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

Andrew deWaard *&* R. Colin Tait
preface by Thomas Schatz

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DIRECTORS' CUTS

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The Dialectical Signature: Soderbergh as Classical Auteur

I don't consider myself an artist or a visionary… There are the Fellinis, the Altmans – even someone like Gus Van Sant – who push the film language, who bend and twist the medium to suit their vision. You look at their movies and you can't imagine anyone else making them. I'm not that kind of filmmaker. I'm a chameleon.

Steven Soderbergh, 1993 [1]

Since its development more than half a century ago, auteur theory – the conceit that a film director's personal creative vision is the predominate force in shaping the artistry of a film – has remained a contentious, heavily fragmented discourse.[2] As with most other arts, film theory's relationship with authorship has morphed and evolved through various iterations, due in large part to historical context and competing ideologies. Nevertheless, a common, if shaky, approach to cinematic authorship has coalesced in film criticism, and its formulation and application to Steven Soderbergh will be the focus of the current chapter. Subsequently, we will update auteur theory for the age of New Hollywood,[3] Indiewood,[4] and Conglomerate Hollywood,[5] adding to it the dimensions of celebrity and fame to formulate the 'sellebrity auteur.' We will then follow that chapter with a decidedly non-traditional application of 'Third Cinema,' considering Soderbergh as a 'guerrilla auteur,' whose repossession of the means of production represents a significant advancement in the art form. But first, we will situate the director within the discourse of 'classical' auteur theory, identifying the prevailing patterns of Soderbergh's work within this traditional view of authorship. As Soderbergh refuses to play by the rules, we will quickly see how our subject matter exceeds the increasingly limited boundaries of auteur theory, not to mention the classical paradigm. That being said, a brief rehearsal of auteur theory seems necessary, if only to analyse how well, paradoxically, the frame does in fact suit the director.

In the mid-1950s, film critics at the influential French journal *Cahiers du cinéma* set out to elevate the status of its most beloved film directors by championing the creative vision of luminaries like Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Renoir, and Howard Hawks. As a consequence of this central objective, these critics sought to diminish the role held by the screenwriter, who at that time was perceived to be the film's true author. Led by François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Eric Rohmer, the *Cahiers* group also sought to demonstrate how the true individual artist rose above the industrial formation of the Hollywood system to clearly relate their unique visions, particularly within set genres. Three predominant criteria of auteurism took hold, which could elevate a filmmaker to the status of auteur: a distinctive visual style, achieved through technical mastery; a continued, intentional set of thematic concerns and patterns; and finally, a struggle with the industrial process of cinema's production, embodying the unavoidable tension between art and commerce. In short, a personal creative vision defined the auteur.

When the theory travelled to the Anglophone world in the 1960s, it was popularised by American and British critics, most notably Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen. Sarris's influential essay, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory' (1962), was the first iteration of this critical trend, followed by *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (1968). Sarris synthesised many of the French ideas and privileged the American context over all others. Sarris elaborated on Alexandre Astruc's notion of the *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen), the instrument through which the director expresses their distinctive creative vision or 'signature.' As a result, Sarris created a hierarchical system, still in operation today, that isolates a 'pantheon' of directors, ranked in order of importance. Despite critical, scholarly, and industrial attempts to dislodge the director as the centre of all filmmaking, the canonising of important figures remains firmly in place today, just as it does in literature, despite similar attempts. Admittedly, this very book participates in the reductive capacity of canonisation, elevating Soderbergh to the status of 'important artist.' At the same time, however, we can use the opportunity to measure the flaws in classical auteur theory by what it excludes and why many productive filmmakers stand outside of the critical canon. As Soderbergh has been equally privileged by and dislodged from a larger canon throughout his career, it is worth mapping the moments and aspects by which he has been anointed as a *bona fide* auteur, as well as exploring those where he has not.[6]

What is often forgotten in the auteur debate is that the theory itself has been divided since its inception, and oriented in opposite directions between French and Anglophone perspectives. As Maitland McDonagh reminds us, the French critics venerated the director who worked within the system, and whose signature emerged despite the interference from the studio. The 'new generation' of auteurs, prompted by Sarris, privileged 'film as art' and a 'medium for personal expression' without regard to the industry that produced them.[7] The irony of dealing with a figure like Soderbergh is that he neither emerges as the romantic auteur, nor the 'studio hack.' His status remains uncertain, despite the reality that he is actually closer to both analytic models than many other contemporary directors. This is also why he doesn't quite fit. Soderbergh thus offers an opportunity to view his career-long trajectory amidst other

trends and a larger model that does not exclusively view him as a practitioner whose works express, as Sarris would have it, the 'élan of his soul.'[8] Rather, Soderbergh is a complex figure whose intersections with many collaborators, contexts, and technologies require that we reach beyond Sarris-inspired criticism to find a new structure that accounts for the many tensions and paradoxes that the contemporary Hollywood industry provides us.

Auteurism fell out of favour when its flaws and limitations were articulated, and a multitude of alternative discourses in film theory gained prominence in its place, but there has been a reconsideration of cinematic authorship in recent years. Dudley Andrew poignantly welcomes back auteurism: 'Breathe easily. *Epuration* has ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again.'[9] 'Auteurs are far from dead,' in Timothy Corrigan's view. 'In fact, they may be more alive than at any other point in film history … within the commerce of contemporary culture, auteurism has become, as both a production and interpretive position, something quite different from what it may have been in the 1950s or 1960s.'[10] Hollywood is a constantly changing and evolving industry; there is no reason why considerations of authorship in Hollywood should not evolve correspondingly. By understanding its theoretical limitations and shifting industry conditions, we may reformulate the concept of the 'auteur' according to these new contexts.

The primary modification of auteurism has been in terms of the reliance on Romantic and individualist notions of the author. Prompted by such grand literary revelations as Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author'[11] in 1968 and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?'[12] in 1969, auteur theory has been overhauled in terms of its breadth and scope. Rather than perceiving an auteur film as some sublime expression of individual genius, it is now regarded as a discursive *site* for the interaction of biography, institutional context, social climate, and historical moment. In this rendering, auteurism is meant to 'emphasize the ways a director's work can be both personal *and* mediated by extrapersonal elements such as genre, technology, [and] studios.'[13] What began as an attempt by the French critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* to elevate the director to the status of an artist has since evolved into a complex theory containing various interrelated theories and positions.

Nevertheless, auteur theory continues to be a useful categorical tool for the film critic, if only for the simple reason that a distinctive authorial signature is still readily perceived in directors to this day. Authors remain an important site for critical analysis. While we have already noted the difficulties in pinning down Soderbergh to any distinct brand on account of his prolific output and his formal, thematic, and stylistic promiscuity, broad strokes of his signature are visible to varying degrees throughout his body of work. When dealing with a canon approaching thirty feature films, as well as dozens of others that have borne his name as producer, patterns are sure to reveal themselves. At first glance, cinematography would be an easily identifiable trademark: Soderbergh's films often exhibit a colour-coded visual pattern, matching stories, characters, or settings with carefully chosen, symbolic colour palettes. On closer inspection, one might isolate editing as his tool of choice; flashbacks, temporal shifting, and

non-linear editing pervade the bulk of his work. Thematically, arguments could be made for technological alienation, conflicted subjectivity, or institutional absurdity. Alternatively, armed with some meta-filmic knowledge, Soderbergh's inventive use of his actors and stars or his deft navigation of the financial aspect of Hollywood production might well be his defining feature. Upon completion of an in-depth study of the man's entire oeuvre, however, one comes to realise that Soderbergh is not so much painting with many cinematic brushes, but *orchestrating* his films with a mastery of nearly all the major roles of film production. And not just the creative ones.

