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# Five films of Steven Soderbergh

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FIVE FILMS OF STEVEN SODERBERGH

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by  
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## **Abstract**

This study examines five films of Steven Soderbergh: *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *The Underneath* (1995), *Out of Sight* (1998), *The Limey* (1999), and *Traffic* (2000). For each film, themes and cinematic form and technique are analyzed with the intent of demonstrating a consistent authorial voice of the director. The investigation reveals that common themes include the protagonist at odds with the world about him, journey, ambiguities and uncertainties in the characters' worlds, and the nondichotomous nature of reality, especially in regard to morality. The study also argues that Soderbergh has evolved a style that favors a nonlinear narrative and parallel editing, frequent use of a hand-held camera, and systematic uses of color. It is concluded that such commonalities in theme and style provide evidence for an evolving artistic vision.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

By now, the story of Steven Soderbergh's near instantaneous transformation from unknown filmmaking-wannabe to prize-winning *wunderkind* has circulated widely and passed into pop-culture legend (the sort of tale, one muses, that inspires the Hollywood dream-moguls at their saccharine best). Soderbergh himself chronicled his "Cinderella" experience in a journal, edited portions of which he included interspersed throughout the published shooting script to his debut film. Working with a \$1.2 million budget, Soderbergh returned to the university town of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he had grown up, to film his first feature-length motion picture from his own screenplay and with a small cast of unknown and moderately known actors. The resulting film, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), debuted at The Sundance Film Festival and went on to play in Cannes, France, winning the prestigious *Palme d'Or* at that most famous of film festivals. Since then, Soderbergh has worked as screenwriter and script doctor, producer, director, and sometimes on his own films as editor and cinematographer. As director, he has dabbled across genres and styles—the artsy film, the small, quirky personal film, and the expensive Hollywood feature boasting the most popular and highest-paid actors. Prolific, he has now directed thirteen feature films in as many years. If the first years after *sex, lies, and videotape* seemed rocky (though work was steady), Soderbergh regained his footing in 1998 with the George Clooney vehicle *Out of Sight*. Since then, he has achieved the status of a highly regarded in-demand director and producer, having proved himself at the box office, in the critics' circle, and at the awards banquets. The year 2000 saw the release of two Soderbergh pictures, *Erin Brockovitch* and *Traffic*; both films received Academy Award nominations in the categories of best picture and best director (among others), and *Traffic* won Soderbergh the award for best

director. For those two films, Soderbergh also won awards from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the National Society of Film Critics, and the New York Film Critics Circle.

Despite such growing popularity and notoriety, no major critical assessment of Soderbergh's work has emerged. Aside from standard movie reviews in the popular press, almost nothing appears in print. Soderbergh himself has published two documents: *sex, lies, and videotape* (1990), which comprises the shooting script and journal entries that Soderbergh made during the production, and *Getting Away with It, Or: The Further Adventures of the Luckiest Bastard You Ever Saw*,<sup>1</sup> a series of interviews with filmmaker Richard Lester combined with fragments of Soderbergh's journal kept during the period in which he made *Schizopolis* (1996) and *Gray's Anatomy* (1996). Last year, the University Press of Mississippi released a collection of previously published interviews with Steven Soderbergh as part of their "Conversations with Filmmakers" series. Jason Wood has written a slim volume, *Steven Soderbergh*, for Pocket Essentials (2002); in ninety-four pages, Wood presents a guide to Soderbergh's directorial efforts through *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) following a pattern of subheads of Cast, Crew, Story, Subtext, Background, Trivia, Major Nominations and Awards, Key Moment, Music, and Verdict for each film. Since the book focuses on facts and entertainment value, little of its content provides any real insight; furthermore, obvious factual errors make it difficult to take the author seriously.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 1999

<sup>2</sup>For example, in the section on *Traffic*, Wood claims, "Flores botches the hit on Ruiz but in the process shoots Castro dead" (p. 74). Even the most casual viewing of the film divulges that Flores hits no one and that Castro dies in the explosion when he triggers the car bomb.

The present study examines five of Soderbergh's films with the aim to identify patterns that indicate a developing artistic vision. I have limited the number of films under consideration to five to keep the project to a manageable length and to allow for detailed examination of the films. The selection comprises *sex, lies, and videotape*, important as Soderbergh's first feature-length film and as a starting point for assessing his oeuvre, and four films that suggest some commonalities of theme and cinematic style. Those four films are *The Underneath* (1995), *Out of Sight*, *The Limey* (1999), and *Traffic*. My methodology involves a reading of each film, following the action of the film closely and commenting as the narrative or form warrants; thus, each film is given a separate chapter divided into Synopsis, Analysis and Commentary, and Conclusions. Despite the scene-by-scene detail of some of the analysis, I do assume the reader has viewed the films under discussion.

Until now, most commentators have observed that Soderbergh's films offer little consistency in story, genre, or style. Soderbergh has helped to perpetuate that myth with comments such as "I am more like those [directors] who respond to a certain kind of subject matter, and who look for the best style to express it. I am not trying to impose my style" (Ciment & Niogret, 1993, p. 60). Or, "I'm a chameleon. Style is secondary to me. I go with the material and then sit down and think about what style would best suit that material" (Chanko, 1993, p. 69). Or, "You know, there are two kinds of filmmakers. There are filmmakers who have a style. And they look for material that fits that style. I'm the opposite. I look at the material and I go, 'Okay, who do I have to be to put this across?'" (Thompson, 2000, p. 141). Some have likened Soderbergh to the sort of journeyman director once identified by names such as Howard Hawks or John Ford. Of course, ironically, Hawks and Ford were among the first



U.S. directors associated with the theory of the *auteur* when French critics and their followers began to apply auteur theory to Hollywood. I intend to show that Soderbergh's films contain common themes and demonstrate the evolution of a personal cinematic style, providing evidence for authorship.

Common themes that emerge in the examined films include the story as journey, the question of whether chance or fate is the greater force in the world, and exploration of the gray areas of life that reveal the error of dichotomous thinking. The characters in Soderbergh's films live in a world in which they must eventually face choices and deal with the consequences of those choices. Those choices are informed by the character's view of the role of chance versus fate and the character's understanding of the ambiguities faced in life. Although Soderbergh has spoken of matching a style to the needs of each particular film, scrutiny of the formal aspects of the films exposes some trends. The nonlinear narrative becomes a hallmark of Soderbergh's work, the director putting together a story by arranging sequences that move across different times or places. Soderbergh makes extensive use of a hand-held camera in his films, using it to help set the tone of the story or particular segments of it. Beginning with *The Underneath* (of the films considered here), Soderbergh makes systematic use of color to express emotion as well as to help the viewer navigate the temporal and spatial structures of the narrative. Taken together, these thematic and formal elements suggest an evolving artistic vision that identifies a film by Steven Soderbergh.

## **Chapter 2** *sex, lies, and videotape*

### **Synopsis**

Graham (James Spader) returns to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, after a long absence. He stays a night with old school chum John (Peter Gallagher) and John's wife, Ann (Andie MacDowell), whom Graham has never met. Ann helps Graham find an apartment, and as they get to know one another, she learns that he is impotent; eventually, she also learns of Graham's fetish for videotaping women talking about sex, a matter that disturbs Ann deeply. John, meanwhile, is having an affair with Ann's sister Cynthia (Laura San Giacomo), who gets along poorly with Ann. Cynthia, intrigued by Graham, visits him and lets him tape her talking and masturbating. When Ann learns of John's infidelity, she visits Graham and insists that he tape her, too; that session ends with Graham and Ann kissing and Graham shutting off the camera. Cynthia ends her affair with John and reconciles with her sister, and Ann leaves John and begins a relationship with Graham.

### **Analysis and Commentary**

The opening shot of *sex, lies, and videotape* is of the highway moving by as Graham, the central character, drives to Baton Rouge, Louisiana; thus, the film immediately suggests the story of a journey, a road picture—an impression that strengthens when the film cuts to show Graham shaving and changing clothes in the men's room of a service station. It is as if Graham has no place, choosing to keep close to the open road rather than take a motel room to rest and groom. From these first images, questions arise. Where is home? Has Graham left home or is he returning home? Does he have a home at all? Is he looking for a home, a place?

The first dialogue in the film has no apparent relationship to these opening images on the screen. As Graham makes his way to Baton Rouge, we hear a voiceover of Ann, “Garbage.” Ann speaks to her therapist, Dr. Flick (Ron Vawter), explaining to him her concern for the garbage piling up, taking up space. The juxtaposition of the visual images of Graham on his way to Baton Rouge with the audio of Ann talking to her therapist provides the first clue that the film comments on the problems of communication among individuals. As we shall see throughout the film, attempts of the characters to communicate appear as disjointed and haphazard as the overlap of image and audio in the film’s opening moments. Formally, Soderbergh’s film reflects the characters’ inability to communicate authentically, as the audience starts out puzzled at what relationship Graham and Ann may have and what the scenes of each may have to do with one another.

As Ann’s session with her therapist continues, Ann claims that things are fine with her husband, John, except that she does not want to touch him. Is the “garbage” that Ann speaks of sex or a sublimated discomfort with or revulsion of human contact? When Dr. Flick introduces the subject of masturbation, Ann laughs it off. “I tried once; it just seemed so stupid.” While both of Ann’s statements imply a discomfort with sex, they also reveal a more general discomfort with human contact. Very likely, Ann’s reluctance to touch her husband relates to her inability to touch herself. Is she frigid? Is she unable to comprehend her own needs? Does she comprehend her needs but refuse to face them?

John, on the other hand, seeks physical gratification elsewhere, namely, with Ann’s sister Cynthia. It is unclear whether John’s affair with Cynthia is a consequence of Ann’s attitude toward physical contact or whether Ann’s withdrawal came about in response to the behavior of

a philandering husband. Either way, both characters have difficulty with intimacy. Unlike Ann, John has no discomfort or anxiety over physical touch; however, a physical relationship appears to be the depth of John's intimacy with any woman. In the first scene between John and Cynthia, John voices his desire for Cynthia to quit her bartending job. His motives are selfish. He dislikes Cynthia having contact with the patrons of the bar and fears the threat that other men may look at and desire her. We learn later that John insisted that Ann quit working once the two of them married. John treats the women in his life as chattel. John wants a sort of ownership over his women, who serve to gratify his needs but have no identity beyond their relationships with him. Emotionally, John makes no effort to know them or communicate with them, but orders them around solely in their respective roles as wife and mistress.

That is not to say, however, that John desires nothing more, deep down. Consider John's choice of paramour. Cynthia suffers none of John's controlling gestures. Independent and self-confident, she herself appears content to indulge in a physical relationship with no emotional intimacy, with the added satisfaction of surreptitiously striking at her sister by sleeping with sister's husband. Cynthia refuses to let John call all the shots. She makes the ultimate decision whether she and John will meet for an afternoon tryst on any given day—sometimes she initiates the meetings herself—and she has no intention even to entertain John's request that she leave her job. Why does John engage in a liaison with a woman who cannot be possessed and treated as property? Is he looking to conquer a self-reliant woman? Or does he seek something else, to make contact with a woman who must be dealt with as a person rather than as property?

Upon Graham's arrival at John and Ann's home, the themes of journey/search and intimacy/communication begin to converge. Graham experiences a shy bladder as he struggles

with meeting Ann. Ann, uncomfortable with the stranger, telephones John. During this initial encounter between Graham and Ann, Graham inquires, “Have you ever been on television?” The question is obscure, if not deceptive, and Ann readily misinterprets it. She appears flattered, probably assuming that Graham means that she is attractive enough to be a television personality. More likely, Graham thinks of videotaping Ann. In *sex, lies, and videotape*, video emerges as a metaphor for distance between people. According to Soderbergh, “Video is a way of distancing ourselves from people and events. We tend to think that we can experience things because we watched them on tape. . . . He [Graham] needs the distance to feel free to react without anybody watching, which, I guess, is the definition of voyeurism” (Jacobson, 1989, p. 30; brackets his). Graham prepares already to distance a woman he has barely met.

Conversation at dinner is fairly mundane, although one exchange reminds us that a journey is in progress (in regards to Graham’s having just one key):

John: Leave some place in a hurry.

Graham: Yeah, or go some place in a hurry.

During Graham’s first night in Baton Rouge, a sleepless Ann walks upstairs to where Graham sleeps, the camera framing her climb by viewing her through the balustrade of the staircase, the balusters as prison bars, an image of confinement and isolation. Ann creeps in and looks at Graham sleeping. What does she seek? Perhaps the man with one key is himself the key that will free her from her prison. In reciprocation, Ann facilitates Graham’s finding a home. The following day, she accompanies Graham in his search for an apartment; indeed, she does more than assist in looking at spaces or making a decision about one. When Graham

haggles with the landlord (Earl T. Taylor) over setting rent without a lease, we see the landlord look at Ann, and Ann nods. With Ann's endorsement, the landlord agrees to Graham's terms.

When Ann finds out about Graham's hobby, videotaping women talking about sex, she becomes noticeably agitated. Is it because the topic of the taped interviews is sex? Is it because the videotape subject makes an effort to communicate about intimacy? Or is it because the videotaping perverts the attempt to communicate? When Ann telephones Cynthia, their words epitomize their complete inability to communicate:

Ann: I don't want to talk about it.

Cynthia: Well, then why did you call me?

Ann: I don't know.

Ann claims she does not want to talk, and yet she did telephone Cynthia. Ann reaches out, grasping for an opportunity to make contact, but she fails because she fears making the contact or does not know how to go about communicating or really does not understand what she wants.

When Cynthia finally learns about Graham's activities with his video camera, she becomes intrigued; she goes to visit Graham, although they have never been introduced to one another. Again, the yearning for communication materializes as talking:

Graham: Why don't you let me tape you?

Cynthia: Doing what?

Graham: Talking.

Of course, talking does not necessarily constitute authentic communication, and the video camera will mediate the conversation, mitigating any possible intimacy of the exchange.

When Ann next shows up at Graham's apartment, Graham is viewing the videotape of Cynthia, linking the woman who refuses to talk with the woman willing to talk. Graham switches off the tape before letting Ann inside; Ann's countenance reveals sadness, even despair. Later, over the telephone, Cynthia tells Ann about the videotaping. During the scene, Ann has just bathed, while Cynthia pots a plant. One sister has made herself clean, while the other makes herself dirty. Ann, frustrated by the topic of their conversation, tells Cynthia, "I don't want to talk about it." These moments link the two women as well as reveal the opposing extremes at work in them. Talking on camera entices Cynthia, but the idea depresses Ann. Cynthia does not mind dealing with dirt, while Ann avoids the dirt and works to make things clean. Cynthia is willing to talk to her sister, but Ann refuses to talk. It may seem obvious that dirt functions as a metaphor for sex as a topic of consideration and discussion—perhaps too obvious, though. In some sense, the continuum of dirty-clean suggests not only the face of the content of their conversation but an aspect of talk as a process. Talk about a serious subject, whether sex or something else, and as a means of meaningful contact with another can be a dirty business. The treatment here of dirty and clean is somewhat ironic. Cynthia does not get dirty merely by indulging in a sensuous romp through mud and muck; she pots a plant, a nurturing act involving the promise of life and growth. Ann's impulse to be clean strikes us as more of a slightly neurotic instance of obsessive-compulsive behavior than a reasonable act of hygiene or sanitation. As with Cynthia's willingness to get dirty, her willingness to talk is a constructive effort at making contact with another, an act with fertile potential. Ann's avoidance of talking reflects her squeaky-clean life, her relationships having become antiseptic, wiped clean of heart and meaning.

Talking, for John, is analytical and rigid. When he finds out that Cynthia has allowed Graham to videotape her, John couches his concern in legalese. John's words do not reflect any intimacy with Cynthia or any concern for what intimacy may have developed between Graham and Cynthia; rather, his words, devoid of human feeling, serve to construct an artificial structure of law around human interaction. Cynthia, however, has begun to release her own humanity and allows emotion and intuition to take a role in dictating her actions: "I trust him," she tells John. The scene reveals the clashing world views of the two characters, something that Cynthia herself now sees. "John, we don't have anything to talk about," declares Cynthia. Significantly, Cynthia's statement differs from the statements that Ann has made. Unlike Ann, Cynthia does not refuse to talk or insist that she does not want to talk—Cynthia instead observes that there is no point to talking with John. Cynthia is open to talk; however, her relationship with John has a dead end and no real intimacy. She is ready to move on to something authentic, where talking will be meaningful.

Meanwhile, Ann has gone from cleaning herself to cleaning the house. Interestingly, Ann wears John's clothes as she cleans.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, her ritual tidying of her home will throw her life into further disarray and, indeed, break up her home. In her bedroom, Ann finds and recognizes Cynthia's earring, evidence of what she already suspects, the affair between her husband and her sister. In response to the discovery and realization of what it means, Ann smashes the earrings and then tears off the clothes of John's that she wears, literally divesting herself of her marital relationship. When Ann confronts Graham about what he knew of the

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<sup>3</sup> A point that may be indiscernible to the viewer, but that Soderbergh pointed out in the published screenplay: "I don't know if anybody will understand that they are John's clothes (obviously she does housework in them)" (Soderbergh, 1990, p. 182).



John-Cynthia affair, Graham tells her that he would not have said anything to her; he did not see it as his place. Although Graham's arrival in Baton Rouge provided the catalyst for the action and changes in relationships among Ann, John, and Cynthia, ironically he remains reticent and resistant to communication.

When John storms in anger over to Graham's place and plays the videotape of Ann, we learn what has already transpired between Ann and Graham. The film cuts from the video playback to a flashback of what went on between them during the taping. Ann insists that a reluctant Graham videotape her. She is finally ready to talk. In the process, Ann turns the table on Graham, asking him about his relationships, becoming the interviewer, beginning with how he became impotent. Graham remains evasive, responding, "I can't answer that." Yet despite fighting the conversation, Graham finally begins to open up. When Ann picks up the camera and points it at Graham, he runs to the corner.

