

FILM DIRECTORS: STEVEN SODERBERGH

University of Pittsburgh, Film Studies
ENGFLM 1470 // summer session I // TuTh 12-3:50

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COURSE DESCRIPTION "Always remember: Steven is a genius. Everything he says, does, ingests, and secretes is Art. Trying to make him conform to standard ideas of behavior will only harm his Art and result in police intervention. The degrading humiliation and diminished sense of self you will experience is part of Steven's desire to break you out of your stagnant uninspired existence, which is not Art. Get off yourself. Get onto Steven." – Steven Soderbergh "Maniphesto" – *Rebels on the Backlot*

This class takes up the topic of authorship in relationship to chameleon director, producer, cinematographer, and editor Steven Soderbergh. We'll look at Soderbergh's playfully contentious relationship to the Hollywood film industry via his radical modes of funding, distribution, and filmmaking style. We'll discuss the way Soderbergh's career challenges traditional roles on set, technological form, and his own cinematic influences. We'll ask how Soderbergh's process of filmmaking is determined by and determines the kinds of political and thematic projects he continually undertakes. We'll consider in what ways Soderbergh benefits and mocks established modes of auteurism and in what ways the variety and quality of his projects resist a stable critical categorization.

Required Texts

All readings will be posted on CourseWeb and/or linked via the digital copy of the syllabus. You do not need to purchase a textbook for this course, although an excellent starter for the material includes:

- *Steven Soderbergh Interviews: Revised and Updated*. Ed. Anthony Kaufman. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2015. *Print*.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. (any edition)* Useful guide, especially if this is your first film course
- Pitt Library Guides: [Film Studies](#), [MLA Citation](#)

* You are expected to print and bring a hard copy of all readings to class

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

Grading breaks down as follows:

20% Participation and 3 Discussion Board Posts

15% Short Paper

25% Midterm Paper

10% Final Presentation

30% Final Project

There are three main assignments for this class: a short paper, a midterm paper, and a final paper/project. I'll give more detailed descriptions as they come up, but to sketch some general outlines:

For the **short paper** (750 words): Analyze a media work that influenced Soderbergh. You may pick something from his 2015 list, another filmmaker, a film, or a book. Give a short description about the context of this object and in what ways its style, look, ideas, or form may have influenced Soderbergh's career. It might be helpful to focus on one particular scene or concept. You may also propose a creative alternative to the paper.

For the **midterm paper** (1200-1400 words), you'll investigate the production, distribution, and reception of one of Soderbergh's projects we don't watch in class. You will choose from a list of less well-known projects. Your paper should address the film in the context of Soderbergh's career paying close attention to in what ways this film distinct from the film's that came before it, what tactics or methods is Soderbergh's testing out here, what industrial obstacles got in the way, how did critics respond to the film. You may also propose a creative alternative to the paper.

["Soderbergh: The Wilderness Years"](#) (Jason Bailey *TheDissolve.com* 2014)

For the **final project**: You will produce either a paper (5,000 words) or, preferably, a creative project of your own design. I will give you a longer description later, but this project will involve an in-depth analysis on some aspect of Soderbergh's relationship to politics, film as industrial production, technology, his collaborators, or his creative process outside of directing (his writing, his editing, his cinematography, his website, his twitter account, etc.). On the last day of class, you will present your final project to the class in a five to ten minute presentation.

*Submit all papers via attachment by email in .doc or .docx format, with your last name, assignment, and class title in the file name.

The 'R' Rating

Some of the assigned media is rated 'R' or unrated: there is violence, language, and sexuality that could be considered objectionable. If a film makes you uncomfortable, you're free to leave the room, but be aware that "mature content" will often become part of our discussions. I also advise that you read-up on the film ahead of time and speak to me about your concerns so we can discuss viewing options.

Website

Course information, links to online readings, and other resources are available on CourseWeb. This is also where you will post discussion board. Readings that aren't publicly available will be posted to CourseWeb – they're marked on the syllabus with "CW." **COURSE WEBSITE** Resources for this course can be found online at the University's Blackboard website, courseweb.pitt.edu, where you can log in using your university computer account username and password; then click on the link to this course. If you have trouble with this or any other aspect of the course website, call the help desk at (412) 624-HELP. Blackboard automatically uses your Pitt email account. If you use Gmail, be sure to check your Pitt account at least once a day, since I'll send email announcements to the class via the course website.

