

Response Sheet #4

Title: Ocean's Eleven

Director: Steven Soderbergh

Date Composed: 2001

Setting: Place and time

The actual crimes themselves take place in Los Vegas, Nevada, in the United States of America. Danny Ocean is released from prison in Atlantic City and travels to Los Angeles, St Petersburg and Chicago to round up the rest of the team.

The film is mainly set in Los Vegas, and appears to take place in the time frame that the movie was released, 2001.

The three casinos robbed are the Bellagio, The Mirage and the MGM Grand. The casinos themselves are described a "labyrinths, designed to keep people in." They are elaborate and well protected. They are presented in a golden, shiny light, have valet parking, escalators, security cameras, flashing lights and various other visions of wealth. This is backed up by the "most elaborate vault door ever conceived by man."

Context & Values: Cultural and societal influences

Los Vegas is regarded as the gambling capital of the world. If anyone was considering making a casino heist film, the first choice would be to set the film in Los Vegas.

The quest for money and wealth comes from the ideal of the 'American Dream.' However, like most ideals, the 'American Dream' has become corrupted. Once upon a time it stood for the ideal of working hard and succeeding in America, however nowadays more and more people are looking for an easier alternative to working.

The 'American Dream' was ironically based on the idea of using your own initiative to come up with a business idea and work hard for it. The irony is that whilst it is indisputable that the team have used their initiative to come up with a very elaborate plan, they are using their initiative for the purposes of crime, as opposed to using it towards honourable causes.

This attitude culminates in the film, as the eleven criminals plan to, and then succeed in robbing over \$160 million for themselves. Their 'work' was in the planning they did to pull it off.

Form, Purpose and Audience:

The text itself is in the form of a feature film. Film is the most popular medium of our time and so for a maximisation of the reach of this text; it was put in film form.

The purpose of any film made today is for takings at the box office. Whilst directors and writers do occasionally aim to make films that have social or political comments in them, their primary objective is essentially sales based. This film was also made as a star vehicle. Some of the biggest names in Hollywood including Brad Pitt, George Clooney, Julia Roberts & Matt Damon have come together to produce a film that is an entertaining star vehicle.

The intended audience for this film is the general cinema going public who have an interest in action or crime fiction thrillers.

Mystery:

The first mystery in the film occurs right at the beginning. When Danny is up for parole, we learn of his chequered past, and he is asked by the parole board what he would do if released. Danny stays silent, leaving the responder wondering just what he has in mind.

The next mystery revolves around how they plan to pull it off. The audience learns that they intend to rob three casinos but also learns of all the security that surrounds the vault. This leaves the audience wondering 'well, if there is so much security, how do they plan to pull it off?'

A final mystery occurs after they have successfully got the money out. The audience sees the SWAT team called in, and then walk out with the money. The audience is momentarily left wondering how that happened, but all is explained when a flashback delivers the answers.

Conventions:

As this is a refinement crime fiction text, many of the conventions of the genre have been subverted.

There are, however, still a few conventions that remain intact. The first of these is the fact that a crime is committed, in this case a robbery. Hence, there are criminals who carry out this crime.

There is also a 'good' guy who attempts to stop the criminals from getting away with the money. In this case it is Terry Benedict, the casino owner. In the end, Terry Benedict is effectively the sleuth but in contradiction to normal conventions, the crime is not stopped or solved.

Sleuths: Appearance, location, methods, traits, flaws

The text does not contain any official detective as such, but the criminals are attempted to be stopped.

The crime is attempted to be stopped by the casino owner Terry Benedict. He is always meticulously dressed, black suit, folder and sleek hair. However, despite the fact he is a successful businessman, he is regarded as extremely tough.

He is described as “ruthless” and if you cross him “he’ll kill you, and then he’ll go to work on you.” He is fluent in Italian, Spanish & Japanese and values money over Tess.

In his work as a casino owner he is meticulous also, he arrives at 2:00PM, remembers every valet’s name, before going upstairs to work in his office. He “hits the floor” at seven and talks with his casino manager before “glad handing the high-rollers.” At 7:30 he hits the restaurant.

