

Placing *Touch of Evil*, *The Border*, and *Traffic* in the American Imagination

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Abstract: American-made cinema focusing on the United States–Mexico border often functions as a popular culture response to American policy changes that affect the border and immigration. How these films situate America and Americans in relation to Mexico and Mexicans dictates these films' critical and popular success.

Key words: *The Border*; Mexico; Nicholson, Jack; policy; Soderbergh, Steven; *Touch of Evil*; *Traffic*; Welles, Orson

Since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which hailed the line of demarcation between the United States and Mexico into existence, the border region has been an area of conflict, na-

tional and international migration, tourism, ethnic interactions, and ineffective political policies. What has resulted is a type of fuzzy space between two countries where "the lifeblood of two worlds [are] merging to form a third country—a border culture. [. . . A] vague and undetermined place [which is] in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa 25). The border is, as Nancy Gibbs observes, "its own country, 'Amexica,' neither Mexican nor American. 'The border is not where the U.S. stops and Mexico begins. [. . .] It's where the U.S. blends into Mexico'" (42). Yet, the United States has consistently attempted—and failed—to reify and concretize the U.S.-Mexico border through such legislation as Operation Wetback, Operation Gate-

keeper, Operation Safeguard, and Operation Hold the Line.

Whether effective as an impediment to illegal immigration or not, these policies, programs, and legislative acts not only have affected the U.S.-Mexico border and its inhabitants, they have clearly been influential in the fashioning of popular culture representations of the border region, as well as representations of Mexico and Mexicans. Christine List has noted that Hollywood has a long history of negative stereotyping and the ability to generate popular myths (21). As such, American cinema has, for years, worked its magic to manipulate popular opinion, machinating to fortify racial stereotypes, prejudice, jingoism, and hegemonic control—especially

during times of political change. David Maciel states that “films are more than just amusement, for movies act as a rich source of informal education and ideas. As such, their content is never free of value judgments or ideological or political biases” (3). And although it seems that the value judgments, ideological biases, and political biases inherent in American celluloid consistently have worked to establish and strengthen the metaphorical border of difference between Americans and Mexicans, these judgments and biases are witnessed most clearly in American-made cinema of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Because the border region is an amorphous and culturally malleable space, and because cinema maintains a political role as an entity unable to free itself from biases while informally educating the public, American-made cinema of the U.S.-Mexico border has repeatedly attempted to reduce the vagueness of the border region by inscribing the inhabitants and ideologies of both the United States and Mexico into a binary opposition that places Anglo and American values in a hierarchical position to (stereotypical) Latino and Mexican values, a phenomenon that Andrew Wood articulates in his discussion about Mexico, the United States, and the media:

For nearly two hundred years, Mexico and the United States have viewed each other with suspicion. [. . . And] many in the United States acted on the belief that Mexicans were mustachioed machos if not banditos—a people, in other words, not to be trusted. Accordingly, media forces—initially newspapers and now cinema—have generally only added to the bad blood between the two countries through continued stereotypic portrayals and skewed ideological constructs. (755–56)

Most important, these stereotypical portrayals and skewed ideological constructs not only are prevalent in most American-made cinema of the U.S.-Mexico border, but they seem almost expected by Anglo audiences during times when U.S. border policies change. How films released during these times foster or impede the hierarchical positioning of the United

States in the U.S.-Mexico binary results in popular and critical praise for the films or, conversely, in their being ignored or, in some cases, spurned.

Critical Concerns and Parameters

In this article, I look at three Hollywood films that deal with the U.S.-Mexico border: Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958), Tony Richardson’s *The Border* (1982), and Steven Soderbergh’s *Traffic* (2001). Although generically different, each of these films crosses generic boundaries and intersects at the space of the border. More to the point, however, is that each film was released during a time when U.S. policies were shifting in relation to the border region. Specifically, *Touch of Evil* was released on the heels of Eisenhower’s Operation Wetback; *The Border* debuted on the eve of the Mexican peso devaluation of 1982 and the height of Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program; and *Traffic* made its bow following Operations Gatekeeper, Hold the Line, and Safeguard, which were instituted by California, Texas, and Arizona, respectively.

What one sees when looking at these films through the context of U.S. policy changes is three pictures, each of which overtly centers on issues imbricated with the border but approaches its subject matter in different ways, with the result being three social critiques of the United States that have received varied responses from both critics and the public.

In an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Orson Welles stated that *Touch of Evil* was “snuck” out in the United States “on a double bill with no press showing” (Welles and Bogdanovich 303). Although Welles was awarded an Oscar for co-writing the screenplay for *Citizen Kane* (1941), he received neither awards nor critical acclaim in America for *Touch of Evil*, despite its winning the grand prize at the Brussels World Fair in 1958, doing “tremendous business all over the [rest of] the world,” and being ranked as the eighth greatest film of the last one hundred years in 2002 (Welles and Bogdanovich 303; Pym x).

The Border, despite having Walton Green (who co-wrote *The Wild Bunch*) on the writing staff and being directed by Tony Richardson—who had won multiple awards in various countries, including four Academy Awards in 1963 for *Tom Jones*—failed to garner any noticeable praise. Whereas most critics in 1982 applauded Jack Nicholson’s performance in the picture, they agreed with *Variety*’s assessment that it was “a surprisingly uninvolved film whose subject matter and execution leave little in the way of a commercial audience” (“*The Border*” 16).

Compared with the other two films, *Traffic* by far gained the most immediate financial success, grossing over \$15 million in its opening weekend and going on to generate over \$124 million domestically (Box Office). In addition, it was a widely popular movie in the United States, not only with the public but with critics as well, receiving instant critical acclaim and winning four Academy Awards (including Best Director).

