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The Auteur as a Critic: Amy Taubin reviews Steven Soderbergh

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The Film Critic as an Auteur:
Amy Taubin Reviews Steven Soderbergh

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of The Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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The reason I chose Film Studies as a major, after initially moderating into Production, was that I claimed not to like the “collaborative” nature of independent production; I erroneously thought I was interested in the independence critical studies would provide me.

Very foolish thought indeed, as I have found myself collaborating with others more through writing than I ever did through production. The collaborative nature of critical studies is a treat. Having the opportunity to learn from and be inspired by some truly exceptional people has been the most memorable part of my 2018 to 2023 film career.

I must start by giving thanks to my advisor, Ed Halter; for being (literally) the best. For teaching me most everything that I cherish about my time at Bard College. Professor Halter is responsible for redefining my understanding of films and what is possible through the art of filmmaking, and mostly to blame for the experimental nature of any and all my films. Most importantly, this project and my graduation would not have been possible without his support and guidance.

Gracias a Charo, Coco y mi abuela. Gracias por existir y por siempre creer en mí, a través del espacio y el tiempo. Sin su apoyo nada de lo que hago sería posible, sin ustedes no sería yo.

Infinite gratitude to my friends from the northern hemisphere of earth: Addison A, my Olivia Jean; Emelia B, my Karen Elson; Em S, my Meg White. Kira H, for showing me the tricks of the old gods; William S, for showing me the tricks of the new; and Isabella, for being home away from home. Y a mis amigos del hemisferio sur, que más que amigos son hermanos: Valeria, Marcelo, y Sabrina. Son lo mejorcito del Perú. Y los quiero mucho. Esto también es para ustedes.

Oh dear, sometimes I wish we were all spores in a forest, close, mysterious, mischievous. Other times I wish I could haunt you in a ghost-like manner without dying. Mostly, I wish that we stay friends until tomorrow. And then some...

A big thank you to Amy Taubin, for inspiring this project and helping fill my heart with a love for cinema the likes of which are only seen in psychiatric patients.

And lastly, thanks to the borough of Queens, the city of Murfreesboro, Jack White, the Nashville Predators, Susan Sontag, Thomas Beard, black tea, coffee, Krispy Kreme, Excel spreadsheets, Peruvian restaurants in the greater New York City Area, grass (wink wink), the original owners of all my thrifted clothes, Ann Green, the Bard Meme Lab, and my dog, Pipsey Piper Juicebox.

With love,

M.B.

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Introduction

"The best film critics are not just writers, but thinkers and scholars who bring a deep knowledge of film history and theory to their work." - Amy Taubin

The film critic, doing film criticism. It appeared to me from a young age as one of, for lack of a better word, the *coolest* tasks that a writer could undertake. It seemed to me this exercise in attention was elemental to the lifecycle of cinema, and the somewhat retroactive nature that all art possesses.. Criticism is necessary because – in the simplest of ways – it proves that a movie has had enough of an impact to inspire the creation of another piece, one that is dedicated to cracking the surface open and figuring the delicate shades of the work presented.

It was not until 2016 that I found Amy Taubin, through her “10 Best Films of 2016” list on IndieWire¹. Ever since and following a deep dive into her work, she became (and remains) my favorite film critic. If in a selfish manner, just because if I was to write film criticism I probably would take the same distinctive approach. You see, Taubin manages to go above and beyond in her role as a propeller of culture, way beyond the scope of the role of the classic film critic. What originally sparked my interest was the magnificent range in this Critic’s Pick list – the spectral, holistic efforts it possessed. Her reviews presented a clear knowledge of filmmaking coming from the person who was not herself a filmmaker, but had obviously engaged with film in both theory and practice throughout a long and illustrious career. More pointedly, I found she clearly had managed to gain knowledge from most of, if not all, of the films that she had taken time to review, effortlessly making connections between her encyclopedic knowledge of cinema. I was

¹ Taubin, Amy. “2016 IndieWire Critics Poll: Amy Taubin.” *Indie Wire*, 6 Dec. 2016

enthralled by Taubin, her wit and voice, the determination she carried from youth to prove filmmaking's place among the arts.

Thanks to the internet, its archives, and my advisor, I had the opportunity to read over 150 reviews by Amy Taubin, ranging from the 1960s to today. The idea of her range, already challenged and expanded by the list through which I discovered her, was further explored through each of these reviews, keeping in mind the consistency of her style and her role as a first-hand account writer through the last 50 years. Beyond that, I came to find – in Amy Taubin – something special; something that I have yet to see as visibly in other critics: an unyielding commitment to the survival of the art of filmmaking. Her role as a critic enabled her with the ability to distinguish between the levels in which the craft acts; a tension which she has highlighted throughout her career-long following of multiple auteurs and figures in filmmaking, as well as her openness to new themes and styles they might experiment with. Taubin celebrates experiments, and never seems too stuck on a specific pattern of what makes a film noteworthy. If anything, she is able to mold her unique approach to each review she writes.

However, finding a throughline through which we can divide Taubin's writings is difficult. Her style and career are fairly consistent, and the variety that her reviews present also turns the most common topics through which we could analyze her into a diminishing disservice to her versatility.

The answer to such a task came in the form of one of my favorite Taubin reviews: *Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Amy Taubin on Soderbergh's The Knick*.² I do not believe that any other critic quite as similarly captures my feelings and impressions on this show, likely due to the depth that Taubin's long-time following of Soderbergh's career gives to the piece.