In an effort to move beyond the Romantic notion of authorial genius, we might reverse the importance given to raw talent versus 'mere' skill. No doubt Soderbergh did appear a considerable talent when his debut film – *sex, lies, and videotape* – seemingly came out of nowhere to win the Audience Award at Sundance, the Palme D'Or at Cannes, the Independent Spirit Award for Best Director, and the Academy Award for Best Screenplay. More impressive than this precocious feat, however, is what he did next. Prophetically claiming that 'it's all downhill from here' in his acceptance speech at Cannes, Soderbergh – determined to hone his craft – followed his debut success with two minor, middling experiments (*Kafka*, *The Underneath*), one critically acclaimed film (*King of the Hill*, one of the best reviewed films of 1993), and one of the most abysmal failures in contemporary American cinema history. Though *Schizopolis* was seen by few and enjoyed by even fewer, Soderbergh took the opportunity to experiment and develop his skill in all aspects of film creation. As director, writer, cinematographer, editor, composer, and even actor, in these multiple roles, Soderbergh assimilated all the necessary skills needed on a film set.

With this newly-minted holistic approach, Soderbergh returned to Hollywood with the one-two crime-genre punch of *Out of Sight* and *The Limey*, showcasing his new signature to much acclaim. This would be followed by *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic* the next year, each landing him a Best Director nomination at the Academy Awards (the first dual nomination in more than sixty years). There is no defining element or characteristic that unites all of these films – nor any of the increasingly experimental works to follow – so much as there is a Soderberghian ethos or spirit that pervades his entire body of work. And work it most certainly is; Soderbergh has fulfilled his desire to rival the career of John Huston, constantly working and prolifically releasing films: almost thirty as director and another thirty or so as producer. Aggressive with his visuals and storytelling, political and antagonistic with his thematics, loose and deceptive with his performances, and ceaselessly experimental, the Soderberghian signature is not a brush stroke, but a full-on filmmaking factory.

Though a holistic approach to filmmaking defines Soderbergh's signature, four major categories can be isolated as his most radical: cinematography, editing/narrative, performance, and production. Each of these categories can be subdivided to highlight not only their opposition to conventional Hollywood modes, but to exhibit the dynamic internal tensions within each designation. Not content with a single visual style, editing structure, or performance expectation, Soderbergh constantly experiments with different styles oscillating along a spectrum, their disjuncture forming a *signature-as-dialectic*. His style itself is working through the formal and aesthetic possi-

bilities of the medium. This formal fluctuation is inherently bound to Soderbergh's choice of material; he bounces from esoteric arthouse project, to digital experiment, to high concept blockbuster, to genre staple, to period piece, to special-effects laden project, and back again. With such a diverse range of subject matter, it is appropriate that the accompanying form and style should oscillate as well. Tracking this dialectical dynamism requires a wider view towards patterns that exhibit themselves only across many films.

Considering the wide scope of Soderbergh's work, we might designate one end of the spectrum as 'classical', referring to his more traditional impulses, and the other 'chaotic', representing his experimental qualities. By 'classical', we mean the painterly compositions, glossy three-point lighting, and smooth camera movements of his cinematography and *mise-en-scène*; the linear continuity and 'invisibility' of his editing; the traditional heroes and genres of his narratives; the Method-influenced 'realism' of his performances; and the big studio budgets of his productions. By 'chaotic', we refer to the stunted framings, lack of lighting, and erratic camera movement of his cinematography; the jarring, non-linearity of his editing; the anti-heroes and abstract narratives; the Brechtian distanciation and fabricated nature of his performances; and the independent and alternative modes of financing and distributing his productions. His mainstream films lean more toward the 'classical', while his experimental films, particularly those filmed digitally, drift more toward 'chaotic'. However, there are elements of both in every one of his films, and it is the oscillation between and paradoxical synthesis of these two modes that defines the Soderberghian signature.

Table 1: Soderberghian signature elements

	Classical/Thesis	Chaotic/Anti-thesis	Paradox/Synthesis
Cinematography	• painterly compositions • 3-point glossy lighting • smooth tracking	• stunted framing, digital, ugly • no lighting • erratic handheld movement	• collage • filmed mosaic • triptych
Editing/ Narrative	• continuity • invisible • hero • genre	• non-linear • jarring • anti-hero • abstract	• modular, network • reflexive • noble thief • genre hybridity
Performance	• Stanislavski / naturalism / realism / Method • amateur, or star as 'real person' / historical figure • style: open framings, long takes, method, monologue, depth	• Brecht / artifice • star, star as themselves • style: quick, post-modern, ironic, wit, banter, off-the-cuff, surface	• hyperbolic • hybrid ensembles • 'dirtied' stars
Production	• studio • high-concept	• independent • limited budget	• Indiewood • mini-major • Section Eight

Soderberghian cinematography can be charted along a lengthy axis, often mixing styles within the same film, sometimes even within a single scene. On one end, we have the painterly Soderbergh, whose keen eye is set to capture careful compositions, in large part achieved with an expert knowledge of cameras, lenses, filters, gels, and other cinematic equipment. Whereas a director working with a director of photography might envision the objective of their scene, then consult their DOP on how to best achieve this formally, because Soderbergh acts as his own director of photography – starting with *Schizopolis*, then everything from *Traffic* on – his scenes are designed in direct accordance with how they will be shot. It is this hands-on formalism that leads to films so intrinsically linked to their precise visual style.

For example, the complexity of *Traffic*'s networked narrative is aided by its geographically matched colour palettes: the East Coast scenes are shot in bright daylight to produce icy blue, monochromatic tones; the Mexican scenes are overexposed and use 'tobacco' filters for grainy, bleached-out sepia tones; and the San Diego scenes use the risky tech-

The complexity of *Traffic*'s networked narrative is aided by its geographically matched colour palettes: overexposed 'tobacco' coloured film for Mexico, icy blues for the East Coast, and flashed negatives for sunny San Diego.

nique of 'flashing' the negative for a halo effect to complement the vibrant hues. An alternative use of colouring, quite literally, is in *Kafka*, which is presented mostly as a black-and-white, *film noir*-inspired world, but colourises on occasion, in order to represent a heightened perception of reality. Another fitting example of this precise cinematography is *The Good German*, which takes on the technical challenge of producing a film under the technological constraints of Classical Hollywood. Using only fixed focal-length lenses, boom mics, rear projection, incandescent lighting, and other technology from the 1940s, Soderbergh creates a film that hinges on its very method of production and visual style, such is the man's commitment to 'form = function.'