In this article, I argue that one reason for the disparity in reception between these films results from how each film positions the United States in the U.S.-Mexico binary at particular historical moments. *Touch of Evil* critiques American law and justice, placing Mexico in a hierarchical position relative to the United States by highlighting American police corruption and portraying the righteousness of Mexican authorities. *The Border* also critiques American law but hierarchizes Mexico by advocating emigration to Mexico and espousing a covert rhetoric of Mexican nationalism. Finally, *Traffic* is able to critique America, vis-à-vis U.S. drug policy, while still garnering critical and popular praise by implicating Mexico as the agent of America’s woes and advancing stereotypical representations of both Mexico and Latinos, effectively depositing Mexico and its inhabitants into the ancillary position of the binary.

Touch of Evil

Touch of Evil, adapted from a shelved Paul Monash script that was itself adapted from Whit Masterson’s novel *Badge of Evil*, was not original-

ly about the border. After Welles changed Monash's script, "the film was much more directly a disquisition on the theme of 'crossing the border,' bristling with racial tension as the Mexican cop attempts to nail the American cop for perversion of justice" (Wollen 22). Furthermore, by changing the script to focus on international differences in justice, Welles places the film in direct opposition to other films about border crossing from the same era; Wood notes that "Hollywood films from the 1920s to the early 1980s dealing with Mexicans and Mexican immigration have usually pitted a heroic actor [. . .] against a vaguely defined 'gang' of undocumented workers seeking entry to the United States" (756).

Quinlan (Orson Welles) is certainly no hero, and although there are references to his saving the life of his beloved sidekick Menzies (Joseph Calleia), he does, after all, kill him at the end of the film. Quinlan not only frames suspects, but he is overtly racist, referring to the Mexican authorities as "Keystone Kops," stating that he "don't speak Mexican," and announcing his desire to return to the American side of the border by saying, "Let's get back to civilization." And although the Grandis are presented as a type of "gang" in the film, they are hardly attempting to gain access to the United States. In fact, the only reference to documentation arises at the beginning of the film when Vargas (Charlton Heston) crosses the border *legally*, showing his passport to the border guard.

Quinlan's presence and actions in the film not only betray Hollywood's border-cinema conventions from the mid-1900s, but his racist rhetoric deconstructs itself, elucidating the hypocrisy of Anglo superiority. First, although Quinlan refers to the Mexican authorities as "Keystone Kops," Vargas's superior police work discovers that Quinlan has been framing suspects—including Manolo Sanchez (Victor Millan). This repudiation is a double blow to Anglo superiority, establishing the adroitness of Mexican law enforcement while highlighting



Quinlan (Orson Welles) points a gun, which Welles later describes in an interview as "every cock in the world," at Joe Grandi (Akim Tamiroff) in *Touch of Evil*.

the culpability of the American authorities. Second, although Quinlan refers to the United States as "civilization," a large portion of the action on the United States side takes place at the Mirador Motel—located in the desert and the only building for miles around. To further problematize Quinlan's reference to civilization, Susan Vargas (Janet Leigh) is accosted, drugged, and kidnapped while at the Mirador, actions in direct contraposition to her interactions on the Mexican side of the border with Joe Grandi (Akim Tamiroff), a character Jonathan Rosenbaum describes as a "menacing villain who does not, in fact, succeed in being very menacing after all" (4).

Key to Tamiroff's character, besides his lack of menace, is his lack of Mexicaness. He tells Mrs. Vargas at their first meeting that his "name ain't Mexican." Mrs. Vargas calls him a "little Caesar," insinuating Italian descent. During the scene in which Quinlan interrogates Sanchez, Grandi announces that he is an American citizen. Introducing Grandi on the Mexican side of the border as a gangster whose brother has just been arrested in Mexico City provides the audience with an assumption about Grandi's national identity,

which Welles immediately begins to undermine. By the middle of the film, after Grandi reveals himself as an American citizen, both his racial and national identities must be reinscribed. Suddenly, the audience is faced with—not a Mexican, or even a Latino, but—an American who is conspiring with Quinlan to frame Mrs. Vargas and defame her husband. Furthermore, Grandi's new identity calls the origin and destination of the Grandi drug-smuggling operation into question: By making Grandi an American of non-Latino (or part-Latino at best) origin, the audience must acknowledge, at least on some level, that the drug smuggling for which the brother Grandi has been arrested could be a North-to-South operation, very likely a counterintuitive proposition for most moviegoers in 1958.

The third way Quinlan's racist rhetoric deconstructs itself stems from his declaration that he cannot "speak Mexican" while physically attacking Sanchez for not speaking English. This scene metaphorically advances English as the language of law while establishing the speaking of "Mexican" as crime or, at best, a suspicious activity. Given Sanchez's actual con-

fession at the end of the film, one can argue that Quinlan succeeds in establishing this metaphor, but this calls into question what it means to “speak Mexican.” David Thomson argues that “Mexico is Quinlan’s instinct (he knows the Mex is guilty), and America is his profession (he orders the Mexican suspect to talk English). But it’s in Mexico that he arranges a cover-up, wraps a peachy-clean U.S. blonde in depravity and goes to have his fortune told” (34). Thus, while Quinlan is an English speaker (he literally speaks English and is also metaphorically associated with the law), equating the speaking of “Mexican” with crime establishes Quinlan as a bilingual character. This makes Quinlan’s denial of his ability to speak “Mexican” as faulty as Sanchez’s denying his own guilt. Welles was familiar with prejudices and racist ideologies of the mid-1900s and effectively turned the Anglo-held stereotype of Mexican-equals-crime on its side, thereby implicating both the United States and Mexico as countries with criminal activity but with the heavier hand falling on the United States. True, Sanchez—a young, angry man in love—is guilty, but so is the venerable American officer who serves as a symbol for the U.S. justice system. Meanwhile, Vargas recuperates Quinlan’s lack—his lost veneration—and places Mexican law enforcement in a superior position in relation to the United States, a statement echoed by Donald Pease in his article “Borderline Justice/States of Emergency: Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil*”:

Although Hank Quinlan’s prejudice against Mexicans supplies Vargas with a psychological rationale for aggressively pursuing [his investigation of Quinlan], Vargas does not accuse Quinlan of police corruption as an expression of his solidarity with the political efforts to right the history of injustices at the border. In exposing Quinlan’s illegal policing practices on the U.S. side of the border, Vargas struggles to persuade Susan of the higher standards to which the police are held on the Mexican side of the border. (83)

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Welles makes another interesting move by imbuing the American characters in *Touch of Evil* with homoeroticism while concretizing the heterosexuality of Vargas. For an audience of 1958, when the national rhetoric espoused homosexuality as deviant and un-American, Quinlan’s homosexuality can be seen as another mechanism that flips the U.S.-Mexico binary. In a rather lighthearted bit of discourse between Orson Welles (OW) and director Peter Bogdanovich (PB), Welles even admits to infusing the scene where Quinlan strangles Grandi with homosexual overtones:

PB: The scene where you strangle Tamiroff is particularly gruesome.

OW: Yes. It was perverse and morbid—the kind of thing I don’t like to do too much. But it was one of those go-as-far-as-you-can-go—in that kind of dirty department. Tamiroff was great in it: when he looked at that gun, it was every cock in the world. It was awful, the way he looked at it—made the whole scene possible.

PB: You meant it to have a sexual connotation?

OW: Of course. It’s a very ugly scene. (Welles and Bogdanovich 320–21)

But it is not only the gun/phallus that invests the scene with sexual connotations. Grandi dies by strangulation—itsself an eroticized form of death and an act that places Quinlan in intimate proximity to Grandi. Furthermore, given that Quinlan’s wife—whose

memory Quinlan cannot escape—was strangled, Grandi’s death by strangulation can be seen as Quinlan’s perverted attempt to feminize him as a way to negotiate his longings for his deceased spouse.

Another case for Quinlan’s homosexuality has also been made by Ivan Zatz, who points to the homoeroticism of Quinlan and Menzies’s relationship. Zatz notes Menzies’s fidelity toward Quinlan: the way he advocates Quinlan’s intuition, guards his walking stick, and is devoted beyond the call of duty (71). Furthermore, Zatz argues that the “phallic symbology of the walking stick and game leg, coupled with an apparent mistrust of women that seems to permeate this relationship, would indicate at least a Platonic, if not actually consummated, homosexual relationship between Quinlan and Menzies. This is reinforced by the fact that Quinlan supposedly got his lame leg by taking a gunshot intended for Menzies” (71–72).

Conversely, the relationship between Schwartz (Mort Mills) and Vargas is not invested with any of the homoerotic dynamics inherent in the Quinlan-Menzies partnership. And Vargas’s heterosexuality is further validated by his recent marriage to Mrs. Vargas, which, after all, makes him the only married character in the film. This juxtaposition between the homoerotic tensions of Quinlan/Menzies/Grandi and the heterosexual inscription of Vargas operates to, in light of popular culture’s attitude toward homosexuality in the mid- to late 1950s, further demonize Anglos as being in some way deviant or defective compared with Latinos, once again invoking the conception of Vargas as one who, as Pease suggests, follows a set of higher standards.

The historical moment of the late 1950s, while key in understanding prevailing attitudes toward homosexuality that would help hierarchize Mexico in the American imagination, is also key when discussing *Touch of Evil* in relation to (or as a response to) U.S. immigration policy. When postulating about Welles’s decision to rewrite the script, many critics suggest the idea

came from an incident at Sleepy Lagoon on August 2, 1942, when “a young Mexican-American named José Diaz was run down by an automobile and his body dumped in a mud-hole near Sleepy Lagoon, a water-filled gravel-pit that was a swimming place for young Mexican-Americans” (Wollen 22). The Sleepy Lagoon case inaugurated an era of police repression, suspects were framed, and the following year the Zoot Suit Riots began. Woolen argues that, after returning from Europe, Welles attempted to re-create the atmosphere surrounding those tumultuous circumstances (23). However, governmental policies being enforced during the film’s creation seem more likely to have influenced not only Welles’s directorial decisions but the film’s reception as well. And Pease has argued convincingly that the film’s political unconscious is derived from Operation Wetback.

In 1954, Senator Patrick McCarran of Nevada suggested that “subversive agents” easily could be included in the “wetbacks” that crossed the Rio Grande illegally, thereby creating a link between migration and “enemy infiltration.” McCarran’s establishing this link prompted the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee to conduct an official investigation, headed by McCarran and Senator Herman Welker of Idaho. McCarran recommended the deployment of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which deported and denaturalized migrant workers whose leaders were found guilty of so-called subversive activities. As a result, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and U.S. Border Patrol were authorized by President Dwight Eisenhower to deport massive numbers of Mexican laborers in a most antidemocratic fashion, regularly arresting Mexican Americans, placing them in interment camps, and refusing them due process, activities that continued from 1954 through 1957 (Pease 91). For Pease,

the controversies concerning the legality of the state of emergency that the U.S. government declared to empower its mass deportation of migrant laborers

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in the four years before Welles began work on the picture [. . .] comprised a more compelling location for the film’s political unconscious than does the Sleepy Lagoon Case. (87)

In Pease’s model, Quinlan and Vargas’s relationship represents the antagonistic relationship between the United States and Mexico during Operation Wetback, while Quinlan’s refusing Sanchez’s civil rights mirrors the lack of rights of migrant laborers at the hands of the McCarran Commission.