Graham: You don't know who I am . . . Am I supposed to recount it to you . . . I haven't the slightest idea of who I am.

Ann: Maybe I can help.

Graham: I've got a lot of problems, but they belong to me.

Ann: You think they are, but . . .

Graham: . . . structured my life so this didn't happen.

It is a breakthrough for Graham. As a result, he pushes aside the very thing that he has used to keep people at a distance—he turns off the camera. So although we do not see what proceeds between Graham and Ann, we know that finally it is an authentic moment for Graham, as well as for Ann. When John, seething from what he's seen on videotape, reveals to Graham that he once

slept with Graham's old flame Elizabeth—when Graham and Elizabeth were still together—the confession, designed solely to hurt Graham, also reveals that John stands as the sole member of the quartet of main characters to come through the film without any measurable change. He failed to learn anything about himself or open himself to a different kind or level of relationship; sans wife and sans job, he remains the same in character and emotion.

The film's denouement finds Ann and Cynthia making amends. Ann goes to the bar where Cynthia works and gives Cynthia a birthday gift—a plant, showing that something rooted in earth (dirt) can be tidy and attractive and flourish with life. When Ann meets Graham at the very end, clearly they have become a couple. The ending is ambiguous, something that Soderbergh has stated explicitly: “And for me the end is ambiguous: I don't have a clear sense of what's going to happen to Graham and Ann. Nor to the other two characters” (Ciment & Niogret, 1989, p. 21). One might consider that the self-declared impotent male and the seemingly frigid female have found a haven in one another, a couple who will pose no sexual threat to one another; yet, we have seen the cathartic moment; they have talked to one another, touched, kissed, perhaps even made love. Now Ann tells Graham, “I think it's gonna rain,” and Graham replies, “It is raining.” Does that signify the coming of stormy times for them, or is it symbolic of the cleansing, rejuvenating power of water? Have they come through a crisis together to discover that they have nothing to say to one another beyond observing the mundane, talking about the weather? Or have they embarked on breaking the barriers to intimacy by learning to talk to one another about the simple truths of life, such as the rain?

## Conclusions

The questions raised by the end of the film are left largely unanswered. Soderbergh is right when he calls the ending ambiguous. If anything, we have a sense that the journey continues. We can see, though, that Graham and Ann have begun at least to remove some of the barriers to intimacy. The ambiguity that remains, however, reflects the filmmaker's belief in the complexity of life and, more specifically, the uncertainty of human intimacy and the imprecision of human communication. Ultimately, Soderbergh's film is a study in communication and intimacy and their interrelationship. Part of the artistry of the film is the ironic use of talk to denote the lack of communication between characters. The film opens with Ann talking to a therapist. Ann and Cynthia talk on the telephone. Graham videotapes women talking about sex. Despite all this talk, little or no communication occurs. As Dieckmann puts it, "One of the points of *sex, lies, and videotape* is that all this quacking about feelings can be a method of stalling the truth rather than getting at it" (1989, p. 44).

As indicated by the film's title, videotape has a connection to the lies and lack of communication that prevail among the characters. Soderbergh explains, "For me, the video was a useful strategy to give one of the characters a certain distance in relation to the others, and to enable him to maintain it until the end. This is also in keeping with the prevalent role of video today in American society" (Ciment & Niogret, 1989, p. 21). The videotaping process seems to present an opportunity to communicate, but it is really artifice. For Cynthia, the artificiality of the taping session reveals itself and brings insight. Her experience, once she gets over her initial intrigue with Graham and his camera, brings an epiphany—it is time to sever the involvement with John, tidy up her relationship with her sister, and get on with her life. For Ann, the

opportunity to be one of Graham's subjects brings catharsis; however, the significance of the moment would be lost if Graham did not turn off the camera. The artifice must at last be put aside so that the characters may attempt real connection and bridge the distance that they had carefully kept in place. The final irony is that Soderbergh shows us this through the medium of film, older cousin to videotape. Perhaps the filmmaker invites the viewer to a self-reflective or cathartic moment before leaving the theater (or switching off the DVD player and television) and going on with life.

### **Chapter 3** *The Underneath*

#### **Synopsis**

Michael Chambers (Peter Gallagher) returns home to Austin, Texas, for his mother's (Anjanette Comer) wedding. Mrs. Chambers's fiancé, Ed Dutton (Paul Dooley), helps Michael get a job with his employer, an armored-car service. Michael meets up with his ex-wife, Rachel (Alison Elliott); Michael had left Rachel and Austin years earlier to avoid the consequences of his gambling debts. Although Rachel is involved with another man, Tommy Dundee (William Fichtner), a nightclub owner and small-time hoodlum, Michael and Rachel make gestures toward rekindling their relationship; however, Michael's brother David (Adam Trese) blackmails Rachel into severing contact with Michael, and she marries Tommy. When Michael and Rachel meet so that Rachel can explain what happened, Tommy discovers their rendezvous, prompting Michael to claim that he was using Rachel to make contact with Tommy to set up an armored-car heist. The robbery goes wrong, leaving Dutton dead and Michael in the hospital badly injured. Tommy has Michael kidnaped from the hospital and taken to a remote cabin to be executed, but Michael convinces Rachel to help him and double cross Tommy. They kill Tommy. Rachel then turns the table on Michael and leaves him behind, taking the money for herself and driving off. As the film ends, it becomes apparent that the man who helped Tommy set up the robbery trails Rachel. The action of the film takes place in three distinct timeframes:

Period 1. Distant past: Michael and Rachel are married.

Period 2. Immediate past: Michael returns, gets job with armored-car service.

Period 3. Present: day of the robbery and subsequent events.

## Analysis and Commentary

As with *sex, lies, and videotape*, the film *The Underneath* begins with an image that suggests that the story is of a man's journey. The opening shot introduces Michael, in close-up, driving an armored car; the camera cuts to a point-of-view (POV) shot looking out the vehicle windshield to the road ahead. To confirm that Michael's story is a journey, the film next cuts to a flashback showing Michael in the back seat of a moving cab, looking out the window, then a cut to Michael on a bus; once we understand that these shots are flashbacks, we realize that Michael's journey began some time ago. We also hear overlapping dialogue that leads to the next scene, continuing the flashbacks, of a woman, Susan (Elisabeth Shue), at the bus depot, giving Michael her telephone number. The journey involves a woman. In the flashbacks, Michael is returning home for his mother's wedding.

At home (i.e., his mother's house), Michael dresses following a shower, unknowingly watched by his brother, David. After eyeing Michael for a few moments, David announces his presence with a comment, "Nice butt." It's an odd moment that seems sexually charged but ambiguous. As the film plays out and we learn more about Michael and David and the relationship between them (it certainly is not incestuous), we may consider that David's comment is one of envy and narcissism. We shall come to see David as possibly another version of Michael. David believes in following rules and adherence to laws—as a police officer, he embodies that notion—yet underneath, he is as self-serving and has the same desires as Michael. David envies Michael's good looks and charm and wants the same woman as Michael (Rachel).

At dinner, Michael, David, their mother, and her fiancé, Ed Dutton, discuss what they each would do if he or she won the lottery. Mother will buy a big-screen television—two of

them, in fact. Later we see her watching television, the televised lotto drawing; she asks Michael to get her some quick-picks when he's out. She appears mesmerized by the television and does not even look back at Michael when he talks to her; her gaze never shifts from the television. Television and the lottery figure significantly throughout the film, the former symptomatic of the petty materialism and lack of ambition that characterizes Michael (and his mother), the latter symbolic of the role that chance plays in Michael's world and its place in his world view versus the view of the film.

The film returns to the present. At a Chevron filling station, Michael gets into the armored car and looks out the windshield; through the windshield, we see a large banner advertising the Texas lottery. From that shot, the film cuts to a flashback, a close-up of a newspaper article, the headline reading "Study: Lottery players with less spend more." The camera then reveals Michael's mother reading the paper; she asks him, "Did you get my quick picks?" He forgot. She does not raise her eyes from the newspaper, does not look at Michael. The camera takes the shot through a stained-glass window in the home, green panes of glass filtering the view of mother and Michael, one of the window's mullions between them. Their relationship is superficial—just as the mullion separates them in the screen image, there is no bond between them. Something as mundane as neglecting to buy lottery tickets distances them. The scene ends with Michael's mother telling him, "Rachel called," and a cut to Michael, the shot now entirely filtered green.

A flashback to period 1 introduces Rachel; she and Michael sit in a car together. As the scene begins, a POV shot has Rachel watching a black Mustang convertible drive by, a for-sale sign in its window. Michael receives cash winnings from a gambling associate. Rachel has been

massaging Michael's crotch with her bare toes; she now uses her foot to pull a bill from the sack of money on his lap. "Feels almost as good as you," she tells him. A flashy car, money, sex: with a few images and a single line of dialogue, we know what interests Rachel. A later scene confirms that money is an important object of desire for Rachel. Back in the present timeframe, Michael asks Rachel about Tommy, "Does he treat you well?" "Not as well as guys without money," she replies. Rachel has chosen a man with money over a man who treats her, if imperfectly, with decency. When Michael walks Rachel out from their first rendezvous in the present timeframe, we see that she now drives a white Mustang convertible. Likely as not, it is a new vehicle, which trumps the used Mustang that Michael once bought for her.

In a scene between David and Michael, David asks about Rachel as he looks intently at Michael. We begin to see that David is as interested in (obsessed with) Rachel as Michael is. Only then does David add his concern for their mother, "Listen, I talked to Mom last night. She told me you haven't sent her any money in two months. We had an arrangement. She needs the money, Michael." Even within family relationships, then, concern revolves around sex (Rachel) and money (Mom). Another scene in period 1 shows Rachel, an aspiring actress preparing for an audition, practicing reading the numbers for the lotto. When we see Michael on a lunch break, we learn that he works at a store called Sport World, a subtle but ironic reminder that he attempts to rely on gambling for income, since he bets on sports. Later, as Michael watches sports reports on television, he complains, "The picture on this T.V. sucks. It sucks, and it's small. It's smallish and sucky." The trappings of the characters' lives seem to interrelate in a constant reminder of material desire and dissatisfaction with what each character has. Mom sits in front of the television, but all we see her watch is the lotto drawing; if she wins the lotto, she'll buy



another television set—two of them, she claims (to watch more lotto drawings?)—a longing that certainly Michael can relate to. Michael sits in front of the television to watch the sports on which he's placed bets, and he longs for a bigger, better television, as if that somehow will ensure his winning each wager. Rachel would become the lotto girl, to go on the air and pick the numbers, though she seems mostly interested in having Michael take better care of her. When Michael does buy the huge television and satellite dish, she is angry that he has neglected to pay his debts instead, a step toward having money to take care of her; she is placated, however, when she discovers that he has bought her the black Mustang. The repetition of the images of televisions, gambling, the lotto, money, foreshadows Michael's description of his pleasure in gambling, "It's like being connected." But connected to what? He calls it incredible, but indescribable. Perhaps Michael does not really know what it is that he desires.

Back in the present (period 3), Michael sits in a lounge at work (the armored-car service), reading a book on self-esteem. Rachel telephones, asking Michael to meet her. They meet under an overpass, and Rachel tells Michael that Tommy has proposed. They talk about going away for the weekend. During their conversation, shots alternate between Rachel and Michael, avoiding framing them together within a single shot. The camera frames Rachel on the right, then Michael on the left. The circumstances of their lives and the choices they have made conspire with the camera to keep them apart. Finally, one long shot frames them together, facing one another. Michael asks, "What'd you say?" They almost kiss. Rachel, "I forgot." Then, finally, they do kiss. Michael, "All you have to do is say No." Rachel, "No." A shot frames them together once more as they move to leave. We then see that David watches them from a distance. The scene underscores the tentative nature of the relationship between Michael and

Rachel and their gestures toward one another. When Rachel voices the word *no*, she speaks to Michael, not Tommy. Tommy will never hear it. Their choices have torn Michael and Rachel apart and led them to circumstances that will keep them apart. As foreshadowed here, David will see to it.

When Rachel fails to show for the weekend getaway with Michael, Michael decides to make a date with Susan. The film proceeds to demonstrate that Susan serves as a replacement for Rachel. A flashback to period 1 shows Rachel and Michael in bed together. The shot begins with Michael and pans left to show Rachel as well. Rather than face one another, Rachel lies behind Michael, both looking to right.

Rachel: Are you with me?

Michael: Yeah.

Rachel: I feel like you're somewhere else.

Michael: (*Chuckles. Pan begins.*) I feel like I'm in an ad for fine wine. But it's nice, it's really nice.

Rachel: I like to be close.

Michael: This is close.

Rachel: This is close to you?

Michael: Isn't it? (*Begins to turn and look back, but not enough to see her. But she's looking at him.*)

Rachel: You're not very present tense.

Michael: Wh- Wh- Is that like an acting thing?

Rachel: (*Head tilts down so she's no longer looking at him*) I love you.

Michael turns to face her, kisses her. Cut to Michael having sex with Susan, in present. These scenes are filtered deep blue.

Susan: Mmm, that was nice.

Michael: Mmm.

Susan: There's somebody else, isn't there?

Michael: Sort of.

Susan: Sort of? Where is she?

Cut to Rachel and Michael kissing under overpass. Dialogue over top.

Michael: I don't know.

Cut back to Michael and Susan. Turning so Michael is more or less behind, they're not looking at each other.

Michael: There's what you want and there's what's good for you. Uh, they never meet.

Susan: They never meet.

Michael: Except for my mother and stepfather.

Susan: Maybe they think they're wrong for each other.

Michael: Nah, they're too old for that shit.

Susan: Then why do anything with anybody?

Michael: Because anything is better than nothing.

Susan: The idea that you think you make sense is really terrifying.

Michael: Yeah, I know.

Michael's commitment to Rachel is as negligible as the casual sex with Susan, made clear by the film's cutting from the post-coital scene between Michael and Rachel to the love

scene in which Susan replaces Rachel as Michael's partner. Rachel accuses Michael of having his attention elsewhere, not in the present; likewise, Susan senses that Michael has someone else in his life. Michael claims to be close to Rachel, yet his back is to her. Neither does he face Susan—they take more or less the same position as Michael and Rachel, but with Michael behind Susan. When Rachel tells Michael she loves him, she does not even look at him. When Michael turns to look at Rachel, the scene cuts to Michael and Susan. In the smallest glimmer of self-knowledge, Michael seems to note that his desires work against him; however, he takes no responsibility for it, attributing all to chance: "Uh, they never meet." Michael's strategy is to grasp haphazardly at life's straws to fill his emotional void, "Because anything is better than nothing."

Back in period 2, another call from Rachel again finds Michael reading pop psychology, this time *Saying Hello to Yourself: On the Road to Self Discovery*. The reference is ironic, for whatever journey Michael is on, it has avoided any forks that lead to real self-knowledge. Michael answers the telephone jesting, "Hello, myself speaking," the humorous tone belying the title of the book in his hand. He will not bother to take seriously the possibility of self-discovery, and his roads lead back and forth, repeatedly to and from those things he desires. To bring the point home, the film flashes back to period 1 and the day Michael left Rachel. He looks at Rachel asleep. He kisses her foot, then leaves.

Returning to period 2, Michael questions Rachel regarding her marriage to Tommy, "Happy?" Rachel responds, "You know me. I like money." The comment seems truthful yet ironic. At least Rachel knows what she wants. Yet, her voice betrays a hint that she might have been willing to reach for something more than money. That possibility seems confirmed when

Michael learns that David saw Michael and Rachel together, that David was obsessed with Rachel, and that David threatened Rachel to make sure that Rachel missed her rendezvous with Michael. “The Chambers family is a bad investment,” says Rachel. For Rachel, after all, even relationships are couched in financial terms and considered for their potential return. That sentiment is echoed by Tommy when he trails Michael and Rachel and interrupts their clandestine meeting. “It’s a risk, in business, that the people closest to you may do you wrong . . . but you can’t unfuck my wife. . . .” Here, Tommy likens personal relationships to business associations, and his words remind us that, in business, exposure to financial loss or gain is also referred to as risk. Finding himself caught in the middle of an unsavory personal relationship with Rachel and Tommy, Michael shifts the context of their association to the fundamental profit-focused character always underlying their relationships. “I wanted to make you a business proposition,” he tells them. With this single statement, Michael at once lies about his meeting with Rachel and reveals a fundamental truth about their relationship. As Michael details his proposition, the camera frames the three of them so that Michael is between Tommy and Rachel; though Michael and Rachel appear together physically, side by side, Tommy, in facing Michael directly, faces them both. The camera cuts to show Tommy between Rachel and Michael. Michael turns away as Tommy kisses Rachel. One moment, Michael stands between Tommy and Rachel; another moment, Tommy stands in the way, keeping Michael and Rachel apart. Ultimately, Tommy appears to get the girl; yet, when he kisses her, it’s the culmination of a conversation over Michael’s business proposition, once again characterizing a romantic or sexual relationship as a matter of gain-or-loss business.

Subsequent to the robbery, as Michael begins to regain consciousness in his hospital bed, he sees a series of visitors. The first three visits involve people associated with money. First is his mother, the perennial lotto follower. Second is Michael's boss, Hinkle (Joe Don Baker), and Hinkle's assistant (Jules Sharp), together representing not only the source of Michael's paycheck, but a business that deals in protecting cash. Third is Susan, the woman who works in the bank and unwittingly facilitates the robbery. Finally comes David, purveyor of the law, simultaneously the faint voice of Michael's conscience and a reminder of Michael's self-serving lack of conscience, as well as a mirror of the sleazier side of Michael's obsession with Rachel. Although David never seems to have any meaningful insight, he is the one person who sees Michael for what he is. "You fake bastard . . . I'm gonna bring you down. . . . But because I think you're worthless. . . . You skated along on your looks and charm, just like a woman, leaving everyone else to clean up after you." Neither brother can look past blaming the other to see his own role in the other's life or his own.