He is also shown to be aggressive in his approaches towards stopping the crime from succeeding. Despite the fact that Benedict is the one trying to stop the robbery, he is regarded as the antagonist and is portrayed as the ‘bad guy’ to the audience.

The reason he is portrayed in this way is because the audience will normally associate themselves with their favourite stars such as George Clooney and Brad Pitt. That, combined with the fact that from the outset we view the text from Clooney’s perspective, meaning any obstacles for him are obstacles for us too.

Suspects or Criminals: crime, appearance, traits and methods

There are ironically eleven criminals in the film. The first of these is the mastermind, Danny Ocean. Ocean is an ex-con who spent four years in jail in Atlantic City Prison. When outside he dresses very business like, suit (most often black) and tie put on crookedly. He was previously married to Tess, Benedict’s current girl, and hence provides him with his motivation.

His right hand man is Rusty Ryan, also a criminal who has turned to teaching celebrities how to play poker. He also is very business like, always wearing a suit (often grey) and in every scene is seen eating something. He is an excellent impersonator and throughout the film plays various roles including an ATF officer, a doctor and a SWAT team commander.

The financial backer for the project is Reuben Tishkoff . He once owned casinos in Vegas but was “torpedoed” by Benedict. He is forced to watch as Benedict destroys his casino but gets his revenge by funding the operation that brought him down.

Frank Catton is a blackjack dealer who goes by the alias of Ramone. He provides inside information from his cover as an employee at the casino and feeds it back to the team.

Linus Caldwell is the rookie on the team. He lives in Chicago and is a professional pickpocket. He is sometimes irrational but impersonates the Nevada Gaming Commission Officer effectively.

The Malloy twins, Virgil and Turk, are the drivers during the operation. They drive the majority of the cars and vehicles used in the operation. They also play crucial impersonation roles including the balloons guy, assistants to Mr Zerger, Food delivery people, medics and SWAT team members.

The 'Amazing' Yen is the team's grease man. He is the one who is placed inside the vault and puts the charges on the inside of the vault door. He is a Chinese man who was part of the circus.

Basher Tarr is the munitions expert. He is the one who gets the pinch to blow the electricity for 30 seconds, allowing Danny and Linus to make their way down the elevator shaft. He is English.

Saul Bloom is a retired criminal who is lured out of retirement by Rusty. He plays Lyman Zerger, a businessman who creates a diversion while the cameras are switched.

Livingston Dell is the technical guy. He is a former FBI assistant and is the one who sets up the video tap. He also manages to re-route the phone line and acts as a phoney 911 operator.

The crime they pull off is the robbery of three Las Vegas casinos. It is done by subtle means and includes video taps, phone line re-routes, impersonations, mobile phones, rappelling, disguises, explosives, a grease man, drivers, background checks, construction, intelligence and of course, talent.

Issues:

The main issue addressed in the film is the way in which casinos are set up as manipulative machines designed to ensnare the senses. As Danny puts "the house always wins. Except if when that perfect hand comes along, you bet big and you take the house."

This issue is explored further as we see in the film that every time someone wins big, Benedict is out on the floor, monitoring the situation. We also see the dark room. It is known as the 'dark' room because there are no cameras in that room, therefore anything that happens in that room is not recorded.

It is the closest thing to international waters in a casino. It is like international waters in the sense that whoever has the power, in this case the casino, makes the rules and they are the governing body.

Alterations to Generic Conventions:

As it is a refinement text, there are a number of alterations to the conventions. The first of these is the very fact that there is no official detective or police officer, just a casino owner trying to protect his own wealth.

Another alteration is the fact that the criminals get away with the crime. In a traditional text, the crime would be solved, and the criminals locked up. Whilst Benedict realises he cannot prove Ocean had anything to do with the robbery, he reports him to the police for being outside of his parole. Ocean goes back to prison for 3 to 6 months but then emerges \$13 million richer.

The other main alteration is that it is the criminal who is the protagonist in the text while the 'good' guys are really the antagonists.