² Taubin, Amy. "Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Amy Taubin on Steven Soderbergh's The Knick." *Artforum*, 19 Aug. 2014

*The Knick*³ (2012-2013), an auteurist work of art, earns its place as one of Soderbergh's most recognizable works. It reaches a level of immediacy and rawness not displayed by the filmmaker since *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (1989).⁴ Taubin makes note of this accomplishment, while also taking into account his notably audacious career, creating a parallel between their trajectories that seemed perhaps one of the only viable ways to look at Taubin's development as a critic. Through the career and range of Soderbergh, we can take a peek into Amy Taubin's thoughts, her own ability for reviewing films from different genres and her ability to stay immutable while growing through time. *The Knick* is worth noting because of its similar reviews to Soderbergh's debut feature by Taubin, a factor that denotes an incredible level of consistency for the two of them.

Both Soderbergh and Taubin's careers seem to mirror each other. They start with a firm, thorough focus on American Independent Film. Through this, they reach critical notoriety. At this point, they both open their horizons to a mainstream audience. However, they focus on retaining a strong element of auteurism and consistency through unique, defined styles. While not many have the range of Amy Taubin, Soderbergh comes as close as a filmmaker could. This is why it is, perhaps, the most viable way to understand how the trajectory of both of their works impacts the finished product that their auteurist legacy is today is by juxtaposing their works. By going through Soderbergh's career through the writings of Amy Taubin, we find not only the ability that Soderbergh has to continuously contribute to the development of filmmaking as an art, but also the constant skillfulness of Taubin to holistically examine his work at different points in her career.

³ *The Knick*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Cinemax, 2014.

⁴ *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Miramax Films, 1989.

As their shared focus of American independent film has spanned three decades, so have their precise yet varying alternative focuses. In a way, as their careers have changed, their relationship to a greater commitment has remained consistent. A viable way to analyze Taubin, the filmography of Soderbergh provides us with a combination of extreme domains of diverse genres and deeply refined personal style. A strong, solid base in the workings of the craft allow for a highly artistic piece to be created in Soderbergh's movies; the same could be said about Amy Taubin's writing, taking into special account how her reviews of Soderbergh denote her own personal ability to maintain her personal writing style through different tones, times, and styles.

Part 1: Taubin

Amy Taubin's career is indisputably unique. Born on October 10th, 1938, Amy Taubin received her undergraduate degree from Sarah Lawrence College and her master's from New York University. Taubin was a member of New York City's experimental art movement in the 60s and 70s. While most of her contributions have happened in the form of film and TV criticism, Taubin is most notably remembered as the subject of one of Andy Warhol's famous *Screen Tests*⁵ (1964) and one of the people present in the mise-en-scene portrayed in *Wavelength*⁶ (1969) by Michael Snow. These two instances of presence in the community of structuralist artists elevate her to a level of insight rarely seen in critics. It is impossible to deny that Taubin has an advantage over other critics, having a deeper understanding of the role of cast and crew and their impact on the finished product.



Screencap from *SCT335 (1964)*, by Andy Warhol.

⁵ *SCREENTEST 335: Amy Taubin*. Directed by Andy Warhol, 1964.

⁶ *Wavelength*. Directed by Michael Snow, 1967.

⁷ *SCREENTEST 335: Amy Taubin*. Directed by Andy Warhol, 1964.

She began a stable criticism career by writing weekly film reviews for the Village Voice in the 1970s, and supplemented her body of work with reviews on the Soho Weekly News. By the 1980s, Taubin managed to move on to writing for prestigious, film-specific publications, such as The Millennium Film Journal, the Criterion Collection, and Sight and Sound, in addition to cultural staples such as Artforum. While her first area of expertise was American independent film, Taubin has expanded her range to include almost every type of filmmaking both in the American and global radar, with a special insight into stylistic auteurship, and extensive bodies of work by single artists.

Additionally, she is a prolific television, arts, and culture reviewer, though that commonly goes unnoticed due to the notoriety of her film-related work. Her most notable TV reviews include Soderbergh's *Behind the Candelabra*⁸ (2013), Damien Chazelle's *The Eddy*⁹ (2020), and Fassbinder's *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*¹⁰ (1972-73). Taubin is a beacon of film culture, having served as curator for The Kitchen and as a current board member at Anthology Film Archives. It is through this illustrious career that Taubin has managed to serve in selection panels for festivals and multiple film societies, most notably the Film Society of Lincoln Center. She also has published books on multiple subjects, such as James Nares¹¹ and Agnes Varda¹², and continues to write regularly today. She also has an amusing, albeit scarce, X (formerly Twitter) presence.

⁸ Taubin, Amy. "Cannes: Amy Taubin on Behind the Candelabra." *Film Comment*, 21 May 2013.

⁹ Taubin, Amy. "À La Modal: Amy Taubin on The Eddy." *Artforum*, 19 May 2020.

¹⁰ Taubin, Amy. "An Abundance of Flowers: Amy Taubin on Rainer Fassbinder's Eight Hours Don't Make a Day." *Artforum*, Mar. 2017.

¹¹ *James Nares*. 1st U.S. edition, Skira Rizzoli, 2013.

¹² *The complete films of Agnès Varda*. Special edition collector's set, The Criterion Collection, 2020.



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Amy Taubin in Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1969)

Though her writing's ultimate purpose is to present the movie through her eyes to the reader, Amy Taubin is a master at wording and storytelling. Before giving her opinion, she's an expert at painting the scene in an accurate and picturesque manner. She is not trying to convince the reader of anything other than to form their own opinion on what she considers a noteworthy piece. In a way that few writers can claim, she manages to give us a rebuttal to most of her own criticism, creating a sort of holistic picture of what criticism can look like; by analyzing not only the angle she is coming from but the different approaches that could be taken while analyzing a film. Additionally, she is outstanding at giving an understanding of not only the finished product of film, but the author's intentions and point of view. Good examples of this are her tendency to include interviews with directors in her criticism for movies, as well as a propensity to situate the film in a metaphysical way both in the societal climate it comes from and is brought into, in

¹³ *Wavelength*. Directed by Michael Snow, 1967.

addition to a highlighting of the connection between the art and the artist and its impact on auteurist styles.