Michael: It's all your fault.

David: Right.

Michael: Oh, if you'd left her alone.

David: No. If you had left her alone! What is it with you? (*No answer.*)

The exchange ends the POV sequence that has encouraged the audience to sympathize with Michael, lying in bed trying to get a fix on his visitors and how they look at him. Now we have an objective view of Michael. He is broken, in traction—in short, a mess and in need of rehabilitation.

In the film's final scene, Michael may be able to best Tommy and convince Rachel to give him the gun to kill Tommy, but Michael cannot comprehend his relationships or the effect of his behavior on others sufficiently to predict that Rachel will double-cross him, too. Rachel sums it up for him:

Rachel: When you left, there was something I didn't understand. You didn't just leave me, you left (*pause*) everybody. Everything. It made me feel very (*pause*) interchangeable. But now I understand the appeal of just walking away. There's something very powerful about being absent. I think you did the right thing when you left. But you shouldn'ta come back

Michael: Rachel, please.

Rachel: Michael. Right?

Rachel's final line implies a question about who Michael is. His lack of self-identity has made it easy for Michael to be absent from others. He has been mentally absent (in love scenes with Rachel and Susan) and has walked away physically (leaving town). Rachel has been exchangeable. When it suited him, Michael found another lover in Susan. When it suited him, he shifted his relationship with Rachel from personal to business.

And in the end, it is still all about money. Rachel takes the loot from the robbery. When she stops at the Chevron station, we see the ubiquitous lotto sign in the store window, above her car. She buys some scratch-off lottery tickets and checks them when she gets back into her car. (Why does she need more money?) The camera cuts to a POV shot watching Rachel. A hand at the wheel of a vehicle signals . . . the left hand, same as the robbery. The camera cuts to a shot of a white van, presumably the same van that took part in the robbery, its headlights switching

on. The van follows Rachel out the station, and we see the signaling hand reach for mints. The hand belongs to Hinkle, the protector of cash, also apparently the mastermind who orchestrated the robbery.

## Conclusions

To the extent that *The Underneath* deals with a journey, it presents a darker picture than *sex, lies, and videotape*. Like the earlier film, *The Underneath* has its ambiguities. What will happen to the characters? Michael's story is more pessimistic than Graham's. Graham gains a companion with whom to start a new journey, and the film leaves room for hope. Michael ends up alone, and we expect the worst for him—either death or jail. Michael's journey involved steps backward. His return home marks a return to the locus of past mistakes and a barren family culture where his most salient inheritance seems to be his mother's cupidity and faith in the lotto. The latter demonstrates Michael's inability to comprehend the reality of the world about him and a refusal to take charge of his life. Soderbergh explains:

He [Todd McCarthy, *Variety*] made the remark that in those films [classic *film noir*] it's always destiny or chance that is responsible for the tragic end, whereas in *The Underneath* it's the character who, because of a series of decisions, brings about his own downfall. Michael is someone who spent his entire life refusing to take responsibility for his actions. In the end, he dug his own grave. . . . but at the same time I show that he has the choice to be a gambler or not. And that he ends up a prisoner of his choice. (Ciment & Niogret, 1995, p. 72)

Michael has some notion that he desires the wrong things; yet, despite the self-improvement books, he resigns himself to letting the chips fall where they may rather than make any effort to change. ("There's what you want and there's what's good for you. Uh, they never meet.")

Michael's reliance on chance becomes less a way of life than a distraction from it. "He is incapable of living in the present," according to Soderbergh (Ciment & Niogret, 1995, p. 71).



The structure of the film confirms that idea. Soderbergh's extensive use of flashback—to two different time periods prior to what we call the present of the narrative—reinforces Michael's being "not very present tense." Indeed, not until about an hour into the film (one hundred minutes total), when Michael suggests the heist to Tommy, does the viewer begin to comprehend fully the scope of the timeframes and which segments to consider as constituting the present. It is as if Michael lives on a huge spinning roulette wheel that stops randomly here and then there. Just as the camera sometimes frames the *mise en scène* to separate Michael from other characters (the aforementioned kitchen scene with his mother and the scene under the overpass with Rachel), the arrangement of scenes from different periods of Michael's life gives the impression of a randomness in his life. The director plays with the audience much as chance, in Michael's view, plays with him. As the film progresses, though, the astute viewer catches on and sees that the movie has built up a background of characters and circumstances and weaves its way to a coherent conclusion. Were Michael to give more attention to the world around him, reflect upon the possibilities, and make some effort accordingly, he might discover the potential for a coherent and satisfying life.

## Chapter 4 *Out of Sight*

### Synopsis

Jack Foley (George Clooney), caught robbing a bank, is sent to prison; a career bank robber, he has done time previously. His friend Buddy Bragg (Ving Rhames) helps him escape; when federal marshal Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez) tries to intervene, they take her along with them. Karen gets away, but not before she and Foley are smitten with one another. A flirtation develops between them as Karen tries to track down Foley and arrest him. Foley and Buddy go to Detroit to join a couple of other ex-convicts in robbing the home of Richard Ripley (Albert Brooks), a wealthy businessman whom they met when he served time for white-collar crimes. Before the hit on Ripley's place, Foley and Karen finally rendezvous and make love. Later, Karen finds Foley and the others at a local boxing venue, follows them to Ripley's, arrests Jack (Buddy gets away, and the others are dead), and takes him back to prison.

### Analysis and Commentary

As with *The Underneath*, *Out of Sight* eschews a linear narrative in favor of weaving a story by editing among several time periods during which the action takes place. Unlike *The Underneath*, *Out of Sight* opens with a scene that is a flashback rather than with the timeframe that can be considered the film's present. The film introduces Jack Foley in an exterior long shot as Foley exits a building and throws a tantrum, pulling off his tie and throwing it to the ground. Foley looks around, sees a sign reading *SunTrust Bank*, and makes a decision. Inside the bank, Foley stands playing with his lighter, a piece of business that will become a character motif throughout the film. After he robs a teller, the film cuts to the exterior of the bank, where Foley walks over to his parked car. As the camera pans along following Foley, the lens catches a flare

from the sunlight for a moment. Soderbergh, in his commentary to the film on the Collector's Edition of the DVD of the film, refers to the lens flare as a fortuitous event that he liked and kept in the film—ironic, since fortune fails to smile as kindly on Jack Foley, whose car refuses to start, and thus, as the scene ends, Foley finds himself apprehended at gun point. “Hey, you wanna hear a funny story?” Foley asks the policeman. That line and the freeze frame that ends the scene signal a transition to the Glades Correctional Institution in Belle Glade, Florida, some time later.

At Glades, Foley involves himself in playing both sides of a getaway scheme, a friendly face forward to the convicts planning the break (while turning down an offer to go along) and a warning to a guard that a breakout will take place—all the while maneuvering the situation for his own intended escape. Cutting away to a parking lot in Miami, the film introduces Foley's accomplice, Buddy, stealing a car to use in Foley's getaway. Following that scene, the film introduces Karen, having lunch with her father, Marshall Sisco (Dennis Farina). The scene provides key information on Karen's character: she and her father are both in law enforcement, and their relationship is such that he gives her a handgun as a birthday gift; she dates another law-enforcement officer (FBI agent), but one who is married, intends to divorce, but has yet to separate from his wife. Maybe the gun is a cheap Freudian image, the father giving his daughter a phallus, making her the son he never had?

By coincidence, Karen is at the scene of the breakout. Will that prove good or bad luck for Foley? Foley and Buddy best Karen for the moment, leading to a scene of Foley and Karen together in the trunk of the getaway car, a scene much talked about in reviews of the film.

During the scene, we learn more about Foley—he has made a career of robbing banks—and his

relationship with his accomplice, already clear from the nickname Buddy. A conversational reference to the film *Bonnie and Clyde* suggests the bank robber as hero. The underlying function of the scene, however, is to spark the attraction between Karen and Foley, lying in the dark next to one another, parrying off with flirtatious banter, the erotic red glow of a flashlight illuminating the shots within the trunk. When Karen emerges from the truck, they are on first-name bases. He calls her *Karen*, and she says, “You win, Jack,” signaling to the audience that Karen has fallen for the charming Foley.

Chance intrudes again when Karen recognizes Foley’s second accomplice, Glenn Michaels (Steve Zahn) and uses their acquaintance to convince Glenn to drive off with her in the second getaway car, leaving Foley and Buddy behind. Foley, intimating the role of fate in their lives, admits to Buddy that he wonders what it might have been like had he and Karen met under different circumstances. Buddy, the voice of reality, tells Foley, “It’s too late for that, Jack.” Again, Soderbergh ends the scene on a freeze frame, a shot of Foley and Buddy watching Glenn drive off with Karen. This time, the shot dissolves to a flashback—two years earlier at Lompoc Federal penitentiary.

The scene in Lompoc opens with a close-up of Foley, in the yard watching a boxing match between inmates. A moment later, we see a shot of Glenn, followed shortly by a shot framing both Foley and Buddy, standing side by side. The three of them have been in prison together, but Glenn is separated from the other two. Foley and Buddy obviously share a relationship that Glenn has with neither of them. The scene serves to establish some history to Foley’s relationship with Buddy and Glenn, to set a hierarchy for those relationships, to introduce the characters of Maurice “Maddog” “Snoopy” Miller (Don Cheadles) and Ripley, and

to reveal Foley's repugnance for Maurice ("Yeah, you the man"). The exposition plays out in conversation between Foley and Buddy and then among those two and Glenn. The camera sets Glenn apart further by placing him midground behind Foley and Buddy, visible in the space between those two, wearing his yellow prison jumpsuit with the top open and hanging at his waist, and sporting sunglasses. Glenn relates the details that Ripley has volunteered to him regarding Ripley's fortune, including the fact that Ripley keeps \$5 million worth of uncut diamonds in his home. It is the first part of a two-level play on Poe's "The Purloined Letter." As we shall see later in the film, Ripley "hides" the diamonds in the open, at the bottom of a fish tank, where anyone might see them. Here, Ripley uses the same tactic verbally, telling his fellow inmate Glenn that the diamonds sit at home. Probably Ripley assumes that no one will believe him, and his diamonds will rest safe; certainly, Foley and Buddy doubt the story. The scene ends in the stabbing of Maurice's opponent from the bout. In these last few moments, the film deftly conveys a change in Foley's relationship to Ripley, as he swiftly steps up to give the Wall-Street milquetoast a little advice and, implicitly, offer himself as protector, and ends in the freeze-frame close-up of the stabbing victim, providing graphic evidence that Maurice is a dangerous man. Having provided all of that information, the film cuts back to Foley and Buddy in Miami subsequent to the breakout from Glades; a high-angle tilted long shot shows them walking to the Adams Hotel.

After Foley and Buddy enter the hotel room where Buddy lives, the film cuts to Karen walking from the stairs into the hallway and down into Foley's room—revealed to be a dream sequence when Mr. Sisco wakes Karen in her hospital room. The sequence has an unfortunate narrative flaw: at this point, there would be no way for Karen to know where Foley stays or

what the hotel looks like; however, as we shall see shortly, the site of the dream sequence is, indeed, Buddy's place. Even so, the sequence serves its function, to set more firmly the attraction between Foley and Karen and make it clear that the attraction is mutual. The God's-eye view in the final shot of the sequence manifests Foley's general fatalism and exposes both characters' willingness to surrender control and follow a passion; Karen surrenders explicitly as she lays down her pistol—allowing her for the moment to become a woman again as well as to equalize her position with Foley, relinquishing what power and authority she holds over him—and focuses completely on an intimate moment with Foley.

In the hospital room, FBI agent Daniel Burdon (Wendell B. Harris, Jr.) interrogates Karen and hints that he suspects inappropriate behavior or feelings between Foley and Karen. He mentions Carl Tillman, a man Karen dated and who turned out to be a bank robber. Karen rebuffs Burdon, asking him what happened with Tillman. The agent admits, "Oh, the time came you shot him, but you didn't shoot Foley or the guy with him." It's a subtle piece of foreshadowing. We assume, somehow, that Foley's a different case; yet, when the time comes, Karen will shoot him, too. The scene ends on a freeze-frame shot of Karen, dissolving to a profile close-up of Maurice in a flashback to Lompoc. In the library there, Maurice's attempted shakedown of Ripley enables Foley to solidify his place as Ripley's protector.

At Karen's home, her father asks about a photograph of Foley in the newspaper. She replies, "He doesn't even look like that." "Oh, no?" asks her father. "Uh-uh. He looks a lot like—" she stops herself, "different." Why the hesitation? Is she afraid of what her father will think if she has a clear, specific idea of Foley's looks? Or is it that she thinks Foley looks like him, her father? Ray Nicolette (Micheal Keaton) shows up; he strikes us as rather dimwitted.

Her father makes fun of him, though Nicolette is oblivious, and we wonder along with Mr. Sisco why Karen dates this guy. Keaton played the same character in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, the 1997 adaptation of another Elmore Leonard novel. That provides a sense of open universe, the character seeming to exist outside this particular film. Nicolette distinguishes Foley from the other inmates that escaped from Glades and guesses Foley has a separate agenda, adding, "He seems to be the only guy who kinda knows what he's doing." Mr. Sisco agrees, "Uh-huh." Nicolette unwittingly credits Foley with being a better man than himself and knowing better how to seduce Karen. Mr. Sisco assents—even the bank robber Foley ranks above this dullard Nicolette. To confirm the contrast between Foley and Nicolette, the telephone rings—a call from Foley, as if those last two bits of dialogue conjured up Foley's presence. Foley tells Karen that he has her wallet; she keeps a photograph of her father in it, again suggesting some connection between the image of her father and Foley. During the conversation, Karen threatens to put Nicolette on the telephone. Certain she would not do it, Foley contradicts her, "You're having too much fun." The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Foley popping the top off his lighter and flicking it to ignite the wick. The camera cuts then to an interior shot of Mr. Sisco and Nicolette facing one another at the table before the windows that look out to the pier; Karen, standing on the pier and talking on the telephone, is visible through the center window. Mr. Sisco and Nicolette talk about a woman who sleeps with a murderer and a married woman who goes to be with a prison escapee. Mr. Sisco observes that the FBI protects the latter woman, keeping her name withheld; he comments: "Well, that makes it sound like what she was doing was okay as long as her husband doesn't find out about it. Like the guy who cheats on his wife, saying what she doesn't know won't bother her." Karen,

returning from outside, calls her father to task, and Nicolette chuckles blissfully. The conversation highlights the hard edges around the grayer moral areas where Karen flirts. The next scene juxtaposes Karen and Foley's ex-wife Adele (Catherine Keener), with the result that we see Karen replacing Adele as the object of desire and affection. Foley goes to Adele's apartment to check on her, since he expects Chino (Louis Guzmán) will go after her; outside her apartment, he sees, instead, Karen. The first shot inside Adele's apartment is an extreme close-up of a framed photograph of Foley; in voiceover, Adele tells Karen, "I'll say one thing for Jack—he's very considerate. Lights on or off, if you know what I mean." The camera cuts to a close-up of Karen and Adele together looking at the photograph. Now Foley is the object of desire in a gender reversal of the classic cinematic representation of two men bonding over the image or thought of the absent woman. In particular, given the gender reversal, one recalls the scene in *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) in which Jody (Forest Whitaker) tells Fergus (Stephen Rea) about Dil (Jaye Davidson) as they look at the photograph of Dil that Jody kept in his wallet. Karen appeals to Adele, "I just want to find him before he does something else and makes it worse on himself." Adele counters, "Buddy'll take care of him. Keep him out of trouble. He's Jack's conscience, always has been." Does that make Buddy Jiminy Cricket to Foley's Pinocchio? Is Foley a wooden puppet looking to become a real boy? The scene ends with an amusing cinematic trill, cutting back and forth between Adele's conversation with the cuffed and prostrate Chino and Karen's conversation on the telephone with Burdon. As Chino prods Adele for an explanation of how a magician saws a woman in half, Karen performs her own slight of hand in getting Burdon—who distracts himself by chiding Karen for investigating



Foley's ex-wife, whom Burdon's men have already interviewed and consider a dead end—to agree to allow her to join the task force if she can bring in Chino.

At the Adams Hotel, Foley and Buddy prepare to leave and head for Detroit. Burdon arrives with his task force, now including Karen. The moment of their arrival, a line of good-looking young men file into the hotel as a row of elderly tenants—mostly women—sitting on the hotel porch lean forward and take a good look. The scene plays for humor and, perhaps, as an homage to a similar moment in *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), when Sweet Sue's all-girl band arrives at its hotel in Miami and files past a row of lecherous old men rocking in chairs on the front veranda and leering at the women. The genders are reversed, but the similarity of the scenes intimates the lightheartedness with which the scene in *Out of Sight* will play out. Burdon blunders again, leading a charge up the stairs as Foley and Buddy casually escape by the elevator and giving Karen orders that essentially prevent her from stopping Foley and Buddy. The moment when the elevator stops at the lobby, where Karen waits, provides a visual reminder of where Karen and Foley stand in relation to one another. Fortuitously, the elevator stops in the lobby with Foley and Buddy on board, on their way down to the parking level. When the elevator bell sounds, Karen looks up, watches its door open, and sees Foley inside, the camera framing him in a medium POV shot across the lobby. Momentarily distracted by a hotel tenant stepping into the elevator, Foley looks up and sees Karen sitting across the lobby looking at him, at which point the camera cuts to a reverse shot, Foley's POV, of Karen. Another reverse shot to Karen's POV, now in close-up, shows Foley looking straight at her. That shot reverses to a close-up of Karen, then reverses again to the close-up of Foley, who shifts his weight from foot to foot. In a reverse again to Karen, she blinks, as if bringing herself

from reverie, and raises her walkie-talkie to her mouth, but hesitates, continuing to look at Foley. The camera reverses to Foley, who raises his hand and waves, the elevator door closing slowly on him and taking him from Karen's view. The camera reverses one last time, moving back to the medium shot of Karen as seen from inside the elevator; the door closes, taking her from Foley's view (as well as ours). Neither Karen nor Foley speaks during the scene, but the lobby music accents the encounter: the sound of a tinny piano banging out "Let Me Call You Sweetheart." The series of reverse shots that Soderbergh uses in the scene reflects the cautious yet flirtatious dance in which Karen and Foley engage. Their business—Foley rocking on his feet, Karen hesitating to radio Burdon—shows their restlessness and uncertainty. The camera's move from medium shot to close-up and back to medium is emblematic of their mutual desire and their conflicting circumstances. The hotel sequence ends with Foley and Buddy driving past the hotel, seen from inside the lobby. The camera follows the car until it passes the window where Karen sits, still looking in the direction of the elevator; the camera stops on Karen as the car moves on and out of sight. Burdon's voice comes over the radio, but Karen, lost in thought, does not answer. The visual connection of the escape vehicle and Karen's silence imply that Karen played some role, by her inaction, in Foley's getaway.

