freedom I had when I first started making films. I
felt I had become a formalist, technically, and I was thinking that this doesn’t feel like my personality. Or, it feels like a part of my personality but it’s the part I like the least. By the time we’d finished shooting, I’d hatched the plan to go and do *Schizopolis*. I started buying some used film equipment and writing the script. I called my group of friends in Baton Rouge that I’d grown up with making films and said, “Look, I’m going to come home and do this thing. I’m not sure how long it’s going to take. I want to start over again.” Part of that process was reminding myself what filmmakers had inspired me and what films had inspired me as well. I reached out to Richard Lester and asked him if he’d be interested in doing a book of interviews [*Getting Away with It*] because he was the person, more than anyone I identified, as being closest to my way of thinking. He worked very quickly, he made a lot of different kinds of films, they have a great energy to them, and I wanted to know more about him and more about how he worked and what he thought. So working on that book was kind of happening in parallel to making *Schizopolis* and *Gray’s Anatomy* [*1996*]. It was a big help for me to talk to him.

DM: But there also seems to be this masochistic edge to want to go in and deal with this relationship. What inspired you to take this creative spontaneity and push it in that specific narrative direction?

SS: The superficial reason for getting my soon-to-be-ex-wife involved was that she was available and I needed someone who would do it for nothing and accept the fact that the schedule was going to be somewhat unpredictable. The other more complicated reason was I thought maybe it would provide some closure or insight for us. That turned out to be wrong, but it resulted in some interesting scenes and it ended up being cathartic but not in a way I anticipated. It allowed her to express a lot of things that needed to be expressed. In that context, it was important for me to just hear them or take them on and accept them and not really push back. For something that looks so frivolous, it was a very intense experience to shoot those scenes that were comical recreations of real events. Looking back on it, we came out of it differently and not in a bad way. I think we would have gotten where we ended up anyway; it kind of advanced it a little bit because we had to go through several emotional stages more quickly than we would have normally because of the shoot. As a result, it was really intense and the ups and downs were really extreme.

DM: In *Getting Away with It* you describe the film as not being personal at all, but at the same time you’ve described it as “private filmmaking” and that you weren’t acting.
SS: I’m not an actor. I was playing a version of myself because that’s all I can do. They’re all personal, they can’t not be. The memory of it is very personal because of the way in which it was made. This very small crew of people I’d grown up with and who had watched me or known me since I had begun making films. So the whole experience was familial and therefore by definition very personal. During the time I was making it, I thought we were on to something. I thought people were really going to like it. So I had planned this whole scenario: I had rented this four-bedroom house in Baton Rouge and put all the editing equipment in there and I had the crew staying there. I was ready to set up a situation in which I made a movie like that every two years and that was how I going to live. That all went out the window when it became apparent that the movie wasn’t going to go anywhere. That’s when I starting entertaining doing Human Nature [Spike Jonze, 2001] and Out of Sight and all that. I was ready to go off the grid and make a Schizopolis every eighteen months or two years.

DM: Speaking to that, your films oscillate between the margins and the mainstream, and while the narrative focus changes, your aesthetic has some through lines. How do you view your aesthetic?

SS: The through line is obviously that I think about how something should be made and I like things to be well made even when they’re supposed to look like you invented everything on the spot. I’m obviously interested in craft and in form, and I think about it a lot. Beyond that, I don’t think there’s much to say because the forms have varied. The decision to employ a certain aesthetic onto an idea comes with certain rules. When I think about any movie, and I decide this is the way it’s going to be made, this is the kind of shots I’m going to use and these are the editing patterns that I’m going to employ. I sat down and looked at a lot of things that I think are similar or will give me some sort of inspiration and I have a tool kit in my mind. Even something as nutty as Schizopolis has a set of rules that I’m following in terms of how it’s going to be photographed, even if it doesn’t look like it.

DM: It also has a three-act form, so you are supplying the viewer with a skeletal form to latch on to.

SS: [Laughs.] Well, if I hadn’t put those numbers in there I don’t know if you could do that.

DM: You’re claiming that you form a style after content but I keep seeing French New Wave patterns again and again. This said, they obviously function differently. Take, for instance, the jump cuts in Out of Sight against the
jump cuts in The Limey. That's what I was implying when I said you had a through line.

SS: Absolutely. When I think about Hiroshima mon amour [Alain Resnais, 1959] or Persona [Ingmar Bergman, 1966], I wonder why anybody is doing anything anymore. What was done by those two filmmakers in those two films, I just ask “Jesus, what does one do? How do I push that forward?” They seem so complete in their use of film grammar. It's kind of depressing. Certainly the French New Wave and the British New Wave are a constant source of inspiration. I'm still watching that stuff over and over again. Whenever somebody starts going off on some new name filmmaker who supposedly changed the landscape, I look at that movie and go, “There's nothing here that Godard didn't do first.” That doesn't mean that they didn't take it and apply it to a genre or set of circumstances that is new. All of these ideas that you say are fresh and new and groundbreaking have been done. There wasn't anything that those guys didn't try. I keep going back to them because I think it's your job, if you can make a living at an art form, it's your job to trace the influences all the way back to the beginning. My concern is that I'm seeing a lot of films now that are employing ideas and references that only go back one generation and they're not taking it all the way back. What's great about the French and the British New Wave is that they were going all the way back to the beginning of cinema. It's a little more unified and it's a little more worldly. I just do that as part of my job, as someone who makes movies, to keep going back to the original sources of whatever ideas you're trying to create.

DM: Do you ever find it limiting? Some critics have described your aesthetic as “clinical” or “chilly,” not necessarily in a negative way, just more detached. How does that strike you?

SS: It depends on what you're talking about. I don't think Erin Brockovich is detached. It may be because I'm not willing to do anything to get an emotional reaction out of people. If it comes across as a little detached, I guess that's me because I'm like that in my life. I'm not willing to do anything to get a rise out of somebody. I'd rather have them later go, “There was more going on there than I thought.”

DM: So your hope is to encourage a form of active spectatorship?

SS: My attitude is that this has to work ten or twenty years from now. A lot of these things that people complain about when they first see it, twenty years from now they're going to look at it and go, “Oh, I really like that he did that.”
DM: I think that’s evident in Schizopolis and some of your other films from this period. The Onion recently ran an appreciation of The Underneath. . . .

SS: Oh God. That is wrong.

DM: Well, it did inspire you to make Schizopolis, and you can see a lot of techniques, like your use of colored filters, being tested.

SS: I’m trying some stuff out there. Absolutely, I was working with fractured narrative, playing with color schemes, mixing shooting styles. That was the only thing going on in that movie, that was the problem. Certainly, I was test-driving things I would later fuse with better material and therefore have more success on a creative level. I don’t want to burn the negative of it, I was just in a bad head space.

DM: Shifting back a bit to Schizopolis, I read in James Mottram’s The Sundance Kids and I think you alluded to it in Getting Away with It that you wish you had gone further with the language games in the film. In what sense?

SS: I agree with Richard [Lester] in that it was pure nonsense. I wish I had made it structured nonsense in which you could understand that a certain word meant “and” or “plate,” that you sensed it was another language. What I was doing was legitimate in its own right, was stringing together words that I thought just sounded cool together.

DM: But you do get a sense of it after a while . . .

SS: You know what smell sign means, but I could have, with a little more work, taken that further. But then, at some level, the point is that it doesn’t add up. That’s why the communication is breaking down. You know what I mean? They can’t find the code key for it.

DM: But it makes sense insofar as Elmo Oxygen’s language allows him to have more of a fruitful relationship than Munson, who uses language as a subterfuge.

SS: Oh yeah, absolutely. Elmo is the id, and you can say that there’s a very compelling aspect in that and a very destructive aspect in that, but at least it’s not hypocritical.

DM: And this ties into Fletcher being a victim of fate. Even his jump into Korchev is unfulfilling because of the fact he cannot escape his relationship with Mrs. Munson. What I was curious about is where Munson ended and Korchev began. They do have a degree of shared consciousness. Would you care to speak to that a bit? Is Korchev’s death due to Munson’s actions or both?

SS: The idea was that the real Korchev makes a different decision than the Munson Korchev.

DM: You begin and end the film with this addressing of the viewer. What
inspired you to add this footage? This was added after the film’s premiere at Cannes, correct?

SS: Yeah. Part of it was to give the audience a lens because the film is not down the middle, but I remembered this crazy thing that Cecil B. DeMille does at the head of the road show version of The Ten Commandments. There’s this huge red curtain and DeMille comes out and for eight minutes tells you how important this movie is that you’re about to see. It’s shocking. I remembered that and thought, “That’s what we’re gonna do.”

DM: Did it have anything to do with the critical reaction at the time? I know you said the critical reception was lukewarm in the book [Getting Away with It], did that influence the addition at all?

SS: It was just a way to frame it for the audience, and it seemed perfectly in keeping with the aesthetic of the movie. As for the critical reaction, you can’t make a movie like that and not anticipate a polarized reaction. What I was acknowledging in the book is the fact that that had a huge impact in getting the movie distributed. I don’t care that the critical reaction was lukewarm, but when the result is that nobody wants to talk to us about distributing the movie then that’s a problem.

DM: Now that the film has found a wider audience thanks to the U.S. Criterion DVD release and was screened at the 2008 Slamdance Film Festival, where does the sequel Son of Schizopolis stand? Are you considering that or is it off the agenda?

SS: I’m never going to say never. I’d have to come up with an idea or an issue that I felt would benefit from that kind of treatment. I obviously wouldn’t want to do it about relationships again so it would have to be some other issue. I’m making this series of movies for HDNet and 2929 [Bubble] and those, to some extent, fulfill my desire to keep playing off to the side. Schizopolis has its own specific language, so to speak, and I do have ideas that I do jot down that are comic, surreal ideas, and at some point I may compile them and fuse them with some issue and make Son of Schizopolis.

Notes

For Nicole Alvarado. Thanks to Steven Soderbergh, Holly Kang, Bill McClain, David O’Grady, my colleagues at UCLA, and to my editors: Mark T. Conard, R. Barton Palmer, and Steven M. Sanders.


12. François Truffaut, “A Certain Tendency of French Cinema,” in Movies and Methods: An Anthology, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976), 224–36, originally published in Cahiers du Cinéma, no. 31, Jan. 1954. It should be noted that the role of Truffaut’s initial intervention has begun to take on a mythic status. Truffaut’s controversial polemic was a rarity within the pages of Cahiers. In fact, under the guidance of his mentor, Bazin, Truffaut spent just over a year rewriting the piece in order to take a more tactful approach. See Richard Neupert, A History of French New Wave Cinema (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 30–32.


15. Ibid., 274.


See Book II, chapter XXVII (“Of Identity and Diversity”), section 9 (“Personal Identity”).


Part 4

Politics, Morals, Methodology
MR. SODERBERGH GOES TO WASHINGTON

Steven M. Sanders

It’s dog eat dog. I just want the first bite.
—Heist mastermind “Duke” Anderson,
The Anderson Tapes (Sidney Lumet, 1971)

No text in Steven Soderbergh’s still expanding body of work has been more neglected than his bold television experiment, the ten-episode HBO series K Street (2003). If a cursory search turns up a fair number of scholarly writings on Soderbergh’s film work, K Street has yet to receive the attention it deserves.1 The following interpretive commentary is aimed at filling this gap in Soderbergh criticism.

Moral Complexity and the Paranoid Style.

As a drama of moral complexity, K Street will be remembered for its use of political events as “backgrounds for fictive narratives.”2 The show is a meditation on power and paranoia in the capital city as seen from the perspective of a start-up Washington-based lobbying and consultancy firm, Bergstrom Lowell, whose principals include husband and wife and real-life political operatives James Carville and Mary Matalin. Numerous actual senators (Barbara Boxer, Charles Grassley, Rick Santorum, Chuck Schumer), House members (David Dreier, Steny Hoyer, Harold Ford Jr.), power brokers (Robert Bennett, Tamara Haddad, Ken Adelman), lobbyists and political consultants (Paul Begala, Joe Lockhart, Jack Quinn), and journalists (Howard Kurtz, Joe Klein, Al Hunt) appear in the series, lending it a spurious realism.
Although feature films such as *Advise and Consent* (Otto Preminger, 1962), *The Candidate* (Michael Ritchie, 1972), and *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976) showed the conflicts and compromises implicit in the world of political influence peddling among the powerful, Amy Taubin suggests that the show’s true precursors include Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969) on the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, Robert Altman and Garry Trudeau’s *Tanner ’88* (1988), on the Democratic Party’s presidential primaries, and *The War Room* (1993), D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus’s documentary on the 1992 Clinton campaign. Taubin also cites *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992–1998), the HBO comedy series that mixed fictional characters with celebrities and improvised dialogue. In fact, the basic idea is not new: one can go back to Norman Lear’s *Fernwood 2Night* (1977), starring Martin Mull and Fred Willard as a pair of bumptious talk show hosts in the fictitious town of Fernwood, Ohio ("the unfinished furniture capital of the world") who interview both actual and pseudocelebrities and parody all too convincingly the forced banter and idle chatter of the real thing.

Some of the best acting in *K Street* comes from the political consultants, candidate handlers, and spin doctors who surround politicians and inflect politics as we have come to know it. It is a moot point whether James Carville, for example, is really playing a character in the series or a fictionalized version of himself. In the cinematic universe of *K Street*, these alternatives are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. One can argue that Carville doesn’t have to act, since he is playing himself. But it can be argued just as plausibly that Carville is *always* acting—not in the sense that he doesn’t believe in the various candidates he represents and the causes he supports in his professional life but in the sense that his every public appearance is itself so bound up with the mechanics of spin that he is always on message. During a conversation in which Carville has just pronounced that “Schwarzenegger politically died today, August twenty-seventh” (not long before the amiable actor would be elected governor of California), Matalin tells him, “I have to keep a tally of all of the times you’re wrong and a separate list of all the times you’re spinning a spinner.” One has only to recall all the times Carville poisoned the well and made ad hominem attacks on politicians and other public figures who supported the outcry against Barack Obama’s proposed health care reforms in August 2009 (just one instance of the phenomenon, to be sure) to be convinced that he and others (not all of the same political persuasion) are submerged in, and have adapted themselves to, a world of exaggeration, innuendo, false pathos, staged drama, and string pulling.
And to what end? It is not clear whether Soderbergh means to imply that the answer to this question is not a more just society but rather power and influence. But he makes it obvious that Bergstrom Lowell’s would-be client list mainly includes bottom-line types who need to be massaged into believing in the firm’s ability to achieve results, and Soderbergh’s camera-in-the-conference room approach makes it easy to see how a smooth professional like Jack Quinn (counsel to President Clinton in 1995–1997 and cochairman of the strategic consulting firm Quinn Gillespie & Associates, LLC) comes by his reputation as a top-flight lobbyist. Carville and Matalin hope to get a taste of Quinn’s type of client, the kind they can bill in the neighborhood of forty thousand dollars a month, and these efforts occupy enough of _K Street_’s screen time to convey the impression that many lobbyists did not come to Washington to manipulate people and game the system but rather that that is what they were doing before they ever got there.

_K Street_ also confirms the film-critical cliché that Soderbergh’s narratives reflect the filmmaking process itself. _K Street_ portrays Washington as a place of betrayals, embattled wills, unconfirmed suspicions, broken relationships, and indeterminate meanings through Soderbergh’s use of skittish camera work, off-kilter framing, and unbalanced lighting. Soderbergh has famously said that “there are two kinds of filmmakers. There are filmmakers who have a style. And they look for material that fits that style. I’m the opposite. I look at the material and I go, ‘Okay, who do I have to be to put this across?’” In addition to operating the digital video camera himself, Soderbergh is the director of photography and editor. Each week’s shoot moves very quickly and is visually shaped and emotionally distanced by Soderbergh’s use of available light photography and improvised dialogue. As in several of Soderbergh’s feature films, _K Street_ eschews a classical narrative structure of character exposition, dramatic arc, and resolution. Instead, we are in medias res where context and flashbacks do little to flesh out the principal characters’ back stories. _K Street_’s nonlinear form, which includes whole episodes in flashback, is one of several innovations Soderbergh brings to the television political drama. Events are elided because it would be impossible to include them and because doing so is an extension of Soderbergh’s style, where narrative ellipses are used to indicate temporal breaks and jump cuts reinforce his docudrama approach.

Soderbergh’s camera captures enough sartorial details, architectural design, location footage, and shop talk to expose the social codes and subtleties of power in early twenty-first-century Washington. By focusing our attention
on both the professional crises and personal mishaps of the central figures in a small, newly emerging lobbying firm, Soderbergh has scope to create *K Street’s* atmosphere of indeterminacy and paranoia. From the junior partner in the firm who is so suspicious of the newly hired employee that she hires an expert in opposition research to do a background check on him, to the adulterous spouse who is carrying on with prostitutes even as he accompanies his wife to couples therapy sessions, to Carville himself, constantly jockeying for position and contemptuous of his employer, Soderbergh and writer Henry Bean create characters who so often see themselves involved in zero-sum games that it is impossible for them to know who can be trusted because someone who is an ally today may be an enemy tomorrow.

In the first episode we follow Francisco Dupré (Roger Guenveur Smith)—a new job applicant at Bergstrom Lowell—as he has his shoes polished and gets a haircut and manicure at the Grooming Lounge on L Street, after which he buys shirts at Pink, an upscale D.C. men’s clothing store. When he shows up for his interview, Matalin is pleasantly surprised while Carville is completely nonplussed. What seems to bother him most is Francisco’s disarming manner; inquiring after Matalin’s ailing brother, whose condition was not widely known, is unnerving enough, but Francisco proceeds to invite the two to a Branford Marsalis concert as his guests. At the conclusion of the interview, Francisco clasps hands with the startled pair and offers, in prayerlike tones, his hopes for Matalin’s brother’s recovery. These colorful flourishes effectively contrast with the portions of each episode where we follow the mostly dim and joyless exposition of the dynamics of consulting and professional flattery.

**Three Mysteries**

*K Street’s* narrative is propelled by three mysteries. The first is, as Taubin writes, “the mystery of the screwball marriage of the political adversaries Matalin and Carville.” Since Mary Matalin’s profile as a conservative is nearly as high as James Carville’s as a liberal, and we are given no reason to think either is insincere in his or her political beliefs, *K Street* encourages their coworkers, and presumably viewers of the series, to ponder the couple’s marital arrangements by asking how they ever got together and how they appear to get along so well. It may be Soderbergh’s intention to use the reaction of so-called Washington sophisticates to the Carville/Matalin pairing as a satiric exposé of their provinciality. Whatever his intention, the scattered
comments about the marital arrangements of the pair do little to illuminate that marriage, and the behavior of Carville and Matalin themselves hardly strikes the impartial viewer as "screwball." What is far more likely and fairly clear from the outset is that each is comfortable in his or her own skin and demonstrably adores the other.

The second mystery, according to Taubin, “is a noir-like plot line about the manipulation of power and the intangibility of its source.” Soderbergh invests this narrative with suspense over a possible conspiracy when word leaks out that Bergstrom Lowell is representing a client (“The Council for Middle East Progress”) with ties to Saudi Arabia. In this connection the firm is under investigation by the FBI on suspicion of funneling money to terrorists. The firm’s owner, Richard Bergstrom (Elliott Gould, in an inspired bit of casting) is a recluse who appears to spend all his time in his Brooklyn walk-up apartment watching *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), the show’s most conspicuous intertext. Watching Joan Crawford, he tells Francisco, “The way she has herself lit, I mean, there’s a woman who just represents womanhood. Minutes later he says, “It’s about people wanting to be in the middle class, and how she is represented there with her glamour. I mean, it’s amazing, it’s something I just can’t stop watching.”

This is not Bergstrom’s only peculiarity. His complaints about maladies extend beyond hypochondria and suggest paranoia. For example, following a power failure that blacked out much of New York City, he asks his doctor (whom we have reason to believe makes house calls to Bergstrom on a weekly basis), “Don’t you think I’m right that something as traumatic and something as monumental as a blackout in fucking New York City would affect the health of the population?” Bergstrom is not reassured when his doctor, attempting to humor him, tells him, “I don’t think it’s going to cause any of your moles to transform into cancerous ones.”

Bergstrom and Francisco have a personal connection that goes back several generations (“I consider you like an uncle,” Francisco tells Bergstrom, and when he leaves his apartment he says, “I’ll tell my father I saw you”), but the nature of that connection is left unexplained. Whatever it is, it has led Francisco to make a momentous decision to cut his ties on the West Coast and travel east to work for Bergstrom. Mysterious as well is Bergstrom’s reason for the unconventional task he has assigned his new employee. “I want you to tell me what’s going on in my business. I can’t come out of here, I can’t leave here. I’m not interested in secret police, but I can’t come out, I need you there. It’s as simple as that,” Bergstrom tells the bewildered young man.
and then sends him on his way to his interview with Carville and Matalin. Although it is clear that Bergstrom plays a prominent behind-the-scenes role in running his firm, he remains a cipher throughout the series. For example, when Francisco offers his condolences regarding Bergstrom’s wife, who has suffered an unspecified fate, Bergstrom responds by saying, “She’s fine where she is now. It’s no problem. It happens every day.” When Francisco explains that he meant to say that he’s sorry about “the way it happened. It didn’t have to happen like that,” Bergstrom insists that it did. “It’s the way it happened. It’s just the way it is.” Far more ominously, as we shall see, is a flashback sequence in which Soderbergh’s camera catches Bergstrom erasing from a whiteboard the names of a dozen organizations, each name a variation on the one that remains, the highly suspect “Council for Middle East Progress.”

Despite these mysteries, the encounters between Bergstrom and Francisco, and the counterpointing between Carville and Matalin on the one hand, and the adulterous member of the firm Tommy Flannegan (John Slattery) and his wife on the other, as well as the disastrous lesbian affair-in-the-making of the hapless Maggie Morris (Mary McCormack), yet another Bergstrom Lowell employee, bring the personal and the political into juxtaposition, an outcome that should not be surprising from a Soderbergh television series centered in that most political of places, Washington, D.C. Moreover, as we shall see, the juxtaposition of the two prevents K Street from being dismissed as nothing more than an experimental curiosity by incorporating genuine political drama into the noir plot line.

Once Carville tells Matalin that Bergstrom has called to ask him to “listen to Francisco Dupré as a favor,” Matalin has the savvy to recognize that this is “a must-hire,” and from that moment Francisco is an object of suspicion among Carville, Tommy, and Maggie. And why shouldn’t he be? He comes with the imprimatur of Richard Bergstrom, who is regarded by nearly everyone as a questionable character. Moreover, Francisco is evasive and vague. When Tommy asks him, “Are you a Democrat?” Francisco avoids answering Tommy’s question by asking him, “Are you from Massachusetts?”—an evasion that is not lost on Tommy. (The contrast here and elsewhere between an African American and a white blonde may be coincidental or it may be Soderbergh’s intent to signal commonalities despite external differences, given Francisco’s pressures to comply with Richard Bergstrom’s requirements and Tommy’s inner turmoil.) Though Francisco is newly arrived in Washington, he appears to be remarkably well connected to a variety of powerful people, including Mitch Bainwol, president of the Recording Industry Association of
America (RIAA), whom the firm wants to represent in the industry’s public relations effort to combat file sharing. Francisco’s astonishing ability to get Bainwol on the phone in a matter of minutes to set up a meeting with the firm, which he explains simply by saying “ultimate Frisbee,” antagonizes Carville and further arouses his suspicions. This leads Matalin to tell Carville, “You need to quit being so paranoid about this manna from heaven.” As it turns out, Bainwol abruptly cancels the meeting at the eleventh hour, which intensifies the doubts Carville already had about Francisco.

Another surprising acquaintance of Francisco’s is Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States. When Maggie spots Francisco in a one-on-one with the prince and asks Francisco about it, he declines to answer whether he knows him or has recently met with him. This leads her to hire a GOP opposition research expert, Gary Maloney (playing himself), to investigate Francisco. Although Maloney initially agrees, he eventually drops out, telling Maggie that he can’t do the job and he can’t tell her why he can’t. This engages Maggie and Tommy in further speculation about Bergstrom’s intervention (“Who else could it be?”) as the unseen hand manipulating people to his will. In a subsequent episode, Francisco takes advice from Michael Deaver (playing himself), whose political experience is legendary. “Don’t be too cute,” he tells Francisco. “People in this town don’t realize that you can see right through cute.” He tells Francisco that the Four Seasons and Hay-Adams hotels are places where insiders go for power breakfasts and it would serve him well to be seen there. When Francisco discloses to Deaver that Bergstrom Lowell is in negotiation with the Saudis, Deaver, looking grave, tells him, “Don’t take any chances. You need to be careful, and I don’t think Richard [Bergstrom] has always been so careful.”

In episode two, an exchange between Carville and Tommy induces more paranoia when they learn that their plans to prep Howard Dean for the Democratic Party presidential primary debates have been leaked. Carville tells Tommy, “I still think something’s going on in New York.” Tommy asks, “You mean Bergstrom?” Carville replies, “Yeah. It don’t smell in Denmark but it sure as hell smells in Manhattan somewhere.” What we have in these bits of foreshadowing from early episodes are clues to the character of Richard Bergstrom. He is evidently a risk taker, almost certainly a man who has his obsessions as well as political (and likely personal) agendas, and he has incurred Carville’s deep antipathy.

The third of K Street’s mysteries concerns what the FBI will discover in its investigation of Bergstrom Lowell and whether its agents will be able to
find an employee of the firm to cooperate with them. Much of the action of the series turns on the bureau’s attempts to gain such an inside source. At one point or another, Francisco, Tommy, and Maggie are approached informally by FBI agents who hope to co-opt them, and on each occasion they are shown resisting the bureau’s entreaties. Carville, the managing partner of the firm, undergoes lengthy questioning by officials of the Justice Department about the status of Bergstrom Lowell’s relationship with the Council for Middle East Progress, with whom the firm has a forty-thousand-dollar monthly retainer agreement. During this session, Carville is ably represented by attorney Howard Gutman (playing himself), but the skilled lawyer cannot prevent the relentless interrogation of his client without creating suspicion that Carville has something to hide. In the course of the questioning, Carville concedes that he signed an authorization for a wire transaction for a substantial amount of money on behalf of the council, and this appears to be the nub of the FBI’s criminal investigation of Bergstrom Lowell. (In a flashback episode, we see Carville casually initialing the authorization without giving the document any scrutiny.)

