

Like a Hitchcock thriller with smart devices

Even an agoraphobe can't be alone

John Thackary

2022

a review of

Kimi, Dir: Steven Soderbergh, 2022

Director Steven Soderbergh is well-known for both prolific output (an astounding 47 films and counting) and speed of production (roughly a movie a year over the past decade). Yet his work's quality seems not to suffer from such a pace.

On the contrary, something about its fleetness belies a fascinating realism of the outlandish. Fittingly, in Soderbergh's latest, his third collaboration with the streaming arm of HBO, a film simply titled *Kimi*, a villain's posture bumbles unceremoniously. A tech millionaire conducts a Zoom interview in his garage before a pitiable, fake bookshelf background. The manner in which these characters are painted, all through edits and camera framings, bleeds with an obscure intentionality. Form as function.

Kimi leaves its mark perhaps more in terms of sincere generic resurgence and philosophizing than stylistic or polemic mastery. It's a happily mood-obsessed, feather-light pandemic-era thriller, but, in Soderberghian fashion, aesthetically sporting little acquiescence to the society which it dramatizes.

For a story taking place during the pandemic years, it blessedly avoids the current events pandering existing within so much other filmic COVID-sploitation of recent memory. The virus acts as a happenstance plot mechanic rather than a gimmick in this narrative. We follow the agoraphobic, "Alexa"-esque-Smart-Device-monitoring tech company employee Angela (Zoe Kravitz) as she attempts to survive cat-and-mouse pursuits with hired goons intent on disappearing her in order to suppress the latter's public exposure of her employer's involvement in a heinous murder. Her awareness of the crime only comes about when, unbeknownst to the perpetrators, its evidence coincidentally and traumatically is overheard by Angela during her work rounds observing audio from the smart device that gives the film its title.

If this miniature of a story sounds as though it hails from the cinematic landscape of the year nineteen-hundred-and-ninety-three, one would be hard-pressed to not deem that a fair call. As we find ourselves today continually devoured by a machine of finance-capital-dependent franchise and reboot-based filmmaking, a simple and original work of intrigue and interpersonal anxiety such as *Kimi* feels like the freshest of breaths of air.

The musical score of *Kimi* admittedly reads as a bit overbearing if only because it may act as consonant with the rest of the film's homage to the similarly voyeuristic melodramas of yore (i.e., Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954)). So, granted, this may or may not be everyone's cup of tea, stylistically. But despite that nostalgia, the film's modernizing of the formula excitingly complicates these tropes.

The presence of the pandemic gives an anxious character an out in justifying her overwrought, lonely response to civilization's horrors. A protest in her city against houseless encampment sweeps by police, thematically resonates. Angela's status as a brown-skinned woman adds layers of haunting subtext to her difficulty having any authorities believe her claims of having witnessed violence. The setting is dually isolating (therefore, heightening

the stakes), the presence of a militant segment of its populace mirrors the unspoken desires of *The Hero*, and verbal veracity becomes not just a matter of mental health, but also one of systemically resultant subjectivity.

Soderbergh crafts something here that visually evokes a radical perspective regarding the very concept of “being” as we conceive of it today. The camera’s locomotion implies a certain mania, procrastination, and the simultaneous out-of-yet-in-body disorientations they entail. The lens’ positions visually posit answers by excluding their questions, displaying a mutuality. Whose eyes are we seeing out of in any given POV shot if it’s not Angela’s? What does the refusal of Angela to touch her apartment key mean, as it sits plainly in close-up during her first multi-step preparation to finally venture outdoors? The film deals in the falsity of binaries as such, the ways they overlap rather than synthesize; relate rather than negate.

Kravitz’s performance stands as one of her meatiest to date, perhaps along with her already critically hailed outing as Cat-woman in the newest Batman film. Her success rests upon physicality, and not her deliveries of the occasionally rote dialogue. Her outside-world-fearing downward stares, and tic-like comforts of hand movements and aurally satisfying clunks of a cell phone tossed onto desks embody a research-dedicated actor (as in, into agoraphobic tendencies), and also one interested in playing a person rather than a political slogan hellbent on denying the specificity of a given being who is nonetheless under the proverbial boot of an ableist and racist system of power.

Kimi seems to possess a conceptual insistence on action rather than posturing, whether political or otherwise. There’s a scene in which Angela divulges her concerns to an at first seemingly well-meaning bureaucrat, before we witness a perversion of feminism and language into a mangled tool of social stasis. Rita Wilson’s acting turn as the aforementioned Suit sounds eerie echoes of how even certain strains of non-carceral conflict resolution have recently, unfortunately, devolved into bizarre, glorified forms of HR doublespeak. All talk and not a true change in sight.

Examinations of such disconnects persist in two remarkable sequences of visual superimposition; traumatic events or utterances layered atop images of someone finding out about those very events or utterances highlighting the direct interwoven nature of each and every one of our lives. One only exists (read as “is perceived”) as a result of the other. Nothing stands isolated.

As the Speculative Realist branch of philosophy would note, “existence is coexistence.” It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that this story centers a conflict with technology. Social media platform and smart-device saturations often alienate, separating us from the emotional consequences of our actions, from thinking deeply about their nuance in an affectively expansive manner. It’s easy to turn your conscience off if you can do the same to the device which you think is the only avenue of expressing conscience itself.

In a finale that, delightfully, may one day be considered an all-timer of the “planting and payoff” screenwriting convention—these latter superimpositions of struggle under the stultifying weight of Leviathan culminate.

Maybe your creepy neighbor isn’t exactly who you thought he was. Maybe he’s just like you. Maybe that one, loud machine that usually distracts you from your inner-peace can save your life in one unexpected context.

And, maybe surviving and thriving when faced with social pain is as complex, ironic, and unquantifiable in its comfort as a blood-covered hand giving a wincing, but earnest thumbs up.

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