Her liking for Soderbergh could be seen as a reflection of her own style of work. Her essay on *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* for The Criterion Collection¹⁴ highlights, in retrospect, what it is that she finds so fascinatingly distinctive about Soderbergh's film; in an echo of sorts the elements Taubin points out as elemental to Soderbergh's success are also what makes her writing so remarkably relevant.

“The brief account of the plot above does not do justice to the psychological complexity of the characters, the quicksilver dialogue, the play of desire and its repression, and the dramatization of how moving images had already, by 1989, begun to mediate all relationships—intimate, social, political, economic, you name it.” (Taubin)

There is no doubt that Taubin recognizes the limits of criticizing images on paper. However, instead of trying to conceal such a fact, she leans into the possibilities of writing. Additionally, this integrative approach to the film as a piece in the context of a broader socio-cultural climate allows Taubin to give us the chance to somewhat understand the basis of the criticism, as opposed to a mysterious, unbeknownst force. Taubin seems to like Soderbergh's ability to provide social commentary about most topics through his choices, seemingly undermining her own participation in the same ritual by reviewing his work. Over the last fifty years, Taubin has awarded the same amount of care through this approach to each one of her reviews, not limiting herself to commenting about the art as if it existed in a vacuum.

¹⁴ Taubin, Amy. “Sex, Lies and Videotape: Some Kind of Skin Flick.” *Criterion*, 17 July 2018.

“[...T]he tenderness with which Soderbergh treats Ann and Graham finally conditions the characters’ behavior toward each other. [...] I wonder if Soderbergh’s rejection of writing doesn’t have something in common with Graham’s rejection of passionate relationships in favor of creating desire through images that are at one remove.” (Taubin)

This seems to be a microcosm of Taubin’s approach to film criticism. She is, first and foremost, a champion for the art of filmmaking. While most of her reviews do express her personal opinion, this is something she does without a need to discredit the craft in itself. This tension between preservation of an artform and its refinement is not a complicated thing to navigate for Taubin. She does never lose sight of her role as a critic, but manages to continuously celebrate any and all wins by films that are less acclaimed than most. Her going beyond her original scope of American independent film is yet another example of this. Taubin shows herself being rather preoccupied with keeping the art of film and film criticism alive, as opposed to obsessed with scrutinizing the form in which it presented itself to appease her own aesthetic preferences.

Criticism, even at its harshest, was not unbeknownst to Taubin. However, it is quite visible through her praises of certain pieces that she is passionate about the art of film staying relevant more than she is interested in putting any filmmaker down. I believe this cultural relevance is based on dismantling the idea that criticism is to be reserved for literature or art. By criticizing film from the point in time at which Taubin started doing it, she was ushering it into its rightful place as a formal art form. It is film criticism, and the general idea of being able to distinguish between qualities of film that awards film recognition as an art form that transcends

the low vs. high art spheres. First and foremost, Taubin is interested in keeping film a part of everyday conversation, and through her writing, she invites us to think more deeply about what is happening on our screens. She is focused on the whole picture of filmmaking as an collective art, and what can be done to promote that, as opposed to being focused on personal preferences.

Once again, this does not mean that she has not been critical in past reviews. But, her criticism always presents itself with such respect for the author's involvement, and an overall thankfulness regardless of opinion for, when awarded, the dedication to keeping moving image art alive. After all, it is this elementally human aspect in filmmaking that she highlights in most, if not all, of her work; the grandiosity of the human experience could never be captured and she understands that, but as we all try through film, she is cheering us on.

A main point we must understand is the society in which Taubin began writing, its relationship to film, and how contrastingly it differs from what 21st-century understanding of filmmaking is. Taubin grew into herself in the times when film was still fighting to find its footing and be recognized as a formal art form. More intensely at the time, contention between what thinkers such as Dwight McDonald saw as the opposing popular culture and high culture made this task harder. Of popular culture, McDonald commented: "*It doesn't even have the theoretical possibility of being good. [...] It is non-art. It is even anti-art.*¹⁵".

Elemental to understanding the impact of Amy Taubin's powerful style, it is worth placing her beside some of the finest writers in her field: Pauline Kael and Susan Sontag. *Sontag & Kael*¹⁶ by Craig Selligman presents a fantastic framework for film and art criticism through the

¹⁵ Macdonald, Dwight, and John Summers. *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain*. New York Review Books, 2011.

¹⁶ Seligman, Craig. *Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me*. Paperback ed. first publ, Counterpoint, 2005.

eyes of these writers. While both Sontag and Kael belong to an older generation of critics, it was their own avant-gardist sensibilities that paved the way for Taubin's seemingly over-developed approach to reviews. Of this era of filmmaking and criticism, Selligman writes:

“Kael knew that she experienced mass culture as something more than aesthetic junk food. So did Andrew Sarris. So did Sontag, who was arguing in 1965 that “the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture seems less and less meaningful,” that for the “new sensibility” she was attempting to define, “the feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes.” You could love Godard and Jasper Johns and the Beatles.” (Seligman, 13)

The first thing that makes Amy Taubin's criticism so special is the implementation of this range over the whole spectrum of culture. As evidenced by her coverage of most genres, and more tacitly, most Soderbergh movies, Taubin appreciates the auteur's ability to mutate, while also showing her own versatility in managing to analyze each piece with her characteristic style in the context of society. Just like with Soderbergh's films, her writing focus is never delimited by this separation between high and low culture.

What is, then, Amy's style? How do we find thematic points in writing that are situated in connection to another piece, with already defined style?