To complicate these matters, in another flashback sequence at Richard Bergstrom’s apartment, Bergstrom instructs Francisco to deliver an envelope to Sophia Al Sabih (Sophia Ali) at the Iroquois Hotel in Manhattan, where she is having drinks with Tommy Flannegan. He describes her as an “Arabic operator.” When Francisco balks at the assignment, Bergstrom muses, “I wonder if this is a character deficiency on your part?” Francisco’s response reflects the full fury of his fear and frustration as he tosses the envelope back to Bergstrom. “No, it’s simply questioning what the fuck am I doing for you, Richard?” At this point, Bergstrom opens the envelope and shows Francisco its contents: three blank pages. “I have to have my games,” Bergstrom tells his bemused new employee. He then relates how much he enjoyed playing games when he went into the office on a regular basis. He tells Francisco that he once passed out phony scratch cards and watched his employees scratch them out and get winning numbers that he had made up. “It’s a little mean,” he concedes, “but it relieved my tension and pressure.”

**Appearance and Reality**

At the end of the series, when Sophia Al Sabih becomes aware of the tissue-thin reality of the organization she thought she worked for, the Council on Middle East Progress, she tells Carville and Matalin that “everything seems
like a house of mirrors.” To her it is all a mystery. The metaphysical basis of the mystery—appearances of people and events mask their undisclosed realities—and the enactment of this idea reveal severe emotional difficulties besetting some of K Street’s central characters. More specifically, Soderbergh contrasts the interactions of Carville and Matalin with those of Tommy and his wife to dramatize the ways in which shared values (for all their political differences, Carville and Matalin have a bond in their Roman Catholicism) can bind people and disparate ones can divide them. Soderbergh’s camera records Tommy and Sarah’s marital crisis as Tommy descends deeper and deeper into transgressive sex. When Tommy goes into darkened corridors or into the night in search of a prostitute, Soderbergh, with his trusty handheld, goes with him, and Tommy’s sense of alienation and the illicit sex are captured by those narrow spaces and darkness. Sarah Flannegan (J. Cameron-Smith) has repeatedly found pornographic material among Tommy’s belongings, and the couple has entered therapy. After six months she continues to find these materials and is deeply distressed. Tommy appeals to his right to privacy, which Sarah says she “agrees with in principle,” even as she remains distressed and confused by Tommy’s needs. But this is not the only thing that constitutes Tommy’s turn away from his marriage. There is also his sexual tryst with his father’s young fiancée, Anna (Jennice Fuentes), a woman Tommy’s age. In a flashback episode, we see Tommy and Anna in bed in her room at the W New York–Union Square Hotel on Park Avenue South. Anna kisses him affectionately and repairs to the bathroom. Sometime later that morning, Tommy discovers that Anna has killed herself with an overdose of pills. Subsequently, in three sequences where appearances defy reality, Tommy “sees” Anna standing on the sidewalk outside the building where Bergstrom Lowell has its offices, in the back of a room where the firm is conducting a focus group session about music file sharing among teenagers, and in the hallway outside his own office.

K Street was produced in 2003, when Soderbergh already had behind him the successes of sex, lies, and videotape (1989), Out of Sight (1998), Erin Brockovich (2000), Traffic (2000), and Ocean’s Eleven (2001). K Street is emblematic of Soderbergh’s inventiveness as a filmmaker and his readiness to combine or transcend conventional genres. His Ocean’s trilogy (2001, 2004, 2007), for example, was not merely a set of caper films; it was also comedy, crime suspense, even travelogue. So we should not be surprised to find that his exposure of the political ethos of image creating and deal making
in Washington should take the form of a docudrama involving at the same
time elements of melodrama and mystery.

Other contributors to this volume have pointed out that Soderbergh
frequently departs from the familiar forms of continuity editing and other
conventions of mainstream or commercial cinema.6 In K Street Soderbergh
is only slightly restricted in his “technologically mediated subjectivity.”7 The
flashbacks are there as well as the awkward interpolations and juxta-
positions. K Street even has Soderbergh’s evocative use of color (so much a part
of The Underneath [1995], Bubble [2005], and Traffic), as when he has Anna
make her ghostly appearances to Tommy in the same red outfit she wore the
night they met for drinks before going up to her hotel room. Presumably
the show’s production schedule prevented him from using even more of
what some critics have perhaps unfairly regarded as just so many crotchets
and contrivances that viewers have come to expect from him, but in com-
ensation Soderbergh’s “run-and-gun” approach allowed him to achieve K
Street’s noteworthy topicality. Each episode of the show was produced in
five days, which understandably gave Soderbergh very little leeway to have
the completed and edited episode ready for delivery to HBO on Friday,
but enabled him to connect his narrative to actual events in a remarkably
inventive fashion.

To appreciate Soderbergh’s achievement in K Street it is necessary to
remind ourselves that the weekly political melodrama did not come of age
on commercial network television until the arrival of The West Wing (Aaron
Sorkin, 1999–2006). Far more adventurous, experimental, and trenchant
than that extravagantly praised program, Soderbergh’s pseudo-exposé fore-
grounds the fortunes of Bergstrom Lowell’s employees against actual events
occurring in all their immediacy. Given the tendency in Washington for
“breaking events” to be reported in the media at a moment’s notice, Soder-
bergh’s creativity is on full display in his ability to exploit the fortuitous. For
example, Taubin points out that “the fictional FBI investigation of Bergstrom
Lowell coincided with an actual Drudge Report story fingerling Matalin as
a prime suspect in the Justice Department’s investigation” into the disclo-
sure of the CIA cover of Valerie Plame. (The blonde, glamorous Plame is
the wife of former ambassador Joe Wilson, the man who, in a well-known
Washington Post article, challenged the accuracy of the Bush administration’s
rationale for invading Iraq in 2003.) “K Street incorporated the Drudge story
so that for a couple of episodes the fictional and the real Matalin’s protests
of innocence merged,” Taubin writes, even as the fictional FBI was closing
in on Bergstrom Lowell. Other current events incorporated into the series include the Philadelphia mayoral election, which Carville and Tommy are involved in as supporters of the embattled incumbent, John F. Street; the California recall initiative to oust the governor, “the aptly named Gray Davis,” in Matalin’s words; the music industry’s concern about file sharing; the energy bill; and the sexual assault allegations against basketball star Kobe Bryant. But the most astonishing of all is the Democratic Party primary debates, in which Howard Dean uses a one-liner given to him by Carville (“in case the ‘Vermont Question’ comes up,” Carville tells Dean). Carville had always expected that Dean would be asked a question about how the governor of a state with a tiny minority population could be expected to understand the problems and concerns of African Americans, and in the actual debates the question did arise. Dean followed Carville’s advice to the letter, replying, “If the percent of minorities in your state had anything to do with how you can connect with African-Americans, then Trent Lott would be Martin Luther King.”

A variety of scenes in K Street function to consolidate Francisco Dupré’s role as the emotional center of the drama. For example, his vulnerability is addressed in a tête-à-tête with Donna Brazile (as herself), Al Gore’s campaign manager in the 2000 presidential election. She asks Francisco who’s going to be watching his back. “There’s no bloods in that room [at Bergstrom Lowell] but you. The white boys are not going to protect you.” What he needs to do, she advises, is to “come back home” and look for work in downtown D.C., join a church (“it’s good for the image”), and get a higher profile at specifically black venues. Yet if Francisco is the most vulnerable character, it is not because of his race (and Soderbergh gives us little reason to think otherwise) but rather because he has invested more trust in Richard Bergstrom than the rest of the employees at Bergstrom Lowell and he has the most to lose in the absence of being thrown a lifeline by Richard Bergstrom.

During a cell phone conversation in the final episode, an angry and distraught Francisco tells Bergstrom, “I came here with a reputation. I no longer have a reputation. I don’t even know why I shaved this morning. . . . I’m fucked! Do you understand that, Richard?” Soderbergh now cuts to Bergstrom, sitting in his apartment in front of the television set watching Mildred Pierce. He tells Francisco that he has nothing to worry about, that he’s not going to go to federal prison. “Zachary Scott [on Bergstrom’s TV screen] is gonna go to federal prison. You dress like that, you’re gonna go to prison. You’ve got nothing to worry about, just believe me. Those guys [the
assistant prosecutors from the Justice Department] are just acting, they're playing their parts.” When Francisco asks, “Where will I be next week? Do you have another assignment for me, Richard?” he receives a devastating rebuff from Bergstrom: “I’m very busy. I’m sure you can take care of this.” The camera stays on Bergstrom and his expression indicates that Francisco has hung up on him. A moment later, his phone rings again—it is likely that it is Francisco calling back—but Bergstrom declines to answer it. He lets the phone continue to ring as he watches *Mildred Pierce*.

By the tenth installment of the series the firm has ceased operation and Carville and Matalin have been forced to call upon their best friends for support as they sell off the office furniture. Tommy Flannegan is utterly bewildered by everything that has befallen the firm and its employees, and he is equally baffled by the apparent indifference of owner Richard Bergstrom. He asks Francisco if he has any idea what’s going on. “You’re the only guy who knows Bergstrom. You’re the only one who’s seen him. . . . What’s his take on all this?” Francisco tells him that “Richard is just taking this whole thing as a joke.” Tommy is incredulous, reminding Francisco that Bergstrom “brought us the council. This whole shit storm is about the council. So is he trying to take this thing down?” Alluding to what he refers to as Bergstrom’s addiction to *Mildred Pierce*, Francisco tells Tommy, “For him this is all just a movie. For him this is all a movie that he can rerun over and over and over again and be entertained.”

Tommy, who has already surrendered the capacity to respond emotionally to his wife and their disintegrating marriage, realizes there is nothing left for him in Washington. He buys a one-way ticket to Las Vegas. Soderbergh photographs him in his Vegas hotel room, naked from the waist up, as he gives two women directions on how he wants them to pleasure each other, and he watches with subdued appreciation until his father phones to tell him that he has begun therapy, something, he concedes, he should have done long ago. He also discloses to Tommy that Anna had a history of depression and had in fact tried suicide once before. As he hears this, Tommy retains the aeffectless expression indicative of the “low-key naturalistic approach” Soderbergh seems to be after in *K Street*.

It would be natural to expect that Soderbergh has put these themes in the service of artistic and philosophical preoccupations that extend beyond *K Street*, and this is exactly what we find. While it is not farfetched to see an investigative and even moralistic impulse at work, this characterization of *K Street* should also mention that Soderbergh is an inveterate social critic.
skewering the culture of high technology and unchecked capitalism where, one is led to believe, the fix is in. Insofar as the absence of knowledge gives rise to feelings of powerlessness in the highly wired world of Washington insiders, the fear inscribed in *K Street* conveys a philosophical message about appearance and reality and a cultural critique of political life in America that has, if anything, even greater trenchancy in the Obama era, when the voting public finds it difficult to tell whether the leadership of the country is in the hands of a transcendent political figure, an all-too-conventional pol, or, what would be worse, a charlatan.

We can construct an analogy between the acts of guesswork around which *K Street*’s narrative revolves and Soderbergh’s art of creative interpretation. Soderbergh does not find it necessary to surmount the opposition between what is objectively real and what is only appearance, but in order to fully understand what *K Street* is about, we need to remind ourselves that while Soderbergh appears as if he is commenting on current political events, he is actually reinterpreting them for his own thematic purposes. Soderbergh is familiar with films such as *The Anderson Tapes*, *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), and *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), in which the confluence of surveillance, institutional power, and paranoia bring people to grief; he tells interviewers Michel Ciment and Hubert Niogret that at the age of ten or eleven he discovered films like *The Conversation* that “had a tremendous impact on” him. The surprise ending of *The Conversation* reverses conventional expectations and leaves the principal character, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a renowned private investigator, in a state of moral solipsism and paranoid fear. (In the earlier, much maligned New Wave–inspired *Mickey One* [Arthur Penn, 1965], the central character, played by Warren Beatty, starts out in a similar state, but it is left open as to whether he ends up there.) *K Street* can be read not only as Soderbergh’s attempt to locate the philosophical nerve of such paranoia in his characters’ skepticism about their ability to know reality but also as his portrayal of the moral solipsism of Richard Bergstrom. This in turn reflects a philosophical crisis over what is merely apparent and what is real. We do not have to insist that these doubts arise, either for Soderbergh or his characters, as philosophical rather than dramatic questions because the two are not mutually exclusive: they arise from the nature of the situations in which Soderbergh puts them. Richard Bergstrom’s role in *K Street* is nothing if not ambiguous, and in the last sequence of the final episode, he arrives at Reagan National Airport—whether in triumph or subject to a subpoena
we don’t know—where he is met by a limo driver holding a sign that reads “M. Pierce.” Has Bergstrom simultaneously looted the Saudi’s account and sabotaged his own firm? Is he part of a larger sinister design? Is he fleeing from actual enemies or only phantom adversaries fostered by paranoid fears? Viewers of the show will have to settle for Soderbergh’s “house of mirrors” approach in which nothing is quite what it appears to be and questions raised in the series are not conclusively settled.

*K Street* is therefore both ambitious and thought provoking because it encourages viewers to distinguish between what they see through Soderbergh’s narrative and what they come to discover are his interpretations. Viewers who understand what Soderbergh is doing realize that he has brought them full circle in order to question the bland assurances of genre conventions in which “politics as usual” is eventually trumped by good intentions. Soderbergh thus exposes the “mask effect” of political culture and challenges its hegemony by upending genre expectations.11

Although *K Street* is not political drama in the partisan sense, it is significant that only two years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, *K Street*’s “Carville” is less concerned about further attacks on the United States than he is about his ability to do business with folks who don’t, in the words of his testimony to the Justice Department interrogator, “reasonably appear” to be worth worrying about. For that matter, it is significant that *K Street*’s Carville seems less worried about such “folks” than he is about his own government, or at least agents of its Justice Department and FBI. By the final installment of *K Street*, Soderbergh has us exactly where he wants us: the fact that Bergstrom Lowell may have been undermined by an investment capitalist who can pose as a recluse with a variety of paranoidlike beliefs suggests the extent of our difficulty to distinguish between appearance and reality and therefore our vulnerability. *K Street*’s conclusion is therefore far more dramatic than that of Soderbergh’s postmodern *Ocean’s Eleven*, for example, which rejected narrative closure in favor of a denouement in which the protagonists’ fates were left ultimately to the sequels *Ocean’s Twelve* and *Ocean’s Thirteen*. The five principal characters in *K Street* are destined to even more ambiguous fates, with no further installments of the series to tie up the loose ends that jeopardize not only their livelihoods but also their lives. In the end *K Street* is a radically underdetermined text, for there is more than one ending consistent with its episodes. The final installment provides what is at best the speculative explanation that all along Richard Bergstrom has planned to lure the Saudis into an arrangement whereby he, Bergstrom,
can use his firm as a way to transfer tens of thousands of Saudi dollars to his own coffers, suitably disguised. In the end, we see Bergstrom as a man who is self-absorbed and greedy for profit to the point of moral culpability. On this reading, Soderbergh has succeeded in dramatizing the cliché that even paranoids have real enemies, for Carville, Matalin, Flannegan, Morris, and Dupré are either Richard Bergstrom’s targets or his helpless pawns and very likely both.

Notes

1. Worse still for those interested in Soderbergh’s development as a filmmaker, the collection of interviews edited by Anthony Kaufman for inclusion in the multivolume Conversations with Filmmakers series appeared a year before Soderbergh filmed K Street and thus could not include any engagement with him on the series. See Anthony Kaufman, ed., Steven Soderbergh: Interviews (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2002).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
7. See Andrew deWaard, “Intertextuality, Broken Mirrors, and The Good German,” this volume.
8. Taubin, “K Street.”
11. I borrow this expression, and something of the point it is used to make, from Robert Arnett, “Eighties Noir: The Dissenting Voice in Reagan’s America,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 34, no. 3 (2006): 126.
Schizoanalyzing the Informant

David Sterritt

All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. . . . Words group themselves automatically into the familiar dreary pattern . . . and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain.

—George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

The protagonist of The Informant! (2009) would be a tough nut for a psychoanalyst to crack. Psychoanalysis explores the past, probing memories, dreams, and parapraxes for clues to the character, attributes, and modus operandi of a person’s mind. But as portrayed in Steven Soderbergh’s fact-based dramatic comedy, corporate wheeler-dealer Mark Whitacre is a person without a past. More precisely, he is a person who has endeavored to erase his past—his childhood, adolescence, and family history—by lying about it to others and refraining from thinking about it himself, as we gather from samples of his everyday thoughts, heard as voiceovers on the soundtrack. Perhaps he is in denial, blocking out a past too painful or heartrending to bear remembering. Or perhaps he has a mental illness that prevents him from assembling the pieces of his past into a coherent internal pattern. Or perhaps he is carrying out a plan to conceal his nature from those around him and has developed the habit of hiding aspects of himself from himself lest they somehow glimmer through and give his game away. Whatever its causes, Mark’s duplicity is heroic in its proportions. Its full extent doesn’t become apparent until long into the story, when we realize that what appeared to be a long string of deceptions is actually an endless string of deceptions, turning the very idea of truth into a chimera as ungraspable by Mark as by the colleagues, authorities, and relatives he has gulled.
The proximate cause of all this mendacity is old-fashioned greed. Mark has been stealing large amounts of money from Archer Daniels Midland, the company he works for, and prevaricating to cover up the crimes. But the intricacy and extensiveness of his fabrications suggest that deceit has taken on its own momentum, becoming a raison d’être rather than a necessary evil. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Mark lies to his allies as freely as to his adversaries—his loyal wife, Ginger, is almost as hoodwinked as his corporate superiors—and he continues to withhold information even when revealing all is unquestionably in his best interest. Further confusion comes from his frequent assertions, when caught in a fabrication or when he simply feels like saying it, that this time he’s really telling the whole truth. Which is, of course, another lie. It’s clear that Mark is bamboozling himself as thoroughly as he’s deceiving all the others, but he’s perfectly contented on that score, since “reality” is for him an arbitrary construct with little more ontological weight than the protean fictions he devises. In the final scene, Bob Herndon, a sympathetic agent from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, visits Mark in prison and asks him to finally tell how much money he has stolen and embezzled over the years. Mark modestly throws the question back to Bob, who has been by turns his friend, his dupe, his confidant, and his nemesis throughout his roller-coaster journey from corporate star to hapless jailbird. “I don’t know, Bob,” he says in the last spoken words of the film. “You tell me.”

Thought Experiments

In sum, the informant and The Informant! are epistemological puzzles, as tantalizing and slippery as any that Soderbergh has given us, even in films that appear considerably more complex on first viewing. They are philosophical puzzles, though—the kind that ask not to be definitively solved but to be embraced, experienced, and ruminated on as we do with any conceptual conundrum that seizes our imagination. And of course they are puzzles that Soderbergh himself wants to investigate, which is why he made this movie. In a perceptive essay on Soderbergh’s work, critic A. O. Scott contends that he seems “to approach each film as a problem, a hypothesis to be explored and tested in the course of production.” Scott groups The Informant! with Soderbergh’s two previous films, Che (2008) and The Girlfriend Experience (2009), as a triptych focusing on “fundamentally unknowable” characters whose “motives, feelings and inner lives remain just out of reach.”1 This
helps to explain the tension in many Soderbergh films between characters as emotionally rich human beings on one hand and as embodied abstractions on the other. To my mind, Javier Rodriguez in *Traffic* (2000) and Chris Kelvin in *Solaris* (2002) fit the former category, the eponymous protagonist in *Kafka* (1991) and Wilson in *The Limey* (1999) fit the latter, and Graham Dalton in *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) falls between them. One of the things that make *The Informant!* exhilarating is Mark Whitacre’s ability to span the whole spectrum, capturing our affection even as he knocks himself out being as abstract and depthless as possible. It’s quite a feat.

As cinematic thought experiments, Soderbergh’s films reflect his curiosity about specific properties of contemporary film production, postmodernist aesthetics, and the sociopolitical milieus that shape both the experiments themselves and whatever tentative results they may achieve. Yet while such clearly ambitious pictures as *Traffic, Solaris,* and *Che* place their cultural aspirations into the foreground, *The Informant!* presents itself as light entertainment, complete with witty dialogue, perky music by hitmaker Marvin Hamlisch, and superstar Matt Damon in the leading role. For moviegoers who don’t see much humor in the fact-based craziness and criminality depicted by the film, its buoyant tone can seem miscalculated and even troubling. One such viewer is critic Lisa Schwarzbaum, who wrote in *Entertainment Weekly* that Soderbergh applies “a greasy veneer of mirth over what is, no joke, a serious mess of malfeasance and mental instability.” Another is Hiram Lee of the *World Socialist Web Site,* who noted that in the years between the ADM scandal and the release of Soderbergh’s film, “the calamities caused by the subversion of the food resources of masses of people [to benefit the] private profit interests of a few has reached new heights.” A serious consideration of ADM’s criminal activities would have been welcome, Lee continues, but Soderbergh’s film “focuses disproportionately on the exploits of Mark Whitacre when it should have other things on its mind,” just as the actual ADM trial resulted in Whitacre receiving a much longer prison term than did higher executives who had committed much greater crimes, presumably because his “eccentricities” and “peculiar ability to deceive” made him especially fascinating to the investigators and prosecutors who were calling the shots. “So many essentials,” Lee concludes, “have simply been ignored.”

These critics make valid points, but *The Informant!* is a more interesting and important film when viewed less as a corporate caper movie—a sort of *Ocean’s Fourteen* blended with fact-based dramedies like Steven Spielberg’s
Catch Me If You Can (2002) and Robert Mulligan’s The Great Imposter (1961)—than as a philosophical investigation of, among other things, the ethical dimensions of everyday living in a world pervaded by the amorality of modern business. The film tacitly invokes the Socratic concept of the unexamined life, tracing intimate links between the unexamined personal–private life and the unexamined group–corporate life, both of which can seem very much worth living in a culture that equates material wealth with success, fulfillment, and happiness. From this perspective, the film’s smooth surfaces and manic moods do not counter but embody and convey the ideas that led Soderbergh to undertake this story. All of its chief elements, from Mark’s eccentric personality and escalating deceit to the company’s illegal practices and the justice system’s ongoing confusion, are colored and critiqued by the ironic implications of Soderbergh’s seamless vernacular filmmaking, which portrays them simultaneously as grist for absurdist comedy and signifiers of terminal decay in a self-obsessed society. With a few adjustments Soderbergh could have made Mark a truly dangerous figure—a Gordon Gekko of biochemistry, a Tony Soprano of price fixing—but Soderbergh doesn’t create flat-out villains very often, subscribing instead to the statement by Octave in Jean Renoir’s The Rules of the Game (1939), “The awful thing about life is this: Everyone has his reasons.”

Mark Whitacre, Crypto-filmmaker

The exploits of Mark Whitacre are drawn from the pages of Kurt Eichenwald’s best-selling book The Informant: A True Story, published in 2000. In the film as in life, Whitacre is a biochemist who took a job in the early 1990s with ADM, a huge agribusiness company with headquarters in Decatur, Illinois, squarely in the American grain belt. Every day, according to ADM’s Web site, its twenty-eight thousand employees “transform crops such as corn, oilseeds, wheat and cocoa into food ingredients, animal feeds, and agriculturally derived fuels and chemicals.” Also on the Web site is a declaration of “The ADM Way,” which asserts the company’s wish to uphold “the highest standards of integrity and ethical behavior in everything we do and say.”

Mark came to ADM as a scientist, but as the film begins he is also a major player in the company’s business area, building up its bioproducts division and supervising the production of lysine, an additive derived from corn starch and used in any number of ways by food processors around the globe. He describes his work in the movie’s first voiceover: “Archer Daniels
Midland. Most people have never heard of us. But chances are they’ve never had a meal we’re not part of. Just read the side of the package. That’s us. Now ADM is taking the dextrose from the corn and turning it into an amino acid called lysine. It’s all very scientific. If you’re a stockholder, all that matters is [that] corn goes in one end and profit comes out the other. We’ve got the largest lysine plant in the world here. That’s where I come in.” These words introduce Mark as a character and as a mindset, or rather a changing array of mindsets. The paragraph begins like an advertising pitch for ADM, shifts into scientific discourse, shifts again into a blunt statement of the firm’s reason for being—making money—and ends on an autobiographical note. Mark looks like a commonplace businessman, but this breezy interior monologue suggests that an unusual sensibility accompanies his bland appearance.

Something similar can be said about ADM and its lofty ethical claim, which comes into question almost immediately. The lysine operation has fallen behind on its production schedule because a virus has infected the dextrose stocks. One day Mark approaches Mick Andreas, a top executive and son of ADM patriarch Dwayne Andreas, saying that surreptitious phone calls from an executive at Ajinomoto, a Japanese competitor, have revealed that an Ajinomoto saboteur is responsible for the virus and that for $10 million Ajinomoto will give ADM a new lysine “bug” that is immune. Andreas might respond to these disclosures with righteous outrage, but instead he instructs Mark to talk down Ajinomoto’s price.

The story takes a decisive turn when ADM executives inform Mark that they’ve called in the FBI to investigate the situation. Mark seems oddly agitated by this news, but agrees to have a recording device placed on his private ADM phone line at home. Soon thereafter, FBI agent Brian Shepard arrives at his house to install the tap. As the agent is leaving, Ginger Whitacre suddenly insists to her husband that he must “say something” to Shepard, and that if he refuses, she herself will make some sort of declaration. Mark reluctantly takes Shepard aside and reveals that he hasn’t been entirely forthcoming about the Ajinomoto calls. In fact, he says, his statements to the FBI were scripted by his ADM superiors, who are covering up a far greater scandal—a multinational price-fixing conspiracy of which ADM has been a prime mover and chief beneficiary. Shepard immediately recruits Mark as an informant against the company, and Mark jumps into the role with gee-whiz enthusiasm. Before long he is wearing a wire to international meetings, facilitating FBI surveillance of executive collusion, and carrying on like a veteran undercover operative. He is also lying to virtually everyone
who crosses his path, about everything from phone calls and kickbacks to illegal bonuses and Swiss bank accounts.