Pease’s model can certainly be advanced as another reason for the film’s poor reception in America when considering Joseph Nevins’s argument about the importance of the media in setting the agenda for public debate. Nevins states that

media coverage can influence policy in two important ways: one, it can influence policy makers, regardless of its effect on public opinion; and two, while it is too simple to state that media discourse *causes* changes in public opinion, it is nonetheless a very important part of the context in which people form their political opinions. (119)

Media coverage of Operation Wetback whipped the public into a frenzy and

produced a “national reaction against illegal immigration” (Koestler). In the wake of Operation Wetback and the inequitable treatment of Latinos by U.S. authorities, the American public—still embracing a rhetoric of nationalism and maintaining a skewed view of Latino-as-illegal—was not interested in a film that placed Mexico in a hierarchical position relative to the United States via highlighting the violation of Mexican American’s civil rights by U.S. governmental agencies and elucidating the corruption of American law enforcement while portraying Mexican police as abiding by a higher standard.

In the end, Zatz contends that the film centers around a dispute between Quinlan and Vargas, two people of “opposing political and national alignment, whose struggle is over control of natural resources, technology, and the cultural legitimacy which would justify their presence within a space where only one or the other can fit. And, precisely because Vargas can function equally well within both spaces, he becomes threatening to the power and authority held by Quinlan” (68). American audiences and critics seem to have been just as threatened by Vargas as Quinlan. Indeed, Vargas does seem to function well on both sides of the border, not only adhering to the higher standards of the Mexican side but, apparently, performing the rhetoric of Americanism more proficiently than the Americans while on the U.S. side. In short, Vargas explodes the American-held myths that put the United States in the dominant position of the U.S.-Mexico binary: Vargas is a *legal* border crosser that repudiates the stereotype of Mexican-as-illegal, assists with the self-destruction of the rhetoric of Anglo superiority, and unravels the notion of superior American nationalism by adhering to higher standards of law enforcement than do his American counterparts.

The Border

The Border, which had its origins in several *Los Angeles Times* articles about illegal Mexican immigrants, is

described by Vincent Canby as “an angry, brutal melodrama about the plight of the illegal immigrants, about the people who rip them off and about the consequences of Charlie’s [Jack Nicholson] crossing of his own border into the alien territory of bribes, beatings, kidnappings and murder” (C10). This terse summary is significant in that it suggests that two separate borders are being crossed, one physical and one metaphorical. However, I am not convinced that Charlie ever really crosses the metaphorical border alluded to by Canby. Charlie is positioned as apathetic toward U.S. immigration policies from the moment he is introduced to the audience, casually meandering through an entire factory of undocumented workers, arresting an arbitrary pair with the fewest mouths to feed, and already aware of the knowledge that the factory owner dispenses to the (also already aware) audience—the workers will be returning to make their \$6 a day as soon as possible. By Charlie operating in this manner, it seems clear that he is at least familiar with a territory that would include corruption, and he certainly does not appear shocked when Red (Warren Oates) advocates “leaving a few Wets in the field” in exchange for a sack of onions.

Moreover, he makes it very clear to Cat (Harvey Keitel) that he will not participate in murder. In the scene in which Charlie confronts Cat in the motor pool, Charlie makes the metaphorical border physical by drawing a line in the dirt. His adamant declaration that “this line right here I don’t cross! This fuckin’ line right here!” establishes him as one who refuses to cross the metaphorical border into a land of absolute corruption. Whether his temporary status as a coyote makes him villainous or not is debatable, especially in the redemptive light of his helping Maria (Elpidia Carrillo) to cross and (more important) recross the border. Furthermore, Charlie’s incorruptibility is refortified simply by his being alive at the end of the film. J.J.’s (Jeff Morris) accidental suicide and Cat’s being crushed by construction equipment—neither of

which are direct results of Charlie’s actions—fulfill the prophecy that the freeway billboard on the road to El Paso portends: “The wages of sin is death.”

Regardless of whether Charlie crosses moral boundaries, he is clearly a border crosser, and, more than anything, this film speaks to issues of mobility. In the beginning of *Touch of Evil*, the film cutting and set construction is such that the viewer becomes disoriented and unable to tell which side of the border the characters are on. Mr. and Mrs. Vargas cross into the United States, the car explodes on the U.S. side, Mrs. Vargas is instructed to go “back to the hotel,” and she is summoned by Grandi. At this point, one is unsure if Mrs. Vargas has already recrossed the border and is being summoned back to the United States or is still headed toward Mexico. The camera cuts back to Mr. Vargas on the U.S. side where Quinlan will make his debut and, as the scenes continue to jump from one side of the border to the other, the audience becomes quickly dislocated. Meanwhile, everyone speaks English, bilingual signs are posted on both sides of the border, and there is a general look of uniformity that makes it seem as if there is no border at all.

In contrast, the beginning of *The Border* makes clear distinctions between the ruggedly pastoral Mexico—seen in the opening sequence and subsequent montage showing Maria’s trek north—and the urbanized and technologic United States where Charlie arrests the two factory workers, a distinction that is again made by using the “Tortilla Curtain” for the establishing shot in the scene that shows Charlie’s first day on the job with Hooker (Stacey Pickren). Like Quinlan and Vargas, Charlie is afforded virtually unlimited mobility, albeit without Quinlan’s metaphorical association to law or Vargas’s explicit association with justice. Instead, Charlie is repeatedly imbricated with water, which aligns him with tropes of mobility and binationalism.

Charlie’s association with water begins when Juan (Manuel Viescas) steals his hubcaps and Charlie chases him across what is supposed to be the Rio Grande. It ends with the film’s final freeze frame, focusing on Maria and Charlie standing in the river. He also falls into his half-constructed swimming pool, and, in the scene immediately following, light and shadows reflected from the river wash over his body for half a minute before he steps into the water a second time. These in-



Charlie (Jack Nicholson) confronts Cat (Harvey Keitel) in the motor pool and adamantly declares that he will not participate in murder in *The Border*.

stances inscribe Charlie with a fluidity of motion that makes him a binational character. He is binational not only because he crosses the border but because his connection to water also links him to the Rio Grande, the very essence of Amexica. In a very literal way, the Rio is the “vague and undetermined place [which is] in a constant state of transition” that Anzaldúa speaks of; it is an ever-flowing, ever-changing, yet a very real and physical border that is at the same time in both the United States and Mexico. And, even more important, this binationalism is reified by his fellow Border Patrol agents midway through the film when they inscribe him with Mexicanness.