Attendance

Because this is a seminar, discussion is central to the work of the course. Come to class on time, prepared to take part in conversation. You are allowed **one absence** during the summer term, though it is strongly recommended that you strive for perfect attendance. A second will affect your grade, and a third is grounds for failure. Students in this situation may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances. You're responsible for finding out about and making up any work you miss.

You'll be considered late to class if you arrive more than five minutes after the start of the class period. Three late arrivals count as one absence.

Late/Missing Work

As this is a condensed class, you'll be turning in assignments every week. **If you submit something late, your grade on it drops by a full letter.** You also won't get feedback on that assignment.

Technology

As this class relies heavily on your participation and engagement with a variety of texts, I discourage the use of laptop computers, internet tablets, smart phones, cell phones, mp3 players etc. Under no circumstances may you use these devices during screenings as they distract from everyone's viewing and listening experience. On rare occasions I may make an exception when we are doing group work where having access to computers will be useful.

University Policy on Plagiarism

Cite your sources, even when paraphrasing. MLA style is the default for this class – ask if you're unsure how to cite properly. **All instances of plagiarism will result in no credit for the assignment and a report to the Dean.**

University of Pittsburgh's official Academic Integrity Policy: Cheating/plagiarism will not be tolerated. Students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted below, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process as initiated by the instructor. A minimum sanction of a zero score for the quiz, exam or paper will be imposed."

The integrity of the academic process requires fair and impartial evaluation on the part of faculty and honest academic conduct on the part of students. To this end, students are expected to conduct themselves at a high level of responsibility in the fulfillment of the course of their study. It is the corresponding responsibility of faculty to make clear to students those standards by which students will be evaluated, and the resources permissible for use by students during the course of their study and evaluation. The educational process is perceived as a joint faculty-student enterprise which will perforce involve professional judgment by faculty and may involve—without penalty—reasoned exception by students to the data or views offered by faculty. Senate Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom, February 1974

The Writing Center

Located in 317-B Student Center, 4024 O'Hara St., the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to correct your papers for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your essays. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/

Other Services

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me (your instructor) and the Office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, 412-228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Pitt offers free personal and academic counseling at the University Counseling Center (412-648-7930). Specialized counseling services are available to victims of sexual assault; you can contact the sexual assault services coordinator via the main UCC phone line during weekday business hours or at 412-648-7856 (after 5 pm, Monday-Friday or on weekends). In a crisis situation, university police can also connect you with an on-call counselor affiliated with the UCC.

SCHEDULE (SUBJECT TO REVISION)

I. BEGINNINGS & INFLUENCES

Week One:

Tue May 17: Introduction

Watch (in class): *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989 US 100min VHS)

Read: "'I'm Not a Visionary': The Staggering Career Arc of Steven

Soderbergh" (Sean Fennesy and Chris Ryan, Grantland), "[Watching Movies with Steven Soderbergh](#)" (Lyman "New York Times" 2001)

Listen: "[The Soderpod](#)" – ESPN Chris Ryan

Thur May 19: Soderbergh and a Chameleon of Influence

Watch (In class): *All the Presidents Men* (Pakula US 138min 1976), *Begin*

Hiroshima, Mon Amour (Resnais FR/JP 90min 1957)

Read: "Everything I Saw, Read in [2015](#), [2014](#), [2013](#), [2012](#), [2011](#), [2010](#), [2009](#)"),

"[Alan McCabe](#)", [Josef Von Sternberg](#) (Soderbergh Extension 765), "[French New Wave Influences in Steven Soderbergh's Films](#)" (Drew Morton 2003,

Interview

Sunday May 22 5 PM: Analysis Due (DB)

Week Two:

Tues May 24: French New Wave// "Alain Resnais meets Get Carter"

Watch: *The Limey* (US 89mins Artisan 1999)

Read: "Hours and Times: The (Film) World According to Steven Soderbergh" (David Kehr *Film Comment* 1999), "The Flashback Kid" (Sheila Johnstone *Sight and Sound* 1999), "Biding our Time: Rethinking the Familiar in Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey*" 9-16, 19-21 (Lee Carruthers *Film Studies* 2006)

Thur May 2

Watch: *Out of Sight* (US 122 mins Universal 1998)