Deceptions, equivocations, concealments, and evasions thus become the film’s main leitmotifs, beating out a narrative rhythm that rarely lets up. Mark isn’t responsible for all of the misbehavior, to be sure. ADM is indeed conspiring with Japanese and South Korean competitors to fix the amounts of lysine each will produce and the prices they will demand—offenses that are taken very seriously by antitrust prosecutors in the United States, where the artificially inflated market is having a heavy impact on suppliers and consumers; as Shepard puts it, “a pound of bacon, a peanut butter sandwich, some vitamins—anything that ADM has a hand in—it’s all fixed. . . . Basically, everyone in the country is the victim of corporate crime by the time they finish breakfast.” But in Mark’s hands, this deep well of malfeasance becomes simply a handy tool. With information about ADM’s crimes at his disposal, he uses it to mask his own embezzling, dupe the FBI and (eventually) the U.S. Department of Justice, and propel his exciting activities as an inside man for the feds. In important ways, Mark is something of an artist, and more specifically he’s a filmmaker, guiding video shoots and recording sounds that ultimately come together as a sort of crypto-movie, seen in bits and pieces by investigators and prosecutors as they gather evidence for their case. With his predilection for reflexive stories and postmodern structures, Soderbergh surely had this consciously or unconsciously in mind when he decided to tell Mark’s story.

The Corporation as Psychopath

Seeing a certain artistic creativity in Mark’s behavior does not preclude the possibility that his habitual lying might result from a mental disorder, as I suggested earlier. But while he consults with psychiatrists for therapeutic and tactical reasons, his machinations and motivations are so byzantine that the experts accomplish little beyond labeling him with a diagnosis (bipolar disorder) that names his idiosyncrasies without illuminating them. Given the uncertainties of current psychological paradigms—psychoanalytic, cognitive, behavioral, neurobiological, existential, or humanistic—it is hardly surprising that Mark’s therapists lose their bearings, relying as they do on such commonsense notions as the legibility of language, the cohesiveness of memory, and the efficacy of cognition as a link between embodied subject and external world. Mark flummoxes all this by supercharging “reality”
with fantasies and falsehoods, presenting the mishmash so persuasively that even his closest companions are taken in. Although the textbook term sociopath doesn’t begin to capture his complexity, it’s true that with him the social and the pathological constitute a single entity: the high-functioning manipulator who lies, cheats, and steals because his personal logic and the logic of capitalism so demand. His delusions are all the more pernicious for being hard to spot.

We must keep in mind, however, that those delusions are not entirely delusional and that psychiatry and its variants may be poorly equipped to fathom them. As farfetched and ill fated as Mark’s plans and schemes ultimately prove to be, they are basically antic variations on abiding themes of American business, grounded in commonplace aspirations to money, power, and esteem; if they were wholly chimerical they wouldn’t so successfully evade the bullshit detectors of his fellow executives, much less the generalized paranoia that famously pervades the corporate world. What distinguishes Mark from countless others of his ilk is less the nature of his crimes (they boil down to embezzlement and fraud) than the extraordinary amount of imaginative energy he puts into them. If he is indeed some kind of lunatic, he is no crazier than the corporate system in which he operates.

That system’s rickety mental health is astutely analyzed in The Corporation (2003), a Canadian documentary written by legal scholar Joel Bakan, who explores its ideas at greater length in his book The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power. Bakan argues that since corporations are legally defined as “persons,” they should be held to the same standards of behavior as actual persons and that when corporate “persons” fail to meet these standards, they should be deemed criminal, psychopathic, or both. This is likely to happen frequently, Bakan observes, since the “legally defined mandate” of a corporation is “to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, its own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others. As a result . . . the corporation is a pathological institution, a dangerous possessor of the great power it wields over people and societies.” In support of this point, Bakan and his colleagues adduce criteria from the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, prepared by the American Psychiatric Association, and other such evidence. While psychopathy is not a clinical term in that manual, the equivalent term, antisocial personality disorder, is used to characterize persons who exhibit traits associated with psychopathic conditions, which include glibness, superficial charm, pathological lying, conning and
manipulating behaviors, no sense of remorse or guilt, shallow emotional affect, lack of empathy, parasitic relationships, irresponsibility, and a habit of shifting blame onto others.6

This describes the collective personality of ADM and the individual personality of Mark Whitacre with remarkable accuracy. Both show appealing faces to the world, lie without shame, manipulate without compunction, and feed parasitically off naïve victims and fellow scavengers alike. More important, however, is something else that Mark and the company have in common—the absence of a meaningful past, the lack or blockage of a sense of history. I mentioned this earlier in connection with Mark, and it applies in related ways to ADM, which retains ties to company patriarch Dwayne Andreas but shows no shred of interest in the institutional memory that might have led its executives to think twice before plundering the wealth and squandering the respect their firm has acquired (legitimately or not) over almost three-quarters of a century. If we come to sympathize with Mark in ways we wouldn't dream of doing with the others at ADM, it's largely because The Informant! portrays him as the fun, entertaining desperado who preys on the dull, disagreeable desperados. And he does so in such a thoroughgoing manner that his actions reverberate beyond the specifics of the movie's narrative.

**Being and Becoming**

To indicate how and why Mark's actions reach out so effectively, I must further develop the point that began this chapter: Mark is a nut that psychoanalysis could never crack. This is because psychoanalysis, like the other models mentioned earlier, has the kind of structure that philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call treelike or arborescent, fixed in place by sociocultural dictates and rooted in a primeval, unconscious past that must be plumbed and explored, however fitfully and obliquely, if its irregularities and dysfunctions are to be understood. As we have seen, however, Mark has constructed a fictitious past so successfully that even his wife believes he was an orphan adopted in childhood by a wealthy benefactor, and he has disavowed his factual past so completely that it has become irrelevant even to himself. As his zigzagging fabrications and invented “reality” attest, he has traded the rigidity of psychic arborescence for the helter-skelter dynamics of rhizomatic thought, which careens in all directions and sets down roots wherever it pleases. “A schizophrenic out for a walk,” Deleuze and Guattari
write, “is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch. A breath of fresh air, a relationship with the outside world. . . . Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.” If any methodology can probe the mental processes of such a person, it is not the depth-oriented psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, which seeks the sources of subjectivity in early-life experience and insatiable unconscious needs. It is instead the desire-oriented schizoanalysis of Deleuze and Guattari, which holds that the subject is not an essential “self” but an infinity of desire-flows that can be either frozen into sociocultural being or liberated into untrammeled becoming. From a schizoanalytic perspective, Mark is, like all of us, an assemblage of desiring-machines in a state of incessant flux and instability. Unlike most of us, however, Mark instinctively resists the cultural codes that reduce the dynamism of libidinal desire to the stasis of convention and conformity; he goes with the mercurial flow, cheerfully oblivious to the fates of his family, his colleagues, and other fellow travelers less flexible than he. Soderbergh doesn’t speak of schizoanalysis, but he tapped into it (wittingly or not) in the aptly named Schizopolis (1996), and The Informant! certainly has a schizoanalytic ring, pursuing Mark’s proliferating schemes, deceptions, and illusions to their (il)logical conclusions without imposing social judgments on them. If one asked the filmmaker for a definitive verdict on Mark’s adventures, he might reply, “I don’t know. You tell me.”

**Existential Assets**

Schizoanalytically considered, Mark’s depthless personality and compulsive self-invention are not psychological flaws but existential assets, and Soderbergh treats them as such, celebrating his incessant energy and openness to experience. In this respect The Informant! resembles Schizopolis, the television miniseries K Street (2003), the improvisational Bubble (2005), and The Girlfriend Experience, which I take to be the Soderbergh pictures most strongly influenced by the work of John Cassavetes, a schizoanalytic filmmaker if ever there was one. “All my life,” he once remarked, “I’ve fought against clarity—all those stupid definitive answers. . . . A good movie will ask you questions you haven’t been asked before.” Writing of Cassavetes’s last major movie, Love Streams (1984), cinema scholar Ray Carney names properties that we can instantly recognize in The Informant! and the other films just mentioned: “the way characters are freed from fixed identities or abstract
Looking for philosophical roots of this approach to experience and aesthetics, Carney goes to a source who predates Deleuze and Guattari by half a century. In one of his last books, philosopher and psychologist William James described empiricism as a way of thinking in which “reality cannot be . . . confined by a conceptual ring-fence. It overflows, exceeds, and alters. It may turn into novelties, and can be known only by following its singularities from moment to moment as our experience grows. Empiricist philosophy thus renounces the pretension to an all-inclusive vision. . . . It stays inside the flux of life expectantly, recording facts, not formulating laws. . . . Philosophy, like life, must keep its doors and windows open.”¹⁰ This is truly a “philosophy of the wrecking ball,” as Carney calls it, toppling the rationalist structures that James opposed because they “systematized the life out of life.” I contend that in his best films Soderbergh, like Cassavetes, lays siege to the “designs for living [of characters and viewers] in order to allow real living to begin.”¹¹

This is what Mark Whitacre does too, in his hectic, fluctuating life that is also a work of semi-aleatory art. He would not be able to embrace his novelties and follow his singularities so wholeheartedly, however, if he were committed to the kind of rooted, ordered existence that ordinary corporate executives—including the unimaginatively criminal sort in ADM’s top ranks—lead as a matter of course. If we try to understand how Mark puts over such extravagant tricks on so many smart people for so long a time, we notice an interesting fact: Until his web starts to unravel well into the story, nobody he interacts with seems to think that something odd, untrustworthy, or threatening dwells underneath his regular-guy appearance. The explanation for this, I think, is that there is no underneath to his depthless, schizo-flowing self. The person and the persona are the same. *The Informant!* is a film of shiny, seductive surfaces leaning against more shiny, seductive surfaces, and one-dimensional Mark is its perfect protagonist just as Hamlisch’s happy-face music is its ideal accompaniment.

I’m not suggesting that Soderbergh’s work in general or *The Informant!* systems of relationship . . . the unpredictability of scenes’ development . . . and . . . the way [the film’s] tones work not to dictate particular responses, but rather to entertain possibilities.” Whereas ordinary films encourage the viewer’s tendency to impose judgments and values, here “scenes complicate and delay judgments, forestalling resolutions and clarifications and suspending us among possibilities,” keeping us off balance so as to encourage the kind of “exploratory stance” that characterizes the movie itself. Precisely.⁹
in particular has schizoaesthetics as drastic as those of Cassavetes’s greatest films; the maker of *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) and its sequels (2004, 2007) often seeks compromise between his more radical impulses and the concessions necessary for sustaining a career in commercial cinema. Despite its mainstream credentials, however—Damon, Hamlisch, Warner Bros., and so forth—*The Informant!* is robustly offbeat stuff, and its sort-of-hero is a unique creation, embodying a fascination with façades that soars far beyond Hollywood’s customary truisms about the deceptiveness of appearances. To say that Mark presents a false front the way an imposter wears a mask would miss the sincerity of his superficiality. If he were the kind of artist who crosses into philosophy, he might echo Oscar Wilde’s comment about guises and disguises: “The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.”12 And if he were the kind of artist who exhibits work in galleries, he might say what Andy Warhol said on the subject: “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.”13 What’s below the surface is the surface, and Mark glides across it like a schizoskater whose blades engrave ever expanding rhizomatic patterns on the sleek topographical plane it offers up for inscription. This is the “schizorevolutionary . . . writing” that Deleuze and Guattari describe—a writing that embraces “all that flows and counterflows,” attaining the “authentic modernity [that] consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings,” namely, “the pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds—art as ‘experimentation.’”14

The implications of such an outlook are often prescient and political. A component of Mark’s overflowing fantasy life, for instance, is an idée fixe that he will end up running ADM when its board of directors fires the present executives and rewards him for having exposed the old guard’s corruption; seen in the context of the early twenty-first century, the notion that he is the only logical candidate to run the company he has just smashed up evokes the decision of the new Barack Obama administration that the only people qualified to repair the economic damage done by the George W. Bush gang were the very people (Timothy Geithner, Lawrence Summers, et al.) who facilitated and exacerbated that damage in the first place. More broadly, the self-inventing, antiestablishment nature of Mark’s mentality makes him an energetic practitioner of deterritorialization, the schizoanalytic term for processes that liberate human energies from the means of production that are privileged by capitalist systems. These processes destratify labor and
power along rhizomatic lines of escape and are contested in turn by forces of reterritorialization and restratification, from which they again strive for freedom. “You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that reterritorialize everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions. Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize.”15 The challenges are endless, but so are the possibilities. Mark’s loopy dances with ADM and the FBI are loose-cannon maneuvers that fall outside the carefully coded rules of business behavior, aiming to destabilize and deterritorialize the protocols of (amoral) rationality and (circumscribed) free enterprise on which the corporate structure rests. The system strikes back by reterritorializing him with a vengeance, putting him in prison to serve longer than the top executives on whom he blew the whistle. But it’s for ten and a half years, not the rest of his life, and he gets paroled after eight and a half. When he walks out of jail at the end of the movie we have no reason to doubt that his family, his spirits, and his anarchic imagination are all intact and ready for more action. He is as bracingly subversive as any character in recent cinema.

**Impromptu Reflections**

Mark’s affability and originality notwithstanding, his depthless personality makes him an incomplete figure, always at risk of sabotage by the confusions and commotions he produces. Soderbergh may identify with him in this regard, knowing that he’s far from ordinary as a filmmaker and that one commercial failure too many could undermine his future in an industry where, as Woody Allen once told me, the indispensable creative tool is big money. This could explain why Soderbergh softens the harshest consequences that rebounded on Mark in real life. According to Eichenwald’s account, Whitacre built up a substantial psychiatric dossier during his secret-agent years, undergoing multiple hospitalizations as well as receiving a lot of psychotherapy. The film includes the hospital stays and therapy sessions, albeit in sketchy and telegraphic form, and it signals Mark’s increasingly unhinged mental state by depicting a fact-based episode in which he fakes his abduction by unidentified kidnappers who, he falsely and hysterically claims, held him captive in the back of a car for twenty minutes. What the movie omits, however, are two suicide attempts by Whitacre when his informant career
was going off the rails; the second of these was staged in such a perfunctory manner that few could mistake it as more than a cry for help, but the first might well have been a serious effort to end his life.

Be this as it may, Harold Baker, the judge who accepted Whitacre’s guilty plea and later sentenced him, saw no need to offer help; he did not deny Whitacre’s bipolar disorder but found it irrelevant to his actions. “The court can find no clear connection between Mr. Whitacre’s bipolar disorder and his criminal conduct,” the judge stated when announcing the surprisingly harsh penalty. “At times, he displays what could easily be characterized as sociopathic behavior. It is difficult to know when Mr. Whitacre is lying and when he is telling the truth.” In the end, Baker decided, Whitacre’s dazzling success at ADM was interlaced with so much “mendacity, deceit, coercion, and theft” that his motivation could not have been anything but “just garden-variety venality and greed.” Baker’s readiness to ignore Whitacre’s history of erratic, contradictory, and ultimately self-destructive behavior strikes me as judicial arrogance that Soderbergh would have done well to question.16

This said, I hasten to add that *The Informant!* as a whole limns Mark’s rhizomatic mentality in terms so subtle and acute that the shortcomings of the courtroom scene seem almost beside the point. The key to Soderbergh’s nuanced (schizo)analysis lies in the stream-of-consciousness voiceovers that I mentioned at the outset. Providing samples of Mark’s interior musings as he goes about his daily life, they initially appear to be little more than wry supplements to the dialogue between characters onscreen. As the film progresses, however, patterns emerge. Some of the impromptu reflections have to do with unforeseen catastrophe—a man who spoke an ordinary sentence and abruptly succumbed to a fatal heart attack, a horse that had to be euthanized at a fair the Whitacres attended with their children. Oth-

ers center on disguise and concealment, as when Mark mulls over the fact that polar bears hide their black noses when they need to blend in with snow-covered surroundings and wonders how they know their noses aren’t white. Whatever their subjects, however, Mark’s ponderings are consistent in three respects: they are rendered in a calm, casual tone; their voiceover presentation clearly distinguishes them from regular dialogue; and they are always anodyne, relating anecdotes, reminiscences, and bromides that reveal nothing of any consequence, to us or to Mark himself.

Why, then, has Soderbergh made them such an integral part of the film’s fabric? At the beginning of this chapter I described Mark as a man who has
attempted to erase his past, lying about it to others and hiding it even from himself, perhaps fearing that if he acknowledges his secret self—we can now say his secret, empty self—then others might recognize it and reject it too. His interior monologues are a vital component of this strategy, displacing the stream of authentic consciousness with a haphazard current of trivia and ephemera that are as numbingly harmless as they are insipid and jejune. To understand why he causes this to happen, consider The Demolished Man, a justly acclaimed novel by science fiction author Alfred Bester published in 1953. The tale envisions a future in which telepathy has become an acquirable skill for those who have a genetic predisposition and work at cultivating the ability. In this environment a man sets out to kill a hated rival, knowing that he must somehow mask his murderous thoughts from police officers who can read minds. As part of his solution to the problem, he asks a jingle writer to compose a ditty that is devoid of meaning yet so relentlessly catchy that he won’t be able to get it out of his head. The result:

Eight, sir; seven, sir;  
Six, sir; five, sir;  
Four, sir; three, sir;  
Two, sir; one!  
Tenser, said the Tensor.  
Tenser, said the Tensor.  
Tension, apprehension,  
And dissension have begun.¹⁷

[repeat, repeat, repeat]

And on and on, ad nauseam, ad aeternitatem.

Mark’s musings are less insufferably viral, but they serve the same purpose—jamming the frequency, filling the forebrain, flattening the intertwined qualia (in Henri Bergson’s terminology) of authentic thought into the deracinated surfaces that characterize what Deleuze and Guattari call the body without organs, a dis-organized flow of “nonstratified, uniformed” desire. Now we can reinterpret the title of the Whitacre saga: the inform-ant is l’informe, the unsublimated materiality that manifests anarchic freedom, Georges Bataille tells us, by eluding containment in meanings, concepts, and categories. When associated with human subjectivity, the radical abjection of l’informe brings the danger that identity may liquefy and seep away. An entropic bull in the china shop of modern business, Mark disseminates
structure-busting disarray at countless points along his rhizomatic path, so slyly and insidiously that no one catches on until the rhizome begins doubling back on itself, carrying him into situations so unstable that his protean pseudoselves can no longer evade the microfascisms of capitalism, law, and family that reach out to reterritorialize him. And now that we see the informant as l’informe, we can schizointerpret the exclamation point that Soderbergh has added to the story’s original title. It points to a line of flight, but it also indicates a boundary, a limit beyond which Mark’s protean self-inventions can no longer be sustained. Eventually, his elaborate house of fiction must break down.

**Deconstruction and Collision**

The collapse takes place in the last scene before Mark’s trial, and the moment is signaled by an alteration in the voiceover pattern. As noted, the voiceovers’ placement on the soundtrack, in counterpoint with the concurrent images, clearly distinguishes them from the film’s regular dialogue—until now, when they start impinging on the dramatic action. Mark and Ginger are sitting in their living room, listening to Agent Shepard’s deconstruction of a fabricated letter that Mark claims was written by Dr. Miller, his psychiatrist. Shepard has prepared meticulously for this moment—covering every base, foreseeing every objection, eliminating every potential weakness from his delineation of Mark’s latest fraud. His charges are unchallengeable, but like the polar bear, Mark instinctively covers up. And in a startling twist, his spoken and unspoken voices collide, indicating the imminent meltdown of his overstressed mental circuits.

“The problem with the letter,” Shepard says with obvious regret, “is it’s a lie.” Mark indignantly points to the (forged) signature and (doctored) letterhead. Shepard replies that the area code on the letterhead didn’t exist at the time of the letter’s date. More quibbling ensues, but we see from her expression that even faithful Ginger is finally accepting the awful truth about her husband. The new area code hadn’t even been announced, Shepard continues, when the letter was allegedly written. And now Mark’s voiceovers make their first appearance in the scene, spoken with an immediacy they’ve never had before.

**Mark to himself in voiceover:** Ron Henkoff from *Fortune* called Dr. Miller and Dr. Miller confirmed—
Mark to Shepard aloud: Henkoff—if you talk to Henkoff—Ron Henkoff—from Fortune magazine?—verified the letter with Dr. Miller—

Shepard: I talked to Dr. Miller, Mark.

Mark to himself in voiceover: That's a violation of my doctor-patient confidentiality.

Mark to Shepard aloud: That's a total violation of my doctor-patient confidentiality. You can't call Miller—

Shepard: Doctor-patient confidentiality doesn't apply to forgeries.

Mark to himself in voiceover: Then why did Fortune magazine run the story?

Mark to Shepard aloud: Then why would Ron Henkoff—for Fortune magazine—put it in—a cover story? Henkoff—if you talk to Henkoff—

And so on, until Ginger tearfully pleads with him to stop and Shepard sadly asks, “Why do you keep lying?”

Mark in voiceover: I don’t know. [long pause]

Mark in dialogue: Well, I think I should go back to the hospital. . . .

At first these voiceovers seem to represent Mark’s spur-of-the-moment thinking as he cooks up responses to Shepard’s unmasking of his scheme. Voiceovers have never performed that function before in the film, however, nor have they seemed nearly as urgent, so their new rhythm and tone must have some other cause. A possible explanation is that Mark’s unconscious has turned the pressure up, forcing itself into his reality after the decades of repression he has inflicted on it, but the movie hasn’t implied psychoanalytical explanations for any of Mark’s previous thoughts or actions, and there’s no reason to think it has suddenly changed course.

In my view, these last-ditch voiceovers are the opposite of unconscious because they spring from the same invisible source that has produced everything we’ve heard and seen for the past hour and a half: they spring from Soderbergh, or more precisely, from the film itself. The film is greeting this singular moment in the story—the dis-organization of Mark’s shape-shifting subjectivity as his rhizomatic line of flight enters its dying fall—by revealing itself as our ultimate informant and sending forth its schizodynamic power to resolve Mark’s otherwise insoluble predicament. It is an extraordinary action
for a film to take, and a moving display of empathy and care. *The Informant!* clearly loves its eponymous schizotrickster, and it’s hardly surprising that the epilogue finds him and Ginger on their way to a new beginning. Will they live happily ever after? I don’t know. You tell me.

**Notes**


4. The screenplay by Scott Z. Burns is closely based on Kurt Eichenwald, *The Informant: A True Story* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000). This was Eichenwald’s second book, and it was a finalist for the Investigative Reporters and Editors Book Award and a J. Anthony Lukas Prize.


COMPETING MODES OF CAPITAL IN OCEAN’S ELEVEN

R. Colin Tait

Why not do it? Because yesterday I walked out of the joint after losing four years of my life and you’re cold-decking *Teen Beat* cover boys. Because the house always wins. You play long enough, you never change the stakes, the house takes you. Unless when that perfect hand comes along you bet big and then you take the house.

—Danny Ocean

“You Shook Sinatra’s Hand, You Should Know Better”

In the first moments of *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), disheveled protagonist Danny Ocean (George Clooney) is released from prison after doing four years of hard time. He stands as a man out of sorts: an unshaven ex-con in a tuxedo, hoping to reassert his male utility in the face of overwhelming odds. This image echoes Ocean’s earlier conversation with his parole board, when he announces that he allowed himself to be caught after his wife left him, as part of his admitted “self-destructive phase.” The juxtaposition of Ocean in his tuxedo, set against the backdrop of the prison, presents him as a man “out of time” as well, an anachronistic, nostalgic version of “manliness” set against the stark representation of a present-day jail.

Steven Soderbergh’s remake of the Rat Pack classic *Ocean’s Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960) consciously exploits the cultural cachet of the earlier picture but with several profound modifications. Here, as in the Sinatra film, an amiable band of outlaws performs the ultimate act of male solidarity and utility—a heist—achieving something far greater than they could have
accomplished individually. A heist expresses the desire for two complementary value systems. The first of these is money, as the gang will attempt to steal $165 million to divide evenly among themselves. The second value is directly related to the heist genre’s ongoing appeal, embodying the way that men, each possessing unique and highly specialized sets of skills, are supposed to use them within the contemporary setting. These depictions of male solidarity, camaraderie, and friendship allow the best of both worlds: the reward of direct monetary compensation for their efforts and fulfilling the more important values of love and solidarity. Thus, the film offers a typical Hollywood reward of love and money for those who deserve it. In this vein, *Ocean’s Eleven* not only foregrounds these value systems that the heist group embodies but also the competing modes of capital that jockey for position throughout the film.

Another tension within Soderbergh’s remake is the film’s depiction of real-life history (circa 2001) set against a present-tense, albeit fictional, “reality.” After his release, Ocean reads a newspaper headline: “Las Vegas Landmark to Be Razed: Former Casino Owner Denounces Plan,” which is accompanied by photographs of Reuben Tishkoff (Elliott Gould) and Terry Benedict (Andy Garcia). According to the newspaper, “Terry Benedict, the new owner of the Xanadu casino, announced his plan to demolish the resort and replace it with ‘something the whole world will treasure.’” The presence of this material at the beginning of the film, and Danny as focalizer for the viewer, is important, testifying not only to the character’s function in mediating this conflict but also his business of producing a solution to it.

The conflict could not be clearer. Here, Gould’s Reuben Tishkoff, the nostalgic embodiment of American capital that Las Vegas used to stand for, runs counter to Garcia’s suave, vaguely European Terry Benedict, who embodies the new global monetary system that is in the process of transforming the site of Vegas from “America’s Playground” to a destination for global tourism.

Despite its status as a typical Hollywood film, *Ocean’s Eleven* highlights several profound issues regarding history, memory, and globalization by overwriting contrasting value systems on the palimpsest of Las Vegas. First, it utilizes the cultural cachet of an earlier historical moment (the Rat Pack and the 1960 *Ocean’s Eleven*) to nostalgically evoke the representation of early Americana within the contemporary global setting of “New Vegas.” The heist is presented as a utopian alternative to both systems of capital (local and global)—depicting an alternate universe that is populated by
“real” people and places—but where it is still possible to realign the system by rewriting the rules and “beating the house” through this ultimate act of male solidarity. In doing so, the film imagines how collective efforts result in a different set of moral and monetary rewards in addition to the achievements of love and money.

As a work of mass culture in the early twenty-first century, Ocean's Eleven necessarily foregrounds historical issues that are subsequently mediated for an audience within the film. The setting here is crucial, not only because Vegas is the staging ground for early postmodern theory but also because it serves as the ongoing site of hyperaccelerated transition. The continued destruction and reconstruction of its landmarks allows us to view, in real time, the global flow of money in and out of the Strip. It is this historical actuality—the replacement of older structures with newer ones—that can be seen as the transitional space of economic modes as they transform from modern to postmodern capital.