On the other end of his cinematographic spectrum, in opposition to this orderly, painterly impulse, Soderbergh exhibits a flawed, chaotic method that is characterised by speed and movement. Highly kinetic and bearing the influence of both *cinéma verité* and the French New Wave, as well as the 1970s' American cinema, this purposefully imperfect style is embodied in handheld camera work, canted framings, unmotivated zooms, and erratic motion. This raw impulse is more readily discernable when he works with a digital camera, whereby mobility and experimentation are afforded both technologically and financially: *Bubble*, *Che*, and *The Girlfriend Experience* mark his most prominently unhinged camera work – apart from *Schizopolis*, of course. However, traces of this erratic cinematography can be found in even the broadest of his films. Each entry in the *Ocean's* trilogy contains one or more aberrant scenes of unexpected delirium that stand in stark contrast to its otherwise slick, big-budget aesthetic. The brief, nostalgic recounting of previous failed attempts at robbing a Las Vegas casino in *Ocean's Eleven* and the high-speed climax of *Ocean's Twelve* are played for light-hearted whimsy in these contexts, but are easily linked to Soderbergh's other more distraught renderings of this raw style of camera work.

Incorporating disparate types of film and video – such as Hi-8, 16mm film stock, and various incarnations of digital video – is another method of adding incongruity in his style of cinematography. Ever since *sex, lies, and videotape*, with its juxtaposition of film and diegetic VHS videotape, right through to his recent usage of the RED One digital camera and 5k digital video – which has five times higher resolution than current 'high definition' Blu-Ray discs – Soderbergh has been experimenting not only with what the camera is capable of capturing, but with the camera and medium itself. A self-described 'gear-head,' accounting for his expert knowledge of filmmaking equipment, Soderbergh's fetishisation of the audio-visual apparatus continually finds its way into his films. Sepia-tinged scenes from *Poor Cow* (Ken Loach, 1967), an old Terence Stamp film, are cleverly used as flashbacks in *The Limey*, while security tape footage is the key to the heist in *Ocean's Eleven*, tricking both the villain and viewer alike. *Full Frontal*, the 'spiritual sequel' to *sex, lies, and videotape*, produced a little over a decade after his debut, represents the culmination of all three of these cinematographic impulses: a highly polished, elegantly filmed story – staged on the set of a Hollywood production – is contrasted with a 'raw,' behind-the-scenes story shot on grainy digital video. The film-within-a-film structure is revealed to be yet another filmic contrivance, and the full extent of Soderbergh's cinematography is on display.

It is on the visual plane that we can make a case that Soderbergh is attempting to produce a new and accurate vision of what the late 20th/early 21st century looks like, as well as how it is to be recorded. The filmmaker's experiments with the texture of film is only part of this process, as is his innovation in the realm of digital cinema. Just as 16mm camera technology informed the movement from Italian documentary film to what we call Italian neorealism, Soderbergh is an early adopter in every sense of the word when considering his cinematographic practices. In this same fashion, he pushes older technologies beyond their limits, by flaring camera lenses, flashing and burning film stocks, and tinting digital images with sickening blue and red hues. Though film-makers such as David Fincher and Peter Jackson are often attributed as the key pioneers in Hollywood's embrace of digital innovation, Soderbergh was, in fact, experimenting with these technologies years before the wholesale digital conversion.

As with any attempt to specifically demarcate technological and aesthetic innovations, the logic of before and after prevail. Following Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author,' we might say that Soderbergh's 'author-function' embodies the specific logic of 'a *before* and an *after*.'[14] When speaking about cinematography, we tend to point to specific films in which the directors of photography accomplished something different, shifting the paradigm of vision. This is certainly true of Gregg Toland's innovative work in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), Gordon Willis's sombre tones in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), and Christopher Doyle's painterly motion in *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar Wai, 1994). For Steven Dillon, Soderbergh's cinematographic experimentation in the 1990s establish him as the artist 'who has most deliberately sought to retool the visual potentiality of [contemporary] American film,' and it is Soderbergh who led the way in a decade that 'saw more rapid shifts in color design than ever before.'[15]

Traversing Soderbergh's experiments in cinematic artifice, Dillon pinpoints *The Underneath* as a pivotal film in the evolution of digital visual texture. True to its title, the film is a work of denaturalisation and desubstantialisation, achieved primarily through a foreboding and haunting system of colour. A noir remake that purposefully carries none of the baggage of its cliched style – 'No wet streets, no smoke, no hats, no long shadows'[16] – *The Underneath* uses colour, framing, and tonality to capture the anxiety and alienation that noir achieved with chiaroscuro. Instead of a heavy-handed voice-over, the film cuts back and forth across its timeline unannounced, in effect denaturalising both time and space. Dillon proclaims the film 'a more significant contribution to the visual development of American film than Stone's *Natural Born Killers*,'[17] and oddly enough, despite the film's own cerebral pace, the influence of *The Underneath* is seen most directly on MTV: '[n]early all of Spike Lee's films after *Clockers* [1995], for example, manipulate film through a method taken straight from Soderbergh. Now every MTV video looks like *Clockers*, but the impulse in the 1990s to color, to tint, and to denaturalize came above all from Soderbergh.'[18]

Once again, the logic of 'before and after' prevails in Dillon's thinking, as he asserts that Soderbergh, and *The Underneath* in particular, should be seen as a historical marker. In an era when presumably everything has already been said, Soderbergh's

work as a cinematographer still produces images that have yet to be seen. Aided by advancements in technology, Soderbergh produces unique, painterly visions of the world.[19] Accordingly, we can tie him more directly to a legacy of visual, film, and video artists like Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, Maya Deren, Chantal Akerman, Bill Viola, Matthew Barney, and Stan Douglas. In other words, perhaps it is more appropriate to judge some of Soderbergh's 'failed' films as belonging to a failure of imagination on the part of his middlebrow critics to see them as part of another legacy, more accurately befitting a 'high art' culture.[20] As visual art is most often the field that evokes comparisons to high culture, it is worth exploring whether Soderbergh's work on the visual plane should be judged outside the traditional evaluative apparatus Hollywood films receive.

On *The Underneath*, Soderbergh and his crew used Ektachrome film stock, overexposed it, and developed it as a negative, a process that favoured the distinctive, anxious green hue that pervades the film. According to Kodak, this technique had never been tried before,[21] and Soderbergh would continue this chemical experimentation on films like *The Limey*, where he 'flashed' the film stock before using it, producing the eerie, flared glow that accompanies the flashbacks. Does this kind of physical cinematographic experimentation deserve to be placed alongside Stan Brakhage's etching and painting on film, rather than be characterised as 'yet another Hollywood remake'? Tellingly, the credit Soderbergh hoped to take for *Traffic*, before clashing with the Directors' Guild of America, would have read 'Directed and Photographed by Steven Soderbergh'; by insisting on calling his work photography, and including it as his main title, he privileges this role as equal to the task of directing.

Somewhat hesitantly, Dillon claims that Soderbergh's lack of any clear style or theme means 'that the adjective "Soderberghian" will never be as meaningful as "Lynchian", "Scorsesian", or "Kubrickian."'[22] Dillon seemingly contradicts his own earlier insight, when he responds to the claim that 'critics and Soderbergh himself always emphasize how different Soderbergh's films are, one from another,' yet 'all of Soderbergh's films work through the absent presence of cinema.'[23] This self-reflexive mediation of cinematic fantasy – Dillon's own thesis that many contemporary American films enact 'the Solaris Effect' – is but one of the possible thematic signatures we might ascribe to the meaning of 'Soderberghian.' In referencing a French critic, Dillon provides us with an even more suitable metaphor: 'la machine Soderbergh.' Like a machine, many interlocking components are needed. Only when this impressive cinematographic vision is connected to a complex editing and narrative structure does this machine start to hum, and can we then begin to get a sense of the multivalent Soderberghian signature.