Language Features: Include quotes

- Flashbacks. Flashbacks are used to help make the audience understand the action but also show how the crime unfolded.
- Humour is used to help break the ice on some otherwise pretty mentally draining stuff. Rusty states that "whatever you do, don't, under any circumstances..." He is then called away.
- Non-diegetic sound. Continually, right throughout the text, an upbeat music track is used. Never at any stage do we really feel that the heroes aren't going to get away with it. This comes down to the music tracks played.
- Motif. The motif of the colour gold is used again and again to represent the glittering lights of Los Vegas.
- Neo Noir. Darkness and shadows are used extensively when Ocean is reunited with Rusty and they are discussing the plan in a restaurant.
- Repetition. "You know what, you're right." "He's right." "You're right Reuben." This exchange is used as a humorous effect.
- Pauses and not smooth frames are used when we see Linus pickpocket the guy on the train.
- Flying overhead shot. A shot of Los Vegas is taken from a helicopter as it flies over Vegas at night. This reinforces what Vegas is all about, lights, glamour and gambling. It also helps to re-affirm the setting of the text.
- Accelerated shot. The frantic pace of Los Vegas city is highlighted by the speeding up of shots. This particular shot involves people coming and going in front of the casinos.
- Superlative degree. "You guys are the best." Reinforces the fact that this is crime on its grandest scale.
- Cliché. "You gotta walk before you can crawl." The very fact that the cliché was stated wrong adds humour to the situation but many responders will be caught out and not even realise he's said it wrong.

- Sarcasm. Allows the star vehicle romance between Clooney and Roberts. Ocean states that he “paid his debt to society.” Tess replies to this with, “Funny, I never got the cheque.” These scenes are used to promote the film as a star vehicle.
- Mis-en-scene. One particular shot is very interesting. Danny is taken to the room with no cameras. The shot itself is of the two hulking body guards standing on either side of the screen and Danny positioned between them, tentatively pointing out the lack of cameras.
- Above and below shot. When Danny and Linus are in the elevator shaft. They drop glow sticks down to light the floor. We first see a shot from below of the glow sticks falling, then a shot from above of Danny and Linus rappelling down. This gives the movie at this time a frantic ‘on the move’ feel.
- Repetition. Two quotes in particular are repeated. The criminals motto is that if “you lose focus in this game for a second, someone gets hurt.” The other key line repeated is that in Benedict’s hotels, “there is always someone watching.” This is particularly important as it is the last words Tess says to Benedict before leaving.
- Shadows/Noir. At the end of the film, the criminals are standing in a line in front of a water fountain. One by one they leave, as silhouettes against the plumes of water. This blank shadow is symbolic of their anonymity, and the fact that they got away with it without Benedict learning who they were.
- Grainy Shot. These are used after a crime has occurred and rather than give the denouement away as it is happening, it gives the text a delayed denouement, building suspense and giving the audience time to guess what happened.

Contrast/Comparison with *The Big Sleep*:

Comparison:

- Both texts are set in America. Both texts have at least part of the film set in Los Angeles.
- A lot of both texts’ action revolves around cars and moving vehicles.
- Both texts are films.

Contrast:

- The criminals in *Ocean’s Eleven* get away with their crime. The criminals in *The Big Sleep* are captured.
- There is no ‘official’ sleuth in *Ocean’s Eleven*. Marlowe, on the other hand, is a professional private investigator.
- There are no murders in this film. This text centres around a robbery whilst *The Big Sleep* mainly concentrates on the crimes of murder.

- The scam pulled off in *Ocean's Eleven* is a first of its kind. A sensational storyline that has not occurred in real life. On the other hand, the issues surrounding police corruption and murder that are explored in *The Big Sleep* was not new to that society.
- This text is a film set in Los Vegas in 2001. *The Big Sleep* was set in Los Angeles in the 1940's.
- *Ocean's Eleven* is set from the point of view of the criminals. *The Big Sleep* is presented from the point of view of the private investigator, Phillip Marlowe.

Personal Response:

Once again, another exciting and riveting crime fiction thriller. The fact that this text tells the story from the side of the criminals, makes it interesting from the beginning. The other aspect of the film that made it so enjoyable was the way in which the plot and plan is joined together with character's insights and vision.

Overall, a very enjoyable crime fiction text that makes you think about what is going to happen next. A 'classic' refinement crime fiction text, if there is such a thing.