The heist film’s meaning can be found within its various reappearances that are historically motivated and symptomatic of overall socioeconomic trends. Ocean's Eleven is emblematic of the transformation of economic mode (the transitional moment of capital), which simultaneously embodies the cultural logic of Hollywood while at the same time criticizing it. In my reading I demonstrate how Soderbergh employs both allegorical and utopian strategies in order to reveal the film’s alternate value system in play.

Fredric Jameson’s reading of Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975) can be reconfigured here in order to account for the new features of the contemporary setting, as the heist film can be read as a utopian rallying point of a competing value system. Jameson suggests that it is not the shark itself that needs to be questioned but rather the formation (and class composition) of the group of people who band together to defeat it. Following this logic, we should put aside our impulse to “interpret” the shark as an outright symbol and instead accept its figuration as “polysemous” (Jameson, “Reification” 26). Jaws not only serves as an excellent example of how ideology is folded back into texts but also shows the way that social and historical issues can be figured within movies in order to “be the object of the successful manipulation and containment” (27). Ocean's Eleven operates in a similar manner, conjuring a set of heroes who rally against the “mythical” conjuration of a “monster” (27). This approach can also be applied to viewing Terry Benedict, whose depiction need not be interpreted as the outright symbol of “capital” but can instead be seen as the “monster” that the protagonists of the film will rally
against. Danny’s goal is not only to repatriate his male utility but also to find a place for himself in the new system of capital, which can be achieved only by opposing Benedict. This opposition links him to Reuben, and both characters must negotiate their past-ness in the present day. Danny supplements the credo, “the house always wins,” with his optimistic assertion that betting big will still let you take the house.

Ocean has spent his time in prison scheming to steal from the most impervious vaults in Las Vegas and has calculated the booty of the job as “eight figures, divided equally.” As his right-hand man, Rusty (Brad Pitt), says, the heist will require ten or eleven specialists in their field or “at least a dozen guys doing a combination of cons.” Utilizing the insider language of the con man, Rusty says that they’ll need “a boskie,” a “Jim Brown,” a “Miss Daisy,” plus “two jethros” and a “Leon Spinks,” not to mention “the biggest Ella Fitzgerald ever.” The formation of a diverse group relates to the central issue in almost all crime films, especially because men get to use their unique skills (denoted by Rusty’s categories) in a “proper” setting. As it stands, Rusty has been teaching (rather unsuccessfully) Hollywood teen stars the ins and outs of poker, Reuben has been ousted from his casino and is doomed to witness its destruction at the hands of his rival Terry Benedict, Frank (Bernie Mac) has been dealing blackjack at a casino in Atlantic City, the Malloy twins (Scott Caan and Casey Affleck) have been entertaining themselves by annoying each other in Utah, electronics expert Livingston Dell (Eddie Jemison) has been working with an FBI drug squad, Yen (Shaobo Qin) has been employed as a Chinese acrobat, Saul (Carl Reiner) is retired in Florida and losing at the dog track, Linus (Matt Damon) has been trying to establish himself as a pickpocket in Chicago, and explosives specialist Basher (Don Cheadle) has assembled an inept gang of bank robbers and is about to get himself caught before Rusty finds him. Basher’s reaction to Rusty’s offer—“It’ll be nice working with proper villains again”—testifies to the bind in which all these characters have found themselves. Their impressive skills and talents are being squandered because they lack the opportunity to express them in the contemporary cultural context.

The pan-American composition of the group is also important, recalling a generic precursor: the World War II combat film. The diverse constitution of the group came to stand as a rallying point for the construction of the mythical American character within the context of the nation-building project. This diversity finds its expression in the Ocean’s Eleven ensemble, who represent the many geographical and racial facets of America. In this
vein, it is important to note that Danny hails from New York, Frank is from New Jersey, Rusty resides in LA, the Malloys are Mormons from Utah, Saul is retired in Florida, Livingston is in California, Linus is in Chicago, and Reuben is a Jew in Las Vegas. The inclusion of Basher (an Englishman) and Yen (from China) is also significant, as they expand the parameters of the group’s resistance to globalization by themselves representing a globalized alternative to the contemporary mode of capital.

The Heist Genre

If what is at stake for Danny is the repatriation of his male utility (a common theme in the less violent examples of the heist genre), a revisitation of the history of the subgenre is essential, as the heist genre dictates the cultural capital that *Ocean’s Eleven* inherits and subverts. Jameson asserts that the historical transformation of the criminal protagonist (from reprehensible to sympathetic) acts as a cipher for the public interpretation of manliness. *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) “is a permutation of a generic convention” through which “one could write a history of the changing social and ideological functions of this convention, showing how analogous motifs are called upon in distinct historical situations to emit strategically distinct, yet symbolically intelligible messages” (Jameson, “Reification” 30). In this view, film gangsters of the thirties were “psychopaths,” while the same type in postwar Hollywood productions “have unexpectedly become invested with tragic pathos” that expressed “the confusion of veterans returning from World War II” (30–31). As the cinematic criminal was transformed, we can also ask whether audiences were either allied or opposed to these conceptions. Today, criminals in narratives, Ocean’s gang being prime examples, are seen as heroic, sympathetic, and ultimately justified in their actions. Thus, Danny Ocean acts as our surrogate in playing out our thoughts and anxieties regarding American identity, capitalism, friendship, and even love.

In the original *Ocean’s Eleven* film, the merry band of criminals comprises the remnants of a World War II platoon that had operated as a crack commando unit under Frank Sinatra’s Danny Ocean. The restless ex-GIs find themselves unsuited to the new conditions of postwar society and must operate outside this framework in order to find personal fulfillment. The heist connects them directly to these new historical circumstances and class relations, with the heist group attempting carve out a small niche for themselves within the new world system.
The depiction of class is central to this discussion, as the heist has always served as a site for this debate, dating from the earliest example of the sub-genre, *Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950). In this film, former soldier Dix (Sterling Hayden) is unable to adapt to the new conditions of postwar society, and his gambling and drunkenness are both symptoms of this listlessness. His contemporaries are the other lost souls who reside in the purgatory of the criminal underworld. Importantly, they are not considered evil but simply seek the “one big score” that will allow them to utilize their skills and redeem their personal pride. The neutral morality of this depiction is a key feature of this work, as the gang attempts to overcome their current circumstances through teamwork, planning, and a nonviolent job. This emphasis on groups corresponds neatly with the postwar eruption of the heist films, in which individuals align with others in order to accomplish something bigger than themselves and attain greater rewards. Jameson accounts for these shifts in the genre, stating that “this very distinctive narrative content . . . can at once be structurally differentiated from the older paradigms by its collective nature: in this, reflecting an evolution towards organizational themes and team narratives, which have been shown to be significant developments in the other sub-genres of mass culture (the western, the caper film, etc.), during the 1960s” (31, emphasis added). This logic presupposes that the heist genre reappears and disappears at various historical junctures and that each version will express different values than the last.

Though the heist genre did not last long in the United States, it found greater life in Europe, where several key texts modified its conventions. In the heist’s reconstitution in France—with *Rififi* (Jules Dassin, 1955) and *Bob le flambeur* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1955)—the genre continued to highlight the exploits of the noble, yet downtrodden protagonist. In *Rififi*, the protagonist is an ex-con who appears to have tuberculosis, and in *Bob le flambeur*, Bob is, among other things, a heroin-addicted gambler. The genre mutated further when transplanted to Italy, where the heist emphasized comic rather than tragic dimensions. Interestingly enough, in Europe the genre depicts the problems of class conflict and poverty in their more explicit forms. *Big Deal on Madonna Street* (*I soliti ignoti*, Mario Monicelli, 1958) traces the exploits of a hopeful, yet down-and-out gang of everyday people. What *Madonna Street* alters is the group as “professional” criminals. Instead, they are all the lowest of the low in postwar Italy. While not immediately inclined toward crime, they assemble in order to transcend their social conditions and poverty, as exemplified by the motivation of photographer Tiberio (played by
Marcello Mastroianni) to spend his share of the money simply to bail his wife out of jail and reopen his camera store.

When the heist genre returned to the United States in the early 1960s, the original Ocean's film was the baroque incarnation of the form, and its repatriation by the silly antics of the Rat Pack looting Vegas sent the heist genre into limbo for another long stretch, this one ending in the early 1990s. The original film takes the essential conventions of the genre and combines both their comic and tragic elements into a playful, reflexive romp for actors to play themselves within a formal structure and to sing songs in the middle of what was once presumably a venue for serious social reflection. This consideration will be important later, as it becomes one of the key features of the film’s doppelgänger: Soderbergh’s own version of Ocean’s Eleven.

Viva Las Vegas

Soderbergh’s film inherits and exploits the cultural capital of the heist film that I have traced but within the specific parameters of its contemporary historical moment. These ongoing transformations are symptomatic of the particular moments of capital from which they emerge. The heist film is the embodiment of countercultural trends and possibly contains the utopian gesture that positively reconstitutes postmodern male utility. Danny’s quest to bet large against the house can be seen as a monumental gesture in the face of the shift from modern (and American) capital to its postmodern and globalized counterpart. This tension between modes is embodied through the opposing real-life spaces of Las Vegas, as seen in the location shooting at the Bellagio casino, the “found” footage of the actual destruction of the “Xanadu,” as well as the synthesis of these sites within the film.

If the contemporary subject is increasingly fragmented by the system of late capital (characterized by Francis Fukuyama’s famous declaration that the end of the twentieth century was the epoch of “the end of history”), then what occurs at this “end” is the “blockage of the historical imagination,” within postmodernism. Not only is Ocean’s Eleven’s status as a remake symptomatic of this phenomenon but presumably we have arrived in an era that remains trapped in a singular mode of representation, reflecting the overall dominance of the singular vision of the market. Hollywood is the best expression of these tensions, as movies are the ultimate product of the system of capital that produces them. What is needed at this point is
allegorical reading that can help us to negotiate between the “real” and “fictional” elements of the film. The camera captures both the real and fictional elements, reconstituting them as allegorical within an equally distributed “imaginary space.”

By rechristening the real-life and fictional features of *Ocean’s Eleven* as allegorical, we can now attempt to reread the historical and “real-life” appearances of actors playing themselves, along with the depiction of historical buildings in the film. Here, the renaming of the El Rancho (which was imploded in 2000—the year the film was shot) as the Xanadu (a hotel that was never built but whose designs feature prominently in the Las Vegas imaginary) is essential to my consideration, as it demonstrates the allegorical relationship that the film has to reality. This feature, in addition to the other real-life personalities within the film (including young stars Topher Grace and Joshua Jackson) along with Las Vegas luminaries (Wayne Newton, Siegfried and Roy, and Evander Holyfield), complicates the reading of the film when viewed head-on.

However, we need to link the concepts of allegory to Utopia, terms that for Jameson are inseparable. An effective reading of the film, then, would demonstrate how allegory reveals the utopian impulse of any text. Viewing *Ocean’s Eleven*—with its emphasis on refiguring class compositions, its problematic relationship to history, and the gesture of an alternative capitalist endeavor, the heist—means being conscious of these relationships.

**Utopia Eleven?**

The heist’s participants largely eschew the use of violence in favor of ingenuity and skill, redeeming themselves through their loyalty to the group and the utility of the job itself. Jameson’s method projects allegorical and utopian features onto the site of the criminal organization. In *The Godfather*, he locates this utopian dimension transposed onto the site of ethnicity. The crime family (or heist group) becomes the imaginary mediation of the collective longing onto a construction that exists outside the everyday parameters of society, or rather, the “figure of collectivity” is a fulfillment of “Utopian longing, if not a Utopian envy” (“Reification” 32). We can further link the heist group to the most basic of utopian desires, namely, employment (147). Men are the products of their depressed socioeconomic conditions, as explicitly demonstrated in *Big Deal on Madonna Street* and its recent American remake, *Welcome to Collinwood* (Joe Russo and Anthony Russo, 2002). “Criminals”
are forced to cope with the real facts of their poverty and to take action to alleviate their hardships through the criminal act. This logic suggests that the desire of the criminal is not simply to elevate one’s social standing but merely to enter society. The act of viewing the heist, with the incorporation of the viewer and participants in the planning stages, also allies these two groups and expresses a collective, shared desire to redistribute wealth into the hands of the protagonists.

The crime of the heist needs to be perceived as victimless, lest the protagonists lose out on the audiences’ sympathies. This element is different from the various other subgenres of the crime film, as many crimes include the probability of people (besides the robbers) not only getting robbed but also getting hurt. Instead, the job itself (as demonstrated in Rififi) involves a great deal of planning (including a trial run) and requires specialists in order to pull off the bloodless crime. The “score” usually takes place in a highly insured space, such as a bank, a jewelry store, or a casino. Finally, it seems obvious but necessary to state that the composition of the group tends to emerge from a lower socioeconomic level. The object that is stolen is not as consequential as what it will do to change the lives of the heist team or as consequential as what the effort represents to the men on the team. Thus, as opposed to a straight-on bank robbery in which people can be harmed, the heist proposes both its “victimlessness” (by robbing insured material) and also the possibility of achieving some sort of upward mobility as within the site of the late capitalist era. The formation of a group speaks to the necessity of a collective gesture in the face of postmodern abstraction of the individual subject. The heist also stands for wish fulfillment on the part of the spectator, who looks to this redistribution of wealth while simultaneously idolizing the entrepreneurial spirit of the group, which is essentially to “steal from the rich.” This idea extends throughout the Ocean’s trilogy, in which the gang’s final heist literally turns out to be a charitable enterprise rather than an effort for personal gain.

Viewing the heist as a utopian gesture means distinguishing (as Jameson does) between “the Utopian form and the Utopian wish: between the written text or genre and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices by a specialized hermeneutic or interpretive method” (Jameson, Archaeologies 1). Sometimes this means that the utopian work functions in a negative capacity, pointing toward an “imaginary enclave” that is different from the world it springs from. By incorporating its negative potential within a system of dialectics or, rather, by its negativity, it points
toward a possible future that no one actually wants but that everyone imagines is possible (15). *Ocean's Eleven*, then, situates fictional characters into real-life space and demonstrates how they can better themselves through the utopian gesture of the heist. We can frame the film’s real footage of the actual implosion of the El Rancho casino complex—which follows the destruction of the Sands, the Dunes, the Hacienda, the Aladdin, the Landmark, and the subsequent implosion of the Desert Inn—as emblematic of the desire to intercede in the continuous destruction of the “American” version of Vegas as represented through the nostalgic (and somewhat anachronistic) presence of Ocean’s gang.  

The opposite (or negative) key to reading this issue lies in the characterization of Terry Benedict. The figuration of über-capitalist Benedict is an important part of this discussion as he sets up a binary opposition to his counterpart, criminal Danny Ocean (George Clooney). Returning to Benedict’s destruction of the Xanadu, the film depicts the event as part of the inevitable destruction of “American” casinos in the face of a globalized future. The viewer is thus presented with a face and a name on to which the frustrations of the era may be placed, and therefore, anyone who stands counter to Benedict—with his destruction of landmarks, his accumulation of the canon of Western art, and his possession of Danny’s former wife Tess (Julia Roberts)—will be worthy of our approval and our loyalty. It is important to state that Benedict is not the outright “symbol” of capital, as he would be in a strictly binary reading, but resembles Jameson’s characterization of the shark in *Jaws*. In other words, “a multiplicity” of readings attributable to the shark allows for polysemous interpretation (“Reification” 26–27). The usefulness of this idea lies in the fact that the protagonists in *Jaws* oppose the antagonistic force, reconstituting class awareness and solidarity by the act of opposition. This conflict takes place within the system of capital that it opposes, presenting a utopian gesture that imagines a happy ending in the face of what we know the more likely alternative would be—the nearly inevitable loss of a gambler’s money.

Paradoxically, the robbing of three of Benedict’s casinos is itself a capitalist enterprise and must be bankrolled and planned in advance in order that the new subsystem of capital can compete with the overarching one. However, the heist is between equals who can trust each other, offering a model to compete with Benedict’s greed and showing us an alternative reality where a handshake still has inherent value. The heist film also functions within the confines of the global capitalist moment but utilizes its own brand
of business, namely, the star system. The presence of stars within a work and their interactions (and acting styles) account for an allegorical system of figurability through which viewers can assess the features of the society in which they reside (Jameson, “Class” 53–54).

Finally, we can grasp the essence of the antagonism present in the work, as the film essentially presents two systems of capital (the personalities of the Hollywood system) against the globalized and de-personalized system of global capital. The heist narrative is mobilized once again to present an alternative system of capital within the larger framework of capital proper. The work of the text is to present the alternative in an affable fashion, which manages to redeem the moment of its conception with a utopian discourse.

Danny Ocean’s heist will redeem his wounded male pride by expressing his utility in the era that obviously was the cause of his original downfall. The means through which he accomplishes this redemption is robbing the three biggest casinos in Las Vegas on the night of their biggest takes. It is important to emphasize that the crime will largely be victimless, and indeed, a major feature of this film and its sequels is the efficiency and harmlessness with which the heists are executed, in addition to the equal distribution of the score. Additionally, the money that Ocean will steal will be insured, and an even bigger corporation (the insurance industry) will be on the hook rather than Benedict. Even more significant is Danny’s redemption in his wife’s eyes, as Tess realizes by the end of the film that the heist is a grand declaration of his love for her.

Ocean knows that it cannot be done alone and that he needs to recruit a face-to-face group of experts, who are themselves as downtrodden as he is. The reappearance of class in this endeavor is extremely important here, as the gang’s constitution from all walks of life (and indeed different countries) accounts for the utopian element in the reconstitution of the capitalist enterprise and prefigures the global transformation of an alternative system that consists of different classes coming together to pull off one job. The reward of “eight figures, divided equally” presents an alternative reading of the contemporary capitalist enterprise and stands counter to Benedict’s portrayal of the single CEO with hired underlings. This formation corresponds to Jameson’s reading of Jaws, in which the specialized unit (the cop, the whiz kid, and the salty sailor) faces off against the threat to society, which Jameson characterized as the allegorical rendition of “bad leadership” but is transformed here into Benedict, who embodies globalized capital.
Love and Money

The film exploits a parallel narrative. This is Danny’s redemption by winning back Tess. Danny utilizes the device of the heist in order to win back his love, which can occur only by rendering the very construct of his limitation (namely, money) moot. After Danny supposedly blows up Benedict’s money, he faces off against him. Their confrontation is important, as it implies that there is a greater value system at work here, namely, love. Finally, when Ocean gets Benedict to admit that he would rather have his money back than Tess (Danny—“What if I told you I could get your money back? Would you give up Tess? What would you say?” Benedict—“I would say yes”), he reveals the value system implicit in the work, and Danny wins both love and money in the end.

This rendering of money as “value-neutral” (as exemplified by its explicit onscreen demolition) attempts to place an alternative system of principles within the work and demonstrates a substitute set of ethics within the overarching milieu of the late capitalist era; namely, the privileging of class solidarity and the bonds of friendship that can engender collective redemption. That Danny gets all the things he wants within the span of the narrative, without the dire consequences that often befall characters in heists, is testament to Ocean’s Eleven’s utopian dimension. Here the entrepreneurial collective rises to defeat the real conditions within the capitalist system by rendering the value of money moot. These are the ideological dimensions that the film disguises through the structure of its narrative, mediated and reconciled in an allegorical manner and refigured in the positive transformation of the genre—the happy ending of the film.

The final collection of the gang for one last gathering at the MGM Grand’s fountain is testament to the success of the enterprise (“beating the house”) and to the fleeting nature of the enterprise. The group walks slowly from their nearby headquarters where they have stashed their winnings to the sounds of Claude Debussy’s Claire de lune dans la suite Bergamasque and assemble in wordless satisfaction at their feat. This image is juxtaposed by Tess’s realization that Danny has staged it all for her benefit, and she runs toward the federal marshals that whisk him away, yelling, “Wait! That’s my husband!” Danny wins both the girl and executes the perfect crime, solidifying the bonds of friendship and matrimony with a single gesture. As the group disperses, the camera lingers on each of their expressions as they look to each other, smile, and leave wordlessly. Tellingly, the camera moves
last to Reuben, the nostalgic remnant of Vegas’s past who puffs, satisfied, on his cigar.

**Ocean's Thirteen—and Beyond**

*Ocean's Eleven* presents a utopian vision of the world that is very much steeped in the historical moment from which it emerges. In the era of postmodernism and global capital, it is worthwhile to resuscitate the utopian imagination with the tools that our world has at its disposal. In Fukuyama’s assessment of the end of history, where alternatives to capitalism have collapsed in the post-Soviet era, paradoxically it is only within an overarching system of capital that alternatives can be explored. The allegorical heist that *Ocean's Eleven* presents is a confrontation between two opposing forces of capital—one that employs the cultural cachet of the star system against another that provides figurability to the destructive forces of multinational corporate capitalism. The film attempts to mediate the predominant tone of the resistance to the forces of globalization by demonstrating that it is indeed possible to imagine an alternate world that is as enjoyable as it is hopeful. This is the impulse that the heist film has always expressed; it is always okay to steal from the rich, as long as you are prepared to face the consequences of your actions, consequences that are postponed to the film’s sequel. If the profits (made by the actors George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, and Don Cheadle) can be redistributed into charitable works, as they are in the third film, or into real charities, such as Clooney’s “Save Darfur” enterprise, then even better.

This is precisely what occurs in the last film of the series, as *Ocean's Thirteen* (2007) positions the gang against a newer, richer, and even more nefarious and greedy force in the form of Willy Bank (Al Pacino). When Bank cheats Reuben out of his claim to the Vegas land that he builds his new casino on, Danny and his group reassemble not specifically to take on Bank but to bankrupt his casino. What is at stake in this conflict is not the Ocean gang’s attempt to rob Bank’s hotel (as seen in the previous films) but to force it to lose money and to destroy its reputation. This conflict is best summarized in Ocean's parting line, when he declares to Bank, “You shook Sinatra's hand, you should know better,” emulating the honor code that the Rat Pack originally embodied. Furthermore, this statement nostalgically bridges the distance between the recognizably American Las Vegas and its globalized, Disneyfied counterpart. *Ocean's Thirteen* overwrites the work of
the previous installments by suggesting that charity trumps both love and money, exemplified by the guest appearance of Oprah Winfrey at the end of the film. Once again, the star system, and its utopian gesture of solidarity, the heist, stands against the excessively atavistic principles of Terry Benedict and Willy Bank, not to mention the abstracting principles of global finance.

Works Cited


Notes

1. See Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas; Lynch, Image of the City; and Jameson, Postmodernism.
2. The anticipated take of $165 million would actually be a nine-figure sum.
3. See Sahara (Zoltan Korda, 1943) and Bataan (Tay Garnett, 1943) for examples of the international composition of “last stand” war films.
4. The violent permutations of Reservoir Dogs (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) and The Usual Suspects (Bryan Singer, 1995) came to define the new 1990s cycle.
5. It is worth noting that Fukuyama has apologized (or at least significantly altered the form of his argument) for this earlier statement in order to distance himself from the neoconservative movement that he helped to found, and he has largely acknowledged the
6. Another interesting intersection is that the hotel was destroyed in order to make way for the multinational megacasino built by magnate Steve Wynn (the real-life owner of the Bellagio and possibly the model for Terry Benedict).

7. Here it is necessary to recall that “in the absence of Utopia, however, things, remaining as they do contingent and ‘unequal’ to their own concepts, have to be pumped back up and patched together with allegory” (Jameson, “Totality” 45). We should also recall that Jameson’s view of Marxist criticism (from The Political Unconscious onward) has always sought to find the utopian impulse within the collective imaginary. Through “the simultaneous recognition of the ideological and Utopian functions of the artistic text,” a “Marxist cultural study can hope to play its part in political praxis” (Political 299).

8. The notable exception is Stanley Kubrick’s 1956 heist film, The Killing.

9. Perhaps it is worth noting that this movie was also funded by Clooney and Soderbergh and starred Clooney as part of the heist gang.

10. It should also be noted that the main conflict in the recent remake of The Italian Job (F. Gary Gray, 2003) is precisely between violent (bad guy Edward Norton’s penchant for using guns) and nonviolent (Mark Wahlberg’s innovative planning) forms of the heist.

11. The destruction of the Landmark casino was also recorded in Tim Burton’s 1996 film Mars Attacks!

12. It is also interesting to note that the Wynn-owned Bellagio, where most of the film’s interiors were shot, stands on the site of the old Sands casino, where Sinatra and his Rat Pack famously romped between takes of the original film.
AN ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF TRAFFIC

Shai Biderman and William J. Devlin

Stuck in Traffic’s Drugs, Murders, and Moral Dilemmas

In his film Traffic (2000), director Steven Soderbergh tells the intertwined stories of four main characters. First is Helena Ayala (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a well-to-do California housewife whose happy family life is abruptly disrupted when her husband, a powerful drug distributor for a major Mexican drug cartel, is arrested. One of the arresting officers is Montel Gordon (Don Cheadle), a DEA agent who struggles with the recent death of his partner, killed during a botched assassination attempt. A few miles south of the border is Javier Rodriguez (Benicio Del Toro), a Mexican police officer who uncovers a drug trafficking conspiracy in the upper echelons of the Mexican military. Finally, Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), an eager government official, is the newly appointed head of the U.S. antidrug campaign. Though optimistic about his prospects for succeeding as the drug czar, Wakefield gradually discovers that his own daughter is addicted to drugs.

The intertwined stories of Helena, Montel, Javier, and Robert constitute Soderbergh’s gloomy depiction of the world of drug trafficking and drug addiction. However, none of the characters is merely a pawn in the universal commotion of drug crimes. Caught within this seedy underworld, all these characters are faced with the same crisis: life-changing dilemmas with severe moral implications. With her husband on trial and her family threatened by his former business colleagues, Helena has to decide whether to remain the humble, naïve housewife or take control of her husband’s business to help ensure that his case is dismissed. Javier struggles with whether he should keep the information he has discovered secret or give it to someone who can help oust the corrupt Mexican military leader. Montel must decide if he will continue to uphold the law or, breaking it, get revenge for his fallen
friend. Finally, Robert confronts the question of which set of duties is more important, the professional or the familial.