On arriving at Red’s party from Mexico, Charlie is criticized for not fitting in with the rest of the guests, who comment on his clothes; Red announces that Cat had “better check his green card [. . .] I think he’s come in wet.” This transformation of Charlie from American to Mexican allows him to be placed in the same position as Vargas (also played by an Anglo); suddenly, his refusal to cross the metaphorical border of corruption—the line in the dirt—is very important: It allows him to stand in as the inverse of his fellow officers so that a critique of American law can be made. And, although one might argue that the Mexicans in the film are just as corrupt and lawless as Charlie’s fellow Border Patrol agents, a closer investigation of this claim will actually uncover the unusual way Mexico is hierarchized in the film. However, before this can be accomplished, the film must be placed in the proper context.

Gary Keller suggests that the film focuses on what he calls the *indocumentado* phenomenon and states that Hollywood films dealing with this phenomenon

never have risen above the mediocre. *Borderline* (1980), starring Charles Bronson, and *The Border* (1981) [sic], starring Jack Nicholson, weigh in as sterling examples of a dismal record. Hollywood *indocumentado* pictures have never surpassed the limitation of the social problem genre as originally conceived in the 1930s and 1940s. (44–45)

[*The Border*] is,
really, about an
innocent family’s
journey *al norte*, the
corruption and
danger they witness
there, and their
return to the safety
of Mexico.

Although the film certainly contains undocumented immigrants, and the action does occur at the border, rather than categorize the film in the social problem genre, I suggest it is more aligned with works like Alejandro Galindo’s classic Mexican drama *Espaldas Mojadas* (1955), which attempted to convince Mexicans not to go to the United States. In this respect, the film is much more about Mexican nationalism than about the United States or its immigration woes.

Richardson, a British film director and prominent figure during the British New Wave, was no stranger to socially engaged realism, and some might read *The Border* as a depiction of the deadend existence of the working poor, similar to, say, *Look Back in Anger* (1958) and citing Charlie as one who is apathetic about his job, perpetually broke, and surrounded by Anglo women who “are slave drivers themselves, whipping on their husbands with the carrot of sex or the stick of sheer malice” (Lacayo 9). However, the film is as much about Maria and Mexico as it is about Charlie. Richard Lacayo suggests that “Mexicans in ‘The Border’ appear mostly as a wretched swarm in a crouch position, ever ready for that clandestine dash into Texas” (9). But Lacayo forgets about the inhabitants of the Mexican interior who appear content enough, if not a bit romanticized, in the picture’s

opening scene; or that Maria and Juan are first seen by Nicholson, through night vision apparatus, pausing and returning to Mexico rather than following their coyote; or that Maria has returned to and remains in Mexico during the film’s final scene. What is crucial to the entire film is the earthquake that sets Maria on her journey north in the first place. The earthquake killing what is presumed to be Maria’s husband and damaging her village operates to forward Maria not as an illegal but as an innocent victim, which is doubly reinforced because the earthquake occurs during her infant’s baptism: Not only is Maria inscribed with a type of virginal purity as a faithful church patron, but the earthquake takes on the form of God’s will, an act completely out of Maria’s hands. In this light, the film is, really, about an innocent family’s journey *al norte*, the corruption and danger they witness there, and their return to the safety of Mexico.

Maria’s journey across the border results in her baby’s kidnapping, her forced employment in a bordello, and her brother’s death, stemming from his involvement in drug trafficking. To be sure, these consequences of her northern peregrination are the outcome of U.S.-Mexico collusion, yet instead of inscribing all Mexicans as illegal or villainous, Hooker notes that the majority of the undocumented border crossers are simply day workers who return to Mexico at night, harmless save for throwing the occasional dirt clod. Furthermore, Jimbo (William Russ) articulates the economic necessity of undocumented laborers in no uncertain terms: “Texas’s been runnin’ on Wet labor since before I was born. Does pretty damn good too. You think this country’d get by without Wets? You go out on some boilin’ hot day and pick your own lettuce and tomatoes and beans and onions.”

In opposition to the so-called harmlessness of (most) undocumented border crossers, everyone in Red’s sector except for a handful of officers is on the take, and the majority of the violence in the film is committed by Cat’s accomplice J.J., who fatally

shoots Juan, and Cat, who indiscriminately kills a coyote driver for infringing on his “business” and brutally murders two *pollos* to pacify Charlie. In fact, after the Anglo law enforcement officers and their accomplices are named, there is only one non-Anglo criminal in the film: Manuel (Mike Gomez), who is successful as a criminal mainly because of his proximity to the border.

Manuel’s bordello, aptly named *El Paraíso*, is the quintessential stereotype of lawless and hedonistic Mexico, and Manuel is quick to offer Charlie the stereotypically dispensed vices: *cerveza*, tequila, whiskey, and “pussy.” Furthermore, John Hiatt’s rendition of “Skin Game” playing nondiegetically over Charlie’s visit to *El Paraíso* hammers the trope home in a way that is hard to miss: “Hey Amigos, don’t pass this by / Got everything that money can buy / Now it’s a place where a face ain’t got no name / Down here everybody’s playing that ol’ skin game / Down in Mexico, Mexico / Well a boy can be a man down on Mexico.” Yet, this entire establishment seems strangely out of place in relation to the bucolic scenes near the river where the majority of the south-of-the-border action occurs. Just as Manuel is positioned as the sole Mexican villain, his bordello resists implicating all of Mexico as a locale for hedonistic abandon. Instead, it serves as a necessary vehicle that allows for Maria’s fall from grace. Forced to work in the bordello, Maria is transformed from the virgin to the whore, a necessary punishment for her decision to venture outside of Mexico.