“Kael discovered that in writing about film, she could write about everything. Sontag's ambition to write about everything seems particularly unbounded. [...] Notwithstanding her stylistic growth, Kael's approach stayed much the same. Sontag's

changed. Mutability has, in fact, been one of the defining motifs of her career”
(Seligman, 21)

Kael, here noted for her consistency, is presented in contrast to Sontag who shines due to her chameleonic writing abilities. Taubin, however, has successfully mastered both of the skills aforementioned. Not only is she able to write about everything when writing about film, but her ability to write about all kinds of film just reflect on this aspect of mutability that Sontag is remembered for. Amy Taubin, who also follows a stable path of stylistic growth, never shies away from the opportunity that films give as a crack into the fabric of the real world. Taubin successfully captures this exemplary element in her film criticism, the role of the human experience as a part of filmmaking. Additionally, her approach to film criticism could be considered almost structuralist, giving great importance to form and its construction throughout a piece.

“For me, Sontag’s best writing on politics and society occurs not in the dryish articles she devoted to those topics but in the same place Kael addressed them: the asides, swipes, and the off-the-cuff observations that crop up constantly in her essays on aesthetic themes” (Seligman, 64)

I believe that a similar, if mirrored, statement can be said about Taubin. While not about politics and society, much is said about the art of filmmaking and its continuity as a craft through her reviews. While she never outright presents a framework or ‘formula’ for successful filmmaking, it is clear that she has an idea of what elements give quality to a film. However, instead of presenting these elements devoid of context, she successfully highlights them by

bringing the importance of the craft into her reviews of films. In an almost structuralist manner, Amy Taubin's focus on the behind-the-scenes work and level of involvement by the filmmaker does not come in a long-form essay about a specific director (though, of course, she has produced that type of content, too), but of what leaks through the cracks in her consistent preferences over a long career in media criticism. In an even more literal way, some of her most dividing opinions come not in the form of reviews but mainstream commentary, such as podcasts or interviews. Taubin does not shy away from her role as critic even when it comes to simple commentary.

“Well, what's art? This question is one that critics of Kael, especially, tend to raise, since she has a habit of throwing the term around. [...] You might reasonably concur with the commentator who demurred, “All movies are art or none are. ‘Art’ is not an accolade to be bestowed by each critic on his half dozen favorites.”

To which Kael might reasonably reply: “Why not?” [...] To declare “all movies are art is to deploy art as a generic term. Adopting this usage, claiming that Hollywood junk isn't art would be like claiming that fast food isn't food.” (Seligman, 169)

What is art for Amy Taubin, then, in the filmmaking context? This seems to be a tension she is keenly aware of, and interested in playing with. Taubin's main goal through criticism is to expand the art of filmmaking, to keep it alive, and to enlarge its possibilities. She seems more interested in this than any aesthetic, stylistic, or thematic quips, once again proving her ability to expand her range beyond the scope of most critics. Additionally, Taubin is not only interested in shaping filmmaking through criticism, but her interest in auteurism and certain filmmakers (such as Soderbergh) denotes a commitment to the craft that goes beyond the reception of the work

benign produced, but its impact in the cultural zeitgeist and more importantly, its impact in the cultural role of filmmaking.

“So much for establishing our right to the word. The question remains: Is it art? Tempting as it is to blurt, Good God, how could it be anything else? It’s essential to draw some distinctions between what the critic and the artist do and how they do it. To benign with, the artists’ sole responsibility is to his or her— let’s say her— vision. The critic’s primary responsibility is to the work of art, through her vision (sensitivity is probably a better word) will frame her view of it. Glory is for artists. A critic’s duty, first and foremost, is to get it right.” (Seligman, 171)

Amy Taubin manages to expand the role of the critic to have not only a responsibility to the work of art, but, as aforementioned, to filmmaking as a form of art. It is important to remember that at the time of the start of Taubin’s career, filmmaking was still making an effort to be recognized as a formal art form. In continuing with that tradition, Taubin’s points of view tend to come from a focus on the film’s overall impact on filmmaking culture as opposed to arbitrary personal sensibilities. While Taubin has a defined style of her own, this is only a channel through which she highlights the pieces that keep the art alive, as opposed to trying to shape the art form into something that follows her personal aesthetic concerns. Yes, her duty, and one she completes time and time again, is to get it right. But what she gets right is the importance of the art of filmmaking in the canon, whatever form or genre it might come in.

“When Kael says criticism is exciting “because you must use everything you are and everything you know that is relevant,” the small phrase that is relevant is a

concession to humility, an admission that the criticism doesn't have unlimited freedom to roam. Whatever else she brings into her writing, the critic has to keep her gaze focused on the work of art, and this willingness to place one's talent, one's ego, at the service of the work is central to any decent criticism." (Seligman, 172)

This is what makes Amy Taubin a champion for the art of filmmaking. Her beginnings as an actress just serve as further proof of this. Her understanding of the importance of filmmaking is total, and has led her to dedicate her life to promoting it. Additionally, she gives a big space in her criticism for the legacy of filmmakers through multiple years of work; a holistic view at their body of work, if you will. It is this, combined with the consistency of Amy's reviews, that result in Taubin herself developing a recognizable style of her own. The expansive array of reviews she has amassed through her career serves as proof that her priorities have always relied upon something bigger than her own opinions, and that her intentions were never those of exclusion, but expansion of the possibilities of film.

Her relationship with Soderbergh is also a clear example of this. Taubin manages to promote the art of filmmaking through her reviews of Soderbergh, and instead of focusing on his missteps, she highlights his successes. She is fulfilling, in this way, her role as a critic; "getting it right." Very few critics can claim such a long-standing commitment to the cementation of filmmaking as an art, but Taubin has never failed in making such a case through her reviews. In equal measure, through her words, and the works she carefully picks to highlight and expose.

It is also clear her past as an actress impacts the way she views and talks about film. Taubin presents an almost structuralist approach to her film criticism, taking into account the integrity of form that is presented and whether or not this is successful. She sees the film for its process as a project, not a result. Her very own hands-on experience with filmmaking clearly

informs her approach to film analysis, one characterized by a heightened importance of behind-the-scenes work and performances by cast and crew.