Ripping it Apart: Soderberghian Editing and Narrative Structure

Parallel to the cinematographic range that runs between orderly composition and erratic movement, Soderberghian editing and narrative structure spans a similar spectrum between classical and chaotic. On the traditional end, there is a distinctly Classical Hollywood mode of storytelling based on the interplay of range and depth of narration, the hero's quest to overcome adversity, and the structures of a traditional

genre. On the classical side, there is an ironic and dialectical relationship between what is seen onscreen and what is heard through dialogue, urging the viewer to question the events as they occur. On the other end of this editing and narrative spectrum, we have a schizophrenic, non-linear editing style that destabilises time and space, complemented by a tendency to shade the protagonists as flawed heroes who cannot achieve closure in their narrative struggles. Soderbergh's films conform to an era of increased postmodern fragmentation to the point that they undermine traditional rules of storytelling and reflect the contemporary subject's struggle to make sense of their fractured, media-saturated environment.

To varying degrees throughout his oeuvre, Soderbergh's cutting destroys linear temporalities, disrupts space, and ultimately destabilises the viewer's expectation as to where and when the film is taking place. Accordingly, the storytelling pushes at the boundaries of narrative convention with frequent flashbacks, flashforwards, and repeated events. Soderbergh also varies and restricts story narration to such an extreme that part of the experience of watching one of his films is deciphering the mystery of the film's form. The 'how' is added to the 'where' and the 'when', while the 'why' is concealed behind a flurry of formal fluctuation. Thus, in *The Limey* it is ultimately revealed that Wilson (Terence Stamp) is flying away from the US, rather than arriving, forcing the spectator to reorganise the story, and realise the non-linear progression of the story is actually a result of the character's unreliable memory. This effect also occurs in *The Girlfriend Experience* as a final montage reorganises the order of events, in a manner that somehow surpasses the narrative device of *in medias res*. As Chelsea (Sasha Grey) makes her way to the restaurant to be interviewed by a journalist, we discover that this event occurs at the very end of the movie, as opposed to the beginning as the narrative has fooled us into believing.

Though we maintain that Soderbergh's signature is the result of a mastery of multiple creative roles, it should be noted that editing and narrative structure in particular are very closely intertwined, hence their consideration here as a single creative element. For Soderbergh, editing is part of the writing process, even from the most preliminary stages of production. In his rejected screenplay for *Moneyball* (Bennet Miller, 2011), Soderbergh states directly on the script: 'an important portion of this film will be written in the editing room… This isn't a cop-out,' but 'entirely by design.'[24] A preoccupation of his from the beginning, considering the innovative splicing of home video in *sex, lies, and videotape*, again it is *The Underneath* in which Soderbergh first asserts his stylistic potential: 'Our physical bodies go through life in a chronological, linear way from birth to death, while in the mind it's different,' Soderbergh explains. '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.'[25] In addition to the deep visual texture mentioned previously, *The Underneath* emphasises this denaturalised time and space with an elaborate editing structure that mimics the protagonist's recollection and regret. *The Limey* was also designed in order to allow the editing to shape the film and emphasise the fractured nature of the mind: 'That was always the my intention. To go and shoot a bunch of stuff and then go in and just rip it apart.'[26] The result is a unique drift through

Wilson's mind, where conversations float above different scenes, flashbacks meander, and impossible memories of his daughter are seen through evocative flares.[27]

The relationship between Soderbergh's editing and his soundtracks is yet another illustration of the director's oscillation between classic and chaotic. His most frequent musical collaborator is Cliff Martinez, who composed the scores for Soderbergh's first six films, as well as *The Limey*, *Traffic*, *Solaris*, and *Contagion*. The slow, moody scores of Martinez are evocative and contemplative, a far cry from the breezy, jovial scores of DJ/composer David Holmes, who worked on *Out of Sight*, the *Ocean's* trilogy, *The Girlfriend Experience*, and *Haywire*. Holmes' scores set a quick, enjoyable pace and tone that keeps pace with the editing, whereas Martinez's music is much more sombre and cerebral, befitting of a classic Hollywood score. More recently, Soderbergh has expanded these musical collaborations to include the moody acoustic stylings of Guided by Voices leader Robert Pollard (*Bubble*), the peppy retro stylings of composer Marvin Hamlisch (*The Informant!*), and the acoustic Latin guitar of Spanish composer Alberto Iglesias (*Che*). In each case, Soderbergh uses the soundtrack as a consistent frame upon which he can overlay his complex editing, while at the same time establishing an evocative mood.

Soderbergh uses sound bridges and jumbled dialogue from several differing temporalities to suggest a unity of space and time, as seen in the hyper-stylised love scene between Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez) and Jack Foley (George Clooney) in *Out of Sight*.

Soderbergh also extensively uses sound bridges and jumbled dialogue from several differing temporalities to suggest a unity of space and time, despite its staggered nature or its being taken from altogether different time frames. A notable example of this technique takes place in the hyper-stylised love scene between Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez) and Jack Foley (George Clooney) in *Out of Sight*, wherein a conversation over drinks is provocatively intercut with images of both characters as they undress; *Solaris* features a similarly brazen love scene between Kris Kelvin (Clooney) and his wife Rheya (Natascha McElhone), also provocatively intercut between the past and the present, dream and reality. The most extreme example, however, takes place in *The Limey*, where the plot's staggered chronology is as much a mystery to the viewer as the film's story. Each of these examples find their origins in *Schizopolis*, where Soderbergh overlays a dense array of staggered chronologies on top of each other, complicating the viewer's understanding of where and when the narrative is actually taking place.[28]

Beyond such general, overarching characteristics of his editing and narrative structure, we can isolate unique plot formations according to formalist critic Charles Ramírez-Berg's 'A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots in Recent Films: Classifying the "Tarantino Effect."'[29] This useful, comprehensive schematic surveys contemporary films that utilise unorthodox and experimental narration and categorises them according to twelve different structures. After exploring the historical antecedents, Ramírez-Berg claims that Quentin Tarantino is responsible for popularising this latest trend of alternative film narration, or what other scholars have called network narratives (David Bordwell[30]), modular narratives (Allan Cameron[31]) and puzzle films (Warren Buckland[32]). One cannot dismiss the popularity and cultural impact of Tarantino in the 1990s, particularly the long shadow cast by *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), but for his purposes, Ramírez-Berg would have been better off choosing Soderbergh as his exemplar, as his films can be seen to exhibit *every single one* of the twelve structures, many more than once (see Table 2), while Tarantino only fits three. *Schizopolis* is a notable oversight, as it exhibits some of the rarer formations (Multiple Personality, Daisy Chain, Repeated Action, Repeated Event), as well as the more common (Jumbled, Subjective, Existential) in a single, hybridised (and appropriately titled) example, providing a textbook case study for the trend of experimental narrative structure in the 1990s and beyond. Just as Dillon proclaims that MTV started to look a lot like Spike Lee films, but the source of this innovative visual texture is actually Soderbergh, we would contend that though the influence of Tarantino is felt far and wide in film and television, the actual source of much of the narrative experimentation at the time is in fact Soderbergh. In other words, a more accurate subtitle would have been 'The Soderbergh Clause to the Tarantino Effect.'

