Toward a Universal Cinema

A Talk with Steven Soderbergh

Steven Soderbergh burst on the international film scene more than two decades ago with his extraordinary indie success, "sex, lies, and videotape," which won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival—at 26, the youngest director ever to receive the festival's top honor. There followed a succession of Oscar nominations and big budget Hollywood successes, including "Erin Brockovich," "Traffic," "Ocean's Eleven" and its sequels, followed by the four-hour, two-part epic, "Che," chronicling the life of the Argentine revolutionary. Soderbergh talked in his Manhattan production studio with World Policy Journal *Editor David A. Andelman and World Policy Institute senior fellow Silvana Paternostro, who also served as associate producer of "Che."*

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL: When you began making films, what were your influences?

STEVEN SODERBERGH: Looking back on it, I was extraordinarily lucky. I was attending this laboratory school on the Louisiana State University campus and had access to a lot of films that under ordinary circumstances I never would have been exposed to. I was hanging out with these college film students and seeing movies from all over the world, in addition to classic American films. Watching "8 1/2," or "Blowup," or "High and Low" at 14 and 15 is a really extraordinary experience. They imprint you in a way that's unique, you're such a sponge at that age. I think it resulted in my work having this funny combination of both aesthetics—there's a very American desire to entertain and to tell a story, but there's also a very European approach to style and character that is obviously influenced by those early experiences. So I'm kind of amazed when I think

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that when I grew up in Baton Rouge I actually got this incredibly varied cinema diet. I can't imagine what kind of career I would have if I hadn't seen all of those films during that period.

WPJ: The films you mentioned—Fellini, Antonioni—you could call them part of the Western Canon. They're Western European filmmakers and a lot of them were influenced by early Hollywood films, but I guess when you start talking about a Global Canon of films, you're starting to expand out, extending to Iranian, Chinese, Japanese …

SODERBERGH: At that point, Asia was about as far away as it got. We got the [Satyajit] Ray films from India and we were getting the highlights of Japanese cinema. In the last 20 years, the wave of movies that have come to us out of Hong Kong, out of Korea, that's kind of a recent thing. I wasn't being exposed to a lot of that.

WPJ: Now when you start to think about other films, do you think in terms of being influenced by your peers? What influences you in your mature years, or is your style already clearly set?

SODERBERGH: There are two ways of working. You're either a filmmaker who has an aesthetic that you carry from movie to movie and you're looking for stories that fit that aesthetic or you're like me, and you're working from the story outward and changing styles according to the content. So I feel like stylistically I'm still sort of evolving from film to film.

WPJ: And your choice of content…

SODERBERGH: My choice of content is driven more by what's happening in the world now than ever before, and less by what other people are doing or what is happening in cinema in general. At the same time I'm much more pragmatic about my choices than I used to be. Part of it is taste, but part of it is the level of competition that exists now. When I started 20 years ago, it was easier, frankly, to be starting out. Young filmmakers today are facing an environment that is so much less forgiving than the environment I was in with "sex, lies, and videotape." I had the opportunity and the luxury of making five movies after "sex, lies, and videotape" that nobody saw, yet that were a very important part of my development as a filmmaker. You wouldn't get those chances now. People would literally lose your phone number if you made that many bombs in a row.

WPJ: In that case, do you think that the real artistic work is being done in other countries, in other cultures, where there isn't that Hollywood money or pressure?

SODERBERGH: Well, there's a different kind of pressure. There are fewer resources, fewer channels of distribution. If they're indigenous filmmakers, they're competing with movies from other countries, specifically the United States, so they have their own sets of problems. I think I see a variation of it here, the democratization of production has resulted in a lot of people being able to make movies now who couldn't make movies before. I don't think that just because you can make a movie means that you should make a movie. Besides, getting eyeballs on a film is much more difficult now, and getting theatrical distribution is hard, really hard. So it's easier to make a movie, but more difficult to get it seen.

What's also happening now, which is interesting, is that a lot of the major studios are financing movies made in other countries. For instance, Warner Brothers finances French-made, French-language films and distributes them around the world. Fox is making movies in Latin

America. Every time I hear people complaining about the encroachment of American movies, I say I've got one word for you: India. My point is their movies outperform our movies by an incredible amount because their filmmakers are obviously making the movies that Indian audiences want to see.

WPJ: So do you think American culture is making fewer in-roads abroad than it used to?

SODERBERGH: I think American filmmakers continue to be influential in certain aspects, but I do think that you're going to see, gradually, a more level playing field when you drop below the blockbusters, in the sort of mid-range section of the movie going audience. American movies will continue to dominate the big, franchise blockbuster.