As the film shifts location to Detroit, Soderbergh gives the picture a cool blue overtone that indicates the cold northern climate and harsh urban sensibility of Detroit; likewise, the almost gun-metal blue gives this segment of the film a sober tone that prepares us for the more serious and violent action to come. The cold, stark monochromatic scheme is a fitting change, as the first sequence in Detroit shows. Glenn finds himself awakened to some harsh realities when he tries to enlist the assistance of Maurice in robbing Ripley's home. Maurice assumes control

of the Ripley job, takes Glenn's (stolen) car, and forces Glenn to assist in a hit on a guy who crossed Maurice, Eddie Solomon. During the brief hit scene, rather than show the actual execution, the camera fixes on Glenn's face in close-up, revealing his horror at what happens. The scene plays with no sound other than the background score and the gun shots. Glenn's trademark sunglasses are knocked off in the tussle, and for the first time we see his eyes, watery and filled with fear. Dark glasses removed, Glenn sees the reality of his situation; he realizes, as do we, that he has gotten himself mixed up with dangerous men.

After Foley and Buddy show up and confront Maurice at the gym, the film jumps, in dissolve, back to Lompoc and a conversation between Foley and Ripley. Ripley asks Foley about robbing a bank at gunpoint.

Foley: I don't know. I never used a gun before in my life.

Ripley: You're kidding.

Foley: You'd be surprised what all you can get if you ask for it the right way.

Foley chides Ripley for telling Glenn too much about his money and the diamonds. Ripley offers Foley a job on the outside, after Foley gets out of prison. The scene ends with a cut back to Detroit and the setting of Solomon's murder.

After checking the site of Solomon's murder and getting some information from an acquaintance, Raymond Cruz (Paul Calderon), who happens to be working the case, Karen appears at the home of Moselle Miller (Viola Davis), Maurice's wife and the sister of his cohort Kenny (Isaiah Washington). The scene is a variation of the earlier one in which Karen visits Adele. Like Adele, Moselle has little information to offer. Like Chino, Kenny intrudes and gets bested by Karen. Kenny seems a more dangerous antagonist than Chino, and we have already

seen Kenny take part in Solomon's murder; despite that, Karen keeps him at bay with her billy club, and the scene ends with a freeze frame of Karen closing the telescoping club against the door post as she exits, proving herself tough, capable, and a person not to be trifled with.

Meanwhile, Foley and Buddy scope out Ripley's mansion and talk about doing the job alone, before Maurice and his crew get to it. Foley exhibits his fatalism most explicitly in this scene. He comments that Ripley's "big-ass house," as Buddy calls it, looks almost like a prison, inviting either musings that the life of a wealthy white-collar drone such as Ripley has its own constraints or a presentiment that the house signals another downfall for Foley and his means back to capture and incarceration. When Buddy anticipates running off to live the good life after the Ripley job, Foley observes, "Good life. Buddy, you know anybody who's done one last big score and then gone on to live the good life?" Buddy accepts the possibility of failure, "I say, let fate decide." Foley scoffs. They ponder fate and Hell. Foley refers to Hell as the Glades Correctional Institute, insisting he will never go back to prison. Buddy avers, "They put a gun on you, you'll go, brother." Foley refuses to relent: "They put a gun on you, you still have a choice." The camera cuts to a close-up of Foley's hands as he flips open his lighter and flicks it into flame. The scene ends as the camera cuts to a duplicate shot of the lighter in Foley's hands, this time back in Florida as Foley sits in an office, having come to a job interview to take Ripley up on the offer made during their stay at Lompoc.

Once Foley realizes that the job from Ripley will be as a security guard, his face drops, revealing a deep embarrassment, perhaps even shame. Embarrassment quickly gives way to anger, prompting Foley to storm into Ripley's office unannounced. Ripley argues that Foley must earn his trust, but Foley throws it back in his face. Ripley earned nothing—fortune smiled

upon him in the form of a wealthy wife who owned the business. Moreover, Foley kept Ripley safe during his incarceration. Foley gets thrown out, his anger seething, and we realize that we have come to the scene that opened the film, when Foley makes the ill-fated decision to rob the SunTrust Bank. As he walks toward the bank, the film cuts back to Foley in the car with Buddy outside Ripley's house in Detroit, looking as if he has been reminiscing this entire last scene. The job at Ripley's company has transformed into the intended job at Ripley's house, an act of vengeance. Shadows cast by the surrounding trees fall in lacy patterns across the windshield of the car; Foley, visible through the windshield, seems trapped in a web. Foley pulls a newspaper clipping out of his pocket, unfolds it to reveal the photograph of Karen and Cruz, and makes a decision.

In the next scene, Karen waits in the hotel lounge. Foley's reflection in the lounge window announces his arrival at her table; in the reflection, we see his hand playing with his lighter. Karen invites Foley to sit down, and when he does so, he places the lighter on the table. They begin as if they were strangers meeting, but when Foley brings their repartee back to reality, Karen resists and calls it a game. Foley denies it is a game.

Karen: Well, does this make any sense to you?

Foley: It doesn't have to. It's something that happens. It's like seeing someone for the first time—like you're gonna be passing on the street, and you look at each other and for a few seconds, there's this kind of a . . . a . . . a recognition—like you both know something. The next moment, the person's gone, and . . . and it's too late to do anything about it. And you always remember it, because it was there, and you let it go, and you think to yourself,

“What if I had stopped and if I had said something?” “What if?” “What if?”

And it may only happen a few times in your life.

Karen: Or once.

Foley: Or once.

In that brief speech, Foley hacks out his muddled outlook on life, with its role for chance and sense of fatalism (“It’s something that happens”) as well as its certainty that choices must be made, if only for fear of regret if you remain passive. That notion is the source of Foley’s impulsive decisions, for even if he leaps to a bad decision, he comforts himself with the illusion that it was his own choice, not life steamrolling over him, and any regrets will be for his action, not his inaction.

Foley reaches for Karen’s hand, then her other hand, and then reaches to her hair, stroking it and her face; she turns her chin to his caressing hand. The frame freezes for a second; it is an unusual freeze in that it does not come as the last shot of the scene. A moment later, Soderbergh begins to cut between the conversation at the lounge and their love scene later that evening in Karen’s hotel room. Their dialogue at the lounge becomes voiceover to the shots in her room. Another freeze frame occurs when, in the room, Foley pulls Karen from a sofa to her feet, and she moves in to kiss him. When the conversation at the lounge reaches the point where Karen suggests, “Let’s get out of here,” the parallel editing ends. The film moves to Karen’s room to stay. A close-up shows Karen’s head fall back onto the bed, Foley moving in on top of her; his face moves nearer to hers, leading to a freeze frame just before they kiss. The camera remains in close-up on their heads, in profile, and maybe a shoulder, their movement indicating their lovemaking, until the scene ends in a freeze frame that fades to black and then cuts to a shot

of Karen, lying in bed awake, facing the camera, some time later. Soderbergh uses the editing between lounge and hotel room to heighten the erotic tension and the freeze frames to punctuate the growing passion and diminishing reluctance as the characters move nearer to succumbing to one another's seduction. The final freeze frame of the scene is the last freeze frame of the film. Soderbergh's explanation, in the commentary to the DVD release of the film, is that there is no longer a need for the freeze frames, since they were a way to comment, but now the film has "caught up with itself," and the remainder of the film plays in the present.

In the scene following their lovemaking, Karen tells Foley that she was not just looking for a thrill, getting her jollies by going to bed with a bank robber. Possibly, her statement is an attempt to convince herself. Possibly, her words are meant to tell the audience that the characters feel something for one another. They talk, and as the scene comes to an end, the camera frames their heads together in close-up as they rest on the bed facing one another, the lights of the city, seen through the window in the background, glowing between them. A siren sounds outside. "You're gettin' serious on me now," Foley tells Karen. The siren continues, becoming louder, but still just background noise. "Trying not to," she says. A second siren joins the first, then both fade away. The sirens are a reminder of the world outside and the reality of the characters' conflicting roles in that world. The law presents a barrier between them. Karen concludes, "I just want to know what's gonna happen." A pause, then Foley says, "You know." The scene ends with a cut to the next morning and Karen waking to find Foley gone; however, Foley has left behind, resting on a pillow, the gun that he had taken from her during the escape from Glades.

At the State Theater, Maurice and his comrades watch a boxing match. Glenn, growing increasingly wary of Maurice, slips out and tries to get away by stealing the stolen car that Maurice confiscated from him. Karen intervenes. Glenn, recognizing Karen, cries, "Oh, my God, I can't believe this!" The scene repeats the earlier scene with Karen and Glenn in a car together. The encounter is fortuitous for both of them. Glenn provides Karen with essential information regarding Maurice's plan to rob Ripley and kill Foley. Karen lets Glenn go, allowing his escape from both Maurice and the law. Even the befuddled Glenn notes the role of chance or fate: "Hey, know what I was thinkin'? If you didn't drive me to the federal court last summer, you wouldn't even know who I am." Karen amends the thought, "If I didn't know you, Glenn, by tomorrow you'd be in jail or dead."

Back inside the theater, Foley and Buddy arrive and talk to Maurice, learning that Maurice intends to hit Ripley's house tonight rather than tomorrow as planned, unbeknownst to Glenn. Maurice double crosses Glenn, just as Foley intended to double cross Maurice. No honor among thieves. Contrast that with Ripley, who refuses to abandon Midge, even in threat of certain death at the hands of Maurice. "Well, if that's my fate then so be it, but I'm not leaving her. I'm in love with her." Cut to Foley, who just looks at Ripley. Foley and Buddy get out with the diamonds, but Foley returns once he stops to consider that Maurice and his boys will almost certainly rape Midge and kill both her and Ripley. Foley's no murderer, but in self-defense he shoots Kenny dead when he goes to the bedroom to rescue Midge. White Boy Bob shoots himself through the head when he trips on the stairs, and Karen kills Maurice when he points a gun at her. Foley tries to get Karen to shoot him, but she refuses to kill him. "You win, Jack," and she shoots him in the leg, both apprehending him and saving him. Buddy gets away,



and Foley gets sent back to Glades. When the time comes for his transport to Florida, Karen is one of the officers to take take him there. She gives him his lighter, “Something for the road. I’m gonna have to take it away, though, soon as the ride is over.”

Foley will travel with another prisoner, Hijirah Henry (Samuel L. Jackson). It turns out that Hijirah has busted out of prison ten times; when Foley hears that, he turns and looks to Karen. Then we learn that Karen arranged a delay in Hijirah’s transport; the camera cuts to a high-angle close-up of Karen, smiling, looking satisfied. Foley tells Hijirah, “Maybe she thought we had a lot to talk about.” After a few more words, Foley smiles. The film repeats a shot of Karen, smiling. Through the passenger window of the van, we see the driver get in and start the car. As they are about to pull out, Karen turns and looks at the camera, sharing a little satisfaction with the audience. The films ends with the camera watching the van drive down the street into the distance and turn a corner out of sight.

## **Conclusions**

The motif of the lighter gives the character of Foley some texture, but the emphasis that the camera gives the lighter—often shown in extreme close-up in Foley’s hands—suggests that a subtext exists. That seems even more likely when we consider that we never see Foley smoking. The lighter is associated with decision (in the SunTrust Bank, when Foley scopes out the place and formulates his plan; in the car, “They put a gun to you, you still have a choice”) and with Karen (when they speak on the telephone; when Foley meets her at the hotel lounge; when Karen gives the lighter back to Foley). The lighter may symbolize the spark between Foley and Karen, the chemistry that attracts them to one another. It also suggest a nervous uncertainty and caution as Foley considers his options and works up to a decision; in this sense, it is similar to Foley’s

restless rocking in the elevator. That uncertainty and caution and Foley's snap decisions, much like the snapping of the lighter's lid covering and snuffing out the flame, suggest the tension between the fear of the inevitability of life and the desire to take action and make meaningful choices.

A major theme of *Out of Sight* is the roles of chance and fate in the lives of the characters. Chance and fate, of course, are not precisely the same thing. It is not clear, however, that Soderbergh or his characters make any distinction. Mere happenstance, it would appear, brings Jack Foley and Karen Sisco together when she shows up at Glades just as the break-out occurs. By chance, Karen has recently encountered Glenn in his trip to federal court; thus, she recognizes him and is able to coerce him into driving off and leaving Foley and Buddy behind. Later, her appearance at the State Theater at just the right moment brings good fortune to Glenn—he escapes both from Maurice and from arrest for stealing a car or taking part in Solomon's murder—and to Karen, who learns of Maurice's plan to hit Ripley and that Foley may be having second thoughts about the Ripley job (since Foley has not shown up yet), the latter point giving Karen new hope for Foley and the possibility of a change in his life. Glenn himself, as previously noted, is cognizant of the role chance has had in their situation; interestingly, that scene demonstrates the ambiguity in the perceived nature of chance. Glenn characterizes the coincidence as unfortunate: “. . . you wouldn't even know who I am.” Karen, on the other hand, presses upon him what good luck he has encountered: “If I didn't know you, Glenn, by tomorrow you'd be dead.” It is all a matter of perspective. Ripley speaks specifically of *fate* and accepts it, but in a manner that seems deliberate rather than passive: “Well, if that's my fate then so be it. . . .” In the face of the force he calls *fate*, he has a choice and makes his

own decision—to stay behind with Midge rather than run. Buddy is the character who is most accepting of fate, perhaps because he seems to acknowledge a higher power (his confessions to his sister, the cross on a chain that he gives to Foley). Buddy argues, “I say, let fate decide.” It is not so much that Buddy relinquishes himself entirely to fate, but that he makes distinctions regarding the time and place to make choices—he has already made his decision and is prepared to follow through with the consequences of the decision. As it turns out, Buddy is the one who gets away with the diamonds.

The struggle to comprehend and influence chance or fate, to take control of one’s life, is reflected in the power and gender-role shifting that takes place in the film. Throughout most of the film, Karen seems comfortable and competent in what appears, if largely by tradition, to be a man’s world. She wields the power of the male in the phallic form of her gun. In her own dream, though, she relinquishes the power of the phallus, laying down the pistol and embracing Foley. And yet, her action does not transfer the power to Foley; instead, it brings them to equal level and frees her to be a woman. No longer cop and robber, they embrace as woman and man. The reality of the film is that neither man nor woman ever has the clear upper hand. Karen interferes and keeps on Foley’s trail, but Foley keeps a step ahead of her. Twice Karen tells Foley, “You win, Jack,” yet we interpret neither case as admission of having lost. On the first occasion, it signals her attraction to Foley; however, he is equally attracted to her, and she takes control of the situation and gets away in the car with Glenn. On the second occasion, the comment is ironic; Karen shoots Foley, but she does not kill him as he wants. All of these inconsistencies and the shifting of power and gender roles underscore the dubiety of dichotomous distinctions in human life, in particular as regards morality.

## Chapter 5

### *The Limey*

#### **Synopsis**

Wilson (Terrence Stamp), a cockney thief recently released from prison in England, arrives in Los Angeles following the death of his daughter, Jenny (Melissa George), determined to uncover the truth behind her death. With the help of Jenny's friends Eduardo Roel (Luis Guzmán) and Elaine (Lesley Ann Warren), Wilson comes to suspect Jenny's lover, Terry Valentine (Peter Fonda), a record producer with ties to the criminal underworld. Valentine, alert to Wilson's presence in L.A., flees to Big Sur, while Valentine's security chief, Jim Avery (Barry Newman), attempts to have Wilson assassinated. Wilson tracks down Valentine and forces the truth from him—that Valentine killed Jenny in a scuffle after she threatened to report his illegal dealings. Wilson then returns to England.

#### **Analysis and Commentary**

*The Limey* begins with a voiceover played over a dark screen, before any image appears, the voice of Wilson making a firm demand, "Tell me. Tell me. Tell me about Jenny." We do not realize it at this point, but as the film concludes, we understand that the voiceover comes from a scene that plays at the end of the film. Thus, from the first moment, the film leaps into a complex nonlinear narrative structure, although the viewer realizes this only upon reflection. As journalist Scott Kelton Jones puts it, Soderbergh "uses flashbacks, flashforwards, and flashwaybacks, cutting back and forth between scenes that appear to be taking place at the same time. . . . It's as though he's skipping around the time line, turning yesterdays into tomorrows and tomorrows into right now . . ." (Jones, 1999, pp. 121–22; emphasis his).

The start of the film establishes connections between characters as well as begins to build the audience's sympathies. Upon his arrival in Los Angeles, Wilson meets Eduardo, who had sent Wilson news of the death of his daughter, Jenny. Like Wilson, Eduardo is an ex-convict. These facts, along with Eduardo's obviously genuine affection for Jenny, as a friend, not a lover, help create a bond between the two men. In the course of the film, Eduardo will not only assist Wilson in his quest to uncover an explanation for Jenny's death, but will become the grieving father's friend. From Eduardo, Wilson gets his first lead about Jenny's connection to Terry Valentine and who Valentine is.