Lastly, her interest in filmmakers as holistic figures proves that she is culturally engaged in film not only through review, but also essays, interviews, podcasts, and most forms of media available to her. Her ability to adapt both to different types of film and through an over five-decade-long career just proves that she is unmatched in the world of film writing.

Part 2: Introducing Steven Soderbergh; or: The Last 30 Years of Amy Taubin

Soderbergh is regarded as one of the most notable American film directors of his generation. From his humble beginnings at 1989's American Film Festival (now known as Sundance), where he presented what is considered his greatest work, and a triumph of indie filmmaking, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989), he became the one to watch in the decade of the '90s. After a short period, where Soderbergh seemed to find his footing through critically acclaimed films that did not seem to break the box office, he made a massive comeback in 2001 as a double-nominee in the Best Picture category at the Academy Awards with *Erin Brokovich*¹⁷ (2000) and *Traffic*¹⁸ (2000). These two films launched him into mainstream notoriety (the latter awarding him the Academy Award for Best Director), being both box office and critical successes that would, in addition to the massive international success of 2001's *Ocean's Eleven*,¹⁹ make the rest of his eclectic career possible.



Steven Soderbergh and Peter Gallagher on the set of Sex, Lies, and Videotape, 1989. Production still photographer: Diana Gary © Miramax Films, Outlaw Productions, Virgin

¹⁷ *Erin Brokovich*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Universal Pictures, 2000.

¹⁸ *Traffic*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, USA Films, 2000.

¹⁹ *Ocean's Eleven*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2001.

Following the cementation of the Ocean's trilogy as a global phenomenon, the stylistic art show that was *Che*²⁰ (2008), and the release of Soderbergh classics such as *The Informant*²¹ (2009) and *Contagion*²² (2010), Soderbergh released his next multi-part stripper epic: *Magic Mike*²³ (2012). Shortly after this, his pivot into television with *Behind the Candelabra*²⁴ (2013) marked the start of a short retirement; one that concluded after 3 months when Soderbergh announced his next project: the masterful exercise in auteur television that is *The Knick* (2014).

“What makes Soderbergh one of the most important filmmakers in the history of the medium is the breadth of his body of work, and his balancing of precision and risk in almost every film he creates.” (Taubin)

Taubin, at the time of the release of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989), was already a well-known figure in film criticism, widely focusing on American Independent Film and its growing space in the industry. It is worth noting that her reviews were remarkable for taking on a great variety of subjects, not limited to American indie film. Writing for the Village Voice at the time, Taubin was no stranger to festival breakthroughs. In 1989 alone, Taubin published reviews on the Soho Weekly News and the Village Voice spanning a variety of subjects from Kuchar to Scorsese, to Akerman and Warhol.

As Soderbergh's career develops and opens towards creating works that go beyond what is considered Indie and into both auteur pieces and mainstream blockbusters, so does Taubin's

²⁰ *Che*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, IFC Films, 2008.

²¹ *The Informant*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009.

²² *Contagion*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2011.

²³ *Magic Mike*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012.

²⁴ *Behind the Candelabra*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, HBO Films, 2013.

reach and writing, solidifying a transition from newspaper journalism to high art magazine criticism, while maintaining her unequivocally distinct style. While it would be impossible to document every instance of contact between Taubin and Soderbergh, extensive reviews, interviews, and talks between the two reveal a tactile relationship that exists connecting both of their bodies of work; one that begins with Taubin's fascination with *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and lives on until now.

While the work they produce could not be more different, both Taubin and Soderbergh seem focused on expanding the reach of cinema and its possibilities. Additionally, both have forged an authentic style that accompanies all of their works regardless of the genre or subject matter. It is perhaps not impossible to find a similar relationship between Soderbergh and another critic. But, while criticisms and theory writing of Soderbergh exist far and large, no one has followed his career as closely and as pointedly as Taubin. Their careers' exponential growth also mimics each other's, allowing them an understanding of each other's work that critics looking back in time when writing about Soderbergh might not be able to find. Taubin is privy to all of Soderbergh's on-screen quips and tricks. She has a trained eye for what his style is trying to achieve and bases her criticism on an analysis of his whole body of work as opposed to a single piece. This is the kind of knowledge that only comes with time, which is why I believe the best way to understand Soderbergh is through the writings of Amy Taubin.

A basic introduction to both of their characteristic styles is possible, perhaps starting with Amy Taubin's essay on *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, published by the Criterion Collection in 2018.

“[...] Soderbergh often frames the two central characters, Ann (Andie MacDowell) and Graham (James Spader), in extremely tight close-ups, held long enough

for the skin of their faces to become naked indexes of their inner lives. They blush, they sweat. We know what their cheeks would feel like if we were to touch them with our fingers as we do with our eyes. I've never seen—before or since—skin that alive in a movie.” (Taubin)

This passage captures Amy Taubin's writing style. It is a prose that borders on storytelling, one that does not feel patronizing but allows for clear images to be conveyed. There is a presence of technical terms necessary to the understanding of the form of the filmmaker's aesthetic. Her writing mimics the urgency in Soderbergh's images, giving us a minimal taste of the experience that *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* is. This ability to transport us, along with Taubin's timeless understanding of this movie in Soderbergh's career and independent filmmaking as a field, bring forth a tension rarely highlighted in film criticism: the ability to give you not an opinion, but the desire to watch a film for yourself. Taubin is fantastic at this.

On the other hand, this passage is a great description of Soderbergh's style. His preference for “extremely tight close-ups” is perhaps one of his most distinctive qualities, in addition to this tactility Taubin so successfully describes. Soderbergh is incredibly sensorial. While all he can play with is your sound and vision, he puts these tools to service by trying to invade the rest of your physical experience. *The Knick*, for example, is a festival of physical and emotional sensibilities.