Performing Reality: Soderberghian Performance

Soderbergh's direction of actors is another important aspect of his filmmaking process, which has inspired loyalty from a repertory of Hollywood talent, and has coaxed unexpected performances out of non-professional actors. As with the previous characteristics, Soderbergh's direction of actors oscillates between two major impulses. The first of these is

Table 2: Charles Ramírez-Berg's Taxonomy of Alternative Plot Formations, with Soderbergh's Films as Examples.

Plots Based on the Number of Protagonists
1. The Polyphonic or Ensemble Plot – multiple protagonists, single location   *Full Frontal*
2. The Parallel Plot – multiple protagonists in different times and/or spaces   *Traffic, Syriana, Contagion*
3. The Multiple Personality (Branched) Plot   *Schizopolis*
4. The Daisy Chain Plot – no central protagonist, one character leads to the next   *Schizopolis*, elements of *The Good German*
Plots Based on the Re-ordering of Time; Non-linear Plots
5. The Backwards Plot   *The Last Time I Saw Michael Gregg*, elements of *The Limey* and *The Girlfriend Experience*
6. The Repeated Action Plot – one character repeats action   *Schizopolis*, elements of *Out of Sight* and *The Limey*
7. The Repeated Event Plot – one action seen from multiple characters' perspectives   *Schizopolis*, elements of *Out of Sight* and *The Limey*
8. The Hub and Spoke Plot – multiple characters' story lines intersect decisively at one time and place   *Full Frontal*
9. The Jumbled Plot – scrambled sequence of events motivated artistically, by filmmaker's prerogative   *Out of Sight, The Limey, The Underneath, Schizopolis, Solaris, The Girlfriend Experience, Che*, elements of the *Ocean's* trilogy
Plots that Deviate from Classical Rules of Subjectivity, Causality, and Self-Referential Narration
10. The Subjective Plot – a character's internal (or 'filtered') perspective   *The Limey, Solaris, King of the Hill, Schizopolis*
11. The Existential Plot – minimal goal, causality, and exposition   *Schizopolis, Solaris*
12. The Metanarrative Plot – narration about the problem of movie narration   *sex, lies, and videotape, Schizopolis, Full Frontal*

rooted in 'naturalism' and 'realism,' which in Soderbergh's usage are concepts that certainly necessitate scare quotes to indicate relativity. From Stanislavski, to the Method school of acting, to considerations of historical accuracy, this performance style embodies the classical end of the spectrum. The opposite impulse employs reflexivity and artifice, rooted in Brechtian distanciation, where performances engage with star persona, either by embracing and playing with its contours, or by radically acting

against type. Again, the paradoxical synthesis of these impulses leads to hybrids in which performances are pushed in tense, hyperbolic directions, leading to alienation, reflection, and ironic indulgence.

Soderbergh's loose style lends itself to acting of either stripe, as his open framings allow for direct, complex performances, which anchor his stylistic excesses. Because he is also the Director of Photography, Soderergh is often behind the camera within a few feet of the action, maintaining an intimate relationship with his actors, whispering directions to avoid interrupting the flow of the shoot. This technique has obviously won him a great deal of loyalty from his recurring collaborators, from A-list stars (George Clooney, Julia Roberts, Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones), to a growing repertory of noted character actors (Luis Guzmán, Don Cheadle, Catherine Keener, and Eddie Jemison). In addition, Soderbergh has experimented with unique performances from non-professional actors, such as KFC manager Debbie Doberener (*Bubble*), Bill Clinton advisor and Democratic pundit James Carville (*K-Street*), adult film star Sasha Grey (*The Girlfriend Experience*), and mixed-martial arts star Gina Carano (*Haywire*).

On the realist and naturalist end of the spectrum, Soderberghian performance can be traced through three categories: 'typage,'[33] Stanislavskian realism leading into 'the Method,' and an emphasis on historical accuracy. The first of these categories draws from the film traditions of early Soviet silent cinema and Italian neorealism, where non-professional actors who look like the parts they play are asked to portray characters who have similar lives to their own. A long history of this effort to capture 'realistic' performances through non-professional actors and location shooting exists in cinema, from *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), to Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952), to more recent examples, like Pedro Costa's *Colossal Youth* (2006). Soderbergh has embraced this style in *K-Street*, *Bubble*, *The Girlfriend Experience,* and *Haywire*, which echo the works of Eisenstein and De Sica by relying on verisimilitude to provide the basis for realistic performance.

This 'authentic' trend within Soderbergh's films is first visible in James Carville's role in *K-Street*, in which he portrays a meta-fictional political analyst in Washington, D.C. named James Carville. *Bubble* continues the geographic/non-professional actor connection with its West Virginia factory workers, including Debbie Doberener, who Soderbergh found in a KFC drive-through and cast as the lead. Filmed at the height of the financial crisis in New York City, Chelsea, the high-end escort in *The Girlfriend Experience*, is played by notorious adult film star Sasha Grey, lending the film some scintillating cache to its tale of bodily exchange. Finally, *Haywire* hinges on the athletic performance of Mallory, the hard-as-nails spy played by mixed-martial arts champion Gina Carano. For her part, Carano is mostly called upon to perform physical tasks throughout the film, such as running, fighting, sleuthing, and executing acrobatic manoeuvres, as the camera stays locked on her performing these tasks. Because these characters exist in environments and contexts that resemble those of the actors' 'everyday' lives, their performances strike us as gritty and 'real'; however, our knowledge of the film *as* film potentially pushes the performances towards being considered contrived. Of course, perceiving of the actor's 'real' life being portrayed as 'reel' life is

Soderbergh experiments with performance by working with non-professional actors, such as KFC manager Debbie Doberener (*Bubble*) and mixed-martial arts star Gina Carano (*Haywire*), while also subverting and 'dirtying' star images, such as Gwyneth Paltrow in *Contagion* and Matt Damon in *The Informant!*

part of the interpretative tension, and the viewer's perception of the film would vary according to their degree of extratextual knowledge.

This devotion to realism in performance derives from a much longer tradition in the theatre, emerging from Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The teachings of actor-turned-director Konstantin Stanislavski are central to this technique, as he sought to find dramatic truth in performance through psychological realism and emotional authenticity. [34] The core of this practice would travel stateside mid-century and be interpreted by American teachers such as Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler, directors like Elia Kazan and Arthur Penn, and depicted onscreen by Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro, among others.[35] The common thread between all these teachers, directors, and actors is that realism and 'truth' lie at the heart of authentic performances.

Soderbergh's own work in theatre may be partially responsible for his use of this approach, in addition to his admiration of figures like Mike Nichols, whose cinematic

style translates theatricality to the screen. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Carnal Knowledge* (1971) all employ this method, allowing their actors to roam and pace, as well as providing longer dialogue scenes, complete with long takes, slow camera movements, and long pauses for acting, which could involve specific rhythms of speech, applying regional dialect, or physically interpreting a character's mannerisms that are apart from the actor's own. When Soderbergh directed Jonathan Reynolds' play *Geniuses* at Louisiana State University's Swine Palace theatre in 1996, he received directing advice from Nichols over the phone.[36] Years later, following her work with him on *The Good German*, Academy Award-winning actress and Sydney Theatre Company artistic director Cate Blanchett invited Soderbergh to write and direct a play for the company's 2009 season, entitled *Tot Mom*, based on the coverage of the Casey Anthony murder trial. In addition to this rigorous theatrical production, in typical prolific Soderbergh fashion he recruited the cast to film an improvised comedy during production and in between rehearsals. Entitled *The Last Time I Saw Michael Gregg*, this meta-narrative concerns a company mounting a theatrical production, focusing on a husband and wife team who lead the troupe, not unlike Cate Blanchett and her husband Andrew Upton.