When Wilson goes to a downtown warehouse to check out some of Valentine's "business associates" and, he hopes, find out more about Valentine, one of the men mentions Jenny's visit to their location. His comment makes Jenny and her appearance there seem similar to Wilson's—wanting to know who the warehouse foreman (William Lucking) is, how he knows Terry Valentine, what their business together is. Like father, like daughter? After the warehouse workers throw Wilson out, Wilson goes right back in after them, killing all but one of the men. The retaliation seems related more to what the foreman had said to Wilson about Jenny, including something whispered in Wilson's ear, than to his being thrown out.

When news of the downtown massacre reaches Valentine, he's worried; however, Avery, Valentine's security advisor, insists that the hit is a good thing—the middlemen are gone, eliminating whatever connection existed between Valentine and these thugs. These first glimpses of Valentine and his associates are revealing; from them, we can peg that Valentine thinks of himself first. His reaction to the downtown massacre displays no remorse or sorrow for the dead but only anguish for himself and concern over whatever consequences the event might

have for him. Not only have we seen that Valentine associates with the kind of thugs that Wilson met in the downtown warehouse, but Avery, his right-hand man, reveals himself an unsavory character who can see the unexplained shootings of several men as a good thing if it keeps his boss out of trouble.

As the film introduces Valentine's young paramour, Adhara (Amelia Heinle), we realize how superficial Valentine is; we surmise that much from the trophy girlfriend, thirty years younger than Valentine and functioning largely as part of the decor. A conversation between them reveals more:

Adhara: I'm loyal to things that make me happy.

Valentine: Oh, am I a "thing"?

Adhara: Well, you're certainly not a person.

Valentine: I'm not?

Adhara: No. You're not specific enough to be a person. You're more like, um, a vibe. Ironically, just as Valentine objectifies Adhara, treating her simply as a thing of beauty and gratification, Adhara's words objectify him. Valentine may be a major L.A. player who has become wealthy as a music producer and, apparently, through some criminal dealings, but he has no meaningful personal identity. As a producer, he makes his money from the talents and personalities of others.

But Valentine's associations are a means to an end. He uses people, without attaching to them through any personal relationship. Avery, speaking of the downtown massacre and attempting to comfort Valentine, notes that nobody could link anyone to Valentine. The statement seems generally applicable to Valentine's personal life as well. Valentine, however,

rejects the assertion. “Jenny did,” he asserts. Avery replies, “Yeah, well, Jenny could. She’d already got to you.” The implications are that connecting with Valentine takes some effort, meets some resistance, and ends badly. Of course, Avery’s words refer literally to connecting Valentine with nefarious characters and illegal dealings, yet they remind us that the person who got closest to Valentine ended up dead—as we have begun to suspect, at Valentine’s own hands.

Contrasted with these clues that Valentine’s relationships involve using people, keeping them at a distance, and death, subsequent scenes show Wilson developing rapport and becoming friends with Eduardo and Elaine. To be sure, Wilson will lean on them for information and assistance, but rather than use them, he lets them play their parts to the extent they wish, no more. Significantly, both Eduardo and Elaine were friends of Jenny, cared for her, yet had no connection with Valentine; they were from a different part of her life. Soderbergh links Eduardo to Wilson’s journey and the small sense of satisfaction Wilson takes in it. A shot of Wilson asking Eduardo whether he knows Valentine cuts to a shot of Wilson on the plane. It’s indeterminate whether Wilson is arriving in L.A. or leaving. In a car together, Eduardo, driving, tells Wilson, “Oh, Jenny was in my acting class.” Wilson turns, looks at Eduardo. Cut to Wilson on the plane; he smiles faintly. Here we feel certain that Wilson is leaving L.A., satisfied in what he’s accomplished. Wilson’s friendship with Eduardo, then, is based on deeds, action. Eduardo was Jenny’s friend and cared for her, but he also provides Wilson with whatever information Wilson solicits, helps Wilson get guns, drives Wilson to destinations (and destiny)—he helps move things along.

By contrast, Soderbergh links Elaine to Wilson’s past, his regrets as well as his joys, and his feelings. When Wilson seeks out Elaine, he goes to her home and speaks to her through the

gate to the house. During this brief interview, the camera shoots Wilson from Elaine's side of the gate, through the gate's iron bars. The image of Wilson behind bars signifies a history of years in jail. The reminder becomes explicit in the dialogue. When Elaine asks about Wilson being "at Her Majesty's pleasure," Wilson replies, "It was the bars then." But it's the bars now, too, visually. Somehow, Wilson remains imprisoned. His love for his daughter coupled with a regret over lost time that might have—or should have—been spent with her leaves him bound to investigate and avenge her untimely death. Wilson also tells Elaine something of his past with his family. "We was always mates, Jenny's mum and me." Wilson's relationship with Jenny's mother involved more than simply being lovers—they were friends. It is a capacity that Valentine lacks.

Back at Valentine's, before the party, Adhara looks at posters in the bathroom and comments that they're the same as those in Valentine's office. They are not, Valentine insists. Like Valentine, Adhara is dull and superficial. They converse on nothing more interesting or meaningful than bathroom decor, and Adhara fails to observe her environment in sufficient detail to distinguish these posters from those in the office. After Eduardo and Wilson arrive at the party, Valentine says hello to Eduardo. Obviously, Valentine fails to recognize him, again showing how little people mean to Valentine, even his former lover's closest friends. Standing by the pool cantilevered from the house, Wilson asks, "What are we standing on?" "Trust," answers Eduardo, indicating further the bond of mutual support that has grown between them. We reflect that it is a faith in kindred souls (two people who really cared for Jenny) as Eduardo observes, "You know, you could see the sea out there, if you could see it." The future may be



uncertain, and some things cannot be known or understood empirically, but they can be accepted on faith and based on things we know sight unseen.

A sequence follows in which Wilson walks inside the house, pulls out a gun, and shoots Valentine. The action is intercut with shots of Wilson standing outside on the cantilever. At first we think it may be more of Soderbergh juxtaposing events across time (although in this case, separated by a mere few minutes), but it's revealed to be a moment of fantasy, played out in Wilson's head. The first clue is that in repeating the moment of Wilson shooting Valentine, we see that each time Wilson shoots Valentine in a different place—first, in the chest, then a replay with a shot in the elbow, then in the head. Finally, in what we take as the actual event, Eduardo stops Wilson before the gun is drawn and leads Wilson from the room. Later, when Eduardo asks if Wilson capped the guy, Wilson says no.

Wilson: That would have been too easy.

Eduardo: Too easy?

Wilson: He's gotta know why.

Eduardo: You think a fuckin' guy like that ever will?

Avery, despite being routed in the car chase down the road from Valentine's house, gives Wilson little credit. He tells Valentine that he has other resources by which to handle Wilson. Valentine wants no association with whatever Avery has in mind. Valentine's position comprises both his desire to maintain some visage of legitimacy and his ongoing effort to avoid intimacy with others. When Valentine notices a photograph of Jenny missing from a wall in his house, it not only confirms the connection between the intruder (Wilson) and Jenny, but signals

the erosion of whatever sense of intimacy with and possession of Jenny that he's retained until now. He has, after all, taken better care of the photograph than he did of Jenny.

During the period when Wilson and Elaine are held for questioning by the agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), who intervened when Stacy (Nicky Katt) was about to assassinate Wilson, Elaine hears from Wilson more of Jenny's childhood with him. Wilson tells how Jenny threatened him with the claim that she would tell the authorities. He tells of her picking up the telephone as if to call the police. It became a joke between them.

Wilson: Only it wasn't, really (*cut to Wilson on the plane, then back to Elaine*)

Elaine: She never would've turned you in. Not in a million years.

Wilson: Oh I know that. But as time went on—well, went in ever decreasing circles—the joke wore off. She had a feeling (*pause*) about this last job. How long I'd get banged for. She said she wouldn't be around this time (*pause*) when I got out. (*Cut to Wilson on plane.*) And she wasn't. (*Cut back.*)

The intercutting links the story to the film's resolution, as well as possibly to its beginning, as we are uncertain whether the shots of Wilson on the plane are him coming to L.A. or leaving. In that sense, we surmise that Wilson's love for his daughter is not only a catalyst for his trip to L.A., but also for the separation that occurred between them over that "last job" and his remorse for having made that choice. Although we do not realize it at this point, the "joke" between father and daughter played a crucial role in her death, as is revealed at the film's end. Thus, Wilson's choices in his life came to bear on the life (and death) of Jenny.

The conversation between the head DEA agent (Bill Duke) and Wilson indicates that the law, like Wilson and Valentine, exists in a gray area, neither fully legitimate (moral) or entirely

bad, but a corruption that exists between two end points. The DEA officer, in fact, helps Wilson, first, saving his life at the moment Stacy prepares to kill him and, then, sending him on his way to complete his revenge. Wilson is a convicted criminal, while Valentine has, so far as we know, no criminal record and has maintained the outward appearance of a law-abiding citizen. While the officer never denies making any deals with Valentine, as Wilson accuses, the officer does provide some information regarding Avery and admits of having “slippery hands.” If the officer was the victim of a double cross by Valentine, as Wilson suggests, perhaps he conspires implicitly with Wilson in hope of some revenge. The officer also forces a moment of reflection on Wilson, asking about Jenny’s apparent fondness for dangerous men. Wilson, though, avoids the issue and changes the subject. For his own part, the officer rationalizes his questionable methods, “See, crooks move faster than the system, so if we’re gonna clean up the neighborhood, we don’t have time to wait for things like search warrants and trials. Procedures become whatever you gotta do on the day.” It’s a rationalization for his own conduct as well as *carte blanche* for Wilson to carry out his own vengeance. Wilson thinks for a moment, then returns the I.D. he had pilfered from another officer. “Cheers, mate.” “Go with God,” the agent tells him. “Yeah.”

Driving up to Valentine’s house in Big Sur, Valentine and Adhara demonstrate again how pathetic they are and how insipid their relationship is. Valentine tells a story about encountering a deer while riding his motorcycle. Adhara has heard the story before, though neither she nor Valentine realizes it until he has finished retelling the tale. Meanwhile, Avery and his thugs follow in another vehicle, listening to the equivalent of elevator music.

Shortly before the final shootout, Eduardo pauses a moment to ask Wilson whether he has any friends. Wilson says he does, down at the pub. Elaine adds, “Friends and colleagues.” Contrasted against that thought of friends, chaos is about to erupt at Valentine’s Big Sur home, along with the ensuing breakdown of cohesion among his group of cohorts. Avery, aware of an intruder and assuming it is Wilson, shoots Stacy, the man Avery had hired to kill Wilson. Stacy’s friend, Uncle John (Joe Dallessandro) shoots Avery. Inside the house, Tom (Matthew Kimbrough), one of Valentine’s bodyguards, reacts, “Fuck this,” and starts to run; Uncle John, however, shoots him, too. Avery then aims and hits Stacy’s friend. Before Wilson has even appeared, Valentine’s group has disintegrated into a pack of every-man-for-himself desperadoes. When Wilson appears, he goes for Valentine. Valentine, leaving the house, stops and takes Avery’s gun, leaving the dying man defenseless.

Wilson catches up with Valentine, who has fallen with a broken ankle and fired all the bullets in his gun. Wilson demands Valentine tell him about Jenny, repeating the line we heard in the voiceover at the start of the film. Valentine says he’d have given her anything. He needed money. She found out about his deal.

Valentine: She tried to stop me. She said she was gonna turn me in. *(Cut to Jenny. Cut back to Wilson.)* She said she was gonna call the cops. I couldn’t stop it. It already happened. It was over. *(Cut back to Jenny with phone in hand, then cut to child Jenny with phone in hand. Cut back to Wilson. Cut back to child Jenny.)* She was going to call the cops. She meant it. *(Cut to Terry, then Jenny arguing.)* She had the phone in her hand. She was gonna call the cops. She meant it. I couldn’t stop it! I couldn’t do anything. *(During these last*

*lines, Valentine and Jenny struggle, and Jenny falls dead. Cut to Jenny, then Wilson, Jenny, etc. Then cut to Wilson on the plane, talking to the woman next to him.)*

Wilson leaves Valentine on the ground shuddering in shock and fright. The film concludes with Wilson, having learned the real circumstances of Jenny's death, saying good-bye to Elaine and Eduardo and returning to England.

### **Conclusions**

*The Limey* contrasts two men who both have questionable ethics in regards to the law, but who treat people differently; moreover, the men have dissimilar histories that have shaped them. As Soderbergh describes the characters, "There's one guy whose dreams of himself were lost in prison and another whose dreams were probably never even his own: he just took everybody else's and made money out of them" (Johnston, 1999, p. 116). Adhara's words echo the sentiment referring to Valentine, "You're not specific enough to be a person." The images of Wilson on the plane that appear throughout the film, typically ambiguous as to where he is going, affirm that in life he is lost. Why is Wilson lost? Soderbergh explains in a succinct description of the picture, "As for *The Limey*: That is about a guy who cannot stay rooted in the present. He is completely dislocated" (Sragow, 2000, pp. 131-2). That statement invites a comparison of Wilson with the character of Michael in *The Underneath*. Nothing in *The Limey* indicates that Wilson ever relies on chance; however, like Michael, we do see how Wilson's choices have made an impact on his life and those around him. Unlike Michael, Wilson has an awareness of how his choices have affected him, particularly in terms of what little time he spent

with his daughter. Wilson's journey to L.A. teaches him even more about the consequences of his past.

Part of Soderbergh's technique in the film is to verify Wilson's dislocation with editing that perpetrates the nonlinearity of the narrative. In that manner, he also surmounts a challenge that filmmakers throughout cinema's history have faced with varying degrees of success: creating an interior life for a character. Michael Sragow, interviewing Soderbergh for Salon.com, comments:

From the start, the cutting in *The Limey* conveys the play of thought and memory, but I wasn't prepared for the cumulative effect. The whole movie hinges on a speech and a gesture that the daughter of the anithero (Terence Stamp) makes to him as a little girl and to the villain (Peter Fonda). Via flashbacks, a woman who is dead carries the film's emotional weight—and turns it from revenge film to tragedy. (Sragow, 2000, p. 132)

Despite whatever complicity Wilson has in Jenny's death, the film provides sufficient ambiguities to keep the cause-and-effect connections uncertain. However Wilson's relationship with Jenny contributed to her interactions with her lover, Valentine is not absolved from culpability; likewise, as the DEA agent points out, Jenny herself prefers to consort with dangerous men. Like the gray area of the characters' and law enforcement's morality in the film, Wilson, Valentine, and Jenny wander about their lives with vague apprehensions about the effects of their behavior, but few conclusions or little insight about the ultimate consequences of that behavior. The real tragedy of the film is its portrait of the difficulty of human interaction and intimacy.

## Chapter 6

### *Traffic*

#### **Synopsis**

In Tijuana, police officers Javier Rodríguez Rodríguez (Benicio Del Toro) and Manolo Sanchez (Jacob Vargas) bust some drug smugglers, but General Arturo Salazar (Tomas Milian) moves in and confiscates the drugs and prisoners. At the same time, in San Diego, Ray Castro (Luis Guzmán) and Montel Gordon (Don Cheadle), working undercover, arrest drug smuggler Eduardo Ruiz (Miguel Ferrer) and convince him to testify against his boss, Carlos “Carl” Ayala (Steven Bauer), leading to Carl’s arrest. In Cincinnati, Judge Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas) accepts the job of “drug czar,” heading the U.S. war against drugs; meanwhile, his teenage daughter, Caroline (Erika Christensen), experiments with drugs and becomes an addict. The film follows these three stories concurrently, with occasional overlap as characters from each narrative cross paths. Rodríguez comes to realize that Salazar actually works for the Juárez drug cartel and eventually, working under cover for the DEA, helps apprehend Salazar and break up the Juárez cartel. Helena Ayala (Catherine Zeta-Jones) accepts the truth of her husband Carl’s involvement in drug smuggling, takes over management of his illicit business dealings, and has Ruiz assassinated so that the case against Carl is dropped. After denying the severity of his daughter’s drug problem and attempting to bury his head in his work, Wakefield faces the reality of the complex obstacles to his job and the conflict between the attention required by his work and the needs of his family; Wakefield resigns his post and returns to Ohio to participate in his daughter’s rehabilitation.

## Analysis and Commentary

*Traffic* opens with a black screen and the sounds of a video game fading in, followed by the fade-in of music. The dark, empty screen cuts to a long shot of a car parked in the middle of the Mexican desert, a subtitle telling us that the scene is twenty miles southeast of Tijuana. The scene is filmed in washed-out sienna tones, making the location seem especially bright and hot. Next we hear the voices of two men, Rodríguez and Sanchez, speaking in Spanish. They sit in the car in the desert, on a stakeout for drug runners. Rodríguez recounts the “ugly nightmare” he had the night before: “I’m lying down in my bed. Then I get up . . . and there’s my mother, may she rest in peace . . . seated in a chair with a plastic bag over her head . . . and she can’t breathe. And I can’t help her.” Rodríguez leans out the car door and spits. “Fuck.” Sanchez looks at his partner and shakes his head, but says nothing. The dream is a barely disguised metaphor for Rodríguez’s relationship with Mexico, his mother country, and the frustration he feels over his seemingly futile efforts as a policeman to fight the immense drug cartels whose power and control appear to permeate the daily lives of most or all Mexicans. A moment after Rodríguez recounts his dream, a plane flies over head. The camera follows the plane, shooting the craft from ground level as it flies over; as the first image strictly related to the drug traffic, the almost worm’s-eye view suggests the dominance and power the drug-trafficking system will prove to have over the film’s characters and how out of reach the traffickers are from those such as Rodríguez and Sanchez.