Our screen opens up to the warm, reddish tones of a dimly lit room; and opium den. In the distance, we can faintly see a lady wearing a robe, with our focus meant to be struck by a striking pair of white boots that occupy the center of the frame. The owner of these boots is awoken by a young woman, who reminds him he requested to be awoken by “seven and a half.” We see Dr. John Thackery's face for the first time, his eyes struggling in confusion, fighting for

awakeness. The next shot shows the protagonist in the streets of 1900s Chinatown hailing a carriage. He gives the driver specific instructions: “The Knick. North on Mott, east on 11th.” Upon a rebuttal by the driver, who points out a faster way to avoid the trolley crossing, he replies in true Thackerian style: “I don’t want faster. I enjoy waiting.”

Moving forward, the third scene is a survey of sorts. We walk through the streets of Lower Manhattan in the olden days. Soderbergh does not shy away from the gory details of life at the time, and drives us into the world that it entailed.

Back to the art, the next scene in the show showcases the meticulousness of the production design. Additionally, this is when the first piece by Cliff Rodriguez comes in. Futuristic synths transform us into the mindset of Thackery at the time; with the next scene taking us to him inside the carriage patiently awaiting at the trolley crossing. In a sharp twist backed by a synth reaching its peak, we discover Thackery has been a step ahead of us all along; the time it takes for the trolleys to cross is the amount of time it takes him to inject cocaine into one of the veins between his toes. The synths continue to peak, the trolley crossing opens up, and the carriage keeps moving as he laces up the white boots from the first shot. After some establishing shots of the hospital, we see through the glass on the main door. A figure in a bowler hat approaches. Dr. John Thackery opens the door and enters the hospital. The screen cuts to black with white letters spelling out THE KNICK in the middle.

From that point on, *The Knick* tells the story of Dr. John Thackery, a pioneering surgeon in 1900s New York City, trying to crack the code to perform multiple surgeries and cure ailments while managing his cocaine addiction at his corruption-ridden, underfunded hospital. Other standout characters include Dr. Algernon Edwards, a black Harvard graduate and prolific surgeon in Europe, who, after initial judgment because of white supremacy being the norm at

the time, ends up under Dr. Thackery's wing, eventually carrying the torch of his studies after his death; and, Nurse Lucy Elkins, a young southerner who seems increasingly more interested with the complexity of medical procedures, and marrying into high society.

A total of 20 episodes that conclude with the death of our protagonist, Soderbergh provides us with an epic for the ages. Meticulously crafted and with a fascinating futuristic soundtrack by Cliff Rodriguez, *The Knick* is, simply put, a masterpiece. I believe that it is on par with *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* due to them both possessing a high level of tension and similar anxiety-inducing sequences, as well as what Taubin calls "*a gory spectacle*,"²⁵ in addition to a level of transgression and a pulp-nature not usually portrayed on our screens.

The first operating scene gives us Soderbergh at his best. If auteurism is what you are looking for, you have arrived at the right place. We start with the surgery, trying to help a woman suffering from placenta previa. Thackery, and his mentor, Dr. Jules Christiansen, have tried multiple times with no success. The surgery is delicate; it feels like a perfect mise en place of medical encyclopedic knowledge at the time. Every tool gets a full frame when called out by either of the doctors. We see the tension on each one of the nurse's faces. As madness takes over, and the patient starts bleeding out, we see the camera go from tripod to handheld to increase tension. The patient dies, even with our doctor's best efforts, and we see the defeat of Dr. Christiansen's procedure. "How many more, Thack?" he asks, as they all wash their blood-soaked hands in the prep room. As he is leaving, Thackery reminds him: "Jules. The procedure failed, not you." "—Thank you, my friend," he replies. Dr. Christiansen goes to his office, puts a white sheet over his couch, and shoots himself in the head in — one of the most delicately tense scenes I've seen.

²⁵ Taubin, Amy. "Blood, Sweat, and Tears: Amy Taubin on Steven Soderbergh's *The Knick*." *Artforum*, 19 Aug. 2014

What is so special then, about *The Knick*? Nothing, and everything. While other Soderbergh projects have garnered far greater attention, and critical and economic success, in addition to other metrics, the Knick seems to capture for Taubin the magic she first encountered in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, this time, 24 years later. For a director to be able to capture the rawness presented at the literal start of his career, consistently through time, is impressive. This seems to me to be yet another point of similarity between him and Taubin. They have the same abilities for consistency and a range that goes beyond what is popularly considered auteur territory.

In her review of season one of *The Knick*, Amy Taubin seems to agree with the grandiosity of this project and the importance it holds within Soderbergh's career. Though it seems her favorite Soderbergh remains *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, it is clear Taubin is struck by *The Knick* in a lasting manner.

“What makes The Knick the latest instance of auteur TV is that it is directed, photographed, and edited in its entirety by Steven Soderbergh, a continuation of the hands-on practice that has distinguished his movie career” (Taubin)

Highlighting Soderbergh's level of involvement in every aspect of *The Knick* is how Taubin begins her review. Though, it is worth noting that this hands-on approach and taking on multiple roles seems to be one of her favorite things about Soderbergh, as it was also highlighted in 2018 in an essay for The Criterion Collection about *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*.

“Shot on 35 mm film, often making use of the light that floods high-ceilinged rooms through large windows, sex, lies, and videotape is not only pleasing to the eye, it

also has an extraordinary facility. [...] A hands-on moviemaker from the beginning, Soderbergh wrote, directed, and edited *sex, lies, and videotape*. Over the past eighteen years, he has also taken charge of the cinematography for his films.” (Taubin)



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From the start of the review, we see a clear consistency in Taubin’s desire to acknowledge Soderbergh as a notable director. It is, after all, this “hands-on” approach to filmmaking, as Taubin describes it, that is the usual characteristic framework for auteur works. But Soderbergh’s approach to auteurism in *The Knick* goes beyond his role as a camera operator, and perhaps can only be understood by looking at the author’s whole body of work as opposed to separate pieces. Taubin, of course, is an expert on this when it comes to specific directors. Soderbergh is one of them. A very good and simple example of this is Soderbergh’s tendency to act as a cameraman in his pieces; in *The Knick*, the balance between tripod and hand-held shots masterfully plays with

²⁶ Photo: Mary Cybulski/Courtesy of Cinemax

the levels of tension provided by the piece. Taubin comments on the masterful use of light in both *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *The Knick*.