As Soderbergh has been involved in theatre and deeply influenced by directors who emerged from the stage, it is worth exploring how theatricality works in Soderbergh's films. *sex, lies, and videotape* provides a suitable example of this theatricality on film, as his actors are given the full range of expressive dialogue, dramatic monologues, and pensive pauses. In these instances, Soderbergh lets the camera roll, providing wide open shots, framings, and space for his actors to interpret the scene, creating the impression that events are occurring spontaneously, despite the fact that the film was fully scripted in advance. A heightened theatricality is also predominant in *Full Frontal*, as characters engage in lengthy reflections and soul-searching through long takes and voice-overs. A subplot also involves a small live-theatre production called 'The Sound and the Führer,' allowing Nicky Katt to indulge in the absurdity of Hitler on stage; though Soderbergh is not known for his comic sensibility, a surreal, understated absurdity, rendered theatrically, pokes through here, as well as in *Schizopolis, The Limey*, the *Ocean's* trilogy, and *The Informant!*

In terms of Stanislavskian realism, many of Soderbergh's films allow his actors free rein to revel in character detail, nuance, and motivation. Details like regional accents are common, such as Terence Stamp's adoption of a lower-class cockney accent in *The Limey*, or Benicio Del Toro, whose Academy Award-winning immersion into the character of Javier Rodriguez in *Traffic* necessitated that he speak a Mexican dialect of Spanish, despite his native Puerto Rican heritage. Ensconcing themselves in the 'grammar of acting,' many of Soderbergh's characters are driven by an existential motivation, such as Clooney's bemused, brooding Chris Kelvin in *Solaris*, Stamp's regretful, nostalgic Wilson in *The Limey*, and del Toro's calm, meditative Che.

Che brings us to the final category at the realistic and classical end of the Soderbergh performance spectrum: historical accuracy. In channeling Che, a long-gestating role and project Del Toro had been preparing for years before production, the actor interprets and internalises the real-life figure by incorporating the patterns, tics,

personality traits, and details of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's life. A great deal of research is required to portray such a controversial political figure, resulting in a synthesis of the many documents read, interviews conducted, and footage screened. This research-oriented approach is indebted to Stella Adler's American variant of 'the method' in which details studied include everything from a character's social class and historical context to their clothing, mannerisms, and physicality. The context of *Che*'s production also aided in this detail-oriented method, as the film was shot in Spain, Puerto Rico, and Mexico with the assistance of local crews, and in an extremely non-commercial decision, the original Spanish language was retained; when del Toro met Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez after a screening of the film, he could confidently tell Chávez that *Che* was 'a totally Latin American movie.'[37]

In addition to this dedication to performance and contextual accuracy, del Toro owes his Best Actor Award from the Cannes Festival to the unconventional structure of the film. Unlike the typical Hollywood biographical film, *Che* is comprised of two campaigns and divided into two parts – the successful revolution in Cuba, followed by the failure in Bolivia – viewed through a stripped-down depiction of events lacking the perceived gravitas of Hollywood's sentimentalism. Such a frank rendering of the man thus relies heavily on del Toro's subdued incarnation. Other Soderbergh films to engage in historical biography include Julia Roberts' Academy Award-winning turn as Erin Brockovich, a clever, melodramatic usage of her star image in the role of a scrappy heroine, and Matt Damon's portrayal of Mark Whitacre, whose weight gain and absurd appearance emphasise the character's bipolar instability, and stands in contrast to the massive institutional corruption at hand.

Turning back to the full spectrum of Soderberghian performance, if Stanislavski represents one pole, then the opposite pole would be Bertolt Brecht and his 'epic theatre.'[38] Using a modernist approach to the theatre, Brecht's techniques assured that his audience was fully aware they were watching a play and his actors were instructed to play their characters reflexively. Brecht's shows attempted to dispel the bourgeois notions of the theatre as well as the ideological structures that held it up. Through reflexivity, and irony on the part of both the spectator and the actor, Brecht sought to engage the spectator in a critical, rather than emotional or escapist fashion. Considering the naturalistic tendencies of Soderberghian performance we have outlined, one might question how Brecht applies to the director's work, but the key tenets of the acting technique should leave little doubt: fragmentation, contradiction, and interruption. Moreover, Brecht later came to prefer the term 'dialectical theatre,' so its inclusion here accounts for Soderbergh's intentions and serves our own analysis.

In cinema, and its corresponding star market, the relationship between an audience's extratextual knowledge and expectation of an actor and the onscreen fulfillment or subversion of that knowledge and expectation is a key site for interpreting performance. Though Soderbergh may seem an odd choice in comparison to more famous practitioners of Brechtian technique (Jean-Luc Godard, for one, who utilised techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, excessive filters, and narrative interruptions[39]), the overdetermined nature of many of Soderbergh's films, particularly those featuring A-list stars, warrants our inclusion of Brecht in the director's toolkit.

Soderbergh's use of reflexivity is most apparent in the *Ocean's* trilogy, which features some of Hollywood's biggest stars: George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Matt Damon star in all three; Julia Roberts in two; Catherine Zeta-Jones, Bruce Willis, and Al Pacino in one each. In an era where box office is seen to be largely determined by celebrity, many directors hope to snag just one of these bankable movie stars; the *Ocean's* trilogy remains a unique franchise for the sheer quantity of star power. Saturated with such high-calibre celebrity, it is no wonder Soderbergh takes the opportunity to ruminate on the star phenomenon. This begins by casting the stars as thinly-veiled versions of their own star persona: Clooney's classic charisma, Pitt's handsome rebel, Damon's earnest modesty, and Roberts' generous heart and smile, these personas are embodied in their characters to such an extent that the viewer feels they are watching glamorous versions of the celebrities themselves, rather than their respective characters. When Clooney and Pitt finish each other's sentences, or Damon is charmingly awkward, the pleasure in watching these interactions is derived from witnessing megastars George Clooney and Brad Pitt clowning around as stereotypes of characters, not from the experience of watching Danny Ocean and Rusty Ryan as believable characters located in the diegesis of the film.

This reflexive engagement with the audience, which we would call the distancing effect or distanciation under Brecht's rubric, is further pronounced in an early scene in *Ocean's Eleven* in which the celebrity-characters of the film world interact with celebrity-actors from the 'real' world. Rusty (Brad Pitt) is seen teaching poker to a group of 'teen idols' who were all starring in popular teen-oriented television shows at the time: Holly Marie Combs of *Charmed*, Topher Grace of *That 70's Show*, Joshua Jackson of *Dawson's Creek*, Barry Watson of *7th Heaven*, and Shane West of *Once and Again*. A quick-cut from Rusty at the bar to Danny (George Clooney) at the poker table, and we can barely hear Danny asking, 'Isn't it a big move from TV to movies?' Topher Grace responds, 'Not for me, dude,' having just made the move to film the previous year in Soderbergh's *Traffic*. The joke relies on the viewer's extratextual knowledge of Clooney's much more publicised transition from *ER* to film. This crack in the façade of celebrity is driven home when the whole gang leaves the bar and screaming fans hound Topher Grace for an autograph, while Clooney and Pitt waltz by unaffected.[40]