WPJ: Is that the global cinema then? To get back to our original Global Canon theme, is there ever going to be something like that? Or is the whole world going to go see an American film on a Saturday night because it cost $100 million and has all these amazing chase scenes and special effects?

SODERBERGH: That's hard to say. There's another variable here that you have to consider, and that's piracy. That affects movie-going in a big way. The movies that get pirated the earliest and are the most popular are the sort of blockbuster movies that are coming out in the United States. So in charting where audience taste goes for movies, for going to the movies, that's where I feel like you may see a slight shift toward more indigenous films being successful. I think there's a generation now that, at a certain point, when the American blockbuster shows up, they'll just buy it bootlegged for $3 instead of spending $8 to go to the theatre.

WPJ: There was a lot of criticism of "Slumdog Millionaire," the Indian movie that was such a worldwide sensation, that it really was just a cheap version of an American film, that it's not really an indigenous Indian film. Is that a fair criticism?

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SODERBERGH: It follows the model of the classic Hollywood studio movie in terms of its storytelling, there's no question. I think the thing that they did that makes it stand out is they took that template and applied it to a milieu that you wouldn't necessarily think would fit, and they made it fit. It's almost like a '30s movie.

WPJ: Again we're coming back to this question of the Western Canon, the Hollywood Canon influencing the world.

SODERBERGH: There are more filmmakers outside of America who are influenced by American films than American filmmakers influenced by films outside of America, mostly because, I think, success stunts growth. If you ask most American filmmakers, they don't feel like there's a lot of reason to be looking elsewhere for new ideas. They feel like we're doing fine. Well, I mean—that's not entirely true. Most of the directors that I know that are friends of mine or at least are of my generation watch a lot of movies from around the world.

WPJ: And you do as well?

SODERBERGH: Yeah but in terms of the industry in general, most of the people that work within it are just not looking outside of the bubble of American cinema for influences. They just aren't—unless it's remaking some Asian horror film, or something like that, that was successful…

WPJ: So why bother to watch these other films?

SODERBERGH: Because you're dealing with people who have to think laterally instead of vertically, and the results can be really interesting. Take a genre film like "Let the Right One In," a Scandinavian vampire movie set in a school. It's a really fascinating take on a pretty well established genre, a very European take on a very American genre. And it's really good.

WPJ: How would that film influence either you or another American filmmaker or, for that matter, a Korean, a Japanese, or a Mumbai filmmaker? Or would it?

SODERBERGH: Well, again, it sort of gets down to what aspect of it you're going to be influenced by. Since this is a genre film and it's a genre that is well established in the United States, the influence could move in a couple of different directions. In general there is just a philosophical difference in storytelling between what most of American cinema does and what cinema outside of America does. It has to do with how much you show. Literally, what level of ambiguity are you comfortable with as a filmmaker and as an audience member? Again, partially because of the issue of fewer resources, you have filmmakers who have to be more creative about how they portray things. That's something that I've always picked up—that in America there's a sense that you just have to see everything and you have to know everything. If there's someone in the theatre who's confused, then that's bad.

WPJ: What comes to mind for me is John Woo's films from Hong Kong, which are masterpieces in setting, but it's a place he's comfortable with. When he came to the States, his films lost something.

SODERBERGH: I think it all depends on what you're trying to do. For me, making a movie like "Che"—it doesn't take place in a world that I have a real connection to. And so part of the fun of it, to me, is to be immersed in a context that's foreign to me and hope that my third party position can result in a more dispassionate attitude toward the narrative of the film. I remember when Benicio [del Toro] took the movie down to Havana and one of the people portrayed in the film said to him, "No Cuban could have made this movie." I think what he meant was that for a Cuban to have to sit down and make the kind of decisions we had to make about what story we were going to tell—the pressure of that would be so extreme that you might be paralyzed, like, "Oh god, now I'm a sort of repository for everybody's feelings about this guy and if I make a wrong move I'm going to get hammered." It took someone coming from the outside to just make a decision about how to do it—whether it's the right decision or the wrong decision. Just somebody going, "We're going to do this part of his life and that's what we're going to do, and let's not worry about it."

WPJ: So what else is influencing film, are there any boundaries?

SODERBERGH: I go through these periods where I think suddenly movies from all over the place are going to feel the

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same, that they're going to adopt a similar grammar. Then audiences will get tired of that and you'll see a swing in the other direction, stuff that is more extreme in its aesthetics and takes them out of what they've been seeing the last five or ten years. It's a moving target in a way—and that's the good news. The other thing that we have to discuss, because it is a business, is the effect on what's going on in the economy around the world because a lot of this work is either subsidized or is being bankrolled by companies that have equity financing that has been greatly reduced or has disappeared completely. I was just in Australia and the film business is dead. There's nothing happening there.