Rodríguez and Sanchez intercept a truck that they suspect carries the illegal drug shipment from the plane. Rodríguez tells the driver and passenger of the truck that they are driving on a private road and asks whether either of them has a permit to be on that road. “Can



we buy a permit?” asks the driver. “Yeah, but it’s gonna cost you,” Rodríguez tells him and quotes a price of four-hundred pesos. The brief exchange, barely two minutes into the film, nudges within us the suspicion of police corruption and provides the first clue that the characters in the film never stand firmly on either side of the line drawn by the law but stagger about in a gray area that obscures the demarcation between lawful and unlawful, ethical and unethical, good and bad. When the driver reaches for his wallet, Rodríguez draws his gun; he and Sanchez arrest the men and confiscate the truck and its contents. We are relieved to see that these officers carry out their duty, yet the suspicion lingers. Can we trust them?

Driving off with their prisoners and contraband, Rodríguez and Sanchez are stopped by the military, led by General Salazar. Salazar says he will take the prisoners and the truck, commends Rodríguez on his excellent work, and briefly interrogates Rodríguez regarding the source of the police officer’s information, an anonymous informant. It is unclear why the military interfere with the police sting, though something about Salazar’s demeanor and behavior is suspicious, even threatening. Rodríguez seems to confirm that when he refers to Salazar as “The Big Boss himself” and answers Sanchez’s question about what the general is doing “around here” with the comment “Up to something. I don’t know.” Before the film cuts to the next scene, Rodríguez observes, “They took our handcuffs, Manolo.” Of course, the cuffs bound the prisoners taken by Salazar and his men; however, the observation suggests how Salazar’s military weakens the civilian authorities, slyly stealing away with bits of equipment, leaving the police, in a sense, impoverished for doing their work.

As the sequence in Mexico comes to a close, we hear a voiceover of a man speaking in Columbus, Ohio. After the first few words, the film cuts to the interior of the Ohio State

Supreme Court, the image filtered blue. The man speaking is a defense attorney named Rodman (Michael O’Neill), arguing before the court: “This informant, paid by police, using taxpayers’ dollars to continue his felony drug habit, was the link that allowed the police to raid a private farm, a working farm where honest Americans make their living. Now, the government, in its haste, has hired an army of criminals whose allegiance to the truth is, at best, questionable.” Judge Wakefield interrupts Rodman to chastise him for representing clients involved in drugs, to declare acceptable the use of anonymous informants, and to deny that property rights protect a farm from seizure if the farm grows any amount of marijuana. The scene reinforces the blur of the line between the lawful and the criminal. No doubt there is an element of smoke-screen rhetoric when the lawyer invokes such things as “using taxpayers dollars,” “working farm,” and “honest Americans”; nevertheless, he does conjure up the possibility of the honest, hard-working—basically good—people entrapped by an ever-so-slight step from the path of lawfulness, thanks to the government’s collaboration with a real criminal (an informant with a felony habit). Wakefield’s statement confirms the government’s willingness to turn a blind eye to the duplicity and possibly malicious intent of one party in order to ensnare another party. His words also indicate that the government insists on taking a black-and-white view of a complicated issue, turning its back on the Constitutional implications of its actions (e.g., Wakefield seems to have no concern for the due process owed the defendant). During Wakefield’s statement, the first obvious jump cut of the film catches our attention. After Wakefield completes his statement regarding the government’s sanction of the use of anonymous informants, we see him pause, while the soundtrack jumps to his next statement, “Furthermore, there is no sacred protection of property rights in our country.” On the word *there*, the image

cuts to the in-sync image of Wakefield speaking. For a moment, though, on the word *furthermore*, dialogue and image do not match; the jump cut brings the image and sound back into synchronization. The technique, here and throughout the film, combined with the extensive reliance on a hand-held camera, contributes to the documentary feel that the film has. Against that, however, in the context of a film that we know to be a fictional narrative, the jump cut reminds us of the hand of the artist and that we watch a fabricated work, not reality. In that sense, the jump cut suggests the disjointed nature of the system that Wakefield represents, its inconsistency and lack of continuity. What we hear sometimes fails to match what we see; words and actions do not always match. As a result, we must question the veracity of what we hear people like Wakefield saying.

In the next scene, we see that Wakefield appears to accept a gift (a fishing rod) from members of his constituency, so we further question what sort of man he is and his integrity. He pours himself a drink as well as one for an assistant, Mark. Mark sips, looks at the glass, and coughs. Wakefield just peers at him. Obviously, Wakefield is a hard-drinking man. When Wakefield arrives in Washington, D.C., and stands in his hotel room looking out the window at the view of the Capitol, he drinks a glass of wine.

Next, the film cuts to San Diego, California, where DEA officers Castro and Gordon are engaged in a sting to catch Ruiz for distribution of cocaine. In the middle of the operation, the local police barge onto the premises and ruin the sting, although Castro and Gordon do apprehend Ruiz in his attempt to flee. In the chaos that ensues, it appears that some officers point weapons at other officers, confused as to who are the crooks. Rather than work together, the federal and local forces duplicate one another's effort and, in the process, hinder the conquest

of all involved. Before running after the fleeing Ruiz, Castro attends to Gordon, shot by Ruiz and on the floor; when a man enters the room holding a gun—but not pointing it at Castro or Gordon—Castro shoots him twice in the chest, presumably killing him. Castro and Gordon appear to be the good guys, but Castro demonstrates a willingness to shoot first, ask questions later. We never learn the identity of the intruder or whether he lives, which adds to the doubt and speculation that surrounds the characters.

Castro and Gordon, whose hidden body armor stopped Ruiz's bullet, chase Ruiz into an amusement arcade called Funland. Inside, Ruiz hides in a bin of plastic balls. Gordon, seeing one of Ruiz's feet among the balls, feigns resignation and then shoots Ruiz's foot. The scene combines senses of comedy and brutality that characterize much of the film. Back in Ruiz's office, Castro insisted on telling jokes. In Funland, a clown starts through a door, sees Gordon, Castro, and their guns and retreats back through the door. Realizing that he and Castro have Ruiz cornered, Gordon toys with Ruiz before needlessly shooting the man in the foot. The comic overtones seem to satirize the relentlessness and brutality of the law, while the trespass of violence in an arcade reminds us of the presence of illicit drugs and the fight against them in places reserved for children.

The apprehension of Ruiz cuts to an establishing shot of a wealthy Ohio suburb, where Wakefield's daughter Caroline and her friends watch an old episode of the television series *Dynasty* and get high. Seth Abrahms (Topher Grace) plays an Internet trivia game on his laptop, answering a question on Aeschylus. An advertisement at the bottom of the laptop screen reads, "Catch Spastic and win"; Spastic is a cartoon character whose image pops up throughout the

film, further making a connection between children and drugs. After answering the questions correctly, Seth snorts some coke and says, “And ‘Tragedy’ is closed out.”

The scene that introduces Helena Ayala (Catherine Zeta-Jones) begins with a view of the country club where she lunches with a few friends, the setting, the conversation, and the menu (for Helena, duck), indicating that she belongs to a class of wealth and privilege. Helena is a mother, but her interest in her son at the moment appears, based on her conversation, to be in making him into a Tiger Woods. She strikes us as somewhat selfish when she remarks, interrupting one of her luncheon companions, that her physician gave her permission to have a glass of red wine during her pregnancy and she adds, “I had two.”

After meeting with the President’s Chief of Staff (Albert Finney), Wakefield goes to meet General Ralph Landry (James Brolin), Wakefield’s predecessor. Wakefield reveals himself as politically savvy, “Well, you’ve done a fine job, General. The Office of National Drug Control Policy is in better shape than when you found it.” The General replies, “I’m not sure I made the slightest difference.” After a few more words, the General tells Wakefield the story about Khrushchev leaving his office and writing two letters to his successor. Landry recites Khrushchev’s instructions to his successor: “When you get yourself into a situation you can’t get out of, open the first letter, and you’ll be saved. And when you get yourself into another situation you can’t get out of, open the second letter.” When a situation arose, the successor opened the first letter, which read, “Blame everything on me.” He did, and it worked. When a second situation arose, the man opened the second letter, which read, “Sit down and write two letters.” The camera cuts from a close-up on Landry to a close-up on Wakefield, both men chuckling, both men somewhat uncomfortable. Landry, no doubt, is embarrassed to find himself

facing his own successor and admitting that he turns over the job at hand having made little or no difference during his tenure. Wakefield is embarrassed by the General's shame and sense of futility; Wakefield is too self-confident to see the potential wisdom and foresight of the General's anecdote.

Back in Mexico, Rodríguez and Sanchez deal with a couple of tourists from the U.S. who have had their car stolen. One of the tourists realizes that they will have to bribe the police officers to get their car back. She instructs her companion to give Rodríguez some money, but he refuses it, insisting that they move on and call the man whose number Rodríguez has given them. Somehow Rodríguez and Sanchez are complicit in an apparent shakedown of the tourists.

The Georgetown party scene comes next. The comments that Wakefield hears are pessimistic. "You're never gonna solve this problem on the supply side. As long as that demand is out there in our cities, Mexico bashing is not gonna do a damn thing for you." "We're not fighting a war here with a traditional winner and loser." "I don't know that you can win this war." Wakefield asks, "Can I get a scotch and soda, please?" "The price of coke and heroin has dropped, but purity has increased, so all this law enforcement has really achieved is that kids get better stuff cheaper." "Education, rehabilitation, prevention—that's not significant to these reporters. They wanna see people in prison. They wanna see the gory aspect of the drug problem." "It's the stick of law enforcement that creates the carrot of huge profit—that is economic truth." During this comment, the camera cuts to a shot of Wakefield raising his glass and taking a drink of scotch as his eyes remain on the speaker. Then we hear the final comment, "Addicts don't vote." As this scene progresses, Wakefield's expression belies a growing realization that the task before him is huge and complex. The shots of him ordering scotch and

taking swigs from his glass begin to suggest, ironically, a man with his own substance dependence. It is another case of the filmmaker asking the viewer where the line is drawn. How does a socially sanctioned substance such as alcohol compare to illegal street drugs? How does this man who regularly carries a glass in his hand compare with the regular user of drugs?

Gordon and Castro enter Ruiz's hospital room. They discuss Ruiz's predicament, the trouble he's in, in an obvious attempt to coerce Ruiz to reveal members of the drug cartel that he is associated with. Castro tells him, "Eddie, you're in a lot of trouble." Gordon and Castro then proceed to discuss how serious Ruiz's punishment may be and the certainty of a conviction. Their exchange is obviously intended to scare Ruiz into talking. "I only see one way out of this predicament," Gordon tells Ruiz. "You make us believe you got a boss, Eddie." Ruiz insists this is coercion, but he suggests he will provide the information if he gets immunity. It is uncertain whether Gordon and Castro cross a line during the scene and treat their prisoner unethically in terms of coercion; what is certain is that they are willing to collude with a criminal and even arrange immunity if they can go for a bigger target.

When Carl is arrested at his home, Helena is confused, but ultimately attends to comforting her son David (Alec Roberts), who we see standing next to his mother, framed by the camera so that we see the child and Helena's stomach, showing her pregnancy. The image of the child and the pregnant woman help to make Helena an archetypal figure of the Mother; the maternal aspect of her persona becomes a key factor in how Helena responds to her husband's arrest and prosecution. Through the remainder of the film, Helena treats her situation as a family ordeal and works to restore the family, without regard to the implication for society at large of

her husband's illegal dealings and without avoiding recourse to immoral and criminal behavior on her own part.

Caroline and Barbara (Amy Irving) pick up Wakefield at the airport; they seem a happy family. At dinner, Caroline exclaims, "None of my friends can fucking believe my dad's actually the drug czar." The expletive stops the conversation; Wakefield is visibly disturbed by his daughter's language. Not quite the perfect family after all.

Arnie Metzger (Dennis Quaid), an associate of Carl's, sends Helena home from the police station, telling her, "Go home and be with your son." As she drives through a business district, she passes Rodríguez, sent by Salazar to find Francisco Flores (Clifton Collins, Jr.). Rodríguez walks into a gay bar and flirts with Flores to catch him. Back in Mexico, Flores is interrogated and tortured by one of Salazar's men. The torturer sprays soda water laced with chili powder into Flores's face. Flores screams; the film cuts to a profile shot of Rodríguez sitting elsewhere at Salazar's compound. Rodríguez hears the scream at a distance; he looks down, frowning. Cut to a long shot of Sanchez standing and laughing with three soldiers. Cut back to a frontal shot of Rodríguez, now looking ahead; his eyes shift. Cut to a medium shot of the four men laughing. The shot-reverse-shot sequence tells us Rodríguez is looking at his partner and the other three. The scene distinguishes Rodríguez from Sanchez, who wants to associate with the soldiers and laughs along with them. Rodríguez cannot ignore the screaming. Unlike his partner, Rodríguez has a capacity for compassion and is sickened by the sounds of the torturing.

Sitting in an office, Caroline lists her accomplishments and activities for a social worker (Viola Davis), demonstrating that Caroline ranks as a bright, accomplished student. The social



workers asks, “You want to tell me what you’re doing here, Caroline?” Caroline has no response other than to look away. Wakefield and Barbara take opposite sides on how to handle Caroline’s behavior. Wakefield proposes, “So let’s ground her, clip her wings: school, scheduled activities, that’s it till further notice.” Barbara objects, “Robert, honey, Caroline clearly used very bad judgment, but don’t you think spending a night in jail is punishment enough?” She continues, “I mean, we’ve all had our moments. Lord knows, I tried every drug there was—” Wakefield interrupts, “I don’t want to hear about that.” He stands and begins pacing. His response is emotional and authoritarian, while hers is calm and reasoned. As they argue, Wakefield realizes that Barbara has known about Caroline’s drug use for some time. He confronts her, and as the scene ends, he is angry not only with Caroline but now also with Barbara. The family is falling apart.

Wakefield goes to Assistant District Attorney Dan Collier (John Slattery) to take care of Caroline’s police record. Collier assures Wakefield that it will be handled and then continues:

Collier: One thing bothers me: the kid they dropped off had coke and heroin in him. Serious amounts. He’s lucky to be alive. So I gotta ask: what’s your daughter on?

Wakefield: I don’t know what you mean.

Collier: Well, I mean (*pause*) have you asked her what kind of drugs she’s tried?

Wakefield: (*After a pause*) No. I don’t know.

Collier: Is she in any kind of therapy, professional help?

Wakefield: No, no, no. No way. My daughter is one of the leading students in her school.

In San Diego, Ruiz makes his statement. “Using regression analysis, we made a study of the custom lines at the border and calculated the odds of a search. The odds are not high, and we found variables to reduce those odds.” These are not street hoods; they use very sophisticated methods to decide how to proceed and to carry out a strategy with the intent of making a large profit. These are savvy businessmen. That point is reflected later when Ruiz comments on the law keepers who oppose them. “Well, you know, in, ah, in Mexico, law enforcement is an entrepreneurial activity.” It is *The Godfather*. American capitalism turns its face from ethics and law, justified by a simple, straightforward mantra—“It’s business.” Ruiz proceeds to comment that these methods have worked and will continue to work, and he explains to Gordon and Castro how and why it will work. The irony is that the criminal comes across here smarter, cooler, and more rational than law enforcement. Gordon’s response, in fact, is pure emotion, as he’s obviously frustrated, “What, are we on Larry King or something? Shit. Tell us something we don’t know, Eddie.” The scene ends with Ruiz talking about himself and Carl. “Carl and I have been friends since we were little kids. He was loyal.” Those are the last words of the scene; the camera holds for a moment on Gordon looking at Ruiz, then cuts to the next scene. Culminating in this way, the film implies that Ruiz’s greatest transgression is not his illegal activities but his betrayal of Carl.

Standing guard outside General Salazar’s dining hall, Rodríguez and Sanchez talk. Sanchez plans to go out that evening with some other fellows. We infer that they are speaking of some of the General’s soldiers, the men Sanchez was joking with in the earlier scene. Rodríguez declines an invitation to join them. The scene reasserts the film’s interest in friendship and loyalty that were established in the immediately preceding scene. Contrasted with the previous

scene, however, this scene involves a character who places morality before loyalty. While Sanchez drifts from the friendship he has with his partner, Rodríguez resists the lure of making new, powerful friends because of his disgust for the way they operate. There may be some resentment of Sanchez embracing the company of new friends, but the overriding sense is that Rodríguez is critical of Sanchez's choice of friends.

General Salazar plays good cop with Flores, yet seems to step beyond that. As they sit having dinner together, there is a sense of paternal interest—feigned to be sure, but deliberate. The General even mentions their respective fathers as he compares himself and Flores. Dinner, wine, and familial conversation all lead up to Salazar asking Flores to write down the names and locations of “those bastards who killed my captains.” Flores complies. He then downs a glass of wine and begins to weep. Fear or shame for his betrayal? Essentially, the scene duplicates in variation the previous scene. Sanchez and Rodríguez go the next day to arrest these guys. Armed with a baseball bat and guns, they drive one of Salazar's vehicles, now working in full collaboration with the General.

Helena visits Carl in prison; the first thing they talk about is their son David. She goes on to describe how their friends have turned their backs on them. “Nobody wants anything to do with us, Carl.” Next she tells Carl, “I'm not bringing a child into the life that I was brought up into. I won't do it, Carl. I want our life back.” Helena's focus remains on her family and providing a certain kind of life for herself and her children.

Next scene, a truck passes with an ad painted on the side. Next to an image of a cartoon character, the copy reads “Spastic Jack in *Straight to the Top*.” At the bottom, “Opening this

summer in theaters everywhere!!” The camera pans from the truck as it passes by to Seth and Caroline walking down the street in a blighted urban neighborhood of Cincinnati.

At the beach, a man approaches David. Carl’s enemies hit where, for Helena, it hurts most—the family. The man threatens to abduct the child if Helena does not come up with a \$3 million payment on money that Carl owes.