Traffic engages its viewers on a moral level, asking them to think through these difficult questions. To resolve these dilemmas, we can benefit from the assistance of a philosophical account of the justification of ethical judgments. Such an account should be able to determine the right thing to do in a given a situation when that situation seems to present at least two alternative and conflicting options. Furthermore, it should be able to determine what makes that decision the right decision. That is, what makes the decision morally right? Should I look only at my self-interest? Should I be concerned about the feelings and emotions of others? Should I rely on absolute moral principles according to which certain acts are good in and of themselves, no matter what my situation may be? Should I look toward the most beneficial consequences? What roles should reason and emotion play in ethical decision making?

When we address these questions, we turn to the philosophical field of ethics. In ethics, we can begin addressing these questions by first asking what kind of answers we are looking for. What will serve as a sufficient answer to these ethical questions? The most definitive answers we can hope for are those that are permanent, that is, those answers that can supply us with a clear solution that can serve as an answer for all situations similar to the problem or dilemma at hand. Such answers are absolute in the sense that they are always true and so always apply to everybody, no matter who they are, where they are physically, or where they are temporally.

Some philosophers throughout the history of ethical discourse have argued that such answers are not only desirable but also essential to the mere existence of such a discourse. The approach they promote has been called moral absolutism. Simply stated, moral absolutism is the ethical view that certain actions are right or wrong, independent of any context or situation surrounding the action. Furthermore, absolute moral principles and rules apply universally for all people in all places, regardless of mitigating circumstances. For instance, if the moral absolutist should maintain that “thou shalt not lie,” then the absolutist would argue that this moral rule holds for all people, regardless of their situation. Even if there is a specific situation where lying may lead to a good end, it is still morally wrong and hence prohibited. Under no circumstances would lying be deemed permissible.

In this chapter, we delve into the ethical stories of the four central characters in Traffic in order to address Soderbergh’s presentation and philosophical
evaluation of the position of moral absolutism. To help us understand moral absolutism through the moral challenges Soderbergh’s characters undergo when facing their dilemmas, we use the ethical outlook of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant aimed to establish a system of ethics that applies universally for all people in all cases, a system that can be known through reason, objectively and independent of experience. Since the criterion of the moral rightness or wrongness of an act can be known independently of experience, according to Kant’s system, Kant’s moral philosophy serves as the paradigm for moral absolutism. As such, it aims to provide us with an absolutist ethical solution to deep rooted moral issues, such as the problems faced by the central characters in Soderbergh’s film. Ultimately, Soderbergh shows us that this attempt to provide us with clear solutions to moral dilemmas fails. Echoing a criticism laid against moral absolutism by the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Soderbergh suggests that moral absolutism cannot handle real-life moral dilemmas because it does not take the relevant circumstances and contexts into account when determining what is right and wrong. As we show, Soderbergh’s criticism and rejection of moral absolutism emerges from his treatment of the different but related dilemmas that the four main characters face. Traffic shows how moral absolutism, via Kant’s philosophy, gradually becomes unraveled and unhelpful when one must come to a resolution.

**Stopped at a Red Light, or Helena’s Dilemma**

Helena is a wealthy wife and mother, living what appears to be an innocent and very comfortable life. An active, upstanding citizen, she is a member of the board at her son’s school and organizes fundraisers for adult literacy out of her home. But this pleasant and rewarding life changes when the police and DEA raid her home and arrest her husband, Carlos Ayala (Steven Bauer). Her world turns upside down. With her husband in jail, she stands to lose her home and property to the IRS and all her friends have abandoned her. She is suddenly alone as she raises her young son and prepares to give birth to a second child. Helena is completely in the dark as to why this is happening since she knew nothing of her husband’s business affairs. Only after Arnie Metzger (Dennis Quaid), the family’s lawyer and confidant, meets with Helena does she learn that Carlos is the leading drug smuggler for the most powerful Mexican cartel. She also discovers that Eduardo Ruiz (Miguel Ferrer), a close friend and business associate of Carlos, has offered
to testify against him. With her husband incarcerated, it falls on Helena to make good on her husband’s debt to the Tijuana cartel. The cartel threatens to kill her son if she cannot repay the $3 million. To do so, all she has at her disposal are two strips of photo negatives, which allegedly contain a list of secret bank account numbers and a contact number for Francisco Flores, aka Frankie Flowers (Clifton Collins Jr.), an assassin for hire.

Among the ruins of her shattered life, Helena faces a critical moral dilemma. On the one hand, she feels unjustly threatened, burdened with a debt for which she has no responsibility. Moreover, now a single parent, she must support her children in the face of the imminent loss of her home and property. She may even have to defend her children and herself from physical assault. In order to meet these responsibilities and get her life back to some semblance of normality, however, Helena has to put her hands in the mud and participate in the criminal life Carlos has been leading. She has to use the blood money he has hidden away and probably kill an enemy or two (using the services of Frankie the assassin). In short, there is a price for her desire to restore her life as it was before her husband’s arrest: she must do things that are not only illegal but immoral.

But is this in fact the only decision she can make? How can she justify her final answer? When we face a moral dilemma and try to determine what the right thing to do is, we must first specify the criteria that help us to differentiate a morally right act from a morally wrong one. Kant addresses the issue of these moral criteria in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. There we find that the only thing that can serve as the basis for morality is a good will, since it is the only thing that is intrinsically good. For Kant, other human attributes, such as intelligence, power, and emotions, can be good depending upon what they are used for. When they are used for good purposes, they are said to be good because there is a good will accompanying the use of these attributes. But when they are used for bad purposes, they are said to be bad because there is a bad will that is accompanied by such actions. Thus, a good will is that which makes all other good things, good. The reason why, Kant says, is that a good will is the only thing that is good in and of itself. That is to say, a good will is not good because of the consequences that follow from it; rather, the moral goodness of a good will is found in how it is, regardless of the consequences: “A good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed end; it is good only through its willing, i.e., it is good in itself.” The good will, understood to be intrinsically good, serves as the
universal moral basis for determining whether an action is right or wrong. Kant thus advises us, as moral agents, to try to produce a good will so that, no matter what happens, we do the right thing.\(^1\)

But how can we produce a good will? The first step is to recognize that we are rational agents and that the purpose of rationality is to make one’s will a good will: “[reason’s] true function must be to produce a will which is not merely good as a means to a further end, but is good in itself.” In order to produce a good will, we must use our reason to shape our actions so that they conform to our moral duties, or the specific moral obligations of a good will. These duties include obligations such as being honest, not committing suicide, developing one’s talents, helping others in need, and so forth. Furthermore, our actions are said to conform to our duties when they are carried out for the purpose of following duty alone, when they are not measured by the consequences they provide, and when they are performed out of respect for the moral law. Thus, we must follow reason to determine our duties, and following those duties, we will be producing a good will.\(^2\)

Still, how is reason to identify what is a moral duty and what is not? This brings us to the second step. For Kant, since morally right actions are those that conform to our duties for the sake of following duty alone, particular circumstances and particular motivations cannot be factored into consideration when we ask ourselves what the right thing to do would be. This means, then, that as we follow our duties out of respect for the moral law, we must act according to a fundamental and absolute moral principle that does not allow for a specific stipulation to do this or that particular action in a given set of circumstances. Instead, we need to follow a principle that is applicable in all situations. Kant calls this fundamental absolute moral principle the categorical imperative, that is, the imperative, or command, that demands that we exercise our will in a particular way so that it unconditionally obeys the universal moral law. The categorical imperative is thus the single guiding principle that provides moral agents with the single absolute categorical answer for what is right and wrong in all moral cases and dilemmas.

As Kant points out, one way to formulate this imperative, a formulation known as the formula of the universal law of nature, is as follows: “I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” That is to say, you should follow your personal, or subjective, volition for action (your maxim) only when it is an action that everyone can follow at the same time (a universal law). If you cannot will your own desired act into a universal law, then that act is rationally understood to
be immoral and so is morally prohibited. So let us take one of Helena's choices as an example. Suppose Helena is thinking about keeping the money in the secret bank accounts for herself and not paying off the debt to the cartel. Her maxim, then, would be to not repay her debt and so break a promise. Would this be the right thing to do under Kant's moral system? In order to find out, we must subject the maxim to the test of the categorical imperative. Here, we recast that maxim as a universal law of nature governing all rational agents and thus as holding that all must, by natural law, act as you yourself propose to act in these circumstances. So, we must ask ourselves: can Helena's maxim of not repaying her debt and breaking a promise become a universal law? As Kant puts it, can I “really say to myself that everyone may promise falsely when he finds himself in a difficulty from which he can find no other way to extricate himself?” Suppose, then, that every rational agent were to make false promises when he or she was in a difficulty. As Kant explains, if this were the case, then “there would really be no promises at all, since in vain would my willing future actions be professed to other people who would not believe what I professed.” That is, if Helena were to try to make her maxim a universal law, she would find that no one would ever trust anyone to keep a promise (since everyone breaks them), thereby setting up a contradiction between the intent of making a false promise and the desired outcome in which the other party believes that you will keep the promise. Thus, following Kant, while it would be possible for Helena to “will the lie,” she “cannot at all will a universal law to lie [or not repay her debt and break a promise].”

Helena, however, does not make this choice; her maxim takes her in a different direction, one that ultimately leads to the dissolution of her debt. Instead of completely ignoring her debt, she uses the money to hire Frankie to assassinate Eduardo, so that Carlos can be released from the legal charges he faces. The aim is to empower Carlos to handle the debt himself. After the assassination attempt fails and Frankie is killed, Helena adopts a different strategy. She meets with Juan Obregón (Benjamin Bratt), leader of the Tijuana cartel, herself and makes a deal with him. She agrees to assume her husband's role in the drug cartel and spearhead a new method for smuggling drugs. In return, Helena explains to Juan, “I want our debt forgiven. I want to be the exclusive distributor of Obregón brothers' cocaine for the United States. And I want the principal witness against my husband, Eduardo Ruiz, killed.” Juan agrees to Helena’s deal. A second assassination attempt on Eduardo Ruiz’s life is successfully carried out. Carlos is freed
and the Ayala family becomes the exclusive U.S. distributor of Obregón brothers’ cocaine.

As we watch these events in the film unfold, many of us may believe that Helena made the morally wrong decision. While her decision brought her husband home to her, it is the direct result of a cold-blooded murder. Moreover, the Ayala family has as a result been driven even deeper into drug smuggling. It seems to be the case that this is morally wrong. But why is it wrong? The Kantian way to demonstrate the immorality of Helena’s decision would be to subject it to the test of the categorical imperative. Since Kant’s philosophy is not concerned with the consequences of Helena’s decision (i.e., bringing a loved one back home), we are only to examine the maxim itself, which we can state on Helena’s behalf as the will, for the love of her husband, that Eduardo Ruiz be murdered. Let us universalize this principle of one’s love for another so that everyone can act in such a way where they murder another person. Once we do, we find that this formulation of the principle of love for another person permits that very person who is loved to be murdered. In other words, if we made it a universal law for every rational agent to murder another person for the sake of a loved one, then even that loved one would be murdered by another rational agent. To clarify things, we can introduce Kant’s explanation of why suicide (the murder of oneself) is wrong: “One sees a contradiction in a system of nature whose law would destroy life by means of the very same feeling that acts so as to stimulate the furtherance of life, and hence there could be no existence as a system of nature.” Like suicide, then, the principle of love for another that permits the murder of a human being cannot become a universal law because it sets up a system of nature in which the law destroys the life of the loved one by means of the same feeling that intended to prolong and promote that specific life. In other words, the maxim to murder out of love runs into a logical contradiction and so it cannot become a universal moral law. Since Helena’s maxim cannot become a universal law, her decision, as analyzed through Kant’s absolutist moral system, is morally wrong.4

Getting the Green Light, or Javier’s Dilemma

In Helena’s failure to follow the universal moral law, we have seen how a personal desire (in this case, the freedom of a loved one) can become an obstacle for doing what is morally correct. But a single personal desire may be no more prominent in Traffic than the one faced by Javier, namely, the
desire to live. Javier and his partner Manolo Sanchez (Jacob Vargas) are Mexican police officers who wage their own war on drugs as they seize a shipment of cocaine being transported through the desert. This seizure apparently crosses the jurisdiction (or at least interests) of General Arturo Salazar, leader of the Mexican army. Salazar becomes fond of Javier and invites Javier and Manolo to work with him and his army in their goal to take out the Tijuana cartel. They accept Salazar’s offer and comply with his first request to capture Frankie, who is currently in the United States working for the Tijuana cartel, and bring him across the border. However, upon their completion of this mission, Javier hears the screams of Frankie as he is being tortured by Salazar’s soldiers. He sees that Manolo is becoming more and more friendly with these soldiers. Javier thus begins to doubt about if he is doing the right thing by joining forces with Salazar.

These suspicions, in fact, are well founded. He and Manolo discover that Salazar is working for the Juárez cartel, the rival to the Tijuana cartel. Manolo immediately thinks of a way to literally cash in on this discovery by selling the information to the Obregón brothers. Javier refuses: “We’re going to keep our mouths shut.” Though Manolo initially agrees to follow Javier’s order, he ultimately is driven by his selfish, greedy desire for money, selling what he knows to the DEA for a substantial amount of money. But this plan fails. Salazar’s soldiers capture him and then kill him in the Mexican desert. What exactly is Javier’s moral dilemma? On the one hand, he has important knowledge that Salazar, the leader of the Mexican military, is working for a drug cartel. Should he give this information to the DEA? On the other hand, Manolo attempts to give this information to the DEA and ends up dead. Should Javier keep quiet and continue working for Salazar, thereby surviving through his demonstration of loyalty? When we turn to Kant’s absolutist moral system, we find that an alternative formulation of the categorical imperative helps us to understand how we can work through Javier’s dilemma. This formulation, otherwise known as the formula of autonomy, can be stated as follows: act in such a way that your maxim “legislates universal law.” Though similar to the formula of the universal law of nature insofar as it promotes universalizing one’s maxim, the formula of autonomy is different because we are to see ourselves not simply as subjects of the law but as creators of the law. As Kant explains, under this formulation, one’s will “is subject to the law in such a way that it must be regarded also as legislating for itself and only on this account as being subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author).” Through this formulation, then, the ratio-
nal agent as a legislator of universal laws must only act out of interest for the universal law and not out of any other motivations, whether to achieve personal desires, interests, or anything else. By erasing all ulterior motives, the moral agent conforms his actions in a way that reveals the autonomy of the will, as he is no longer acting out of his own interest or the interest of others. Javier’s decision, whatever it may be, must be grounded in the idea that he is acting as a legislator of the universal laws, regardless of his own personal desires or gain, and so he must reject any maxims “which are not consistent with the will’s own legislation of universal law.”

Ultimately, Javier decides to share his inside information regarding Salazar with the DEA. Given the manner in which he made this decision and carried it out, we find that Javier, unlike Helena, acts according to Kant’s categorical imperative. Javier’s decision to provide the DEA with this information stems from his maxim to help protect and provide for those in need in his home of Tijuana. Following the autonomy formula, Javier acts in such a way that his maxim of helping to protect and provide for those in need legislates universal law. Here, Javier is not acting out of self-interest or any other motivating factor than the interest of the universal moral law. Unlike Manolo, Javier is not sharing this information because of the selfish motive of money. Javier’s motivation is so far removed from his own self-interests that he doesn’t even accept the DEA’s offer for protection, as he tells the agents, “I’ll worry about myself.” Likewise, he does not perform this act to gain any praise from others. In fact, he doesn’t even take credit for the consequences, as he tells Manolo’s wife that it was Manolo’s bravery and courage that led to the exchange of information and the downfall of Salazar. Finally, Javier doesn’t feel happy about making the deal, as he tells an agent, “I feel like a traitor.” That is, Javier doesn’t even have the personal satisfaction of doing the right thing as a motivating factor in carrying out his decision.

We can say that Javier’s sole motivation for his decision is to do the right thing. In Tijuana, he recognizes that rampant drug use is devastating his fellow citizens, and so his decision to inform on Salazar is motivated from the moral duty he has, as a rational agent, to help those in need. It is for this reason, then, that Javier does not think of himself when he makes the deal with the DEA but instead thinks of the children of Tijuana: “We need lights for the parks so that kids can play at night. So they can play baseball. So it’s safe. Everybody likes parks. Everybody likes baseball.” Thus, Javier’s decision reveals the autonomy of his will, as he knew that despite the risk of his life, despite the lack of any personal reward or gain, his maxim—to
help those in need—is a maxim that can be legislated into a universal law. Thus, from Kant’s moral absolutist position, Javier’s resolution to his moral dilemma can be considered to be morally right.6

**Changing Lanes, or Montel’s Dilemma**

Helena has decided wrongly, while Javier has made the morally right decision. Moral absolutism, as formulated by Kant, has helped us to explain why Helena’s choice is morally flawed while Javier’s choice is morally correct. This suggests, then, that moral absolutism works well for these cases, as they supply us with definitive answers to the moral dilemmas at hand. Soderbergh, however, does not seem to be at ease with such definitive answers to moral dilemmas. As the film seems to suggest, such clear-cut resolutions fail to universally apply to moral dilemmas in real life. It is only very rarely that one comes across such black-and-white cases, in which the moral dilemma can so crudely be analyzed and universalized. We can see Soderbergh’s skepticism toward moral absolutism through the moral dilemmas faced by the remaining two main characters.

Montel is a DEA agent whose mission in life seems to be to uphold and enforce the law, even at the risk of losing his own life. He and his partner, Ray Castro (Luis Guzmán), lead the sting on Eduardo’s drug operation and ultimately capture and arrest him (with Montel getting shot along the way). Montel and Ray interrogate Eduardo and offer him a deal: testify against his boss, Carlos, in exchange for immunity. Once Eduardo accepts their offer, Montel and Ray arrest Carlos and place Eduardo under protective custody as Carlos’s trial takes place. Frankie’s botched assassination attempt of Eduardo results in the accidental death of Ray, linking the two narrative lines.

Despite Ray’s death, Montel continues to carry out his duty as a DEA agent and keeps Eduardo under protective custody so that he can testify against Carlos. But the loss of his friend and partner torments him, and it seems as though the only thing that can make Ray’s death meaningful (or at least bearable) for Montel is the fact that justice will be served as Eduardo will testify against Carlos so that the prominent drug lord in the United States will be sent to prison. In other words, Montel believes that it is right to risk one’s life to uphold justice under the law, as both he and Ray make a difference in the war on drugs. Eduardo, however, sees things differently, as he argues with Montel during his breakfast before he takes the stand against Carlos: “Can’t you for one second imagine that none of this happened, and
my drugs had gone through? What would be the harm? . . . A few people get high who are getting high anyway? Your partner is still alive. We don't have to have breakfast together. Don't you see this means nothing? That your whole life is pointless? . . . The worst part about you, Monty, is you realize the futility of what you're doing and you do it anyway.” After he speaks these words full of foreboding, Eduardo dies, poisoned, as Juan had promised Helena.

The deaths of Ray and Eduardo force Montel into a moral dilemma concerning justice, revenge, and his duties as a DEA agent. He and Ray have done their duty as DEA agents completely by the book, all with the goal to help win the war on drugs by placing the top drug distributors behind bars. In pursuing their goal, however, Ray lost his life. To make matters worse, their goal was not achieved, since the murder of Eduardo forced the state to discontinue their case against Carlos. Eduardo's claim that Montel's “whole life is pointless” may resound more than ever before to Montel. How can Montel make both his life and Ray's death have meaning? On the one hand, we may expect Montel to do his duty as a DEA agent, strictly adhering to the laws as he continues trying to place Carlos, and other drug lords, in prison. On the other hand, we may expect him to make it his goal to capture Carlos, so that he seeks revenge for the loss of his partner and friend. Which route should Carlos take, and why?

We can once again turn to Kant for moral advice in this situation. Here, we can introduce another formulation of the categorical imperative, what Kant calls the practical imperative and has come to be known as the humanity formula, to help us evaluate Montel's situation. This version of the categorical imperative is formulated as follows: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.” For Kant, humanity should be understood as the collection of features that make us distinctively human, and these features include our capacities to engage in self-directed rational behavior and to pursue our own ends. Since humanity consists of rational agents, we are to acknowledge the dignity of other fellow agents by showing them respect. This means not treating human beings as instruments to achieve another end; rather, we must universally treat other human beings as ends in themselves. Under Kant’s absolutist moral principle, then, no matter what the circumstances may be, we must always treat others as ends and never as a means. Thus, whatever Montel decides to do, he must make sure that he does not treat Carlos as a means to another end.7

We find Montel's decision unfolding during an outdoor party at the
Ayala family residence, a party celebrating Carlos’s freedom. While Helena and Carlos are in the study, Montel casually walks in and provokes Carlos by calling him a murderer. The Ayala’s security guard then struggles with Montel and wrestles him to the floor. At this point, we see Montel’s true reason for coming into the Ayala home, as he falls under Carlos’s desk and furtively plants a bug on its underside. As the security guard throws him out of the house, Montel tells Helena, “You tell your child a nice little bedtime story . . . You tell him how you murdered my partner! His name was Ray Castro, Helena, Ray Castro! You remember that!” Once outside, Montel walks away, apparently in anger, until he gradually reveals a smile, happy that he accomplished his task.

Montel thus decided that he would continue his effort to get Carlos behind bars, and, it seems he will use any means necessary. However, from Montel’s outbursts at both Carlos and Helena, we can see his real motivation for this pursuit of Carlos: revenge for the death of Ray. Now, many of us may sympathize with the feelings of revenge that Montel may hold toward the Ayala family. But is it morally right to seek revenge? According to the humanity formula, a human being cannot be used merely as a means. As Kant explains, “Man . . . is not a thing and hence is not something to be used merely as a means; he must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in himself.” Since Montel’s motivation is revenge, and not the moral good, he is using Carlos’s potential conviction as a means to satisfy his personal desire. In so doing, he would be considered under Kant’s moral system a “transgressor of rights of men” insofar as he “intends to make use of the persons of others merely as a means, without taking into consideration that, as rational beings, they should always be esteemed at the same time as ends.” Although we may be able to sympathize with Montel’s decision, his actions would be deemed immoral under Kant’s absolutist moral system insofar as he is not motivated by the moral good but only by his personal thirst for revenge—a thirst that pulls Montel to use Carlos as a means to satisfy that desire for revenge.

Montel’s dilemma thus provides us with another case to be analyzed by moral absolutism. In this case, as in Helena’s dilemma, we see that the moral absolutist would find that Montel’s steps toward gaining revenge are morally wrong, despite the specific circumstances that surround him. However, Soderbergh intentionally provides us with this emotionally charged dilemma to help build his argument against moral absolutism. Whereas we were quite sure to take the right side against Helena (and to deem her actions
immoral), we are much more sympathetic toward Montel. We are inclined to see the reasons behind his deeds. On the one hand, we understand and acknowledge his commitment to his job and his duties because he is one of the “good guys” in the film—an enforcer of the law and a gentle man who upholds social peace and order. On the other hand, we sympathize with him in his sorrow over the loss of his friend. We understand and perhaps even agree with Montel’s decision. Such agreement suggests that moral absolutism should give us pause. That is, though we may have been fine with using moral absolutism to assess Helena’s case, Soderbergh helps to make us uncomfortable with the way moral absolutism is forced to work in this instance.

At the Crossroads, or Robert’s Dilemma

While we may be uncomfortable with the way moral absolutism applies to Montel’s dilemma, Robert’s case is even more disquieting. While Montel finds himself torn between upholding the law and avenging his friend’s death, Robert is faced with two mutually excluding choices that are good in themselves. Robert is an Ohio judge and the newly appointed head of the President’s Office of National Drug Control (with the informal title of drug czar). As drug czar, Robert takes a conservative approach in the war on drugs: he adheres to a universal and strict policy against drugs, he visits the front lines of the battlefield (i.e., the U.S.-Mexican border), and he meets with General Salazar to exchange information and discuss policies. He is so deeply invested in his role as drug czar that he spends very little time with his wife, Barbara (Amy Irving), and his daughter, Caroline (Erika Christensen).

More important, Robert is so wrapped up with his official obligations as drug czar that he is initially unaware of Caroline’s drug problem. When he does learn of her problem, he addresses it less as a father and more as the official drug czar. Upon being told that she was caught by the police leaving a friend at the hospital who had overdosed on cocaine and heroin, his stance is rooted in his role as drug czar: as he tells Barbara, the plan is to “ground her, clip her wings a bit—school and scheduled activities and that’s it until further notice.” All the while, it is important that this situation “be handled delicately” since such news “could be embarrassing” to his image as drug czar. However, his focus on his duties begins to wane as he gradually realizes the seriousness of Caroline’s problem. Once Robert catches Caroline smoking heroin, he sends her to a rehabilitation center, from which she escapes and ends up on the streets having sex for money and
drugs. Increasingly distraught and focused on saving his daughter, Robert neglects his job, searching the dangerous streets of Cincinnati to find his daughter and bring her back home.

Robert thus faces a dilemma. On the one hand, as drug czar, he has the duty and obligation to lead the war on drugs in the United States. On the other hand, as a father, he has the duty and obligation to care for his daughter. Each duty and obligation seems to require so much time and effort that Robert cannot do both. What then should he do? When we turn to Kant’s moral system, we find that it has trouble providing us with a clear solution to the problem. In order to see why Kant cannot provide a definitive answer to Robert’s dilemma, let us analyze this dilemma under each formulation of the categorical imperative. We can begin by specifying the two competing maxims that Robert has in mind. First, as drug czar, his maxim is to protect the people of the United States by leading the war on drugs. Second, as a father, his maxim is to protect and care for his daughter when she is in need. Now, let us put these maxims to the test of the categorical imperative. Following the formula of the universal law of nature, let us see whether or not universalizing the maxim to protect the people of the United States leads to a contradiction of any kind. It turns out that it does not. If everyone were to protect one another, then the notion of protection remains intact, as the actualization of the motivation is not inhibited in any way. So, under this formula of the categorical imperative, Kant could advise that performing one’s duties as drug czar is a morally good act, and so Robert ought to devote his time to fulfilling such duties. But what about the maxim of protecting and caring for one’s daughter? When we subject it to the formula of the universal law of nature, it turns out that it, too, is morally compelling. Once universalized, the notion of fatherly protection and care remains intact, as the actualization of the motivation is possible. Thus, Kant could also advise that performing one’s duties as a father is morally good, and so Robert ought to devote his time to caring for his daughter, who is in need.