WPJ: Traditionally, an economic downturn is a time when movies pick up because they're cheap entertainment.

SODERBERGH: That was pre-Internet. Now I think it's a little bit different. You're seeing just more and more fragmentation. Fragmentation is obviously not good for the big companies. It's good there are other people finding ways to take advantage of this fragmentation, and that's the good news, but it's difficult when you get into the smaller margins where there are eyeballs but not in enough numbers to build a company around, or build a career off of. If you can get 30,000 people to download something that you made, that's not bad—but you can't build a career out of that.

WPJ: But that's how Sony Pictures Classics

and Fox Searchlight built themselves up. Maybe there will be more of those kinds of low-budget, smaller budget productions.

SODERBERGH: But those companies are closing more often than they are being opened now.

WPJ: So it's still easier to make a super expensive blockbuster than a smaller film?

SODERBERGH: Yeah.

WPJ: It is? Even with all the problems of financing and so on?

SODERBERGH: Oh, they'll make those movies all day. The thing is that there is this weird dead zone in the terms of the scale of movies between $20 million and $85 million. Most of the movies that fail and *lose* the most money are in this 20 to 85 range. You know, "Slumdog Millionaire," which cost six or eight million—anything in the teens or below they're kind of interested in, and these tend to be genre movies or at least they hope that they are. And then when you get above the 85 range you're into sort of the physically big movies that probably have movie stars in them or have some high concept behind them that they can sell. The mid-range film is eroding.

WPJ: So is the vacuum going to be filled by third world films?

SODERBERGH: Yeah, it could be filled by other films coming out of cultures that, again, don't have the resources to make "The Matrix." And that's not a bad thing. But what's worse to me than the encroachment of American movies into other markets is the encroachment of the American definition of what constitutes a success. That's a real problem. Our acceptance of what we're told constitutes a success is pretty narrow. "Che" is a perfect example. When you look at the context of the entire movie, what happened to the film here in the States has actually been great for us. By the standards of any of the companies that make movies in the United States, though, it's a non-event—it made a million or two dollars in box office and then does 200 to 250 thousand in on-demand sales, and I think it's going to be a pretty big video title. The bottom line is for IFC Films, this has been a very profitable release.

WPJ: But doesn't every filmmaker ultimately look at the box office? Only because, not so much for money, but just in terms wanting to produce something that people are going to watch?

SODERBERGH: You can't keep making things that people don't go to see. You just don't—you want to have a job, you know. And that's why I've been trying to be pragmatic about what I pick—I'm weighing the scale of the idea versus what I think the accessibility of that idea is. There have been a couple of times where I really miscalculated and I've done things that, in retrospect, were probably too weird for the amount of money that I spent on them. And that's frustrating because I don't like losing people's money.

WPJ: But that's the marketplace talking. So are you saying then that the marketplace really is—more than any other factor—driving filmmaking today all over the world, not just out of Hollywood?

SODERBERGH: Yeah, but I think that's fair.

WPJ: That doesn't bother you then?

SODERBERGH: No it doesn't bother me at all. It's true in every art form. And look, filmmaking is a very expensive

hobby. It really is. I have no problem with the marketplace being the arbiter of whether you have a career or you don't have a career.

WPJ: Let's look to the future. Where do you think we're going to be in 25 years in terms of global cinema?

SODERBERGH: Well, it's hard for me to talk about where cinema is going to be in 25 years because I'm not convinced that it's going to be relevant. I think it's absolutely conceivable that the world is going to be in a lot worse shape a lot sooner than anyone thinks. I think this place could be "Mad Max" in ten years if we don't really start to act. And I can't say that I look around and feel confident that that will take place. Whenever I start looking ten years or so into the future, movies immediately get pushed to the side because I feel like that's really not what anybody's going to be thinking about. If we don't go through another variation of the Enlightenment soon, I really think we're going to be in trouble.

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WPJ: It's a very dark view of the future. Do you think this crisis is reversible?

SODERBERGH: No, I don't think so. I think the math of it all doesn't work. I think it's like life, you might be able to slow down the inevitable, but you can't stop it.

WPJ: You know, traditionally we work in cycles, you have a down cycle and you come back up. You're saying that this suddenly has broken all laws of cycles?

SODERBERGH: Potentially, yeah. I think in terms of when we look at what's going on with just the speed with which we are converting this planet into garbage, it's just alarming—on a deeper level than people wanting to put solar panels on their house or anything like that. Every Thursday night I take all of my paper and I tie it up and put it outside and it gets picked up, and I feel like I'm really doing my part. And then I get stuck on the 405 Freeway in Los Angeles at eight o'clock in the morning and for as far as I can see there are millions of cars at a standstill, and this happens everyday. So you have to think, this is silly, me wrapping my *New York Times* in a bundle. We've got bigger problems than what I do with my paper.