Ana Sanchez (Marisol Padilla Sanchez), concerned about Sanchez, goes to see Rodríguez, showing him a small packet with the scorpion insignia and *911* stamped on it. Rodríguez finds Sanchez and confronts him. Sanchez claims to have been with friends from work; Rodríguez knows that Salazar was not there. “The General is going to Mexico City next week,” Rodríguez tells Sanchez, “and I’m not going to get left behind.” Rodríguez’s loyalties have shifted: he is concerned, first, for himself and the role he sees for himself with the general; second, he thus has developed some loyalty to Salazar. In the very next scene, however, Rodríguez is approached by DEA agents Hughes (Jack Conley) and Johnson (Eddie Velez). “Javier Rodríguez, the word is you’re not that happy in your work. Maybe we can help.” Rodríguez’s loyalties are not that certain after all.

After Wakefield visits El Paso, as he boards his jet, he tells his staff, “I want everyone thinking out of the box for the next few minutes. What are we doing about Mexico? Come on guys, out of the box.” His use of such a catch phrase reduces his demand to an American business cliché. He then gives a pep talk about going after the big guys, sending a message to the cartels; he concludes by opening the floor to the groups’ suggestions, but they all sit looking at one another or at the floor. It is one of the satiric moments in the film. The humor of the

group sitting silently, Wakefield looking about the group, underscores the impotence of the task force.

Helena visits Arnie to plead for money. Once Arnie indicates that he cannot help, she tells him, “I just keep wondering what’s gonna happen if he doesn’t get out. Just never been on my own before. Always had someone. Always.” Arnie moves from his desk chair to the sofa, sitting next to Helena. He tells her about the first time he saw her. The camera frames their faces together as Arnie clearly flirts with Helena. She tells him, “I just keep picturing a debt-ridden, thirty-year-old mother of two whose ex-husband is being compared to Pablo Escobar.” Arnie isn’t really looking at Helena; neither does she look at him. Each simply looks off into space, in thought. “I don’t know anyone who wants to be with someone like that.” Arnie now looks at her. “Do you?” she asks, turning to look him in the face. He continues to look at her, but says nothing. The scene comes across as a seduction—but who is seducing whom, and what is the outcome? Both characters’ loyalty to Carl comes into question, though the close of the scene remains ambiguous.

Driving Rosario (Salma Hayek), Madrigal’s mistress, through the streets of Mexico City, Rodríguez responds to a comment she makes by telling her, “The General is a man of his word.” She replies, “They will say anything to get what they want, but then you remind them, it’s always tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Occupational hazard I guess.” At the house, Sanchez sees Madrigal (Joel Torres) and reports to Rodríguez that the Scorpion (Madrigal) is alive. “That means that Salazar is working for the Juárez cartel,” he tells Rodríguez. “I can’t believe this doesn’t matter to you.” “This is nothing new, Manolo,” Rodríguez replies. “That’s why Salazar is so interested in cleaning up Tijuana.” Sanchez suggests that Juan Obregón would

pay heavily for such information, at which Rodríguez tells him, “We’re going to keep our mouths shut.” Rodríguez understands the gray area involved, knows how to play the game, and considers his own safety.

Meanwhile, Wakefield has decided that General Salazar is a candidate for Mexico’s drug czar. Barbara’s concern is that Wakefield will be away from home more. “You might want to pencil in a little face time with your daughter.” They are Wakefield’s own words from an earlier scene in which he talked about the President penciling in face time for himself. In this scene, accusations fly. Barbara claims Caroline and Wakefield shut her out. Wakefield compares Caroline’s “self-medicating” to Barbara. Barbara responds, “I’m not the one who has to have three scotches just to walk in the house and say hello.” Wakefield answers, “I have one drink before dinner to take the edge off. It’s different.” Barbara sends Wakefield into the house and drives off alone. Inside, Wakefield discovers Caroline hiding in the bathroom, where she starts to take a hit of crack. Wakefield explodes as he searches for the drugs. They yell at one another, Wakefield in the bathroom, while Caroline stands outside and to the right of the entrance, her back against the open door. In one shot, the camera frames them so that we see them both in the same shot yet a wall separates them, and they cannot see one another, representing the distance these family members have put between one another.

Rodríguez meets with Agents Hughes and Johnson. He tells them, “I believe it’s important that we work together, Mexico and the United States, one hand washing the other.” Rodríguez wants to know about informants in “our operations.” The agents wanted the same kind of information from him. They offer to pay. He asks for the installation of lights at a public baseball park in Tijuana.

As Gordon and Castro sit in a van outside the Ayala home, the camera shows a vent atop the van, smoke coming out in puffs. Castro, smoking a cigarette luxuriously, blows the smoke upward to the vent. Gordon asks, “You ever try the patch, man?” Castro dismisses the idea, “That shit doesn’t work, bro.” Everyone has his addiction, apparently. It’s also another comic-relief scene. Gordon says the patch worked for his cousin, though he had to use five or six at a time, and now he’s dead—but not from the patch, he insists. Adding to the comedy, Helena leaves the house and brings the officers lemonade.

Wakefield meets with Salazar and congratulates the General on his work so far. Salazar notes that his task is difficult “because of the corruption in the police force.” On those words, the camera cuts to show Jeff Sheridan (D. W. Moffet) and Rodríguez sitting side by side. Sheridan smiles and reviews his notes and closes his book. Rodríguez watches Salazar and Wakefield and listens to their words. Wakefield observes, “Hopefully, the exchange of training methods and information between our two countries will help.” At this, Rodríguez averts his gaze and looks down into his crossed arms. Salazar blames the police for their corruption, but hides his own. Wakefield unknowingly collaborates with a man who works for one of the drug cartels. Sheridan, satisfied that they are making progress, closes his book. Rodríguez understands another meaning to Wakefield’s placing importance on exchange of information. He averts his eyes because he sees more than the other men; he is aware of the corruption and betrayal among them all. Wakefield asks the General about treatment of addiction. Salazar repeats Wakefield, shrugging, “Treatment of addiction.” He looks directly at Wakefield, “Addicts treat themselves. They overdose, and then there’s one less to worry about.” Salazar is seen from behind Wakefield’s left shoulder; not quite a POV shot, but we nevertheless feel as if

he may be addressing us. Wakefield thinks about this, then looks away, to Sheridan. Possibly he is something of a caricature of himself, the hard-nosed crusader who sees in black and white. The comment hits home, literally, as Wakefield's daughter is now in treatment. Rodríguez looks away. A voiceover comes up over the end of the scene, the voice of a counselor discussing relapse with Caroline and her group of treatment companions.

When Helena goes to a botanical garden to meet Flores, the scene opens with children walking by as Helena watches David and waits. Flores tells her, "You were followed by the police, but they won't be able to hear us over the children." Helena arranges with Flores for the assassination of Ruiz. As they discuss the details of the plan, there a long shot of the garden, framing Helena and Flores to the right middleground, the children walking away in the background, center. Helena's back to us, she faces the children. So far, this is the film's most blatant juxtaposition of children with the illegal-drug underworld. We also glimpsed David at the start of the scene as he wandered about the garden; thus, the scene reminds us that the mother's quest for family order motivates Helena. When she insists that Flores can get this job done, his parting words to her are, "Careful. You're starting to sound like your husband, Mrs. Ayala." The camera provides a profile close-up of Helena as he says this. If the subject of the scene—arranging for Ruiz's assassination—had not already convinced us, the words of Flores tell us explicitly that Helena now poises herself to step into her husband's role as leader of his business and all its trappings, regardless of how heinous. Helena plays Michael Corleone to Carl's Vito. She takes her husband's place as head of the business and head of the family; she does what she must to keep the family together, and it's all just business, nothing personal.



After the car-bomb explosion intended to kill Ruiz, a firetruck rushes down the street to the location of the bombing, passing Sanchez sitting in an open-air café waiting for someone. He is picked up by a couple of Salazar's men. After the men execute Sanchez, they drive away with Rodríguez, who has been spared, and explain to him, "The old man works like this," adding, "We had to do this to be sure we could trust you. Now we see that we can. We are family now." Salazar is referred to as "old man," as if he might be their father. They refer to themselves as a family and include Rodríguez.

Meeting with drug lord Juan Obregón (Benjamin Bratt) in Tijuana, Helena is cool, firm, and business-like. She tells Obregón about her husband's "Project for the Children." The project involves smuggling cocaine pressed into the form of a toy doll of Spastic Jack, the cartoon character we have seen in passing images earlier in the film. Helena excuses herself from testing the cocaine because she is pregnant. She is still a mother. Calm, emotionless, she cuts a deal: "I want our debt forgiven, I want to be the exclusive distributor of Obregón brothers' cocaine in the United States, and I want the principal witness against my husband, Eduardo Ruiz, killed." In a single moment, she becomes a competent, enterprising business leader, an illegal-drug dealer, and a murderer.

Rodríguez tells the DEA agents, "You worry about getting me what I want. I'll worry about myself." The camera frames Rodríguez alone in a close-up. He is alone, but self-sufficient. He is the cowboy of the picture. One of the agents tells Rodríguez he should feel good about what he has done. Rodríguez responds, "I feel like a traitor." Rodríguez has stood alone and, in the end, been true to himself while doing something altruistic, yet he feels as a traitor.

Sheridan calls Wakefield and tells him about the arrest of Salazar and of Salazar's dealings with Madrigal and the Juarez cartel. Despite the weight of the matter, Wakefield puts Sheridan off, "I gotta call you back." Realizing that Caroline, apparently living on the street since leaving the rehabilitation facility, has been stealing valuables from their home, Wakefield again goes after her. Wakefield grabs Seth from a classroom. Sitting in Wakefield's car, Seth goes into a tirade about racial stereotypes and the market pressures that bear on drug trafficking. Wakefield just looks at Seth, and Seth's face goes blank. Seth's rant satirizes the sophomoric liberal outrage that oversimplifies the problem and comes across as a programmed response. At the door of Seth's drug dealer (Vonte Sweet), Wakefield's pleas for information about his daughter go unheeded. "This is a business, man," the dealer tells him through a screened hole in the door, "Why don't you get the fuck out of here?" Wakefield offers to pay for information. In response, the dealer opens the door and then pulls a gun out and threatens Wakefield. When Wakefield again offers money, the dealer tell him, "If I want your money, man, I will take your money." The business entrepreneur is also a thief. Walking back to the car, Wakefield realizes that Seth knows where Caroline is. Once found, a drugged-out Caroline sees Wakefield, smiles, "Hi, Daddy." He cries. There is a shot of Seth in doorway; Seth turns and goes.

In protective custody, Ruiz argues, supposing he had not been caught: "What would be the harm? Huh? What would be the harm? A few people get high who are getting high anyway. Your partner's still alive. . . . Don't you see this means nothing? Your whole life is pointless. . . . The worst part about you, Monty, is you realize the futility of what you're doing, and you do it anyway. Wish you could see how transparent you are." Camera cuts to Gordon. "Let me tell you something. You only got to me because you were tipped off by the Juarez cartel, who's

trying to break into Tijuana—you are helping them. Uh-huh. So, remember, you work for a drug dealer, too, Monty. Fuck me.” Ruiz leaves the room; a few minutes later, he lies on the bathroom floor convulsing.

After the court scene, in which the state drops its case against Carl, there is a long shot of vehicles coming across the desert toward the camera. It is Rodríguez, now dressed in a suit and wearing sunglasses, followed by news crews. They arrive to seize cocaine at an airstrip. Cut to Salazar, held in same cell as Flores earlier. A physician gives Salazar an injection; according to the published shooting script, the physician explains to Salazar that the shot will calm him (Gaghan, 2000, p. 137). Cut to a shot from above of someone making a statement to a crowd around him, a crowd that includes the media with cameras and microphone. The film cuts to a medium shot from ground level; we see that some of the men in the crowd wear jackets with DEA printed on the back. Cut to a medium close-up, through the crowd, of Rodríguez giving the statement. Cut to a door opening; Rodríguez steps through, tie and sunglasses removed; he looks through the door and down. Reverse-shot, Salazar lies on the floor, hands bound behind him, his chair on its side behind him—he appears dead (the screenplay confirms this [Gaghan, 2000, p. 138]). Rodríguez looks up and leaves. Cut to exterior, Rodríguez giving a statement. Cut to D.C. exterior, filtered blue to signal a Wakefield sequence.

Chief of Staff tells Wakefield, “The President’s sorry he hasn’t been able to spend more time with you.” With the camera on Wakefield, the Chief of Staff remarks on the matter with Caroline; he has handled the press regarding the situation. Wakefield looks up on this. When the Chief of Staff adds, “Anyway, if it came out, we could turn it into a qualification.” The camera cuts to a closer shot of Wakefield, who looks down at the end of the sentence. “I’ve

been in the trenches of the drug war,” suggests the Chief of Staff, “I’ve seen the face of the enemy, et cetera, et cetera.” Wakefield looks up after the words *drug war*. As the camera lingers on Wakefield, a voiceover begins, “A sterling reputation and close friend of the President,” before the camera cuts to Wakefield in the next scene, as he is introduced to speak. The camera is focused on Wakefield, medium shot, in the background; the woman introducing him is seen out of focus, extreme close-up, in the foreground. Wakefield, head tilted down three-quarters, stares into space. He may be listening to the introduction, but he looks distracted, his thoughts elsewhere. He looks grim and fidgets during the brief introduction. Wakefield verges on epiphany. During the previous scene and now, thoughts form that lead to his abandoning his post. As he begins the speech, the camera frames him in a medium shot through the crowd with an obvious hand-held camera, which moves right through the crowd, putting the viewer there in that audience watching the speech. As Wakefield gets to the statement, “We have to win this war to save our country’s most precious resource—our children,” the camera cuts to a view of five monitors, four of which show the same television image of Wakefield giving the speech. That shot is a brief satiric moment, for we realize that, for the moment, the speech has the aspect of the typical political speech, grandstanding and attempting to instill optimism in a smokescreen of empty rhetoric, playing to the media, playing for ratings. The film cuts to an objective medium shot, full on, shooting slightly above the heads of the people in the audience, as Wakefield continues, “Sixty-eight million children have been targeted by those who perpetrate this war, and protecting these children must be priority number one.” Although the Harold Hill-like cry to protect our children encourages a lingering thought of the satiric element, the statistic (68 million) emphasized by the change of camera shot brings a sober note to

Wakefield's words, and we realize that, as always, satire gives way to quite serious matters. Next, a reverse shot shows the large crowd, all media personnel, many taking notes or flashing cameras. It reminds us of the issue's significance, worthy of media attention. The pause in Wakefield's words, however, once the camera cuts to the media crowd, before he continues his speech, makes it easy to interpret the crowd as wolves, waiting for another snatch of meat. As Wakefield continues, the camera cuts to show him in profile, close up and out of focus, to the right of the screen; in the background, taking up most of the frame, stand Sheridan, Landry, and the Chief of Staff, all frowning and looking at the media audience. One by one, their eyes shift to Wakefield. Reverse shot, we see Wakefield turning to look at the three men at the side. Wakefield pauses as he looks at the men. Then: "An opportunity (*pause*) to correct the mistakes (*pause*) of the past (*pause*) while laying a foundation for the future." The men seem too serious, too concerned over the media response; they stand in the wings, the architects of a carefully crafted message and image, a stage show for the media and public. Wakefield continues, "This takes (*pause*) not only (*pause*) government, but families." Now he really appears to struggle. Finally, he realizes, "I can't do this." The camera shows the audience and then cuts back to Wakefield as he tells them, "If there is a war on drugs, then many of our family members are the enemy. (*Pause*) And I don't know how you wage war on your own family." On that, he leaves. The film cuts to an exterior long shot of Wakefield leaving the building; the camera shoots through the iron gate, showing Wakefield through the bars, as if imprisoned. A jump cut brings him to the gate, where he opens it and walks out, freeing himself. His job—and the government—merely impeded his relationship with his family and his battle for his daughter. A shot of Wakefield riding a taxi to the airport dissolves to an exterior shot at the Ayala home,

where children and adults enjoy a party on the lawn. Elsewhere, a couple of Carl's goons assassinate Arnie—betrayal repaid and the final step in restoring the Ayala family.

The film ends on three images of hope. First, Gordon walks into the Ayala home, causes a scene, and in the scuffle, plants a bug. Maybe the authorities will get Carl after all. The camera moves ahead of Gordon as he leaves the property, and we see him grin. Stopping to revolve around Gordon, the camera then shifts to show Gordon from behind, walking away, the road ahead of him; Gordon breaks into a run, down the road. Caroline's voice plays over the final seconds of the scene, "On the good days, I feel like I get it." Cut to a medium close-up of Caroline talking to a rehab group. She talks about how she feels on the good days and the bad days and concludes, "I'm pretty sure I'm gonna make it (*pause*) through today." She leaves the podium and returns to the audience; the camera follows her to the audience where, we see, she joins her parents sitting among the group. Invited to share, Wakefield tells the leader and the group that he and his wife are there to support their daughter and "we're here to listen."

Wakefield turns and looks at Caroline, and the film cuts to a shot of outdoor lights shining in the Mexican night. Thanks to Rodríguez, the community ballfield has lights for night games, and Rodríguez sits in the stands watching some children play a game. The camera shows Rodríguez in the crowd, an ever-so-slight smile on his face, hands clasped before him as if in prayer. The camera cuts to the final shot of the film, a view from the stands of the baseball game. Rodríguez truly has accomplished something, stopping one drug cartel, including a corrupt official, and gaining a place for the children to play safely.

## Conclusions

In *Traffic*, Soderbergh has put together a complex motion picture that portrays the sense of futility that permeates the American experience in the drug war, illustrates the ambiguities and nondichotomous nature of the problem, emphasizes the role of the family, and treats its subject with gravity yet with satire. Nearly all of the characters outside of the drug dealers and smugglers experience some degree of futility in the course of the film. That is especially the case with the law-enforcement personnel. As a general phenomenon, we see that in the way agencies inadvertently work against one another (as when a local police force interrupts the DEA sting targeting Ruiz and Ayala) or in the corruption within the disadvantaged Mexican police force. In the case of Gordon and Castro, one of their own adversaries, Ruiz, points it out to them. General Landry tries to prepare Wakefield for it, but Wakefield must learn for himself. The futility initially overwhelms Rodríguez to the extent that he dreams about his despair over Mexico's situation incarnated as his mother suffocating.