In the end, the film provides a very clear carrot-and-stick representation of the United States: Venturing north of the border may provide one with a few extra dollars, but the final cost may be more than one can bear, a view Vincent Canby succinctly articulates when observing that the filmic El Paso border “teems with poor, desperate, illiterate Mexicans seeking entrance into the land of milk, honey, bigotry and exploitation” (C10). This carrot and stick is, however, not only represented via Maria’s trials but is also re-

inforced aurally by Freddy Fender’s rendition of “Across the Borderline” that serves to bracket the film:

There’s a place where I’ve been told
Every street is paved with gold
And it’s just across the borderline
And when it’s time to take your turn
Here’s one lesson that you must learn
You could lose more than you’ll ever
hope to find
When you reach the broken promised
land
And every dream slips through your
hands
Then you’ll know that it’s too late to
change your mind
’Cause you’ve paid the price to come
so far
Just to wind up where you are
And you’re still just across the border-
line.

By positioning the United States as a land of broken promises and evanescent dreams, a land that annexes innocence and robs mothers of their children, a land of corrupt law enforcers and clandestine murders, *The Border* hierarchizes Mexico in a way that invokes a sense of Mexican nationalism. Maria’s returning to Mexico at the film’s end is telling insofar as it insinuates that immigrants’ woes can be healed by coming home or averted altogether by avoiding a northward journey. In this respect, the representation of America’s southern border guard as a corrupt entity, implicated in adding to the United States’ sorrows by assisting illegal immigrants, was not the only reason American audiences rejected (and perhaps continue to reject) the film. The majority of Anglo audiences can neither identify with a sense of Mexican nationalism nor accept representations of illegal border crossers as innocent victims.

In terms of the historical moment, however, the lackluster critical and popular response from 1982 (which helped marginalized this film) is directly related to how the film’s rhetoric of Mexican nationalism and covert call to emigrate is linked to the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) just prior to Mexico’s peso devaluation. The BIP was created in 1965 to mitigate the unemployment in Mexico’s northern region, which was caused by the United

States’ dissolution of the *Bracero* program. Mexico used facilities that were built by the National Border Program and encouraged U.S. firms to join with Mexican entrepreneurs to build factories that would produce goods for the U.S. market. The program was a success in terms of lowering unemployment, and labor statistics show that Mexico’s strong gross domestic product rates from 1978 to 1982 gradually lowered unemployment (Mertens and Richards 236). At the time of the film’s release, Mexico’s economy was doing well and unemployment rates had consistently fallen in the preceding years. In addition, Alberto Davila and Rogelio Sanez have shown that the steady increase in *Maquiladoras* from April 1978 to January 1982 had an inverse effect on illegal immigration, based on monthly INS apprehension data (101). In other words, as the number of *Maquiladoras* increased, the number of illegal immigrants apprehended by the Border Patrol decreased, allowing one to extrapolate that the number of illegal border crossers (men and women) as a whole also steadily decreased.

Davila and Sanez state that the number of *Maquiladoras* increased from 841,441 in 1978 to 1,571,680 in 1981, an 86.8% increase (101). This increase in Mexican employment opportunities, coupled with reductions in Mexican unemployment and a steady decrease in illegal immigration, created an unconscious anxiety in the American imagination. This adds an entirely new level of meaning to Jimbo’s question about the country getting by “without Wets.” *The Border*, then, works on three simultaneous levels to scare, infuriate, and alarm the Anglo public. On the most basic level, the film invokes the Anglo fear of an undocumented horde illegally infiltrating the United States to take American jobs. On a secondary level, the film infuriates Americans vis-à-vis its representation of Border Patrol agents. This infuriation can stem from either the refusal to believe such a corrupt representation is possible—thereby dismissing the film as propaganda—or from the complete acceptance of such a representation, which leads to out-

rage over how a government agency charged with protecting America could allow such a “dangerous threat” to propagate itself.

Finally, on the unconscious level, even as Anglos are processing their fear and outrage, they experience the suppressed panic of the realization that their cheap labor might not be available, a view articulated by the factory owner at the beginning of the film: “I’m talkin’ about the life and death of my operation and half the factories in Los Angeles. They want a minimum wage. The day that I gotta start payin’ these people two-fifty an hour, my business is a memory.” By hierarchizing Mexico through a sub-text of Mexican nationalism, covertly advocating a return to Mexico, and demonizing Border Patrol workers and the border-crossing experience in general, *The Border* tapped into the American imagination on several levels that did not bode well for the film’s reception in 1982 and continues to position the film in a liminal space today.

Traffic

Like *The Border*, the camera work in *Traffic* is very different from that in *Touch of Evil*. Stanley Kauffmann observes that “Welles shoots almost everything from a strained bizarre angle. The lighting by Russell Metty is exaggeratedly *noir*. The film moves with a kind of rush, rather than rhythm” (31). In contrast, *Traffic* is a type of cinema verité that uses grainy film and does more with colors than was even possible in *Touch of Evil*’s time. However, whereas *Traffic* is more aligned with the cinematography of *The Border*, which switches from deep green and blue hues to desolate desert-bleached cinematography, it is *The Border* and *Touch of Evil* that more closely resemble each other when discussing critical reception: Of the three films, *Traffic* is the only one to receive instantaneous critical recognition and wide popularity among moviegoers. Likewise, it is the only film to (not surprisingly) establish the United States in a hierarchical position to Mexico in the U.S.-Mexico binary,



Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas) sees the decay of America’s moral foundations and family values while standing face to face with Caroline (Erika Christensen) in *Traffic*.

clearly establishing a link between its four Academy Awards, critical acclaim, and instantaneous popularity and its alignment with the American imagination.