Ocean's Twelve pushes this self-awareness to breaking point with its infamous 'Julia Roberts playing Julia Roberts' scene. With half of the crew in jail, Tess (Roberts) is called on to play a role in the heist, pretending to be none other than Julia Roberts. What results is basically one giant in-joke, with Julia Roberts' star image being the linchpin of the gag. First, we get Linus (Matt Damon) coaching Tess in how to act like Julia Roberts: 'She needs a southern accent… You're from Smyrna, Georgia… You're playing an actress, they're insecure!' Many references are made to her previous films: *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) is mistaken for *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), a similar film also written by Richard Curtis in which Roberts also played a version of herself; Tess is later incarcerated with prostitutes, alluding to her breakthrough role in *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990); and the 'real' Bruce Willis plays himself, a real-life friend of the real-life Julia Roberts, who co-starred with Roberts in the fake movie within a movie in *The Player* (Robert Altman, 1992). The

appearance of Bruce Willis also creates the opportunity to riff on the cultural impact of his film *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), as well as make a jab at his lack of Academy Award appeal. 'You know, that little statue on the mantle starts smirking at you after a while, you know what I'm saying?' Linus asks, to which Willis replies, 'Not really, Glen, no' (Damon and Roberts are both Academy Award winners, Willis has never been nominated). The viewer is left with one final fissure in the credits. Jokingly referring to Hollywood's highest-paid female star as an ingénue, the credit 'And introducing Julia Roberts as Tess' in *Ocean's Eleven* is followed by the intertextual reversal in *Ocean's Twelve*: 'And introducing Tess as Julia Roberts.'

This explicit level of reflexivity is just scratching the surface, as subtle homages and in-jokes proliferate in the series. Character names Virgil and Turk are an homage to *The Godfather*; the concluding scene in front of the Bellagio fountains in *Ocean's Eleven* is an homage to *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983). Terry Benedict (Andy Garcia) is heard denying a request to 'Mr. Levin,' recommending he instead watch the boxing match on TV, because 'surely he must have HBO.' Gerald Levin is chairman of Time-Warner, the parent company to both HBO and Warner Brothers, the film's distributor. Reprising his cameo role from the first film, Topher Grace claims he 'totally phoned in that Dennis Quaid movie,' referring to *In Good Company* (Paul Weitz, 2004), the preview of which was seen before *Ocean's Twelve* in many theatres. The franchise ends on a final reflexive note, in which Pitt's character tells Clooney that for next time, 'try to keep off the weight in between,' referring to the actor's weight gain for *Syriana*. As a retort, Clooney tells Pitt to 'settle down' and 'have a couple of kids,' referring to his much-publicised relationship and family with Angelina Jolie.

We could continue this referential catalogue, but suffice to say, the tenuous connection between the 'reel' world and the 'real' world is continuously put on display – to varying degrees depending on one's inter/extratextual knowledge – within the world of *Ocean's*. By explicitly pointing to film *as* film and stars *as* stars, Soderbergh is in turn able to use his celebrity-filled high-concept blockbuster to comment on celebrity-filled high-concept blockbusters. In addition to playing *with* star image, Soderbergh also plays *against* star image, and this is where we see the paradoxical synthesis of the two poles of Soderberghian performance. The most direct synthesis of both Stanislavskian and Brechtian impulses is in Soderbergh's use of what we might call 'dirtied stars,' in which a performer will dull the shine of their star persona by adopting a gritty, naturalistic character, often by transforming their bodies through weight gain and other alterations, or by playing a radical departure from their usual roles. Julia Roberts' Academy Award-winning performance in *Erin Brockovich* is emblematic, as the actress plays a scrappy, down-on-her-luck, lower-class character, yet one who uses her beauty as a weapon in the diegetic story. A clever use of her star persona, Roberts is able to be both 'real' yet seductively charming; she is portrayed with both selfless tenacity and charismatic sentimentality. The paradox here is that the naturalism is ultimately achieved only through sheer artifice.

Similarly, George Clooney's first acclaimed movie role, beginning his transition from television heartthrob to 'serious' film star, came with the working-class, kind-hearted ex-convict and criminal Jack Foley in *Out of Sight*. Another charming, criminal

role in *Ocean's Eleven* would cement this rugged, mysterious, 'Classical Hollywood'-type persona, before exploring more dramatic, existential roles for Soderbergh in *Solaris*, *Syriana*, and *The Good German*. Matt Damon's turn in *The Informant!* belongs in the 'dirty star' category as well, his appearance and performance a far cry from his marquee idol star persona seen in the *Bourne* trilogy. In this case, Damon's appearance – weight gain, hair piece, and unsightly moustache – is played for comic absurdity, as opposed to Clooney's weight gain and world-weary demeanour in *Syriana* that indicates 'heavy drama.' Fittingly, both films involve stories of widespread, global corporate malfeasance, and the institutional weight of these topics is literally embodied in each performance. But the most explicit example of the 'dirty star' is Gwyneth Paltrow's role in *Contagion*, in which she not only dies early in the film, transmitting the deadly virus, but suffers the indignity of having her face peeled from her skull during an autopsy. Her pale, sickly visage was used extensively in the marketing campaign, signalling that this film would enact all manner of unsightly trauma upon its A-list ensemble cast. Kate Winslet would also be unceremoniously dispensed with by the pandemic.

The Limey features a dual example of this performative synthesis, with Soderbergh exploiting the countercultural image and 1960s' legacy of Terence Stamp and Peter Fonda. In a sort of 'washed-up star' or 'past-their-prime star' variant, *The Limey* features two characters/actors who both peaked in the 1960s; Stamp as a career criminal who did time for robbing a Pink Floyd concert, and Fonda as a promoter in the music industry. We are first introduced to Fonda's Valentine in a montage set to 'King Midas in Reverse' by the Hollies, and later, we see him driving up the Californian coast with Steppenwolf on the soundtrack, surely evoking Fonda's iconic Captain America from *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969). For Stamp's Wilson, his background is established in flashbacks which are actually taken from a film from 1967, Ken Loach's *Poor Cow*. On one hand, the performances portray a naturalist quality – these characters 'really are from the 1960s,' with the mannerisms to prove it – but on the other hand, we are distanced from them for the very same reason; the actors each bring too much cultural baggage to be believable as anyone but themselves. A similar paradox is achieved with Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones as morally conflicted characters on opposite sides of the law in *Traffic*, and Tobey Maguire destroying his heroic *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) persona in *The Good German* as Tully, the soldier turned con-man, whose physical violence, excessive swearing, and sexual vices stand in stark contrast to both Maguire's good-natured star persona and the Hay's Code-era cinema the film is imitating.