Read: Mark Gallagher "Intertextual Conversations: Genre, Adaptations, and Remakes" "Part I: Intro, "Soderbergh's Intertextual activity 2: Crime and Crimestoppers" 168-172, 178-182) "[Sodeberghian style, sex, and settings of Out of Sight: A Forum](#)" (*TheDissolve.com* 2014)

Sunday May 29 5 PM: Short Paper Due (email)

II. PLAYING WITH HOLLYWOOD / RE-FRAMING POLITICS

Week Three: Remakes and Recuts

Tues May 31:

Watch: *Ocean's 11* (US 118mins Fox 2001)

Read: Mark Gallagher "Intertextual Conversations: Genre, Adaptations, and Remakes" (Part II: "Intertexts and Authorships: Lem's, Tarkovsky's, and Soderbergh's *Solaris*" 182- 193" Mark Gallagher, "Boutique Cinema, Section Eight, and DVD" 213-232, "[The Soderbergh Variations: 2001, Recut](#)" (Jackson Arn *Film Comment* 2015)

Thur June 2: Section Eight Productions/Working Through Other Films

Watch: *Solaris* with DVD Commentary: Soderbergh and Director James Cameron (US 2002 98mins Fox) OR Editing Experiments: *The Return of W. De Rijckl 2001: A Space Odyssey* Recut (SS *Extension 765* 2015)

Read: "Smooth Operators: Ocean's Eleven" (Douglas Bankston *American Cinematographer* 2002), "Having Your Way with Hollywood, or the Further Adventures of Steven Soderbergh" (Dennis Lim *Village Voice* 2000).

Selections on Camera work for *Traffic*: "Steven Soderbergh: from sex, lies, and videotape to Erin Borckovich- A maverick Directos route (with detours) to Hollywood's clout" (Anne Thompson 95, 98-100), "Man of the Year: Steven Soderbergh Traffics in Success" (Anthony Kaufman *Indiewire.com* 2000 112-117)

Sunday June 5 5 PM: Midterm Paper Due (email)

Week Four: Birth of Peter Andrews (Film to Digital)

Tues June 7

Watch: *Traffic* (US 147mins Universal 2000)

Read: "Guerilla Filmmaking on an Epic Scale" (Amy Taubin *Film Comment* 2008), "[Peter Andrews: The Soderbergh Vision](#)" (Matt Zoller Seitz/Nelson Carvajal), Watch (on your own): "[Che and the Digital Cinema Revolution](#)" (Parts 1-4, Youtube)

Thur June 9 Red Camera

Watch: *Che: Part One* (US/SP/DE 257min 2008)

Read: Auteur Readings – Andrew Sarris , Bazin, André. "La politique des auteurs". *The New Wave*. Ed. Peter Graham. New York: Double Day, 1968. Print. 137-155. "Interview: Steven Soderbergh" (Amy Taubin *Film Comment* 2012)

Sun June 12 5 PM: Final Project Proposal (DB)

III. SHIFTING GEARS & "RETIREMENT"

Week Five: The Two Magic Mikes

Tues June 14

Watch: *Magic Mike* (US 112mins Warner Bros 2012)

Read: "Partial Interview with Mark Gallagher: 'Are you an Artist?' 252-254, 267-268, "State of the Cinema Address" (SS San Francisco International Film Festival 2013) "[Steven Soderbergh will shoot and edit \(but still not direct\) Magic Mike XXL](#)" (Matt Singer *TheDissolve.com* 2014)

Thur June 16

Watch: *Magic Mike XXL* (Jakobs US 115mins Warner Bros 2015)

Read: "[The Binge Director](#)" (Matt Zoller Seitz, *Vulture*), Mary Ann Bernard (Editing), "[Steven Soderbergh's Editing Notes for 'The Knick' Season 2](#)" (Indirewire.com 2015)

Watch (at home): [Music Videos](#), Website experiments, Paintings, Twitter

Sun June 19 5 PM: Secondary Texts Due (DB)

Week Six:

Tues June 21: Television & Experiments

Watch: *The Knick, Season 1/2 Selections* (2014 Cinemax)

Read: "[Beneath Behind the Camera](#)" (Matt Singer *TheDissolve.com* 2013)

Thur June 23: Final Presentations (Before Film)

Watch: *Behind the Candelabra* (US 118 mins HBO Films 2013)

Sun June 26 5PM: Final Projects Due (email)