WPJ: Do you think that films in general, global film, reflect this feeling? Or are they pure escapism?

SODERBERGH: I think they do, in a way. Even when they don't reflect reality, the way in which they don't reflect reality says something very specific about where our headspace is. So, it can't help but be a snapshot of what we're all thinking and what we're all feeling, even if it's to avoid what we're thinking and feeling. I just wish they mattered, and I don't know that they matter.

WPJ: Films? You don't think that they do matter to people?

SODERBERGH: Well, that's a larger question of whether art matters. The point is that art is a story that we tell each other about what's going on and I just feel like

we've had a lot of it, we've had a lot of art for a long time. How many stories do we need to tell about ourselves in which we point out a better way to do things and it's basically ignored?

WPJ: Look back to classical art, go back to Michelangelo, da Vinci, Gaugin or Cézanne—they all had a vision of the world that was lasting.

SODERBERGH: Sure, but their worlds were pretty small. What they were exposed to and their reach was really small compared to what we're exposed to and what our reach can be now.

WPJ: So that's good. The globe does in fact impact you.

SODERBERGH: Yeah, but I'm still waiting to see some sort of quantifiable positive impact.

WPJ: Che had a strong, powerful view.

SODERBERGH: But this is my point: Che Guevara became activated and radicalized because of some real-life experiences that he had, and they were strong enough to make him wake up every morning wanting to do one thing. It wasn't a movie; he didn't read a book. No one is going to watch "Che" and get up and leave his or her job and go somewhere and volunteer for the rest of their lives. First of all, that's not the role of the film, it's not a commercial for him. It's a piece of art.

WPJ: Stories are illuminating…

SODERBERGH: I know, but how many more illuminating stories do we need before we start solving the bigger issues?

WPJ: You're still going to be making films, right?

SODERBERGH: I will stop sooner than people think.

WPJ: What are you going to do?
SODERBERGH: Let's put it this way, when I was looking for a job earlier this year, when I was being sent things, being called and told an idea, I would ask myself, "Is this a 'white people who feel empty' movie? Because I can't do it, I can't do that anymore." I'm not really interested in the emotional lives of my peers anymore. But I think it's kind of a dangerous attitude to have at the same time, because there's an argument to be made that only someone who has it really good would ever want to make a movie that makes people feel bad, because most people who have it bad want to go to the movies to feel good.

WPJ: Everywhere. That's universal…

SODERBERGH: Yeah, that's true. And you see at the end of the year when awards season rolls around, the big serious movies that make you feel bad come out and usually are showered with accolades. It's kind of crazy, you know. Again, on the one hand, I feel very lucky to have this job, it's a great job, and I feel a responsibility to work hard at it to prove myself but the idea of it being in anyway ennobling for people to experience is questionable.

WPJ: I think some people will feel ennobled by seeing "Che."

SODERBERGH: Well that would be bad. The only thing that I would hope is that people come out of that asking themselves, "What in my life am I that passionate about?" It's not do I want to be him or am I like him. It's really, what am I that committed to? Another person? An idea? Anything? That's really what it was about to me. What was interesting about him to me was his ability to sustain this outrage.

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WPJ: So ultimately, you have to keep going to the movies in the hope of seeing another great movie…

SODERBERGH: Well, there are some out there. Again, it all comes down to this question of filters and how you find stuff that you'll respond to. What I think is frustrating about watching how the business works is how it's not really designed to reward risk-taking on the part of the audience. We're making it more and more difficult for people to take a chance when they go buy a ticket to a movie, and that's really unfortunate. There's this argument about the issue of ticket pricing. Movies are the only business in which there isn't pricing relative to what you're actually going to see. It's a heretical discussion.

WPJ: It's like saying that "War and Peace" should cost ten times more than some mass-market paperback book.

SODERBERGH: Not exactly. I'm not saying that you should necessarily tie ticket price to the size of the movie. But, again, at a certain point, if you want to grow an audience say, for independent or foreign films, you'd be smart to come up with a pricing plan that makes you more competitive. If we are talking about continuing to grow, or at least maintain because attendance is sort of dropping slowly, a movie-going audience, then we have to be a little more creative in enticing people. You should be rewarding people. This is my whole theory: the price paradigm should be inverted. You should charge people more money for a downloaded movie than you are charging them to go to a theatre. You should reward them for getting out of the house and going somewhere. You should make them pay more for double-clicking and getting something instantly. The pricing scheme is totally backwards. You're making the easy thing the cheapest and the most difficult thing the most expensive. It doesn't make any sense. ●