Finally, no discussion of Soderberghian performance would be complete without at least a cursory mention of Soderbergh's own appearances within his films and others. He has a series of self-deprecating auteur cameos: in *Ocean's Eleven*, credited as the 'incompetent safecracker'; in *Full Frontal*, as the film-within-a-film's director, whose face is edited out with a black censor block; and *Contagion*, as Paltrow's adulterous love interest, heard only briefly at the beginning of the film as a voice over the telephone. Animated through rotoscoping, Soderbergh's visage pops up in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001), recounting a story about Louis Malle and Billy Wilder: Malle has just made a film (*Black Moon* [1975]) costing two and a half million dollars, and tells

Wilder it's about a dream within a dream, to which Wilder responds: 'Well you just lost two and a half million dollars.' Soderbergh has also performed the role of critic and cultural authority on the DVD commentaries of films he was heavily influenced by: *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), *Clean, Shaven* (Lodge Kerrigan, 1993), *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967), *The Graduate*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Last but not least, in *Schizopolis* Soderbergh plays the main character, Fletcher Munson, and his *doppelgänger*, Dr. Jeffrey Korchek.[41] We will have more to say about this esoteric little experiment in later chapters, but for now, it's worth mentioning that Soderbergh spends a great deal of time alone on camera, performing in front of it. *Schizopolis*'s mirror scene, literally and figuratively a moment of reflection, has the director standing in a bathroom making faces at himself. One of these faces would grace the front cover, and nine others the back cover of *Getting Away With It: Or: The Further Adventures of the Luckiest Bastard You Ever Saw*, a book containing Soderbergh's interviews with his hero and mentor, Richard Lester, as well as a collection of Soderbergh's diary entries providing insight into the period between *Schizopolis* and *Out of Sight*. A fitting cover image, the many different faces (and personas and titles and roles) of Soderbergh is something that, by now, should be more than apparent in the man's expansive oeuvre.

Cinema of Economy: A Steven Soderbergh Production

For all the experimentation and variability of the Soderberghian signature in cinematography, editing, narrative, and performance, these are common tools in an auteur's arsenal. Production, and its direct involvement in the business side of the film industry, however, is not a role we often associate with the romantic view of the auteur genius. Yet this is where Soderbergh's most confounding challenge to the auteur system lies. As demonstrated by the previous categorical assessment, Soderbergh is a resolute auteur, not only a master of the technical apparatus of filmmaking, but someone who pushes the boundaries of the medium itself. The rest of the book will investigate the thematic, social, and cultural implications of his impressive body of work. But what do we make of Soderbergh's industrial role?

Once again, we can plot a spectrum to illustrate the extent to which the economic and industrial nature of Soderbergh's productions vary. On the 'classical' end, big Hollywood productions, funded and distributed by one of the big studios; on the 'chaotic' end, smaller independent productions, experimental distribution strategies, and his own production company, Section Eight. In the middle, Soderbergh is emblematic (and considered one of the founders) of the most explicit, literal case of paradoxical synthesis we have seen yet: the formation of so-called 'mini-major' production companies within the industry, and the short-lived fantasy of 'Indiewood.' We will investigate this axis of production in the next chapter, when we complicate auteur theory by also considering how fame and celebrity enter into the business side of being a film director in the new 'New Hollywood.'

In conclusion, we can return to the epigraph that began this chapter, and consider Soderbergh's own evaluation of his craft. After four films, he describes himself as a

chameleon rather than an artist or visionary; instead of imposing his own style, he finds the right style for the right material. Thirty films later, we can certainly see the vast variability in how he applies his wide range of style to a wide range of material, but is this not artistry? Is it the lack of a singular, concrete artistic vision? Perhaps we have just never had someone like Soderbergh in Hollywood before. He compares himself to John Huston and Howard Hawks, but these men never pushed and struggled at the boundaries of the medium quite like Steven Soderbergh. And though his personal characterisation of himself as a chameleon is accurate, there is a thread that binds the many facets of his form and style together: experimentation. In the next chapter, we will look at another extremely experimental position for an auteur: wearing a suit.

Notes

1   Anthony Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh: Interviews*, 69.
2   For an extensive history, see John Caughie, *Theories of Authorship*, 2001; Virginia Wright Wexman, *Film and Authorship*, 2003; David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger, *Authorship and Film*, 2003; and Barry Keith Grant, *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Anthology*, 2007.
3   See Thomas Schatz, 'The New Hollywood,' 1993.
4   See Geoff King, *Indiewood U.S.A: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema*, 2009.
5   See Thomas Schatz, 'The Studio System in Conglomerate Hollywood,' 2008.
6   For a typical example of this trend, see Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan – And Beyond*, 2003. On the one hand, there is a recognition that Soderbergh is not a typical director, while on the other this exceptional status occludes him from easy identification because of some confusion as to what to do with him. Wood explains that he is 'aware of the absence of Steven Soderbergh' in his book despite his 'obvious significance,' though he is 'uncertain' of what his significance is, admitting that he 'cannot seem to get a firm grasp on his films.' This recognition of Soderbergh as simultaneously belonging to, but excluded from a canon is typical, as is the assumption that scholarly inquiry has caught up with the need to address the director and his films. For Wood, this omission comes down to the filmmaker's emotional impenetrability, the idea that he does not 'know' the director after watching his films. The lack of the personal, so it seems, is part of the larger problem. Moreover, there is a tendency to view this lack of a coherent personality as a bad thing, as if the issue of biography were more important to the issue of artistry and authorship than the effect of watching a movie.
7   Maitland McDonagh, 'The Exploitation Generation, or: How Marginal Movies Came in from the Cold,' in *The Last Great American Picture Show: Traditions, Transitions and Triumphs in 1970s Cinema*, eds. Alexander Horwath, Noel King, and Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 111.
8   Andrew Sarris, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962', in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry K. Grant (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 43.

9   Dudley Andrew, 'The Unauthorized Auteur Today,' in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 20.

10   Timothy Corrigan, 'Auteurs and the New Hollywood,' *The New American Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 60.

11   Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in *Image. Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148.

12   Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?,' in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141–60.

13   Robert Stam, *The Author: Introduction*, in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 6.

14   Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' 145.

15   Steven Dillon, *The Solaris Effect: Art & Artifice in Contemporary American Film* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2006), 22.

16   Soderbergh quoted in Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh: Interviews*, 83.

17   Dillon, *The Solaris Effect*, 29.

18   Ibid., 22.

19   It is fitting, then, that Soderbergh has suggested he might take up painting in his 'sabbatical' from filmmaking.

20   See Pam Cook, 'The Point of Self-Expression in Avant-Garde Film,' in *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, ed. John Caughie (London: Routledge, 2000), 272. 'Traditionally the relationship of the avant-garde film-maker to her or his work has been artisanal, i.e. the film-maker, like a craft worker, is in control of all aspects of the process of production and distribution/exhibition, retaining rights of ownership over her or his film. The artisanal mode of production has several levels: it implies a particular mode of production which is small-scale and therefore, in a capitalist economy, lies outside the dominant system.'

21   Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh: Interviews*, 73–4.

22   Dillon, *The Solaris Effect*, 26.

23   Ibid., 17.

24   Steven Soderbergh, *Moneyball*, Revised Version of Script, June 22, 2009, 1.

25   Quoted in Kaufman, *Steven Soderbergh: Interviews*, 75.

26   Ibid., xv.

27   For a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between these two particular films see R. Barton Palmer, 'Alain Resnais Meets Film Noir in *The Underneath* and *The Limey*,' in *The Philosophy of Steven Soderbergh*, eds. R. Barton Palmer, and Steven Sanders (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 69–90.

28   See Drew Morton, '*Schizopolis* as Philosophical Autobiography,' in *The Philosophy of Steven Soderbergh*, eds. R. Barton Palmer, and Steven Sanders (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 173–193. Morton's assessment of the film offers the following corrective, stating that '*Schizopolis* stands as an odd film out, a misunderstood film in a complex and far-reaching filmography due to its emphasis on surrealist comedy and stylistic flourishes'. In an interview with the director that ends the essay, Soderbergh states that he 'was working with fractured