The humanity formula of the categorical imperative faces the same difficulty. Robert is to treat humanity, in the sense of his own person or another person, always as an end and never simply as a means. That is, the maxim that he follows should not intend to treat people as means or use them as instruments for another end. By following this maxim, Robert will be able to acknowledge the dignity of others. But both of Robert’s maxims satisfy this criterion. His maxim to protect the people of the United States treats people as ends in themselves, and not as the means to another end.
Robert is acknowledging the dignity of the people of the United States as he strives to uphold his duties and obligations as drug czar. At the same time, his maxim to protect Caroline treats her as an end in herself and not as a means to another end. He has no hidden agenda here; he doesn't even acknowledge his superior's help in burying the news story of his daughter's drug addiction and his offer to spin the story so that it helps Robert's public image, should the story float to the surface and reach the public eye. Robert ignores such offers, because accepting them would be to treat Caroline and her drug problem as a means to the end of enhancing his career and public image. Thus, Robert's competing maxims are both seen to be morally good acts under the humanity formula.

Finally, the autonomy formula doesn't offer us any further help in resolving this dilemma. This formula maintains that the maxim must be one that legislates universal laws. Robert's maxim, then, must be one that he can create as a universal moral law for all rational agents. His motivation, then, must spring from his moral duty itself and not from any personal desires or interests. But notice that both of Robert's maxims are maxims that can be legislated as a universal law. It is consistent to say that it should be a moral law for people to strive, whenever they can, to protect their fellow beings. Likewise, it is consistent for there to be a moral law that all fathers protect and care for their children when they are in need. Thus, yet again, the categorical imperative fails to provide an adequate resolution to Robert's dilemma.

Getting Out of Traffic

Moral absolutism via Kant, which aimed to apply moral principles and rules universally for all people in all cases, has thus been useful for clearly analyzing and morally evaluating only two (Helena's and Javier's) of the four dilemmas. While it can suggest an answer for a third dilemma (Montel's), many of us may reject this solution on the grounds that it fails to acknowledge the specific circumstances that are relevant to the dilemma. But, more important, moral absolutism fails to handle Robert's dilemma, because it exposes a serious problem for moral absolutism. Namely, moral absolutism cannot adequately address complex cases that seem to be context dependent or to involve contradicting values and ideas that make it impossible to universalize one definitive moral judgment. We see that Robert's dilemma is a conflict between two morally absolute duties. He has a moral duty as drug czar to help protect the citizens of the United States and lead the war
on drugs. At the same time, he has a moral duty as a father to care for his daughter, because she is lost in her drug addiction. The problem here is that both of these moral duties are obligations of a good will. Since this is the case, the Kantian version of moral absolutism would compel Robert to perform both actions so that he further develops his own will as a good will. But, as we specified in the dilemma, each duty requires too much time for Robert to adequately carry out both duties at the same time. Kant does not provide us with a way to prioritize these duties, so it is unclear which one Robert should choose to fulfill. Appealing to Kant’s use of reason and the categorical imperative does not show us a way out.

Sartre points out this exact problem in his essay, “Existentialism and Humanism.” According to Sartre, Kant’s moral principle of the categorical imperative is “too abstract to break down when we come to defining action.” That is, given the real life dilemma between two good acts, Kant’s system provides us with “no means of judging” because the “content [of the moral dilemma] is always concrete, and therefore unpredictable.” Thus, Kant’s moral system is too abstract in the sense that it does not account for real-life concrete moral issues.

We can see, then, that Soderbergh follows Sartre’s critique of moral absolutism when he points to the unavoidable gap between the particularity of a concrete moral dilemma and the universality of an abstract moral law. It seems that, according to moral absolutism, our moral choices are not real choices in the sense that they are predetermined by the universality and the absolute nature of what is right and moral. In other words, we never freely choose between two (or more) valid alternatives, since the right (and only) moral option is already given to us in advance. We can still make mistakes (and consequently do the “wrong thing”); however, these mistakes will only occur in the level of moral implementation (the acting out of the moral choice) and will never occur in the preliminary investigative level (in which we are actually making the moral decision). Moral absolutism thus overlooks human freedom and the human capacity to experience a moral situation in ways that go beyond logical analysis.

Sartre pinpoints this problem when he writes, “If values are uncertain, if they are still too abstract to determine the particular, concrete case under consideration, nothing remains but to trust in our instincts.” Soderbergh, in his portrayal of the four moral dilemmas, seems to promote the same conclusion. Robert’s dilemma is Soderbergh’s focal point of this critique, because it exemplifies what Sartre already found unavoidable: if Robert is to succeed in
following the guideline of a moral law, he “[i]s obliged to invent the law for himself.” That is, Robert must create his own moral foundation, whether it is a moral view based on rationality, a good will, sentiments and emotions, or self-interest, and so forth. And it seems that Robert acts according to Sartre’s moral advice. As he reads his official speech regarding a ten-point plan for the war on drugs, Robert abruptly stops, telling the audience, “I can’t do this. . . . If there is a war on drugs then our own families have become the enemy. How can you wage war on your own family?” He then walks away from the podium and steps down as drug czar so that he can instead focus his attention on helping his daughter. This fits Sartre’s view regarding how to make moral decisions, as Robert lays his own moral foundation for his actions. Through his feelings of love and compassion toward his daughter, Robert acts in such a way that he sets the law of caring as a father as a law of greater priority than carrying out the formal duties of drug czar.

Notes

2. Ibid., 8–11, 9 (quote).
3. Ibid., 14–15.
4. Ibid., 31.
5. Ibid., 38–39.
6. It is important to note here that Javier’s action to help those in need also follows from the previous formulations of the categorical imperative. First, under the formula of the universal law of nature, Javier can universalize his maxim so that it becomes a universal law that everyone helps those in need. Since this action, when universalized, does not entail a contradiction, it is morally permissible. Second, under the humanity formula, Javier can ask whether helping people treats them as means to another end. Since he is treating others as ends in themselves, he is not violating the moral law, and so his action is morally permissible.
8. Ibid. We can also see that Montel’s decision is immoral under the formula of the universal law of nature of the categorical imperative. Montel is so blinded by his desire for revenge that he plants an illegal wiretap in the Ayala family residence. However, this action stems from a maxim whereby one intends to deceive or lie to others. Montel is deceiving not only the Ayalas but also the DEA and, implicitly, American citizens. Montel’s actions break the laws and the rules that he has sworn to uphold as a DEA agent. Since such an oath is implicitly made to the DEA and the United States,
Montel's actions demonstrate a lie, as he breaks his oath. However, as in the discussion of Helena's dilemma, the breaking of a promise or a lie is said to be immoral under the formula of the universal law of nature.

9. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism and Humanism,” in Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings, ed. Stephen Priest (New York: Routledge, 2001), 43. Sartre introduces the dilemma of a young student during the Nazi occupation of France in World War II. The student just lost his brother, who died fighting for the French resistance, and he now faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the student can join the French resistance and thereby carry out his duty as a citizen to defend his country. On the other hand, he can comfort his mother, who is mourning the death of her son, and so carry out his duty as a son. We can see here that the student's dilemma closely resembles Robert's challenge in trying to carry out both his duty as drug czar and his duty as a father.

Part 5

Simulacra, Space, Solaris
THE PHILOSOPHY OF SPACE AND MEMORY IN SOLARIS

Douglas McFarland

In an essay written some twenty years after the publication of his novel *Solaris*, Stanislaw Lem offers examples of the three narrative typologies of science fiction writing, ranking them in order of increasing complexity. In the first, an imagined device for preventing earthquakes leads to the elimination of a natural catastrophe. Stories of this type require that the reader “re-evaluate or reorient . . . cultural norms” since it is a given that prevention of earthquakes is a “worthwhile goal.” Lem’s second example asks more of readers. The author creates a certain fantastic hypothesis and places human figures within that imagined context. What might happen, he asks, “when the use of a certain chemical that separates the sensation of pleasure from sex spreads throughout the world?” This scenario allows for the exploration of the relationship between biology and human culture through a fictional narrative. The third and most challenging type is a farrago of cosmological viewpoints that reflect the human need to construct an understanding of an “intentional” universe. The reader might be asked to make sense of “a collage of excerpts from scientific texts, press clippings, the addresses of Nobel laureates, or other facsimiles.” Lem’s *Solaris* represents a never fully realized attempt to synthesize models two and three. In this hybrid, a fantastic hypothesis is given traditional novelistic form, while conventional characterization and narrative are interwoven with discursive summaries of centuries of “Solaris studies.” These studies reflect the human attempt to understand the nonhuman other, and they pose a puzzle for characters and readers alike.

To structure his film adaptation of *Solaris* (2002), Steven Soderbergh opted for Lem’s second fictional typology, crafting a traditional narrative
based on a fantastic premise involving a journey to an enigmatic planet, Solaris, and the experiences both of the crew who manage the orbiting space station there and of those who come to rescue them, including a psychologist named Kelvin (George Clooney), whose wife, Rheya, has, as the story opens, killed herself after he abandoned their marriage. Central to the mysteries that the film explores is that proximity to Solaris causes human memories to become physical entities. The narrative is driven by the human response to this imaginary fiction. The larger cosmographical questions concerning the nature and purpose of Solaris, the force that generates those memories, the set of motives that shape the human need to explore space and to encounter that which is alien—all the questions that the novel repeatedly asks and meditates on—have been relegated to the film’s periphery. Soderbergh replaces them with a love story that focuses thematically on the possibility of the return of a departed object of desire (Rheya) now lodged in the landscape of Kelvin’s memory (a theme that takes many forms in Western literature and philosophy). Much in the manner of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Solaris traces the return of the beloved from the land of the dead. The film becomes philosophical through the questions that arise when a traditional narrative motif intersects with a fantastic, antirealist premise. In the process, Solaris becomes a complex, if admittedly unsystematic, meditation on recollection, recognition, and repetition.

Modernity and the Philosophy of Eros

The Platonic understanding of recollection forms the basis of the philosophical questions raised in Soderbergh’s idiosyncratic adaptation of Lem’s novel. That conceptual premise finds itself challenged in turn by the postmodern and existentialist critiques of Platonic idealism advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Søren Kierkegaard, respectively. Let me begin by establishing the place of memory in Platonic thought and then explaining why memory in this sense becomes crucial to an understanding of modernist art and modernist identity. Socrates’ dialogue with Phaedo during the hours before his death turns appropriately toward the question of the soul’s immortality. Socrates argues that learning is simply remembering: “when we speak of people learning, they are simply recollecting what they knew before. In other words, learning is recollection. . . . We recollect after we are born the things of which we possessed knowledge before we were born.”4 This means that the soul exists in this world as a mere shadow of its previous existence. Socrates makes
the same argument in *The Meno* but explores this idea and its implications most fully and most famously in *The Republic*. In that dialogue, Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a cave with an entrance open to the light. Within the cave are men whose legs and necks have been “fettered from childhood” and who can look ahead but not backward. And so the men, chained as they are, can see only “the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave” by a never ending procession of men and animals, which those chained within never see directly. For Socrates, the pursuit of the “good” involves escaping this perceptual and epistemological bondage; such a pursuit enables us to turn from this realm of mere shadows so that we may contemplate the realm of becoming and ideals, which, unlike the imprisoning cave, constitutes a true “region of being.”

This understanding of memory and knowledge is recast in terms of love and desire in *The Symposium*. In order to pass the time at a dinner party, Socrates and his companions decide to give speeches in praise of love. Initially, the most striking of these is the rhetorically exquisite speech of Agathon, in which he characterizes love as “the richest ornament of heaven and earth . . . the loveliest and the best . . . the author of those very virtues all around him.” Socrates takes exception to Agathon's speech, arguing that love is not a beautiful creature but a continuing state of desire. Such longing is a condition of both poverty and plenitude. Similarly, the philosopher (literally in Greek a lover of *sophia* or wisdom) finds himself in a constant state of desire. Wisdom, in other words, is the obscure object of desire the philosopher is always striving to attain.

In *The Confessions*, and to a lesser extent in *The Trinity*, Augustine synthesizes Platonic love of wisdom and memory with Hebraic prayer and Christian meditation. For Augustine, the obscure object of desire, the elusive beloved, is God, who resides outside natural process in a world of pure being. In the opening paragraph of *The Confessions*, Augustine struggles with the notion that God could be so close and yet so far away. He feels intimate with an absence, aglow with a shadow. And in a manner that speaks to *Solaris*, he finds himself torn between love of the creator (the original) and love of the created (its copy). In Book X of *The Confessions*, the elusiveness of the divine being is considered within the context of Platonic recollection. Augustine recounts how he strives to recollect God in the landscape of his memory. Since God must have existed before man's creation, man must share in some part of Him that might be re-membered, that is, made whole. Augustine recollects the image of God in the fields of his memory only to have the
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The distinctions between shadow and light, becoming and being, beloved and lover come together in Augustine's field of memory, and it is there that the human condition defines itself as a perpetual longing, there that the gap between creator and creation takes shape. The memory of the original is, in Lem's phrase, a "cruel miracle," the simultaneous presence and absence of the elusive beloved.7

Some might be taken aback by the assertion that the bishop of Hippo formulated the foundation of what could be called the modernist condition and the art that condition has generated. But Augustine's synthesis of Greek, Roman, Hebraic, and Christian culture and, more specifically, the place of memory and recollection in that synthesis, permeates the modernist frustration in attempting to achieve intimacy between self and other and between self and the world. This frustration is powerfully expressed in Pier Paolo Pasolini's Teorema (1968). The film opens with the sudden and mysterious arrival of a beautiful, androgynous young man into the home of a bourgeois family. Each member of the family falls in love with him. But roughly a third of the way through the film, just as suddenly as he arrived, the young man disappears. With only the camera as witness, the young man at dawn walks away, never to return. His absence creates a crisis to which each member of the family reacts differently. The son turns to art in order to recall the ideal of beauty that has inexplicably disappeared, but no single work he creates can end his sense of separation and loss. As a result, the young man is driven to create more and more, but each new production brings only dissatisfaction, failure, and frustration. The modern artist, Pasolini suggests, finds himself driven by the visceral need to dispel his deep sense of absence in the world. But a more debilitating and dehumanizing reaction is also possible. If the son turns to art, his father falls into madness. In the final shot of the film, the man, dehumanized by his profound sense of loss, can only scream incoherently into the camera.

Dream, Memory, and Copy

The opening sequence of Solaris announces that the film will be concerned with absence and loss. The first shot is an angled close-up of a window pelted by rain, which is beading on the glass. Moisture has condensed on the pane, preventing visual access to the interior. The shot subtly establishes a sense of self-enclosure, a time to be inside. The second shot confirms and expands on that sense. The film cuts to the interior, and we observe a man sitting on
the edge of a bed, crouched over and seemingly in distress, clearly thinking
to himself. Over this image comes a soft, almost ethereal voice filled with a
kind of incredulous innocence, almost childlike in its tone: “I love you so
much, Chris. Don't you love me anymore?” It seems to be, and it in fact is,
the voice of a ghost that haunts his psyche, as the hovering camera seems to
act out. And although it seems to have a life of its own, the voice in its tone
and quality also seems to emanate from the man's memory and imagina-
tion. It seems to well up from within him rather than simply descending
from above. It is, in short, how Chris Kelvin remembers the voice, and that
memory seems infused with a kind of innocent recrimination. There is a
painful intimacy here, painful because it is intimate. The shadowy voice is
excruciatingly close yet hopelessly departed, reflecting the cruel miracle of
memory.

The second segment of the film deepens our perception that this figure is
self-absorbed and haunted by the past. We learn that Kelvin is a psychologist
who listens to the inner lives of others and yet shares his private thoughts
with no one. He seems indifferent to his surroundings as he makes his way
down a crowded street. His body is pitched forward, and he moves rapidly
and with purpose as if he needed the public world to get out of his way.
On the train, Chris is haunted by the site where he first met the one whose
voice we heard in the first scene. He seems unresponsive to the present and
future, at home only in a region of regret and longing. His disconnected
state extends to his relationships with clients. He appears detached as he
goes through the motions of his professional life. In a group therapy ses-
session, the camera looks from directly behind Chris as two patients speak.
They are out of focus, reflecting his inability to see them clearly. This scene
is edited in a blank style, with no motion or emotion, no cutting between
faces, no 180-degree shots, no cross cutting, no point of view shots, and
perhaps most importantly, no reaction shots. In the next scene he leaves a
pro forma and disengaged message on another patient's answering machine,
then impatiently counsels a client on the phone. Committed, however un-
easily, to helping others, Kelvin the psychologist seems helpless, unable to
move forward, engaged only with and by that haunting voice from the past.

When Chris, in response to a call for help, joins the crew on the space
station orbiting around Solaris, the gap between present and past is ostensibly
closed. The identity of the disembodied voice we heard at the beginning of
the film is now revealed. The female figure, Rheya (Natascha McElhone),
appears in two forms, as dream memory and as a physical reproduction.
Chris falls asleep and remembers his first encounter with Rheya, how they met and how they became lovers. The sequence begins with a chance encounter on a train and ends with love making. This dream remembrance is intercut with Chris and what appears to be Rheya making love in the narrative present. The complexity of this sequence comes not from the dream memory, which seems most undreamlike in its straightforward linear trajectory, but from its entanglement with what seems to be transpiring in the present. The dream is the first in a series of flashbacks that offer a chronological account of their relationship on Earth, from their first meeting to Chris's discovery of Rheya's suicide. These flashbacks may at first viewing seem only to be part of a rich narrative structure blending past and present together in complex ways by way of exposition, but they also back away from profound questions about the nature of memory. From them we learn much, almost everything, about the relationship between Chris and Rheya, from its inception to its demise and her subsequent suicide.

The real significance, as I said, is in the interweaving of the two representations and the tension generated between them. In *The Sophist*, Socrates makes the distinction between a good copy and a bad copy, that is, between one that is genuine and one that is counterfeit. The good copy “conforms to the proportions of the original in all three dimensions.” Socrates calls this image an εικον. The bad copy only seems to be a likeness, and this he calls a ϕαντασμα. The philosopher pursues the former in order to reach the ideal, while the sophist pursues the latter in order to make an argument appear to be the stronger of the two. In *Solaris* the distinction between true and false copy is made between the image Chris recollects in his memory (the image that appears in his dream) and the physical manifestation of Rheya in present time. Chris's initial reaction upon awakening is one of terror, as if the Rheya before him were a demon. One is reminded of the response of the apostles in the gospel of Mark when they encountered the resurrected Christ: “so they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.” But what is most disturbing in the scene, both for Chris and the viewer, is the mixing together of the two representations. Chris concurrently makes love with the Rheya of his memory and the Rheya before him, almost as if the second Rheya were seducing him. The cross cutting between these intimate encounters is particularly effective in conveying the sense that Chris is betraying the memory of Rheya. Chris has tainted his memory by intermingling it with a bad copy. In Augustin-
ian terms, Chris has made love to an idol, breaking faith with the good copy, the elusive image of God in the landscape of his memory. Chris feels astonishment over the material manifestation of his memory but repulsion over his unfaithfulness to the immaterial memory. He, therefore, jettisons this false copy into space, like an Orpheus dispatching a false Eurydice back to Hades.

The Degraded Likeness

After he has disposed of the reproduction of Rheya, Chris asks Snow (Jeremy Davies), “What was that?” Snow replies with his own question: “Do you want her to come back?” The implications of this question inform the philosophy of the remainder of the film as well as drive its plot forward to a final conclusion. The philosophical implications of this choice rest on two seminal responses to the Platonic distinction between good and bad copies. Let me take them out of chronological order and begin with the most recent. In Difference and Repetition, Gilles Deleuze argues that even for Plato this distinction between the true and the false copy is on the point of collapse. He asserts that there is no diachronic displacement, no unfolding series of copies that refer back to a transcendent original, but only synchronic multiplicity. As he puts it, there comes a point at which “spiritual imitation gives way to repetition.” In other words, the haunting absence of a transcendent ideal, the original from which the true copy emanates, is expunged by an “infinite movement of degraded likeness from copy to copy.”10 Snow’s question implies that Solaris can supply just such an endless repetition. Chris is now given the chance to jettison not the copy, as he has just done, but the original, or at least to eliminate the need to recollect an original. When the second copy of Rheya challenges Chris on her own status in relationship to the original Rheya, Chris replies, “All I see is you.” Chris answers Snow’s question by choosing to live in the immediate present. In retrospect, knowing that Snow is himself not an original but a copy of a twin, one might suspect that Snow’s world might very well be one of endless repetition. The motions of his hands, the tone of his voice, and his facility with gadgets very subtly suggest that he might be at home in Deleuze’s degraded postmodern world. To put it differently, Snow’s ostensibly simple and straightforward question tempts Chris to embrace a copy and, in so doing, to enter a world in which there are only copies, one in which the concept of transcendence has become obsolete.
As I have indicated, with the arrival of the second copy of Rheya, Chris answers Snow in the affirmative. He no longer feels the need to ask, “Who are you?” He simply feels joy and relief over the generation of another copy. His motives are twofold. First, he simply wants back what he has lost. His unquestioning acceptance of the copy eliminates the issue of an original, neatly curing him of the pain of the absence he clearly felt at the beginning of the film. As I pointed out, he tells the second copy that when he looks at her, “all I see is you.” What he apparently means to say is that all he sees is her physical reduplication, which is all he needs. At this moment, Soderbergh’s film seems less a remake of Tarkovsky’s Solyaris (1972) than of Hitchcock’s Vertigo (1958). The film’s protagonist, Scottie (James Stewart), like Chris, is satisfied with the copy of Madeleine (Kim Novak) that he believes he is creating out of the girl, Judy (also Kim Novak), he has seen on the street. Scottie’s problem arises when he discovers that the first Madeleine was a fabrication, that the woman he fell in love with was a counterfeit Madeleine. Scottie now understands that, in remaking Judy, he is fashioning a copy of a copy; the turn from the shadows on the wall, to invoke Plato’s metaphor, reveals only further shadows, not any true region of being. Chris, however, no longer cares about originality. He has lost interest in the distinction between good and bad copies, which, after all, can be distinguished from one another only by reference to that which they re-present or re-member. No longer invested in holding on to the real, Chris also no longer feels the pain of absence.

The second consequence of accepting the second copy of Rheya is to cleanse Chris of his guilt. Chris is haunted not simply by the absence of the beloved but also by his complicity in her death. We learn in a flashback that Chris abandoned Rheya after she told him she had aborted their child. Chris returns to her but only after she has killed herself. His acceptance of the Solaris copy is a chance to erase the memory of his role in her death. To live with the copy of Rheya means he will no longer live with that memory. He tells the copy of Rheya that if they are together, it will be a chance “to undo that mistake.” The key word is “undo.” It is not contrition and forgiveness Chris seeks but the elimination of transcendent moral categories, whether they are Platonic or Kantian. To put it differently, Chris will no longer be haunted by his “original sin.” Being with the copy of Rheya will also provide him with the opportunity to undo the mistake of sending the first copy into space, of erasing it from his own and others’ memories.
Recollection and Repetition

In the midst of this, a second philosophical challenge to Platonic recollection is offered. Chris has just come from a meeting with Snow and Gordon (Viola Davis) to discuss how they should deal with the copies created by Solaris. Gordon tells Chris that the second copy of Rheya is nothing other than an inauthentic facsimile of the original. It is a mistake, she emphatically asserts, to become emotionally attached to these copies. Chris returns to his room and falls asleep. He is awakened by the image of Gibarian (Ulrich Tukur) projected on a screen. He offers his own warning to Chris not to give in to Solaris. He suggests that we may all be puppets, that it is the puppet’s dream to become human, and that maybe Chris is nothing more than his own dream. In the face of this ontological tangle in which the status of Cartesian self-knowledge is undermined, Gibarian pointedly concludes by telling Chris that there are no answers, “only choices.” The issue here is the plural. It is not the one question of whether Chris should accept or reject the copy of Rheya but whether he chooses to exist in a condition that demands an ongoing series of choices. To choose Solaris is, in effect, to choose not to make choices. There is in Gibarian’s assertion an implicit critique of both Deleuzian multiplicity and Platonic recollection, a critique made at length by Kierkegaard primarily in *Repetition* and *Either/Or*. As if he were anticipating and countering Deleuze’s postmodern philosophy, Kierkegaard accepts the absence of the divine, not as confirmation of the nonexistence of a transcendental entity but as the existential condition of humankind. To enter the space of absence is to enter the abyss of Abraham’s fear and trembling, a state of despair that, as Sartre puts it in *The Flies*, is the starting point for creating meaning. In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard contrasts the directionless “half hour works” of the aesthete to the choices of the ethical individual who “has so totally penetrated himself that every moment is attended by the consciousness of a responsibility for himself, only then has he chosen himself ethically, only then has he repeated himself.” Echoing Kierkegaard’s position, Gibarian speaks not only to Chris’s acceptance of a world of copies but also to his abrogation of his responsibility for the past.

Kierkegaard likewise rejects the Platonic notion of a transcendent ideal lost at birth and approachable through memory. Platonic recollection leads to a painful and paralyzing nostalgia, a homesickness for what was lost at birth. Kierkegaard contrasts a repetition that moves forward through choices to a recollection gazing backward through memories: “Repetition and recol-
lection are the same movement, except in opposite directions. For what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy." But again Kierkegaard does not understand repetition as engagement with an endless series of degraded reproductions, as I think Deleuze does, but as a movement driven into the future by the willingness to make choices, to engage a world of process without recourse to either a memory of transcendence or the aimless repetition of "half hour works."

Gibarian has pinpointed the dilemma that the fantastic premise of the narrative—that memories might come to life as physical entities—has created. It is never a question of taking the copy of Rheya back to Earth. Nor is it a question of betraying the memory of Rheya and accepting the elusive nature of memory. It is rather a question of choosing to make choices, of moving forward into the flux that informs the human condition.

**Kalypso’s Island**

The response of Chris to Gibarian comes at the end of the film when he makes what for him is the final choice. This critical moment is precipitated by the decision of the second copy of Rheya first to make an unsuccessful attempt at suicide and then to submit to her annihilation by Snow and Gordon. Rheya realizes that she is a copy and that her identity is based exclusively on Chris’s memory of Rheya. She recognizes, in short, that she lacks authenticity. Her decision to kill herself differs from the original Rheya’s choice to end her life after Chris has left her. The copy of Rheya chooses suicide in an attempt to acknowledge herself, to acknowledge her power of choice. With her disappearance, Chris must confront not only her absence but her rejection of her own false legitimacy.

