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Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Steven Soderbergh's State of Cinema: Art Shrinks as Commerce Grows

Sophia Stein · Thursday, May 2nd, 2013

“I’ve been in meetings, where I can feel it slipping away, where I can feel like the ideas that I’m tossing out are too scary or they are too weird, and I can tell it’s just not going to happen, I am not going to be able to convince them to do this, the way I think it should be done, and I want to jump up on the table and scream, ‘Do you know how lucky we are to be doing this, do you understand that the only way to repay that karmic debt is to make something ambitious, something beautiful, something memorable?’ But I didn’t do that. I just sat there and I smiled.”
– Steven Soderbergh, in his State of Cinema keynote address

“Cinema is shrinking,” warned cinematic genius and ‘prophet’ Steven Soderbergh, in his highly anticipated “State of Cinema” address at the 56th San Francisco International Film Festival this past Saturday, the swansong to a filmmaking career spanning more than three decades.

‘Cinema,’ as Soderbergh defined it, is work crafted by a filmmaker with specificity of vision, unique as a signature or fingerprint, an approach in which everything matters – in contrast to ‘movies,’ which he defined as commodities manufactured by committee, company, or the audience itself; homogenized, simplified spectacles constructed to maximize global reach and appeal. ‘Cinema’ is under assault by the studios, he contested. Business and money are pushing ‘cinema’ out of mainstream movies.

Soderbergh enumerated, in graphic and illustrative detail, the multiple frustrations he has recently endured crafting ‘cinema’ within the Hollywood movie studio system. He cited inherent flaws, such as lack of leadership (“I know how to drive a car, but I wouldn’t presume to sit in a meeting with an engineer and tell him how to build one.”), exorbitant distribution costs (point of entry to put a movie out – \$60 million dollars), and the marketing machine with its concomitant testing, tracking, and running the numbers (“the equivalent of a doctor showing you your chest x-ray and saying there is a shadow on it”). “Magic Mike” opened to \$38 million, but tracking predicted \$19 million; the tracking was only 100% wrong, he asserted. We were left to surmise, that these cumulative disappointments informed his decision to retire from filmmaking (or take a sabbatical, one rather hopes) effective with the release of “Side Effects” earlier this year. “Maybe my feeling that the studios are kind of like Detroit before the bailout is just totally insupportable ...,” he sarcastically entertained.

“What is art for, really”?

In January of 2013, Soderbergh celebrated a milestone birthday, his fiftieth, to which he alluded in his opening remarks: “I’m on the back nine ... older than Elvis,” and perhaps this accounts for the grave, introspective tone of his rather weighty address. “When people are more outraged by the

ambiguous ending of a Sopranos [episode] than some young girl being stoned to death ... there is something wrong,” he observed. “Given all the incredible suffering in the world, I wonder sometimes, what is art for, really?”

As far back as 30,000 years ago with those paintings on the cave walls in France, Soderbergh concluded, we are a species “driven by narrative,” for whom “art is inevitable.” We tell stories to transmit ideas and order the chaos. At its best, art enables us to enter the consciousness of another, and sometimes, it even leaves us transformed. “Art is a very elegant problem-solving model,” Soderbergh argued, where all ideas are on the table and open for discussion. “An entrenched ideology” (the antithesis of an artistic approach from his perspective) is the main obstacle to actually solving problems.

Quoting Douglas Rushkoff, Soderbergh diagnosed his malaise as a case of “Present Shock.” He suggested that we may indeed all be suffering the effects of so much information rushing in at us, from so many sources, with no coherent narrative to explain it all.

His assessment of opportunities for arising independent filmmakers was similarly bleak. With increased access to the means of production, independent filmmaking is markedly on the rise: 275 independent films were released in the United States back in 2003, and a whopping 677 independent releases in 2012, or by Soderbergh’s calculations, twice as many independent films scrambling for a smaller piece of the pie. “When I was coming up, making an independent film and trying to reach an audience was sort of like trying to finally hit a thrown baseball. This is like trying to hit a thrown baseball with another thrown baseball,” he analogized.