“Most TV dramas, even those that are photographed in so-called film style, light the actors’ faces so intensely that they seem to exist in a separate dimension from the background. Soderbergh favors natural light for exteriors and a minimum of practical lights for interiors, which allows him to play with focus as well as shadowing for expressive purposes.” (Taubin)

In *Theories of Authorship*²⁷ edited by John Caughie, the introduction gives us a solid, working description of auteurism:

“The auteur was the artist whose personality was ‘written’ in the film. [...] Auteurism shares certain basic assumptions: notably, that a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director (‘meaningful coherence is more likely when the director dominates the proceedings’: Sarris); that in the presence of a director who is genuinely an artist (an auteur) a film is more than likely to be the expression of his individual personality; and that this personality can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency over all (or almost all) the director’s film.” (Caughie, 12)

This passage perfectly captures the essence of Soderbergh’s approach to auteurism. This form entails more than the aesthetic of thematic patterns. It is based on a collective work

²⁷ Caughie, John, editor. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*. Repr, Routledge, 2001.

successfully carried by a single vision, in this case, by Soderbergh. This vision contributes towards creating a universe of sorts. In comparison with “other films,” such as *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, or even blockbusters like *Ocean's Eleven* or *Magic Mike*, *The Knick* manages to match the level of energy and tension that is so characteristic of Soderbergh. His interests are not purely aesthetic (though it is worth mentioning that Soderbergh movies tend to have impeccable production design for every one of his creations) or thematic. The auteurism comes from the emotional timing and impact each decision on the screen takes. The consistency in Soderbergh's method is admirable. Not only that, but his ability to do this job is remarkable.

“What the auteur theory argues is that every film, certainly a Hollywood film, is a network of different statements, crossing and contradicting each other, elaborated into a final ‘coherent’ version. [...] By a process of comparison with other films, it is possible to decipher, not a coherent message of world-view, but a structure which underlies the film and shapes it, giving it a certain pattern of energy cathexis.” (Caughie, 30)

While this passage refers to auteurism within a filmmaking context, it could also be used to analyze the possibility of the critic as an auteur. Taubin is an expert at deciphering the intentions of these statement networks presented in film, the same way an art historian would recognize motifs in paintings. Additionally, her writings collectively follow a theme of discovery, a wondrous tone that allows the reader to extract a network of statements from her writing. Taubin has managed to maintain this style throughout her career, her immensity of style leaking through all of her pieces. Through her writing, she manages to show us her very own coherent message of a worldview; one that is focused on the promotion of the art of filmmaking while

maintaining a critical eye. Her ability to sediment her career on this factor is perhaps the reason for my keen interest in her.

“Soderbergh has never again made a film as intimate or as filled with yearning and confusion as his debut feature,” Taubin wrote in her essay on *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. This statement from Taubin comes five years after the end of *The Knick*. While it is clear she is resolute in the place *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* has as her favorite piece from Soderbergh’s career, she seems to see traces of this film as evidenced in multiple points along her review of *The Knick*. Additionally, Taubin has pointed out that perhaps the element that sets *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* apart from other Soderbergh projects is that it gives us the director at the prime of his writing. He has not been credited with writing a film since *The Good German*²⁸ (2006), and his production of screenplays has decreased consistently, starting with the 2000s. In her review of *The Knick*, Taubin writes:

“Over the past eighteen years, [Soderbergh] has also taken charge of the cinematography for his films. But even as he has embraced being his own director of photography, Soderbergh has gradually pulled away from writing. Looking again at sex, lies, and videotape, a film whose script and direction speak to a singular, deeply held vision, I wonder if Soderbergh’s rejection of writing doesn’t have something in common with Graham’s rejection of passionate relationships in favor of creating desire through images that are at one remove. In any case, we still have sex, lies, and videotape, a movie to cherish forever.” (Taubin)

²⁸ *The Good German*. Directed by Steven Soderbergh, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006.

There is no clear, verifiable source with answers on why Soderbergh stopped writing. What is evident, however, is that Taubin remains keenly interested in his approach to the craft even after he abandons this seemingly elemental part of his filmmaking process. She speaks of a “singular vision” that ties everything together in *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, and she speaks of sensorial elements and the feeling we get while watching this.

“[...] They blush, they sweat. We know what their cheeks would feel like if we were to touch them with our fingers as we do with our eyes. I’ve never seen—before or since—skin that alive in a movie.” (Taubin)

Which resonates with her *Knick* review:

“The *Knick* is nothing if not a show about the body, and Soderbergh seems to have been liberated to make both the most sensuous and erotic and also the most nauseatingly visceral images of his career.” (Taubin)

The tension between range and style is deeply felt here. It is important to note that the relationship between Taubin and Soderbergh seems to come full circle thanks to this, as this is a defining factor of both of their careers, and one that they share.

This ability to maintain a style on top of a critic’s attention throughout his career gives Soderbergh the right to call himself an auteur, in my opinion. This consistency of not only aesthetic style but also cinematographic themes and a coherent worldview gives him a place among American auteurs such as Tarantino and Cronenberg. Meanwhile, for Taubin, this means

she has an impressive ability to decipher the puzzle that is Soderbergh. She is effective at recognizing his intentions, regardless of what packaging the director might put it in. This level of versatility is essential to the successful film critic, yet rarely recognized in them as writers. The degree to which Taubin adheres to her personal style while reviewing contrasting pieces, such as the ones throughout Soderbergh's career, make her an auteur in her own right. She is absolutely in tune with her personal sensibilities, which just happened to be expressed through the lens of the pieces she decides to review. Her ability to be limitless is reminiscent of Soderbergh's similar interest in diving into a variety of topics, protagonists, styles, and methods.