When Gordon decides to leave the ship and make her way in the pod back to Earth, Chris is forced to decide whether he will return with Gordon or stay on Solaris. As he is about to board the craft, the film fades to a scene back on Earth. The scene appears to be either the projection of Chris’s own memory/imagination or a jumping ahead to Chris’s life back on Earth. The sequence begins with Chris in his bedroom, the same scene with which the film began. It moves ahead just like the earlier sequence to the arrival of Chris at his apartment. An important detail, however, signifies that Chris is in fact on Solaris and that he has chosen to stay rather than return to
Earth. As happened earlier, Chris slices his finger while cutting vegetables. His flesh, however, grows back almost immediately. As I said, it is apparent that Chris is not on Earth. He has chosen a place where, indeed, death has no dominion. He has chosen a place in which process has no power.

At this point Chris looks up from the miraculous healing of his finger and sees Rheya enter from out of nowhere, much like the scene in _Vertigo_ in which the remade Judy appears from the bathroom in Scottie's hotel room, now become once again, this time through his obsessive remaking, the "authentic" copy of Madeleine (the copy that was for Scottie the original). Chris and Rheya look at one another, and their eyes lock. Like Romeo and Juliet meeting at the Capulet masque, Chris and Rheya make a sonnet for themselves, a space in which the mutability of the world and the claims of history have no power, perhaps no longer exist. Soderbergh ends the film with this intimate moment. And this artistic decision raises a number of difficult questions. Are these figures themselves copies? Has Chris chosen to love a third copy of Rheya, a copy of a copy of a copy of an original? Can there be intimacy with a facsimile? Has Chris chosen a copy of Rheya that exists outside of process over the memory of the original Rheya? What of the second copy, the one who chose not to exist as someone else's copy?

The film hovers over two possibilities of overturning the Platonic legacy of the distinction between ideal and copy, being and becoming. The first is Deleuze's radical displacement of the primacy of the transcendental ideal in favor of the primacy of difference and replication. The second is Kierkegaard's rejection of Augustine's reworking of Platonic recollection of the cruel miracle memory, which places the ideal so close, yet so far away, for an active movement forward, a modern self not defined by absence but by choice. As John Caputo puts it, Kierkegaard treats the self “not as a substance, a permanent presence which endures beneath the changing fortunes of age and bodily change, but as a task to be achieved—not as presence, but as possibility.”13 A movement toward either of these possibilities would have been daring, perhaps even transgressive. But instead, Soderbergh ends his story of a version of Kalypso's island. Like Odysseus, Chris is faced with the choice of returning to the mutable world, a world of space and time, a world of change and process, or staying with Kalypso on her island, a locale where death does indeed have no dominion. Odysseus chooses to return to a world of choices, a world of flux in which he might be tested, where perhaps most importantly he might weave his own narrative of self. If he were to choose the immortality Kalypso offers, he would live perpetually in the unchang-
ing present, divesting himself of past and future. And this is what Chris has done. He has chosen to remain in the eternal present tense of Solaris.

The Material Ghost

The film, therefore, concludes with the dismissal of the modernist struggle over a self informed by absence, opting for a romanticized realm of a blissful and endless repetition, for a place obviously beyond the boundaries of the human condition. We might see this not simply as Chris’s, but also as Soderbergh’s failure. Steven Dillon has argued that Soderbergh’s films are essentially self-conscious and self-reflexive, drawing in upon themselves rather than opening up into a world they transform through the process of its re-presentation. This may very well be true, but at the end of Solaris, Soderbergh turns his back on what may be the essential quality of film. Gilberto Perez has written, “The images on the screen carry in them something of the world itself, something material, and yet something transposed, transformed into another world: the material ghost. Hence the peculiar closeness to reality and the no less peculiar suspension from reality, the juncture of world and otherworldliness distinctive of the film image.” The images of great films entice us when we encounter them on the screen and afterward persist as elusive memories and spectral, haunting (because seemingly material) ghosts. Film takes us to a world that is ultimately not our world, however much it asks to be understood as a copy of it. When we return to our own earth, as we always must, we take the memories with us of the images we have encountered there. Their elusiveness, their present absence, feeds but cannot satisfy our imagination. Chris’s journey refuses that return to Earth with its painfully pleasant sense of the insubstantiality at the heart of imaginative experience, even as Soderbergh refuses in Solaris to effect in the final analysis what Perez identifies as the unbearably poignant “juncture of world and otherworldliness.”

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 171.
514a–15b.


SOLARIS, CINEMA, AND SIMULACRA

Michael Valdez Moses

Cinema also approaches an absolute correspondence with itself and this is not contradictory: it is the very definition of the hyperreal . . . Cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent film more perfectly than the original . . . the cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent.

—Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation

Soderbergh, the Remake, and the Dream Factory

Though not a graduate of one of America’s leading film schools, Steven Soderbergh is as much a student of the history of cinema as any of his celebrated peers who learned their craft at university. One of the key figures behind the 1990s “independent” film movement, Soderbergh has distinguished himself by a self-conscious style of filmmaking that conspicuously imitates and reworks earlier cinematic forms and genres and by an unusually self-reflexive body of works, beginning with his 1989 feature-length debut, sex, lies, and videotape. In a filmmaking career that currently spans two decades, Soderbergh has directed three remakes of earlier films: The Underneath (1995), an adaptation of Robert Siodmak’s 1949 film noir classic, Criss Cross; Ocean's Eleven (2001), a stylish updating of Lewis Milestone’s 1960 Rat Pack vehicle of the same name; and Solaris (2002), a carefully meditated revision of Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1972 science fiction masterpiece.

Given that contemporary directors are generally eager to talk about the influence of earlier filmmakers on their work (discussions of cinematic influence have become a standard feature of interviews with and DVD commentaries by directors), it might not seem all that remarkable that So-
Soderbergh's films routinely reference the work of his cinematic predecessors. Soderbergh nonetheless stands out among his peers for his conspicuous interest in remaking the films of those predecessors and for his abiding interest in how film and video mediate both his professional relationship to the idiom and history of cinema and, more generally, the complex networks of our contemporary social and personal relationships. His films conspicuously and reflexively represent the ways in which the media, and especially cinema, constitute the experiential fabric of our postmodern existence. His startling portrayal of how ordinary lives are decisively altered by the presence of visual media provided the thematic and dramatic center of \textit{slv}, and as director, screenwriter, cinematographer, editor, and producer, Soderbergh has continued to explore the peculiarly hypermediated character of contemporary life in his subsequent projects, perhaps most brilliantly in his 2002 science fiction remake, \textit{Solaris}.

Though by no means a commercial success upon its initial release, \textit{Solaris} marks one of Soderbergh's most aesthetically successful attempts at fusing cinematic form and content. In his remake of Tarkovsky’s classic (itself a visual re-presentation of Stanislaw Lem's 1961 novel), Soderbergh found a conceit that concretely figures the hyperreality of our contemporary postmodern existence: the sentient planet. Superficially a story about crew members aboard a space station orbiting Solaris who discover that the planet communicates with them by materializing “facsimiles” of those about whom they dream, \textit{Solaris} may be understood as a film about the omnipresent influence and power of cinema itself. The key to unlocking the mystery of Soderbergh's film is the recognition that the planet Solaris (which effectively controls the orbiting space station, \textit{Prometheus}) is a dream factory; it functions in precisely the ways that theoreticians of film have suggested that cinema in general, and Hollywood in particular, do. Solaris captures, mediates, and reproduces the dreams of those who come within its gravitational field, and in so doing, it transforms or remakes the dreamers in its own image. The formal brilliance of Soderbergh's film depends upon its relentless conflation of the mimetic and diegetic levels of its narrative; that is, the film collapses the distinction between the characters in the film and the actors who play them, between the world that is represented in the film and the film itself as a self-reflexive representation. The resolution of the story, the climactic scene in which the protagonist, Chris Kelvin (George Clooney), and the facsimile of his long-dead wife, Rheya (Natascha McElhone), are reunited in a hyperreal world created by the implosion of Solaris,
immerses the audience in a moment of pure cinema, one that collapses not only the real world and the dream world but also the world of cinema and the world that cinema represents. In this concluding scene, the audience is caught up in a kind of endless loop in which cinema reveals that it is always already remaking itself, perpetually recycling the desires of its audience, who both supply the contents and consume the products of the dream factory.

That Solaris is a “remake” of an earlier film is thus not merely incidental to Soderbergh’s larger aim. Its status as a copy of a copy (Tarkovsky’s 1972 Solaris) that was, in turn, a visual translation of an earlier novel (Lem’s 1961 Solaris) represents in formal terms what it (Soderbergh’s film) presents thematically and dramatically: the story of a planet capable of projecting and reproducing an infinite number of “facsimiles,” a narrative about characters who continually reappear as new avatars or manifestations of themselves (and yet who are always the same). Soderbergh is an auteur (he directed, scripted, photographed, and edited Solaris) with a peculiarly belated artistic sensibility. Paradoxically, his originality (if we can be permitted to use the word) consists in recycling, reiterating, repeating, and remaking the works of his cinematic predecessors. Soderbergh exhibits what Harold Bloom famously called the “anxiety of influence,” which is the sense that, as an artist, one has nothing new to say because everything worth saying has already been said by one’s artistic models and forebears. He overcomes his anxiety by exulting in his belated postmodern status: his films relentlessly and self-consciously proclaim their indebtedness to earlier movies, cinematic idioms, and film genres. But in so doing, Soderbergh can metaphorically be said to channel the voices of the dead (those of his predecessors); he first absorbs and then entirely refashions their cinematic visions until he can claim them as his own.

In the case of Solaris, Soderbergh owes his most obvious debt to Tarkovsky. But the visual details of his film, its cinematic textures, are also deeply indebted to the works of many other directors and auteurs, including Jean-Luc Godard, Ridley Scott, and James Cameron (all makers of science fiction classics), but perhaps most of all to Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). The extended sequence in which Kelvin’s space ship docks with the orbiting space station Prometheus, close-up shots of Kelvin’s face behind the mask of his helmet that capture the multicolored reflections on its transparent surface, or the sudden appearance of an otherworldly manifestation (Rheya) next to Kelvin’s bed when he awakens, all gesture in form or content toward Kubrick’s science fiction epic. Soderbergh’s borrowings
from Kubrick extend even to the soundscape of Solaris. In his DVD commentary, Soderbergh reveals that he directed the composer, Cliff Martinez, to incorporate reworked musical tracks by György Ligeti (whose music was featured in 2001) into the film score of Solaris, thereby “recreating the sound” of Kubrick’s science fiction classic. (Like the sentient planet around which his film revolves, Soderbergh attempts to influence his audience even at the subliminal level.) For Soderbergh the remake is not so much a pastiche of earlier film genres as the master genre, one he has made his signature form. Though we tend to think of the remake as a minor or derivative work, one not generally regarded as a proper or canonical film genre, one to which a filmmaker might turn out of desperation, for purely commercial interest, or because of a lack of artistic inspiration and originality, in Soderbergh’s hands it has become a uniquely powerful aesthetic form, the exploitation of which allows him to exercise a postmodern mastery over the works of his predecessors. Like a god or Solaris itself, Soderbergh might be said to remake the visions of his artistic predecessors in his own image.

Baudrillard, Simulacra, and Hyperreality

The writings of the French philosopher and social theorist Jean Baudrillard, and in particular his influential work Simulacra and Simulation, provide several crucial concepts that can help to illuminate the most salient features of Soderbergh’s Solaris. A theorist of postmodernity, Baudrillard famously maintained that the late twentieth century is characterized by a disappearance of “the real,” which has been replaced by what Baudrillard terms the “hyperreal” (SS 2). During the past eras of Western civilization, theorizes Baudrillard, it was taken for granted that reality could be represented, that there was a rigid divide and strict correspondence between the forms of representation (e.g., mimetic works of art, historical accounts) and that which those forms represented (reality, history). But over the course of Western civilization, revolutions in our metaphysical understanding, the forms of economic life, and the technological means of representation led to an inevitable collapse of this fundamental distinction between representation and reality. According to this provocative theory, our reality has gradually been supplanted by its representations, and we are left with what Baudrillard neologistically terms the “precession of simulacra” (1). According to Baudrillard, it is not simply that our contemporary forms of representation occlude the real but rather that we postmodern subjects discover ourselves
to inhabit a “hyperreality” in which representations are the only reality. Baudrillard refers to these hyperreal representations as “simulacra,” which, unlike earlier historical (and traditional) forms of representation, no longer refer to an original. They are, as it were, pure copies lacking an original or authentic source, or as Baudrillard insists, the “models” (representations) supplant and precede that which they purport to represent:

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials. . . . It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real. . . . Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself. . . . A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences. (2–3)

The work of such simulacra is merely to simulate the difference between reality and representation; such simulations thus merely disguise or postpone the recognition of the “fact” that no distinction between reality and representation exists.

Building on the earlier influential insight of the Canadian media and literary theorist Marshall McLuhan (“the medium is the message”), Baudrillard argues that the mediations of our contemporary reality (especially the electronic and visual media of photography, television, video, and film but also including the older forms of media such as print news and literature) have so entirely saturated and absorbed what we formerly believed to be our “reality” that they have, in effect, come to constitute the very basis of our lived existence; they form the very fabric and substance of our experiential postmodern “hyperreality.” For Baudrillard, this means that the formerly essential distinction between history and its representation, between social relations and their technological mediations, and even that between consciousness and the unconscious are no longer tenable. It is important to recognize that the advent of hyperreality signals for Baudrillard not just an epistemological crisis but also, and more fundamentally, a final, unavoidable, and accelerating crisis of Western civilization itself. Reworking a concept he borrows from the Russian émigré and French philosopher Alexandre Kojève, Baudrillard insists that the advent of postmodernity heralds “the end
of history” (36). For Baudrillard, this ever deepening crisis takes the form of a cultural implosion that must end in the complete collapse of Western civilization. Always a radical political thinker, Baudrillard sometimes insisted that arrival of postmodernity and the advent of hyperreality heralded the long-awaited demise of capitalism and the final triumph of socialism (26), but as a self-identified “terrorist and nihilist in theory” (163), Baudrillard also gave the impression that the utopian prospects for socialism (which presumably would not resemble any of the forms embodied by the actually existing communist nations of the cold war era) depended upon a destruction of our Western system of signification so total and complete that it was possible only to gesture, in a kind of prophetic fashion, at what might lie beyond its end.

**Solaris and the Dream Factory**

We shall return to Baudrillard’s work in the course of our analysis of Solaris, but for the moment, it is sufficient to note that that Simulacra and Simulation had circulated widely enough in English translation among cinéastes and filmmakers by the late 1990s to be featured in a pivotal scene in The Matrix (Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski, 1999): the protagonist, Neo, hides his electronic stash (which he sells illegally to various buyers) in a hard copy edition of Baudrillard’s book. Given the tremendous international success of the Wachowski brothers’ film just three years before the release of Solaris, and given Soderbergh’s encyclopedic knowledge of film history, as well as his casually expressed interest in film and media theory, it seems highly likely that the director was at the very least familiar with the basic concepts advanced in Baudrillard’s best known work, if not with the text itself. And given Baudrillard’s own deep interest in works of literary and cinematic science fiction—he was, for example, influenced by and wrote about the works of Philip K. Dick and J. G. Ballard—it should not surprise us that his theories seem to have a particular relevance when set beside Soderbergh’s remake of Tarkovsky’s 1972 science fiction classic. For at the center of Soderbergh’s film (to say nothing of Tarkovsky’s film and Lem’s novel) is a cold, distant, and utterly alien (if evidently sentient) planet that possesses the power to produce perfect simulacra of human beings. Solaris does not produce mere copies of the original Rheya; it reproduces facsimiles of Kelvin’s dreamed version of his long dead wife. (Suggestively, the English translation of Lem’s novel, which Soderbergh most certainly read, uses the
The word *simulacra* to describe the copies of Rheya reproduced successively by Solaris. Each facsimile of Rheya is only as detailed and as seemingly real as Kelvin remembers, imagines, or dreams her to be. (In Tarkovsky’s and Lem’s versions of *Solaris* this point is brought home by the fact that Kelvin doesn’t remember the buttons on the dress that his wife wore on the day of her suicide. The simulacrum of Rheya therefore cannot unbutton her dress; she must cut her way out of her clothing.) To be sure, Kelvin can apparently distinguish between the facsimiles of Rheya and her original (or so we assume). But the distinction he makes is the product of an illusion that Soderbergh’s film both self-consciously foists upon his audience and slyly subverts. In the first instance, we never *directly* see or hear the “original” Rheya. We know her only through Kelvin’s memories and dreams, which could well be unreliable records of what her “original” was like. “Rheya” has already been mediated by Kelvin’s conscious and unconscious mind even before she is projected by Solaris onto the plane of reality that her husband inhabits. Moreover, because of the cinematic medium in which Soderbergh manifests her character, Rheya is necessarily only a visual representation, an image on the screen. (She is a visual projection of Natascha McElhone, who is only playing the part of Rheya. There is, after all, no “real” version or original of Rheya, only earlier cinematic and literary instantiations of the character in Tarkovsky’s film and Lem’s novel.) And insofar as Rheya exists as a specifically cinematic (or even digital) image within Soderbergh’s film, there is not even an *original* filmic version of her to which we can refer. There are only *copies* of Soderbergh’s *Solaris*, no *original* to which we can compare any of the thousands of actual and millions of potential versions that circulate through the postmodern media as reels of film, DVDs, and in downloadable digital formats.

One might object that this is true of virtually all contemporary films, not just Soderbergh’s *Solaris*. Such an objection would, of course, pose no challenge to Baudrillard’s thesis that the character of postmodern hyper-reality is a thoroughly mediated and media-saturated one. But this objection would, unfortunately, lead us to overlook the peculiarly self-reflexive quality of Soderbergh’s *Solaris* that crucially distinguishes his film(s) from those of his cinematic contemporaries. For as I’ve suggested, the final scene between Kelvin and the simulacrum of Rheya depends for its full dramatic and psychological effect on our recognition that Soderbergh has momentarily suspended the distinction between reality and representation. We know that the increasing gravitational pull of Solaris causes the planet to collapse into
itself. In much the same way that, according to Baudrillard, Western reality comes to an end via an ever accelerating implosion, the planet pulls Kelvin into itself (the protagonist remains aboard the space station Prometheus rather than flee Solaris in the space pod, Athena), where he unaccountably rejoins Rhea in a simulacrum of the apartment he inhabited in the opening scene of the film. In a matched set of close-ups that Soderbergh, in his DVD commentary on the film, claims he borrowed from Hitchcock’s Spellbound (1945), Kelvin and Rhea speak to each other. Or so we assume, for in fact they look and speak directly into the camera, which is to say, at us, the audience. Kelvin asks, “Am I alive or dead?” And Rhea answers, “We don’t have to think like that anymore. We are together now. Everything we’ve done is forgiven. Everything.”

Several key themes and formal elements are thus dramatically compressed in this final scene. At the final moment, Soderbergh grants his audience the Hollywood ending. His hero and his long-lost beloved are reunited in a kind of afterlife or dream world for all eternity. And thereby, the dreams of the audience are realized (once more) in the mediated form of cinema itself. Willing witnesses to a self-consciously unoriginal reiteration of an endlessly recycled Hollywood denouement, we are encouraged to indulge in a projection of our desire for an immortal love, one that will survive even the limits of human finitude. (It is no accident that Kelvin recites or remembers the title of Dylan Thomas’s poem during his courtship of Rhea and after her suicide: “And death shall have no dominion.”) And in some highly mediated fashion, Solaris makes good on its invitation, at least insofar as Soderbergh’s cinematic representation of endless love is preserved on film and in digital format and is thus endlessly repeatable. But in reflexive fashion this final scene also allows Soderbergh’s film to signal to its more critically minded audience that all is an illusion, a mere representation or simulacrum. For it is Soderbergh who directs Clooney and McElhone to violate the so-called fourth wall and speak directly into the camera, to us, the audience (though at the same time we are happy to entertain the fiction that the characters are in fact speaking directly to each other—something literally impossible for the actors to do in this kind of shot). We, by implication, are invited to join the characters and cast in a realm that does not recognize the distinction between life and death. (A cinematic representation, unlike a stage presentation, is never live and therefore never dead; in film, both the characters and the actors who play them never grow older or die no matter how many times the movie is seen or remade or how many years pass after
its initial release.) We are tacitly invited into Solaris itself, into the inner workings of the dream factory, where we get to see, hear, and participate in the hyperreality of pure cinema; in the final shot of the film, the “living” planet Solaris becomes indistinguishable from the image at which we look. As Rheya’s simulacrum proleptically puts it to Kelvin, “I wish we could just live inside that feeling forever. Maybe there’s a place that we can.” That place is at once the imploded planet Solaris and the world of pure cinema, Solaris. Solaris simply is (and is not) the mediated representation of what we see, and we what we see is the virtual materialization of our dreams and desires speaking directly to us, telling us the words that we want to hear.

The Romance of Alienation and the God in the Machine

If his critique of hyperreality often ran the risk of becoming a merely self-indulgent and self-reflexive commentary on the superficial characteristics of a media-saturated culture, Baudrillard nevertheless insisted that his theoretical engagement with postmodernity was not an attempt to ignore or diminish the importance of what was at stake for those who must live in a world of simulacra and simulation. He maintained, for example, that the violence of war at the end of history (he had in mind the Vietnam War) was “no less atrocious for being only a simulacrum—the flesh suffers just the same” (SS 37). In like manner, I wish to avoid giving the impression that, in translating Baudrillard’s insights onto the screen, Soderbergh offers nothing more than a clever film about film, a highly rarified form of aesthetic frisson for his critically minded (and jaded) viewers. For Soderbergh, as for Baudrillard, fascination with the hyperreal is an attempt to grapple with what has become of our human nature, or at least what we in the West used to call our human nature. In the postmodern age, our inner selves, our souls, have become (so Baudrillard would have it) denatured, merely an effect of the media by means of which we represent ourselves. Our own inner life, to say nothing of the inner life of others, becomes something inaccessible and incomprehensible. We can no longer represent its reality.

For all its fascination with the mediation of desire, Solaris is a love story, one that attempts to come to terms with the peculiarly involuted psychology of postmodern romance and its accompanying sense of radical alienation. At the emotional center of Soderbergh’s film are the feelings of grief, guilt, and loss that Kelvin experiences following the death of Rheya, who commits suicide after her husband (temporarily, but no less fatefuly)
abandons her. The ingenuity of Soderbergh’s plot (not its originality, for the director borrows this plot device from Tarkovsky’s and Lem’s earlier versions of the same story) consists in its restagings and reenactments of Kelvin’s troubled relationship with his wife. Like such light romantic Hollywood comedies as *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993), *Solaris* portrays a hero who repeatedly attempts to rectify the critical mistakes he has made in a failed relationship, but in the case of Soderbergh’s much darker film, the protagonist tends to repeat the same missteps with the same fatal outcome. In a kind of endless loop of romantic fatality, Kelvin acts or fails to act in a way that leads to Rheya’s death. On Earth Rheya commits suicide after Kelvin leaves her. He subsequently “kills” the first facsimile Rheya by trapping her within a space pod that he launches into deep space. Kelvin is determined to keep her second facsimile alive but fails when she attempts to kill herself by drinking liquid oxygen after learning that Kelvin has done away with her predecessor. Rheya’s third avatar fares no better; she allows Gordon (Viola Davis) to dematerialize her when she becomes convinced that her relationship with Kelvin could not survive their separation, that it can exist only within the hermetically sealed confines of the space station orbiting Solaris. Kelvin never learns how to prevent Rheya’s fear that their relationship will come to a premature end from becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Most dishearteningly, in each reiteration of their life together, Kelvin inevitably feels responsible, directly or indirectly, for Rheya’s death.

But if the manifest reason for a failed marriage is Rheya’s fear of abandonment, the latent reason is Kelvin’s inability to see his wife as something other than a projection of his own desires. Told through a series of rapidly unfolding scenes that reiterates Kelvin and Rheya’s past life together, their earthly affair begins when Kelvin first sees Rheya sitting on a train seat directly facing him. This “vision” of Rheya follows a jump cut, and since we see her from Kelvin’s point of view, it seems almost as if she were summoned up by Kelvin’s unconscious. Rheya sits silently, mysteriously holding a doorknob in her hand, and then appears to look through and then directly at the hero (and therefore at us). As if at the bidding of his newly awakened but not yet gratified desire, Rheya next appears at a party Kelvin attends (apparently on the same evening he meets her on the train). It is Kelvin who pursues Rheya at the party, and it is he who subsequently seeks a commitment from her. Kelvin urgently and insistently presses Rheya to marry him. As a woman mortally afraid of entering a relationship that might fail and one who suffers from various unnamed debilitating psychological maladies (we surmise that
she is given to depression, low self-esteem, fear of commitment, an inability to trust in others), Rheya attempts to put Kelvin off. But as a practicing psychiatrist, he is confident that he can treat Rheya, *make her better*, transform her into the woman that he and (he assumes) she desires. But after Kelvin and Rheya are married, he fails to appreciate that his “militant atheism” and more particularly his “nihilistic utterances” at a dinner party among friends signal to his wife (who is secretly pregnant) that she really doesn’t know the *real* Chris Kelvin. Rheya’s worst fears seem realized; she is in love with her own projection of Kelvin, just as he is in love with his projection of her. In his DVD commentary about the film, Soderbergh speaks about their (all too common) predicament: “I think that was one of the things we [Soderbergh and the producer of the film, James Cameron] were interested in exploring is this idea of romantic love as opposed to a more pure form of love that doesn’t involve projection and whether or not it’s possible to have a love for someone that doesn’t involve a projection in both directions.”

The remarkable power of Solaris is its ability to literalize the psychological projections of those characters who come within its orbit. The planet makes visible for us and for the characters what they, but most especially Kelvin, have been doing all along. They fall in love with their projections. However, once their dream vision of the other begins to take on a life of its own, they find that they do not really know and are emotionally alienated from that other whom they have projected. Sadly, this also makes “the other,” on whom an idealized image has been projected, feel incomplete, fragmentary. As Rheya’s simulacrum says to Kelvin, “I am not a whole person.” Ironically, the consequence of projecting the self onto the other is to make the self feel inauthentic, unreal.