Gloom and despair

When someone of Soderbergh’s stature spews forth such gloom and doom, how does one respond? He is, after all, an artist with the backing from the studios! Soderbergh’s success represents what aspiring filmmakers all over, pin their hopes on -- so, when someone of Soderbergh’s stature laments the “State of Cinema,” it is easy to despair indeed.

As I spoke with several attendees just after the address, they voiced their disappointment – that Soderbergh had spoken for less than 45 minutes, that we already knew much of what he said, that he had not talked about his retirement or his artistic future, that there was no Q&A?! From my perspective, Soderbergh did deliver – in terms of acute analysis, honest reflection, with witty and provocative delivery of the ever-evolving story.

Soderbergh prescribed several remedies to correct the current state of affairs. First off, the studios are making a mistake betting on “races,” not “horses.” In a talent-driven industry like the film industry, studios would do best to back talent, rather than projects, he advised. If Soderbergh were a studio head (hint-hint), he would gather the best filmmakers he could find, give them a three-picture deal, along with financing to apportion as they see fit across projects, and let them do their thing. (To his generous credit, Soderbergh named names – Shane Carruth, Barry Jenkins, and Amy Seimetz.) “Let’s not do any tracking at all,” he suggested, and spend that \$15 million on something else. Instead of remaking already great and famous movies from the past, studio executives should look for underachievers in their more distant catalogue, for a good idea that would benefit from a fresh take and talent.

By way of encouragement to aspiring independent filmmakers, Soderbergh offered up the example of “Memento.” Christopher Nolan’s film was rejected by every distributor, with the result that his financiers formed their own distribution company, put the movie out, and ended up banking a cool \$25 million. (An implicit endorsement for self-distribution, I believe, and riding that wave of the future.)

Want-to-see is mysterious

Soderbergh mentioned how the process by which people decide to go to a movie or not remains mysterious and almost impossible to predict. It is interesting to me that focus groups almost never

focus on the primary criteria that my husband and I each use in selecting the movies we choose to see. For me, it's all about the auteur. I know to trust a Soderbergh film, or a Charlie Kaufman picture, or anything by Sally Potter – even their flops are interesting. For me, there is nothing worse than being bored by a predictable and clichéd narrative, or noisy bangy action sequences, where I cannot follow the narrative arc of a fight. The less I know of story before I go, the better. For my husband, he has to be attracted to the “ideas” behind the story: a clever concept, well-developed, with an accurate and nuanced basis in science. These are the types of elusive preferences that those algorithms at Netflix and iTunes and Hulu and Amazon are becoming more and more accurate at predicting. With the advent of releasing new content online directly to subscribers (Netflix' “House of Cards,” for example), online distributors may be eliminating some of those wasteful expenses that Soderbergh bemoans.

San Francisco Film Society Executive Director Ted Hope introduced Soderbergh as a filmmaker who, through unceasing experimentation, has worked “to elevate the state of cinema.” If I had to predict, I see Soderbergh retooling from the arsenal of new distribution technologies at his disposal just beyond those crumbling movie lot and theatre walls, to unleash a virtual-cinema renaissance. Perhaps one of the Silicon Valley pioneers will have the foresight to ante up and invite Soderbergh onboard, putting some of his ideas to the test as the head of a digital film studio here in the Bay.

Soderbergh ended his rant with an ironic story. He suggested that all young filmmakers, when they are pitching any project for financing – no matter how dark the subject, “it can be about genocide, it can be about child killers” – somewhere in the middle, they should pause as though they have had an epiphany, and claim, “At the end of the day, this is a movie about hope.” And that was where the irascible, chameleonic Soderbergh ended his filmmaking career ... at least for now.

Here is the full video of Soderbergh's address:

State of Cinema: Steven Soderbergh from San Francisco Film Society on Vimeo.

Photo by Pamela Gentile, courtesy of the San Francisco Film Society.

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