Like *The Border*, *Traffic* establishes a clear delineation between the United States and Mexico, with Soderbergh advancing Mexico in the opening scene and then moving to the more technologic United States. But more than a split between the pastoral and technologic separates the two countries in *Traffic*, which uses a banner in the opening shot to announce the filmic location as Mexico, twenty miles southeast of Tijuana. The film is grainy and has a decidedly yellow (the more romantic call it *sepia*) tone, and the audience is introduced to two state police officers, Javier Rodriguez (Benicio Del Toro) and Manolo Sanchez (Jacob Vargas), who are speaking Spanish. The dialogue begins with Javier explaining a nightmare to Manolo. Later, Javier and Manolo capture some drug transporters, the audience is introduced to the corrupt General Salazar (Tomas Milian), and the scene shifts to Columbus, Ohio, where the graining is re-

moved and the film is saturated with rich blue tones. Two minutes later, San Diego in all its beauty arrives on screen. Clearly, Soderbergh’s tobacco filter does the trick, and the audience is immediately alerted to the difference between the United States—with its rich vibrant colors—and the jaundiced Mexican landscape.

This difference, however, does not stop with the Mexico that is twenty miles southeast of Tijuana. Soderbergh continues to use his tobacco filter to effectively yellow all of Mexico, which a handful of critics—such as Richard Porton and Catherine Benamou—have noted as problematic:

[Soderbergh] shot the Mexican sections “through a tobacco filter” and then overexposed the film to imbue these vignettes with an oversaturated look. Mexico, therefore, becomes a mirage-like, evanescent realm where life is cheap and morality is infinitely expendable. As film scholar and Latin American specialist Benamou observes, the movie “posits an historical and moral hierarchy between the postmodern United States—which has to retrieve its moral foundations and family values—and premodern Mexico, which has presumably never been able to draw the

line between the law and lawlessness.”
(Porton 42)

Benamou’s observation here is key insofar as the historical and moral hierarchy she refers to implicates Mexico on both sides of the border, how Mexico’s lawlessness is directly linked to the moral decay of the family on the U.S. side.

No one would argue that Soderbergh advances Mexico as lawless. In fact, it is as if he takes great pains just to do so. From the opening scene, the audience is faced with smugglers who are blatantly subverting the law and then immediately spoon-fed General Salazar’s intervention, which highlights (if not immediately, then certainly later) the lawlessness of the federal authorities. Twenty-one minutes later, the corruption of the state is on display when two American tourists plead for Javier’s help in finding their stolen car, and he explains how the couple will pay local police to make their car appear. Moreover, the hit man Frankie Flowers (Clifton Collins, Jr.) later assigns lawlessness to the non-governmental realm of the society, completing a taxonomy of federal/state/local corruption that apparently runs through all of Mexico. When two of these worlds of corruption collide in the form of General Salazar torturing Frankie Flowers, one can see a clear reference to Benamou’s description of Mexico as premodern. In fact, the only thing that seems misplaced in the scene is General Salazar’s yelling, “We are not savages.” But this statement is obviously to be read as ironic—after all, in a fantastic world propped up by so many stereotypes, the notion of the savage being the only one who does not see himself as such would be even more noticed by its absence.

This carefully choreographed lawlessness and savagery becomes key when considering Soderbergh’s yellowing of all Mexico, an act that extends these tropes throughout the country and inscribes all of its inhabitants as the agents who have, as Benamou states, led the “postmodern United States” astray from its “moral

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foundations and family values.” Wood explains that by “beginning with the yellow camera filters, Soderbergh insinuates that nearly all Mexicans are somehow involved in the drug trade” (761). But the yellowing of Mexico implicates both the people and the land; Wood goes on to state that “from the highest echelons of power to the street dealers and sidemen, Soderbergh’s portrayal of life across the border establishes Mexico (and by extension, all of Latin America) as the fountain of evil that is the drug trade” (760).

If, as Porton claims, Soderbergh’s film is “primarily obsessed with how drugs have befouled the American family nest” (42), then Benamou’s claim that the United States is hierarchically positioned over Mexico but must still retrieve its moral foundations and family values is key. Because these foundations and values are being destroyed by drugs—as seen via the Wakefield family—and all of Mexico is implicated in the drug trade by way of Soderbergh’s tobacco filter, then the disintegration of family values and morals in America is a result of lawless Mexico.

In this light, Mexico is doubly culpable. First, Mexico’s own lawlessness has averted its progression into a postmodern stage of development; second, Mexico’s premodernity and lawlessness have thwarted the United States and threaten to derail its progression to the next stage of cultural development, which allows Soderbergh to make his critique of the United States. *Traffic* succeeds in adducing the United States as a country lacking in morals and family values only by simultaneously producing a scapegoat that Americans can point to as the entity responsible for their woes. Wood observes that, by portraying Javier as a “noble soldier while nearly all his compatriots fall prey to kidnapping, assassination, torture, and betrayal, *Traffic* offers a skewed portrait of Mexican society in getting its anti-drug message across to U.S. audiences” (760).

Yet, Soderbergh successfully destroys any recuperative properties that even Javier might have, not even allowing him to be positioned as a noble soldier. Although Javier is a legal border crosser, similar to Vargas and Charlie, his being smuggled *into* Mexico by the FBI links him to the trope of Mexican-as-illegal that Vargas repudiates. In addition, because Javier has just provided information to the FBI about his countrymen in the previous scene—information that makes him “feel like a traitor”—he is also unable to skirt the trope of Mexican-as-illegal via innocence like the immigrants in *The Border* manage to do. In this way, Soderbergh’s skewed portrait of Mexican society is a totalizing one—no one is recuperated, no one is noble.