As I have suggested, the final scene of *Solaris* invites us to believe that a love without projection *is* possible, but of course, the prospect of such an utterly pure and unselfish love being made manifest before our eyes necessitates the intervention of a postmodern deus ex machina. According to a still influential tradition in Christian theology, the kind of love that doesn’t involve human projection, that is utterly selfless and entirely comprehensive, is *agape*, the divine love that the Christian God has for his creatures. And Soderbergh’s film certainly toys with the possibility that Solaris may be a kind of god (the space station that orbits the sentient planet and seeks to discover its secrets is suggestively named *Prometheus*). It is, after all, an omniscient and seemingly all-powerful planet that appears to make possible a union between Kelvin and Rheya that is so complete, so infinite, and so
invulnerable that the two can be forever as one. Only by means of such an extraordinary mediation can all be forgiven and can that which separated Kelvin and Rheya, the ineradicable otherness that each poses for other, be finally and definitely overcome. Only within Solaris (the planet-god) can the alienation that haunts the characters seemingly be banished from the postmodern soul.

But given Soderbergh’s frequently expressed skepticism, indeed, his open avowal of atheism, it would be misleading to suggest that the director intended the sentient planet of his film to be taken as a metaphor for a literal and loving God, or that Kelvin and Rheya’s final cinematic state be understood as representation of an actual paradise. In fact, in his DVD commentary on Solaris, Soderbergh suggests that he is not “unsympathetic towards Gordon’s point of view,” that Solaris is “not benign.” When his producer and co-commentator, James Cameron, prompts him to elaborate, Soderbergh quotes Stanley Kubrick: “I don’t think the universe is either good or bad. I think it’s simply indifferent.” Soderbergh goes on to suggest that Gordon “may be right. It [Solaris] may just be playing with them, out of curiosity, without any real motive other than to learn how human beings react.” Soderbergh’s secularist gloss on his film may be considerably more guarded than Baudrillard’s characteristically extravagant trumpeting of nihilism, but it nonetheless suggests that the alienation of one individual from another is a disturbingly salient and ineradicable feature of postmodernity. The symptoms of this contemporary form of alienation are at once palliated and aggravated by the very thing that gives rise to the malady in the first place: the endless circulation and mediation of desire that characterizes postmodernity. Confronting an indifferent universe, human beings communicate their yearning for meaning, belonging, and permanence via an ever more sophisticated and complicated network of media, and thereby, they project those amplified longings onto one another, only to be perpetually disappointed but no less ready to reenact that act of projection after each new disappointment. The alienated individual entertains the illusion of complete fulfillment, which in turn compounds his or her sense of alienation, and that in turn leads the alienated individual to seek out all the more ardently the illusion of total fulfillment. For Baudrillard, and, I am tempted to say, for the characters of Soderbergh’s Solaris, no final satiation of the human longing for satiation is possible except in death. All else is the mere prolongation, agitation, and recycling of desire. Soderbergh’s postmodern film may thus be said to reiterate one of the central tropes of an earlier romantic sensibil-
ity, one that points the way toward the psychological discontents of what Baudrillard terms “the desert of the real itself” (SS 1, original emphasis): only in death, or rather in the representation of death, is love truly and forever consummated. Only within Solaris (the film) can the alienation that haunts the characters seemingly be banished from the postmodern soul.

The Age of Unnatural Reproduction

Soderbergh’s screenplay adds a distinctive, even original plot twist to Tarkovsky’s and Lem’s earlier versions of Solaris. The precipitating event that leads Kelvin to walk out on Rheya is his discovery that she has furtively aborted their child. (Rheya has acted on her recent discovery of Kelvin’s nihilism; she assumes that Kelvin would not want to bring a child into the world.) Before he leaves Rheya, Kelvin exclaims with bitter irony, “Why would I want a child? Why would I want anything that would bring life to this house?” It is not only Rheya’s fear of abandonment and Kelvin’s sense of guilt over his wife’s suicide that haunt their relationship; it is also the ghost of their lost child. Their repeated and futile attempts to remake their marriage are always shadowed by the fact that they have had no offspring of their own; the figure of the aborted child always stands between them. Driving home the point, Snow (Jeremy Davies), Kelvin’s fellow crewman (in fact, a simulacrum), poses a disturbing question: “I wonder if they [the simulacra] can get pregnant?” We never get a definitive answer to this question; Rheya’s avatars commit suicide so soon after their materialization as to render the issue moot. But there is nothing that might lead us to believe that the answer to Snow’s question is “yes.” Solaris does not merely create facsimiles out of the immaterial dreams of the crew members; it also causes their nonhuman bodies to regenerate or revive if injured or killed. At the very least, we can say that there is no need for the simulacra to reproduce in the way that human beings do; they have another more efficient and dependable means of replicating themselves.

Soderbergh’s film thus dramatically opposes two types of reproduction: one that is sexual, natural, and subject to the earthly rules that govern human bodies, and another that is asexual, unnatural, and subject only to the otherworldly powers of Solaris. Simulacra and Simulation deals directly with this opposition: it is the development of a new kind of unnatural reproduction (identified with cloning and scissiparity) that Baudrillard identifies as a distinctive feature of postmodernity and the hyperreal (SS 95–103).
According to Baudrillard, “when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death” (95). Baudrillard speaks here of the literary figure of the doppelgänger (though his remarks seem like a gloss on Rheya’s materializations). Baudrillard immediately connects the figure of the doppelgänger with contemporary scientific efforts to make possible reproduction without need of sexual congress. Although they are particularly concerned with “the clone,” Baudrillard’s comments (which appear to have influenced the Wachowski brothers) provide an apt description of the predicament in which Kelvin and Rheya’s facsimile find themselves: “The Father and the Mother have disappeared, not in the service of an aleatory liberty of the subject, but in the service of a matrix called code. No more mother, no more father: a matrix. And it is the matrix, that of the genetic code, that now infinitely ‘gives birth’ based on a functional mode purged of all aleatory sexuality” (96–97). For “the matrix” we might say “Solaris,” and in place of the genetic code we might substitute the information that the planet gleams from Kelvin’s unconscious. For like Baudrillard’s clones and simulacra, Rheya represents “the end of the body, of its history, and of its vicissitudes. The individual is no longer anything but . . . its base formula” (100).

Our brief digression into Baudrillard’s commentary allows us to illuminate several themes in Soderbergh’s film. When Kelvin enters into the space station orbiting Solaris, he passes into a realm in which reproduction has been decisively and forever severed from human sexuality. Solaris can unnaturally reproduce a countless number of perfect facsimiles of Rheya based on a code that it steals from Kelvin’s unconscious, but Kelvin and the Rheya simulacra, for all their erotic ardor, are (almost certainly) sterile. They can (and do) have sex, but they cannot make their own child and so in the most traditional and natural sense cannot join their flesh in the body of their offspring. To be sure, in angelic fashion, the simulacrum of Gibarian’s dead son (Shane Skelton) offers his hand to the huddled figure of Kelvin as the Prometheus is violently drawn into Solaris’s gravitational mass. And Soderbergh admits in his DVD commentary that one of his friends, as well as members of his crew, speculated that the boy is a figure for Kelvin and Rheya’s lost child, “the child they never had.” But this identification only underscores the degree to which natural reproduction has been entirely displaced within the world that is Solaris. In the afterworld that is the imploded planet, Kelvin and Rheya cannot have their own child. They can, at best, adopt the simulacrum of a dead child who is not even generated
out of Kelvin’s mind; he is a residual effect produced by the unconscious of Gibarian (Ulrich Tukur), who has committed suicide even before Kelvin boards the *Prometheus*. Suggestively, the boy is nowhere to be seen in the final hyperreal scene between Kelvin and Rheya.

I am not claiming that Soderbergh implicitly champions a return to traditional conceptions of the nuclear family, though he perhaps relies upon the longings of his audience for just such a traditional family structure to achieve the emotional effect at which the dramatic conclusion of *Solaris* aims. But I believe that Soderbergh, like Baudrillard, knowingly reveals the emotional vagaries, anxieties, and absences of a postmodern existence in which nature, has, as it were, retreated or disappeared. Accordingly, both director and philosopher provocatively choose to represent the postmodern family as an unnatural or posthuman one. Love, desire, and sex may well be liberated, but, as in many dystopias (such as Huxley’s *Brave New World* and Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*), they will bear no necessary relationship to reproduction and the perpetuation of the family. Indeed, familial reproduction will increasingly come to bear a striking resemblance to the replication of images, simulacra, and facsimiles in the media and cinema, which is to say, it will look just like the imploded world of *Solaris*.

**Monitors, Surveillance, and Closed Circuits**

Thus far we have approached *Solaris* as if Soderbergh’s interest in the mediated character of postmodernity manifested itself chiefly on the symbolic, formal, and thematic levels of the film. But in fact, Soderbergh’s obsessive fascination with mediation is evident even in the film’s mise-en-scène: the stage settings, props, locales, and physical environment of the cinematic world captured on screen. In particular, we should note the conspicuous proliferation of monitors, panels, televisions, video screens, computers, videophones, intercoms, and electronic and digital interfaces that are everywhere present. In an early scene we watch Kelvin in the kitchen of his home preparing a meal. In the foreground, partly obstructing our vision of the kitchen, we see an impressively large transparent monitor, a glass panel or partition on which we can barely make out several distinct streaming broadcasts and visual feeds (they are meant to be viewable from Kelvin’s vantage point and consequently are inverted and unreadable from our perspective). In this same scene, Kelvin briefly communicates with his callers from DBR (the organization that hires him to travel to the space station
orbiting Solaris) via an intercom system. Still later in the scene, we view the video message from the *Prometheus* that Gibarian has sent to Kelvin via DBR. We watch the message from Kelvin’s point of view; the screen on which it appears serves as a monitor for several other interpolated visual feeds that play in the background. This one scene may be taken as representative of the film’s mise-en-scène, for in the scenes that follow we find Soderbergh’s characters almost always surrounded by the technological components and apparatus of futuristic media. Indeed, it would be fair to say that there are very few scenes aboard the *Prometheus* (the principal set in which the action takes place) in which mediating technologies are entirely absent from view for any considerable length of time.

Soderbergh’s DVD commentary on the early scene in Kelvin’s apartment provides a preliminary articulation of the thesis tacitly being advanced here: “I have a theory that despite the fact that we will have more and more ways to communicate in the future that it may actually be a very isolating place to be.” A central paradox of the forms of postmodern mediation is that they often inhibit rather than facilitate genuine or meaningful communication. In his video message to Kelvin from the *Prometheus*, Gibarian insists that he can’t really explain what has happened aboard the space station; Kelvin must come to talk with Gibarian face to face. But of course, the only subsequent contact that Kelvin has with his friend, who commits suicide before Kelvin reaches Solaris, is via more recorded video messages. To be sure, Kelvin eventually gets an opportunity to meet face to face with those who inhabit the *Prometheus* (including Gibarian, Rheya, Snow, and Gibarian’s son), but by and large they are simulacra who, one is tempted to say, are the three-dimensional communications or messages that Solaris sends to Kelvin. (Gordon is the exception, and she is initially unwilling to meet face to face with Kelvin, preferring to talk from behind the locked door of her cabin.) Amid a superabundance of communications media, Kelvin is indeed marooned, cut off from almost all other human beings.

Ironically, Kelvin’s human isolation is perfectly compatible with (and to some degree an effect of) the completely surveilled character of the worlds through which he moves. Though unmediated human face-to-face communication is extremely difficult for any of the characters to manage successfully, they nonetheless find that the environments in which they live paradoxically offer no genuinely private spaces. On *Prometheus*, for example, the crew is constantly monitoring Solaris, and the looming planet, usually visible through the windows of the many rooms and compartments
of the space station, monitors the crew. As the facsimiles begin to materialize aboard the space station, the crew exhibits an increasing paranoia that manifests itself in their need to keep watch over each other (Gordon provides the clearest case of this psychological malady). And once they’ve manifested aboard the space station, even the simulacra can’t bear to be out of sight of those individuals who have dreamed them into existence with the assistance of Solaris. Rheya literally becomes uncontrollably violent when she is separated from Kelvin.

Within the orbit of Solaris, even the unconscious can no longer provide a private sanctuary for the individual self. One’s dreams, once manifested as simulacra, become visible to everyone else on board the Prometheus. Solaris once again fulfills one of the key conditions of Baudrillard’s conception of postmodernity: the effective disappearance of the unconscious—or to put it in other terms, the collapse of the division between the conscious and unconscious (SS 3). And just as Soderbergh represents the mediated character of his postmodern reality through a mise-en-scène supersaturated with the apparatus of communications technology, he visualizes the collapsed distinction between inner and outer worlds, private and public space, by employing almost entirely interior shots. Except for a few brief scenes on the rainy streets in front of Kelvin’s office and home and the rare exterior pan of Solaris and the space station, almost the whole of Solaris is claustrophobically realized via an almost seamless sequence of takes from within confined spaces and built structures: Kelvin’s office, the room where Kelvin holds his group therapy sessions, Kelvin’s home, the train in which Kelvin and Rheya meet, Gibarian’s home, the bookstore where Kelvin and Rheya court, the Athena, the Prometheus. There is little or no evidence of a natural earthly world, for the urban environment of the city frames even the exterior shots on Earth. The implosion of Solaris at the end of Soderbergh’s film signals the final and complete collapse of the interior and exterior worlds. In that hyperreal scene we can no longer discriminate between life within Solaris and life within Kelvin’s home. The inside is the outside. The “unconscious” of the sentient planet has become the only reality, a closed circuit that the characters forever traverse without getting anywhere new.

**9/11 and the Affects of Postmodernity**

Alienation, paranoia, claustrophobia—such are the psychic features we have mapped so far on the landscape of Solaris. For Baudrillard, the psychological
derangements of hyperreality have no one particular historical source (modernity gives way to postmodernity with the transition from the industrial to the postindustrial age). But in Soderbergh’s film, we are provided a small and easily overlooked hint at what might be the most proximate historical cause of our current discontents. In one of the earliest scenes in Solaris, we see Kelvin meeting with patients at a group therapy session. One patient speaks of how images on the Internet, television, and even on T-shirts are “setting off” his wife, after which another female patient wearing a headscarf laments that when she sees the same images she feels nothing; she wonders whether “it’s real.” In the screenplay that accompanies the DVD release of Solaris, Soderbergh writes, “The implication is that these people are undergoing grief counseling due to some recent cataclysmic event.” Considering that Soderbergh began shooting Solaris in April 2002, it’s not too much of a stretch to suggest that the cataclysmic event to which Kelvin’s patients obliquely refer is meant to resonate with an audience still traumatized by the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001 (little more than a year before the film was released in November 2002). While I am by no means arguing that Solaris is really about the events of 9/11, I will suggest that the film registers the psychological disorientation that the attacks left in their wake, psychic disturbances that turn out to be symptomatic of the general conditions that prevail within postmodernity as Baudrillard understands it.

Written at the height of the cold war, when the doctrine of mutually assured destruction had achieved ideological orthodoxy, Simulacra and Simulation advances the claim that the ultimate purpose of nuclear deterrence was to freeze the bipolar political arrangements of the postmodern era. Far from offering a defense against foreign (Soviet or American) threats, deterrence was the means by which the superpowers terrorized their own citizens, psychologically immobilizing them and thereby stabilizing the power sharing arrangements they had reached with each other (SS 31–40, 53–57). For Baudrillard, nuclear deterrence was a technique of internal political control that depended for its effect not on the actual use of nuclear force but on the ever deferred threat of nuclear force. As he succinctly formulated it, “the balance of terror is the terror of balance” (33). The terror of balance, of nuclear deterrence, resembles the spectacular terrorist acts of the 1970s insofar as both forms of terror are crucially dependent on mediation. It is, paradoxically, the postmodern media that gives terror and terrorism its power over the populace: “The media make themselves into the vehicle of the
moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but simultaneously, in the most complete ambiguity, they propagate the brutal charm of the terrorist act, they are themselves terrorists” (84).

In The Spirit of Terrorism, written and published in 2002, in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, Baudrillard provocatively updates his earlier thesis to fit the new epoch. Terrorist violence, he insists, isn’t effective because it’s real but because it’s symbolic. The populace is terrorized not chiefly by the actual violence done but by images of violence purveyed in the media (ST 29). With his usual chiasmic flourish, Baudrillard writes, “The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us” (30). It is significant that Kelvin’s patients speak not of the cataclysmic event itself but instead of the images of the unspecified event they encounter in mediated forms everywhere about them. They are as likely to be set off emotionally by these images as they are to be numbed by them. But what is especially arresting is the second patient’s remark that she no longer knows what is “real.” Kelvin’s patients cannot figure out whether their problem is that they overreact or that they don’t react at all to the spectacle of violence; they don’t know whether the source of their trauma is too real or not real enough. The cataclysmic event seems to have triggered a kind of ontological or metaphysical terror in them: they no longer can distinguish between reality and its representation; the two have become hopelessly fused in their minds. Kelvin’s patients thus exhibit the classic symptoms of Baudrillard’s postmodern terror. And in the course of the film, Kelvin will reenact his own terrifying version of their trauma. He too will watch a series of simulacra, images if you will, of Rheya die over and over again. His increasing terror and psychic disorientation stems as much from the simulacra’s reiterations of Rheya’s death as from her original suicide (which necessarily has become only a memory or a nightmare in Kelvin’s mind).

Baudrillard suggests that the traumatic postmodern break with the real, marked by the supplanting of reality by hyperreality, gives rise not only to the affect of terror but also to the affects of nostalgia and melancholia (ST 6, 160, 162). The postmodern subject longs for that thing that he believes existed in the past but that is no longer accessible to him: the real. He is perpetually given to feel nostalgic about a reality that has vanished and that can never return. He likewise feels the loss of that thing for which there is no adequate substitute. All substitutes for a lost reality evoke in him an unquenchable melancholy. There is no direct connection between Kelvin’s deep nostalgia or his profound melancholy and the psychic traumas of his patients, or at
least none that we can detect. But it is nonetheless the case that Kelvin’s odyssey to Solaris immerses him ever more deeply in those emotional states that are, according to Baudrillard, the signature affects of postmodernity, affective states that characterized the public mood of America (especially as represented and purveyed in the print and electronic media) following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C. Kelvin’s trauma, his loss of the real Rheya, is in no obvious way a political event. But the loss of his wife, for which he feels responsible, triggers in him precisely those moods—terror, nostalgia, melancholia—that typify the postmodern subject. He is terrorized by the constant reappearances of Rheya’s simulacra; he nostalgically and obsessively recalls their vanished life together before her suicide; he feels melancholic over the fact that none of the substitute Rheyas can ever take the place of the lost original.

**The Paradoxes of Postmodern Implosion**

Our critical excursus through *Solaris* leaves us facing a final (and perhaps irresolvable) set of paradoxes. What sort of work is it that can simultaneously evoke feelings of desire, love, transcendence, ecstasy, religious rapture, guilt, alienation, paranoia, claustrophobia, terror, nostalgia, and melancholia? How can Soderbergh reconcile his searching critique of the postmodern condition with his embrace of a postmodern aesthetic? What does it mean for Soderbergh to represent a hyperreality that is only ever a representation of itself? How can Solaris be at one and the same moment both sentient planet and *Solaris*, self-reflexive film? It is no doubt an overworked truism to suggest that Soderbergh attempts to overcome these antinomies through the magic of cinema, but in this case the cliché expresses a deeper truth that validates the artistic integrity of Soderbergh’s extraordinary film. As a quintessential work of postmodern art, *Solaris* does not pretend to be anything other than a scrupulously crafted work of mimesis, one that does no more than to represent a contemporary reality that has become so thoroughly mediated that our experience of cinema and our experience of life are necessarily conflated. Soderbergh’s *Solaris* suggests that we are as much creatures of the media as the media are creations of our own devising. If his film refuses to extricate us from the quandaries of postmodernity, it is at least in part because such a gesture would be just one more deceptive ploy worked upon the postmodern subjects Soderbergh’s film addresses. For after all, what can we expect a film to do? It is not, by definition, capable of shedding its mimetic status; we can-
not ask that even a self-reflexive representation free us from the labyrinth of mediations that Baudrillard and Soderbergh believe are the very fabric of postmodernity. In his more apocalyptic moments, Baudrillard insisted that all the theorist of the present age could do was to intensify and accelerate the movement toward a total implosion of hyperreality; he lamented that there was no escaping the centripetal pull of postmodernity. Soderbergh remains true to Baudrillard’s insight. Unlike such faux revolutionary films as the *Matrix* trilogy, *Solaris* does not offer us a way out of the postmodern condition, only a way ever deeper into its dark matter.

**Notes**

1. Contemporary directors with an MFA degree from USC, UCLA, or NYU (Tisch) film schools include George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Joel Coen, Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Oliver Stone, Jim Jarmusch, M. Night Shyamalan, Kimberly Peirce, Marc Forster, and Ang Lee. While a high school student at the K–12 Louisiana State University laboratory school, Soderbergh attended a film animation class at LSU and borrowed equipment from university students to make his first Super 8 mm films.

2. Although Soderbergh’s *Ocean’s Twelve* (2004) and *Ocean’s Thirteen* (2007) are, properly speaking, sequels, they might for our purposes also be considered remakes of Soderbergh’s own *Ocean’s Eleven*.


4. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973). In their DVD commentary on *Solaris*, both Soderbergh and the producer, James Cameron, speak of their mutual sense of belatedness. Commenting upon the final scene of *Solaris*, Soderbergh notes that decades earlier Hitchcock had made exceptional use of the device of having actors speak directly to the camera. The technique is “five decades old,” he says, “just in case anyone is under the impression this is a new idea.” Cameron responds, “Well, there are no new ideas, unfortunately. We are one hundred years into the whole filmmaking process now.” Regardless of the minor inaccuracies contained in them (cinema was somewhat more than one hundred years old in 2002), Cameron’s remarks, along with those of Soderbergh, attest to the psychological reality of the anxiety of influence or sense of belatedness. For our purposes, what matters is not whether cinematic innovation has in fact become impossible but rather that even highly successful and innovative filmmakers often feel and readily remark that originality has become historically ever more difficult if not impossible for them.

5. Soderbergh is particularly adept at employing one of Bloom’s aesthetic strate-
gies to overcome his belatedness: a “revisionary ratio” that Bloom calls “Apophrades,”
or “the return of the dead.” See Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 138–55.

6. Baudrillard’s book was originally published in French by Éditions Galilée in 1981
as *Simulacres et simulation*. Throughout this chapter I cite the unabridged American edi-
tion: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor:
Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994). All citations to this work are incorporated parentheti-
cally into my text as SS. An earlier, heavily abridged English translation of *Simulacres et
simulation* appeared as the first part of Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss,
Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

Harvest, 1987), 65. Kilmartin and Cox translated *Solaris* into English from a French
translation of the 1961 Polish original and borrowed the word *simulacra* directly from
the French text. The Harvest paperback edition is a reprint of the 1970 Faber and Faber
edition published in London. Soderbergh provides a blurb for the back of the Harvest
paperback edition and speaks at some length about Lem’s novel in his and James Cam-
eron’s commentary that accompanies the DVD release of *Solaris*.

8. One might argue that a final-cut negative, finished before the first release
print was struck, would theoretically count as “the original” of a film. Of course,
such an “original” fails to resemble, in a crucial respect, an “original” painting or
sculpture, insofar as it is not intended to be and in fact would not be seen by a public
audience. A final-cut negative, though it provides the basis for all prints, might be
more profitably compared to a cast or mold for a statue, rather than an “original”
work of cinematic art.

9. These final matched shots are foreshadowed by an earlier close-up shot from
Rheya’s point of view of Kelvin speaking to her. Conspicuously, this is a “sound-off”
shot—the soundtrack is silent. We see Kelvin but cannot hear what he says to Rheya.
In his DVD commentary, Soderbergh calls this silent scene on the train “the most in-
teresting in the film”: it is an example of “pure cinema,” of “imagery pushing the story
forward.” Like the final scene, it offers the audience an opportunity to consider that it
sees only an *image* on the screen.

10. The terms “militant atheism” and “nihilistic utterances” are Soderbergh’s; con-
sider the director’s commentary on the DVD release of *Solaris*.

11. For Soderbergh’s public statement that there is no god, see Stephen Thompson,
“Is There a God?” http://www.avclub.com/articles/is-there-a-god,1394/ (accessed 16
Dec. 2009).

12. James Cameron’s response to Soderbergh’s comments reinforces the point: “Yeah,
I think you see that now. I mean people communicate by email instead of the telephone
because it’s easier for them, because they don’t have to connect. They just say what they
have to say, and that’s it. I think that the more we add technology as an interface between
ourselves, the less communication in some ways happens of an emotional nature. And I
think you’ve captured that feeling in these early scenes. I mean people don’t really talk
to each other. They talk to telephones. Screens are talking to them, or information is coming back and forth in some mediated way.”

13. In his DVD commentary, Cameron notes the omnipresence of the planet in the mise-en-scène: “Solaris is always there. It’s always kind of in the background. It’s in the fabric of their [the crew members’] reality.”


15. The 1970s witnessed a succession of terrorist acts carried out by various groups, including the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), Fatah, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Japanese Red Army, the Red Army Faction (the Baader-Meinhof Group), the Red Brigades, ETA (Basque Homeland and Freedom), the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional), the Weather Underground, the Symbionese Liberation Army, and the Black Liberation Army. Among the most spectacular terrorist acts were Black September’s kidnapping and massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich; the Lod Airport massacre carried out by the Japanese Red Army in 1972; the “Black Friday” bombings in 1972, the bombing of the Houses of Parliament in 1974, and the assassination of Lord Mountbatten, all part of the Provisional IRA’s campaign to liberate Northern Ireland; Abu Nidal’s bombing of TWA Flight 841 in 1974; Carlos the Jackal’s kidnapping of more than sixty ministers and personnel from OPEC headquarters in Vienna in 1975; the 1976 hijacking of an Air France flight diverted to Entebbe, Uganda, conducted by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in conjunction with German revolutionary cells; and the kidnapping and assassination of Italian prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978.

16. Jean Baudrillard, The Spirit of Terrorism, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002). All citations to this work are incorporated parenthetically into the body of this article as ST. Given its date of publication, it would appear that Soderbergh could not have been familiar with The Spirit of Terrorism before Solaris went into production.
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