From *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* to *The Knick*: Conclusions

There is no doubt that Soderbergh is a fascinating director. His talent is evidenced in each one of his filmmaking experiments, and his level of proficiency is impressive. His place in auteurism is only further evidenced by the similarities in Taubin's reviews of *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* and *The Knick*. Soderbergh's ability to be visibly consistent over such a long period of time is impressive, but he takes it a step further by being able to carry this grandiose ability of immersion into every one of his works, regardless of medium, with the same intensity that made him relevant in the first place. It is at the same time, Amy Taubin's achievement to be able to consistently review his work with the same understanding and ability to integrate new information. She has a deeper understanding of his career, and its development from the American-indie sphere to where he is today, than most other critics, having gone through that leap herself. This is most concretely evidenced through her writing, in which a recurrent topic of the complete, fully immersing nature of Soderbergh is not only defined but recalled in most of his films.

However, the relationship between Soderbergh and Taubin is just one of many that exist between Taubin as a critical writer and multiple directors, some with just as expansive bodies of work as Soderbergh. Just as she has mastered the secret intentions of Soderbergh films, Amy Taubin is capable of understanding the microcosm presented by directors on an almost daily basis, and has managed to make a career out of her heightened ability for understanding and her appreciation of art. As mentioned before, Soderbergh is not the only auteur that Taubin covers, and this denotes a fantastic ability for a critical understanding of art and how to present it on Taubin's part. While the level of understanding and insight she possesses into Soderbergh is

extremely meticulous, it is not exclusive to him, and Taubin repeatedly manages to create these heightened levels of understanding not just out of Soderbergh but almost out of every single filmmaker she has touched upon. Over 50 years of relevance are just further proof that her ability for critical comprehension of art remains as sharp as it was on the first day, and her ability to constantly adapt to the changes in cultural, social, and artistic contexts just

What makes Soderbergh such a perfect entrypoint to Taubin's world is his impressive range and consistency through changes in both accessibility and relevance. They have both successfully navigated being on both ends of the cultural low-high spectrum, as well as an exploration of themes from the banal to the mythological. While a level of understanding over a subject, such as Taubin has with Soderbergh is impressive, the true wonder of Taubin hides behind her ability to form these levels of connection with just about every director she touches upon.

While the role of the auteur is almost exclusively reserved for film, it is impossible not to note similarities to that of the role of the film critic presenting a review to an audience. Taubin recognizes the power of criticism; by writing about a film, she has the ability of presenting it through a modified form, one that she has complete control over at that. Instead of trying to turn images into paper, she presents us with the images to the best of her ability, just to then begin peeling off the layers of meaning that can be found in a film. The auteur is constantly preoccupied with maintaining a specific standard for their work, a fact which could also be said about Taubin. All of her work belongs to a bigger project, one that is focused on the continued relevance of film and the ancient struggle to have filmmaking recognized as an art form. This is perhaps what sets her apart from most critics, an ability to remember that first and foremost filmmaking must be recognized for its critical complexity yet high accessibility. If we were to

speak of an auteur writer, it would have to be a film critic, and it would have to be Amy Taubin. Very seldom do writers manage to create such an extensive body of work without losing sight of their priorities and characteristic writing style. Regardless of the volume and variety of her work, she manages to keep the topic reachable to the reader and have her style transcend through different mediums.

On her profession, Taubin writes: "Film criticism is a form of cultural analysis that can help us to understand the world around us and our place in it."²⁹ This is a job she excels at. She does not allow for her role as a "critic" to diminish her role as a writer, one that is heavily interested in the impact of film in society and arts connection to humanism. My favorite thing about Taubin is her commitment to the immensity of film, the way in which she celebrates both the possibilities of filmmaking as a human creation, and the portrayal of this experience in film. Additionally, she comments: "The best film criticism is a collaboration between the critic and the reader. It's a dialogue that expands our understanding of what cinema can do and what it means to us as individuals and as a society."³⁰

Most of all, Taubin is a remarkable critic because she has a true passion for cinema. She interacts with it meticulously and carefully, she studies the people involved in it and the social circumstances which bring forth their inspirations. Focused on never taking her words and their power lightly, and consistently acting on the benefit of the building of a general filmmaking culture, Taubin understands that the power of the film critic resides not in having a "correct" opinion, but an ability to point to the conversation that should be had around a film, and even if a film deserves a conversation at all. She is never too hung up on specific faults of a film, as if she has decided to write about a film at all it is because she has managed to find something worth

²⁹ Taubin, Amy. "Out of the Past." *Artforum*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2007.

³⁰ Taubin, Amy. "Out of the Past." *Artforum*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2007.

expressing about it. Amy Taubin's power relies on her ability to elevate the film director, regardless of outcome, to that of a cultural ambassador. By recognizing the never-ending need that film has to prove itself, Taubin manages to keep it more relevant than most.

The impact her work has had is mostly visible in the results of, for example, Soderbergh's never ending auteurist pictures. By bringing Soderbergh into the cultural spotlight, Taubin manages to make the continuation of his work possible. Without Taubin, Soderbergh would not be able to tell just how consciously his films are appreciated. Without Taubin, Soderbergh would not be able to know someone is paying attention to his intentions and noticing the inventiveness of his experiments. The film critic, as portrayed by Amy Taubin, is first and foremost a lover of movies; what could be considered her foray into auteurism is just the consistency of this idea throughout all of her writing, unfailingly analytical and appreciative at the same time. Without Amy Taubin, and without film critics, cinema would have a much harder time staying alive.

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