The image of a desperate Mexico as a suffocating mother is ironic, since the film goes on to explore the role of the family as both victim and conspirator in the drug problem. It is fairly obvious how the family becomes victimized by drug trafficking. The Wakefields serve here as the prime example, torn apart by Caroline's drug habit; Wakefield compounds the family's estrangement with his own substance abuse, clouding his eyes in a scotch-induced haze of denial. Helena, on the other hand, embodies the complicity of the family. Helena's sole motivation is to keep her family together and protect her children from any want or humiliation. Soderbergh accentuates the irony of Helena's maternal motive with camera angles and compositions that catch Helena with her son, reveal her pregnancy, and place her in the company

of children (on the beach, at the botanical garden, and at the party on her lawn). The crowning touch, though, has Helena selling Juan Obregón the idea of smuggling cocaine by disguising it as a toy doll modeled on a children's cartoon character. The protective mother becomes the predator. It is a convoluted picture—Wakefield must abandon his fight against trafficking to save his family; Helena participates in trafficking to save hers. General Salazar complicates the film's treatment of family further. As a soldier, Salazar might be looked upon alternately as defender or aggressor. Salazar's vision for running his operation is one of paternalism—whether that is a matter of playing father figure to the tortured Flores in order to pluck information from him or charming his men into thinking of themselves as a family in an attempt to instill in them a sense of loyalty.

The family, then, provides a dramatic signifier of the ambiguities in the world that Soderbergh portrays. A family comprises relationships and processes that may be nurturing and protective or may prove detrimental, even fatal. *Traffic* treats law and the law-enforcement establishment in a similar way. Men like Salazar, Wakefield, Rodríguez, and Gordon frequently obscure the delineation between right and wrong. For the Salazars, it ends in total corruption. For the others, it provides a mix of despair and hope. Visually, the film suggests a sense of hope for Gordon at the end, and we accept that because Gordon is so sure that what he does is right. But the film ends with Rodríguez and his illuminated baseball field, and the reasons that he comes across as the biggest hero in the film and the one for whom hope seems the strongest are, first, because of the poignancy of what he accomplished—an act of benevolence for the children in contrast to so many other acts of exploitation—and second, because of his intense self-scrutiny. Rodríguez never takes it for granted that what he does is right, just as he never



immediately condemns or endorses what others do. He sees the knotty complexity of the world and never ceases to question his role in it.

## Chapter 7 Conclusion

Other writers have already observed one mutual characteristic of Soderbergh's films—the character at odds with his world. Soderbergh made the observation himself after completing his second film, *Kafka*: “My two films have in common a protagonist who is alienated and disoriented, bewildered by the world around him. *Kafka* hides behind his camera and the hero of *sex, lies, and videotape* hides behind a camera! Both films are about digging in order to find a hidden truth” (Ciment & Hubert, 1992, p. 48). Soderbergh has stood by that statement as recently as 2000; when Anne Thompson, interviewing Soderbergh for *Premiere* magazine following the release of *Erin Brockovich*, observed that many of the characters in his films are “spinning out of control,” Soderbergh replied, “Protagonists in my films tend to be at odds with their surroundings and/or the people around them” (Thompson, 2000, p. 141). Graham, Michael, Foley, and Wilson can all be viewed as alienated, at odds with their surroundings. The characters in *Traffic* are a more complicated mix, and there is no obvious protagonist to single out; however, several characters fit the pattern to a greater or lesser degree. Helena finds herself at odds with a world that she had been oblivious to; Caroline gets sucked into a world of addiction that she cannot control; Wakefield tries to juggle two worlds that conflict, finding himself failing in both. The most straightforward example in *Traffic*, though, is probably Rodríguez, who seems above the corruption of the Mexican police force even while he tries to work within it, joins Salazar in order to get a leg up on the fight against the drug cartels, despite his repulsion for Salazar's methods, and fears and distrusts the U.S. authorities, though he cooperates with them to achieve his small triumph at the end.

The films discussed here exhibit some other common themes as well. Images of journey are common. *sex, lies and videotape* starts out with a road trip, as does *The Underneath*, both Graham and Michael returning home. Soderbergh punctuates *The Limey* with shots of Wilson on a plane. Even in *Out of Sight* and *Traffic*, characters move from place to place (Miami to Detroit; Ohio to Washington, D.C., to the U.S.-Mexico border), though those films are not so explicitly about a character's journey. Soderbergh likes to deal in ambiguity and explore the continua that characterize human existence. In this way, he dispels the false dichotomies that his characters face and explores the gray areas that are revealed. That is especially the case with morality and law. The line between good and bad is seldom clear. The protagonist in *sex, lies, and videotape* has an aberrant sex life and a history of lying. The central character in *The Underneath* is a chronic gambler who initiates an armored-car heist. *Out of Sight* and *The Limey* both feature thieves as the stories' heroes. Nearly all of the characters in *Traffic* resort to questionable tactics to achieve their goals, even when the ultimate goal is to uphold the law. Soderbergh never quite implies that the end justifies the means, but he raises the question. More important, he offers a dialectic that ponders where the line should be drawn and how solidly. Along with ambiguity, Soderbergh's characters typically face varying forms and degrees of uncertainty. In *The Underneath*, uncertainty is depicted expressly as games of chance. In *Out of Sight*, the characters mull over the possibilities of chance or fate. Ultimately, Soderbergh reflects that choice and deliberate action have a degree of influence on the characters' lives, and even the refusal to avoid making choices is seen as a decision. All of these themes converge in one overriding notion that permeates Soderbergh's films—that human interaction, especially

intimacy and love, is complex and difficult and its rewards uncertain. Often Soderbergh's films end with images of road or traveling; the journey continues, but the way is obscure.

Recently, some authors have compared Soderbergh's filmmaking approach to the Danish *Dogme* movement. Dennis Lim, writing in the *Village Voice*, claims, quoting Soderbergh, "He acknowledges a certain kinship to the Dogme school. 'I went through a similar psychic break myself, where I felt like formalism was a dead end. You could polish stuff into oblivion and strangle the life out of a movie'" (Lim, 2000, p. 150). When asked directly about an interest in the Dogme style, Soderbergh comments without really endorsing it or confessing any discipleship to it: "It's used in an attempt to get at something that feels emotionally honest and immediate. . . . In movies, the formal choice has to be appropriate to the material. . . . like *Ocean's Eleven*, which is very stylized" (Thompson, 2000, p. 145). Indeed, most of Soderbergh's films, including the most recent ones, strike one as very much stylized, which is antithetical to the Dogme approach. Richard Corliss reports the ten rules of the Dogme manifesto, "as set down by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg":

1. Shooting must be done on location; props must not be brought in
2. The sound and images must never be produced separately
3. The camera must be handheld
4. The film must be in color
5. Optical work and filters are forbidden
6. The film must not contain superficial action or violence
7. The film must take place in the here and now
8. Genre movies are not acceptable
9. The film format must be Academy 35 mm
10. The director must not be credited (Corliss, 1999, p. 84)

Soderbergh's work violates the majority of these rules most of the time. When one considers Soderbergh's use of sets (e.g., the interiors of Adele's apartment and Ripley's house in *Out of Sight*), use of music (all five films examined here have incidental music), unrealistic colors and

use of filters (*The Underneath*, *Traffic*), reliance on flashbacks (*The Underneath*, *The Limey*, *Out of Sight*), and so forth, the comparison becomes absurd. Any resemblance to Dogme seems more coincidence and dependent almost solely on Soderbergh's penchants for the hand-held camera and for shooting on location in available light when possible.

Any adherence to a particular school of thought would seem uncharacteristic if we are to believe Soderbergh's proclamations of following a style that best suits the material of the particular film. Even so, over the course of his career thus far, the filmmaker has accumulated an arsenal of favorite techniques that have evolved into the Soderbergh style. Part of what may make Soderbergh's films successful when in other hands they would fare less well is that he never insists on imposing style arbitrarily. In *The Underneath*, *The Limey*, and *Out of Sight*, the nonlinear narrative makes each film a richer experience for the viewer, transforming what otherwise might be a needless color remake of a semi-classic *film noir*,<sup>4</sup> a melodramatic revenge story, and a pedestrian crime picture. But the temporal shifting does more than add texture to the films. In *The Underneath*, the shuffling among three time periods underscores the unrootedness of Michael, his inability to keep his mind in the present. The lack of chronology in the narrative also gives the film a disjointed, random feel that plays on Michael's fixation on chance and his desultory life. It reflects, too, the disconnected, intermittent, interchangeable character of his relationships. *Out of Sight* is similar; moving back and forth across time imitates the repetitive cycle of Foley's life—repeated incarceration for the same type of crime, bank robbery—and testifies to the film's dialectic on fate. In *The Limey*, the discontinuity of the narrative conveys a

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<sup>4</sup>*The Underneath* is a remake of Robert Siodmak's *Criss Cross* (1949); both are based on the 1934 novel *Criss Cross* by Don Tracy.

sense of the tension between destiny and the choices made in the past; more than that, however, the editing in *The Limey* expresses pieces of Wilson's interior life, mimicking his thoughts, memories, fantasies.

The precursor to these virtuoso flashes forward and backward is found in *sex, lies, and videotape*, in the sequence when John begins to watch the video of Anne, and the film cuts to the scene of the taping. That shift provided a practical and dramatic means for Soderbergh to avoid revealing what happened between Anne and Graham until after John had learned of the taping and bolted over to Graham's place to see the tape. The flashback also enabled Soderbergh to bring the audience simultaneously into the moment and the product of the taping and then to include the climactic moment when Graham shuts off the video camera. *Traffic*, on the other hand, takes its inheritance in a different direction, namely parallel editing among sequences in different spaces rather than different times. That, of course, enables the viewer to follow several characters' histories as they play out at the same time and, to some extent, overlap. In that way, we see how events and actions influence one another and interact. We also see the parallels in the lives of the characters involved. We perhaps see Gordon and Rodríguez as two faces of the same character. We see Rodríguez and Salazar representing disparate players in the conflict against the illicit drug industry within Mexico. We compare Salazar and Wakefield, each the leader of his respective nation's war against trafficking. We judge Wakefield and Helena as variations of the parent. Thus, editing that alternates between different temporal or spatial positions is not only a common feature of the Soderbergh film, but also supports the thematic content.

Another cinematic technique favored by Soderbergh is the hand-held camera. Among the five films under discussion here, the hand-held camera is most effective and pronounced in *Traffic*. There are moments elsewhere. The Solomon-murder scene in *Out of Sight*, for example. Typically, the hand-held shot is used to convey a sense of uncontrolled setting or, in particular, the feel of a documentary. As Soderbergh expressed regarding *The Underneath*, “we added the hand held [sic] camera for the scenes in the present and we ended up with the tension I wanted” (Ciment & Niogret, 1995, p. 74). The documentary tone seems partly the case for *Traffic*, especially in scenes such as the Washington cocktail party or Wakefield’s visit to the U.S.-Mexico border. Scenes such as the toppling of Salazar at the end of the film also come to mind. There’s an ironic touch, however, to this documentary sense. It contrasts with the contrived (though effective) color scheme of the film—different locales being filmed unnaturally in fixed colors. The notion of documentary also acts as counterpoint to the subtle satiric touches that arise throughout the film. It is possible that the hand-held camera in this film creates a tension between the documentary feel (realistic) and the artistic elements (contrived) that eventually make the viewer conscious of a similar tension in the struggles of the characters and—moreover—the reality of the world reflected and interpreted by the film. After all, when we hear Wakefield’s patriotic praise for our country’s effort against drug trafficking and his war cry for saving our children, do we believe that literally is the message of the filmmaker, or does he intend for us to hear the hollowness of Wakefield’s words?

Color is another significant cinematic element in the Soderbergh film. Although not discussed in this study, *Kafka* has both color and black and white sequences. *The Underneath* has its own peculiar color coding of specific shots and sequences, notably using green and blue.

Oddly, the colored shots are used frequently in the present timeframe, making the present the most stylized period within the film. According to Soderbergh, “I wanted to stylize the present because I wanted to create a tension. This stock produced strange colors and a graininess that evoked a sense of anxiety and ill at ease” (Ciment & Niogret, 1995, p. 74). The colors used in *Out of Sight* key directly to the environment—bright, warm colors for Miami and the cold, muted blues of Detroit. Aside from accentuating the tone of the setting, the colors help the audience keep track of the changes in location. Similarly, Soderbergh puts the prisoners at Lompoc in bright yellow jumpsuits to distinguish them from the inmates at Glades. *Traffic* uses the most conspicuous and systematic code of colors to identify changes in setting and storyline. The idea is not original with Soderbergh. D. W. Griffith released *Birth of a Nation* (1915) with various tints on particular scenes to suggest different moods. Most famous, Dorothy (Judy Garland) leaves the black-and-white drab of Kansas to step through the farmhouse door into a world of wonder and color in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). But Soderbergh’s color manipulation goes beyond gimmick; furthermore, it has become a consistent signature to his films. Clearly, Soderbergh makes deliberate choices regarding color for each of his films; although the choice may be idiosyncratic for each movie, the consistent deliberation implies artistic control—and a consistent style—as much as or more than does a consistent look across a filmmaker’s body of work.

Soderbergh is a young artist, very likely just hitting his stride. The number of films he has directed already and the paucity of scholarship on his work invite further study. A study of Soderbergh’s complete directorial oeuvre to date suggests itself most readily, though not necessarily the most readily undertaken. For those more interested in research grounded in



theory, the possibilities are probably limited only by the imagination of the scholar; however, the most profitable established approach might be a Marxist reading. Certainly several of Soderbergh's films comment expressly on capitalism or suggest a subtext with Marxist implications. Soderbergh states, regarding John in *sex, lies, and videotape*, "I think his attitude typifies that of the American government, which is that the only crime is getting caught" (Dieckmann, 1989, p. 42). Money preoccupies *The Underneath*, and Michael transforms his romance with Rachel into a "business" deal. Jack Foley comes across as a good-natured rogue who takes money from the banks and avoids making it personal; the real bad guys are the murderers and Ripley, who steals money (or diamonds) he does not need. Terry Valentine epitomizes U.S. capitalism, making his fortune on the talent and work of others. *Traffic* concerns the pecuniary underpinnings that support and fuel drug trafficking. Alongside the fertile Marxist possibilities, gender issues surface in characters such as Karen Sisco and Helena Ayala as well as in how some of the men in Soderbergh's films treat women. With Soderbergh's current status and influence in Hollywood, coupled with his focus on contemporary characters and issues, his films surely offer fodder for the cultural theorist.

Regardless of the possibilities for other approaches to his films, it is clear that Steven Soderbergh has begun to develop a coherent body of work. Given that Soderbergh writes or co-writes many of his screenplays, frequently produces, and sometimes photographs his pictures, there should be little doubt of the authorial status of the films he has directed. Common themes add to the evidence. Trends in formal technique suggest the evolution of a style and vision that is personal without overwhelming the work. Taken individually, any of Soderbergh's films provides the viewer a rewarding cinematic experience; considered together, his films proffer a

richer, more meaningful comprehension of the vision and world view of the artist behind the works.

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## Appendix

### Filmography of Steven Soderbergh

#### As Director

*Yes: 9012 Live* (1986)  
*Winston* (1987)  
*sex, lies, and videotape* (1989)  
*Kafka* (1991)  
*King of the Hill* (1993)  
*The Underneath* (1995)  
*Gray's Anatomy* (1996)  
*Schizopolis* (1996)  
*Out of Sight* (1998)  
*The Limey* (1999)  
*Erin Brockovich* (2000)  
*Traffic* (2000)  
*Ocean's Eleven* (2001)  
*Full Frontal* (2002)  
*Solaris* (2002)

#### As Writer

*Winston* (1987)  
*sex, lies, and videotape* (1989)  
*King of the Hill* (1993)  
*The Underneath* (1995)  
*Schizopolis* (1996)  
*Nightwatch* (1998)  
*Solaris* (2002)

#### As Cinematographer

*Schizopolis* (1996)  
*Traffic* (2000)  
*Ocean's Eleven* (2001)  
*Full Frontal* (2002)  
*Solaris* (2002)

#### As Editor

*Yes: 9012 Live* (1986)  
*sex, lies, and videotape* (1989)  
*Kafka* (1991)  
*King of the Hill* (1993)  
*Solaris* (2002)

#### As Producer

*Suture* (1993)  
*The Daytrippers* (1996)  
*Pleasantville* (1998)  
*Tribute* (2001)  
*Who Is Bernard Tapie?* (2001)  
*Insomnia* (2002)  
*Welcome to Collinwood* (2002)  
*Far from Heaven* (2002)  
*Noqoyqatsi* (2002)  
*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind* (2002)

## Vita

Donald Beale grew up in the Allegheny Valley of Pennsylvania, about twenty miles northeast of Pittsburgh. He attended the Pennsylvania State University, where he studied art before completing a bachelor's degree in psychology. After graduate study in clinical psychology, his interests turned elsewhere, especially to a growing serious interest in film studies. For a few years, he was active as a volunteer on the LSU Union Films Committee, assisting in programming, writing program notes to accompany screenings, and organizing a workshop and lecture by visiting Canadian filmmaker John Weldon. Mr. Beale was also co-creator, co-writer, and co-host of a weekly television series, *Film Focus*, produced by the LSU Union Films Committee for LSU television. Last year, he gave a presentation on *Days of Glory* (Jacques Tourneur, 1944) as part of the Hollywood Propaganda Film Series at the West Baton Rouge Museum in Port Allen, Louisiana. For the past dozen years, Mr. Beale has been employed as an editor for employers publishing in the field of distance education and independent study; he currently holds the position of Senior Course Editor in the LSU Office of Independent Study.