Even worse than Soderbergh’s totalizing image of Mexico as the place to focus blame, however, is that the same proclivity to blame that occurs in the film is happening in the real world. An article in *U.S. News & World Report* printed shortly after *Traffic* was released in theaters quotes one Latino’s response to the film: “‘It’s obviously made in the U.S.’ [. . .] ‘For them, the drug problem is always our fault’” (“Life” 34). And the article continues, stating that “Mexico’s *El Financiero*

newspaper criticized the film's portrayal of a military general in the pay of drug lords as 'Hollywood's version of corruption' ("Life" 34). The key words here are "Hollywood's version," especially considering Porton's discovery of what the film excludes. He argues that, "while it would be silly to deny that Mexico is rife with corruption, the film, either willfully or naively, sidesteps the long history of collusion between the American CIA and members of the Elite in Central America whose best interests are served by the efficient proliferation of drugs" (43). Furthermore, Porton discusses evidence that American military equipment that is supposed to be used to fight drug trafficking in Mexico is being used against the Zapatista movement; he goes on to claim that the "War on Drugs has become inextricable from a War on Subversion. One of Gaghan's more articulate mouthpieces insists that 'in Mexico law enforcement is an entrepreneurial activity, this is not so true for the U.S.A.' This kind of offhand remark is Hollywood's version of disinformation" (43).

So, between Soderbergh's stereotypical portrayal of Mexico as a lawless, premodern, last frontier; his representation of Mexicans as savage, barbaric, and corrupt; his implication of Mexico as the agent of Americas woes; and his election to omit any facts that might portray an America that is responsible for its own problems, he effectively mirrors the same ideological tenets held by the majority of American culture, thereby performing a critique of the United States while simultaneously propping up the ideologies that paint a picture of a hierarchized United States in the American imagination—offering what Wood calls a "curious mix of old stereotypes and new perspectives regarding U.S.-Mexican relations" (756).

Wood's comment about mixing old stereotypes and new perspectives is particularly trenchant, especially when considering *Traffic*'s historical moment and the events that formed the specific U.S. border policies being enforced during its release. Today, why the film garnered such critical and

popular praise seems perfectly clear: It was released during a time when the border was experiencing the most militarization since its inception. In short, the movie tapped into the American imagination and confirmed the suspicions about the lawlessness, dangerousness, and deviance of a people that all those U.S. tax dollars were being spent to protect civilized society from.

Operation Gatekeeper, which was launched by the INS on October 1, 1994, was, as Nevins has convincingly argued, the end result of a rise in "neo-restrictionism" that began in the 1970s due to several factors, most notably the Chicano civil rights movement in the late 1960s and the mid-1970s energy crisis and economic downturn (62–63). The neo-restrictionist rhetoric stemming from the 1970s was further exacerbated by both President Regan's linking unauthorized immigration to issues of national security and his war on drugs. Following the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, the Border Patrol became more and more preoccupied with drug enforcement, causing the INS to begin deputizing Border Patrol agents as Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Customs agents to fight against drug and contraband smuggling (Nevins 69). In 1993, after the "bombing of [the] New York's World Trade Center by suspected unauthorized immigrants," an advisor to President Clinton explained that "there is a fear that unless the administration gets out in front, you'll see what you did in Germany: a violent reaction against immigration" (Nevins 88). As a result, on July 27, 1993, Clinton announced his plans to increase border enforcement, and on October 1, 1994, Operation Gatekeeper was born.

Because a large portion of the action in *Traffic* occurs in California, the film speaks almost directly to Operation Gatekeeper and the rhetoric that produced it, especially the holdover ideology from the Regan era that somehow implicates all of Mexico in drug trafficking and the still-held belief that our southern border must be secure against illegals who may be a security risk to the nation-state. But the film's wide ac-

ceptance by American audiences signals that the anti-immigration and Mexico-as-lawless rhetoric was more pandemic. Indeed, other southwestern states recently had militarized their borderlines in a fashion similar to that of Operation Gatekeeper: Texas implemented two plans—Operation Hold the Line in 1993 (actually created before Operation Gatekeeper) and Operation Rio Grande in 1997, and Arizona launched Operation Safeguard in 1995. Moreover, Congress had recently passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996. Nevins explains that "the emergence of Operation Gatekeeper—or, more specifically, the emergence of the context that led to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) strategy's implementation—demonstrates the power of the boundary and its related sociogeographical practices in forming an almost reflexive consciousness in favor of boundary and immigration enforcement" (62). In other words, militarizing the border propagates a militarization of the border or, more to the point, that militarizing the border instills the necessity of a militarized border in the American imagination.

With this in mind, it is clear why *Traffic* was such a success: Through its depiction of Mexico and Mexicans, the film not only waves the political flag that calls for continued militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border but it helps fortify what most Americans (think they) already know, namely that by militarizing the border, they made the right choice.

Conclusion

Touch of Evil, *The Border*, and *Traffic* are, of course, not the only examples of films that speak directly to U.S. policy changes and the American imagination. As Chon Noriega points out, "most Chicano feature films are based on true stories or historical events," with an obvious example being *Born in East L.A.* (1987), a film that "lampoons the Simpson Rodino Immigration Reform Act of 1986 and English-Only Movement" (90, 113). An even more recent example is the short-turned-feature-length *A Day*

Without a Mexican (2004), which seems to speak directly to President George W. Bush's proposed guest worker program and the strong political opposition it faces. Although the three films investigated here are only a cross-section of the past fifty years, they seem like an important starting point to begin thinking about the voluminous celluloids that speak to specific shifts in border politics since 1848. Now, at a time when anti-immigration rallies such as Jim Gilchrist's Minuteman Project are being organized to do the "jobs Congress won't do," it is important to understand how media affect popular opinion, which representations of the U.S.-Mexico border are lauded by popular culture, which ones are spurned, and how the continual militarization of the border reinforces or changes both public and political opinion in the United States.

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