"Touch of Evil": Style Expressing Content

Author(s): Eric M. Krueger


Published by: University of Texas Press on behalf of the Society for Cinema & Media Studies

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225404


Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=texas.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Touch of Evil: Style Expressing Content

Eric M. Krueger

Touch of Evil is a seedy experience. Orson Welles drags us through the dirt, dust, and garbage of his characters' existence; and therein lies his mise en scène: a world where filth, garbage, and disarray become metaphors for evil—swirling in the funhouse, the dream, and the delirium. If, as Andrew Sarris points out, Hitchcock shows "the evil abnormality that lurks beneath the surface," then Welles roams above it and with us in the crazed confines of the border towns—which, as the protagonist Vargas notes, "bring out the worst in a country."

Welles, then, gives us a crazed, nightmare world where all are touched by evil as its victim, purveyor, or both. It is a world where people live in filth, try to escape it, become it, and die in it. Garbage becomes a reflection of the human condition and the material embodiment of the evil we live with.

As a visual and aural motif, filth is integral to the thematic structure of the film. Aside from a certain soiled quality pervasive in each frame, Welles uses specific shots of ubiquitous, flying trash: for example, the rear of the club when Quinlan and company first go to investigate the Linnekar murder. In front of the club, there is trash all over the street; it has an ominous life of its own. Later, at the Sanchez apartment, Quinlan mentions that an old lady found a shoe with a foot in it: the explosion blew Rudi and his girlfriend into rubble—human entrails to be scattered by the wind like piles

---

1 This article was primarily written for those who have seen the film. I am, however, adding this brief synopsis for those who have not yet experienced Touch of Evil. Mike Vargas, a Mexican narcotics detective, arrives in the Mexican border town of Los Robles with his new American wife, Susan. As the two kiss on a main street of town, with the American border but a hundred yards off, Rudi Linnekar, an American businessman from the town just over the border, is blown up by a bomb planted in his car. Vargas enters the case, and in doing so, becomes involved with Joe Grandi and Hank Quinlan. Grandi runs a local narcotics ring in the absence of his brother whom Vargas is currently prosecuting; and Quinlan is the American sheriff in the town where the murder occurred. Quinlan finds a suspect; Vargas is convinced the suspect, Sanchez, is being framed; and a struggle begins as Vargas increasingly interferes with Quinlan's investigation. To stop Vargas, Quinlan conspires with Grandi to kidnap Susan and thus scare Vargas into calling off his private search for the murderer—and for the dirt in Quinlan's past. In the end, Susan survives her being kidnapped by the Grandi gang; Quinlan murders Grandi; and Vargas emerges with a concrete case against all three.

of litter. In the accusation scene where Vargas presents the evidence linking Quinlan to a frame-up of Sanchez, Quinlan makes a mess of himself by squashing an egg in his hand. This is, one can add, symbolic of what he's done and is doing to his life, while it foreshadows his steady deterioration throughout the rest of the film.

Thus it is only right that the final scene should have him slowly dying in a garbage dump, and, as his last act, tumbling backward and submerging himself in its murky, slimy water. Welles underscores Quinlan's corruption with a close-up of the tape recorder playing back his final lines while it sits on a mound of trash beneath the bridge.

These visual images of filth and garbage as metaphors for evil and for a vitiated human condition are buttressed by references to dirt and filth in the script. When Quinlan storms out of the gathering in Vargas' room where he has been accused of the frame-up, he is half-mumbling, half-shouting, among other things, "Thirty years of dirt!" And later, looking up at the oil pumps with Menzies, he speaks of his "dirty job." In her beautifully delivered line, Tanya states upon recognizing him, "You're a mess, honey." The always hysterical night man at the motel looks at Susan's room after the party and stutters, "It's a stinkin' mess!" And finally, Vargas, berating Menzies after seeing Susan in her cell, sardonically assumes that "nothing's been touched by all this filth." His sarcasm is justified, for a touch of evil seems to be everywhere with everyone.

Welles, by placing his story in the border-town cosmos, gives us the mad complement to his theme. All that lies repressed in the mother country thrives on the surface in the border town. It is a place where anything can happen—where the underside of humanity is exposed. Symbolically, one is constantly crossing the borders of good, evil, logic, and sanity. Indeed, Vargas and his wife seem to have stumbled through some warp in the boundaries of morality and waking reality—into a funhouse nightmare threatening their lives as well as their value systems. If border towns do bring out the worst in countries, perhaps, then, they are metaphors for what those countries really are. At the same time, the constant criss-crossing of the border by most of the major characters in the film tends to confuse one's sense of location. This only adds to the ambiguous, crazed atmosphere of the film by heightening a certain feeling of dislocation and by undermining any search for surety.

The film viewed once is a manic vortex of time, space, and energy; no structure or logic of any type appears until it is seen three or four times. Even then, some major questions, like Quinlan's past vis-a-vis his wife or what actually happened to Susan, are still moot points. Welles has done his best to create a world of distortion and uncertainty, where one is constantly crossing borders between what is happening and what one thinks is happening, between reality and illusion—one crosses time and again as the distinctions disintegrate in the first few minutes of the film.

Welles also uses the lighting in many scenes to accentuate the breaking down of moral and psychic boundaries. When Susan has her first meeting
with Joe Grandi in the Hotel Ritz lobby, the flashing neon outside rhythmically darkens and lightens the room for the entire scene. Later, Susan, undressing in her shadeless, darkened hotel room, is again caught in alternations of black and white by the flashlight of one of the Grandi boys in an adjacent building. The same visual rhythm runs through the entire murder scene with Susan on the bed and Quinlan strangling Grandi. The ominous flashing always accompanies threats, intimidation, or murder. It blends good and evil and our contact with both, while saying we are all touched with evil in one way or another, conscious of it or not: its boundaries are not to be perceived.

Distortion and Dream

The boundary between states of waking and sleeping also blurs where Welles creates the ambience of the dream for certain scenes. The entire episode in the Linnekar girl's apartment is a nightmare for Sanchez. Quinlan keeps hitting him, his lover deserts him, he's surrounded by police, and he's terrified. Moreover, Welles crowds the room with people and overlapping lines; there is general confusion while Sanchez desperately sweats out the morass of his own bad dream—even Vargas is powerless to help him.

Tanya also occupies this dream dimension of the film. Despite her prosperous business—"... movies, T.V., what can I offer you?"—she seems ultimately disengaged from the reality of her existence. She is a transcendent creature, and Welles' close-ups detach her from her environment to heighten her presence as an omniscient spirit linking past and future. Every time Quinlan goes to see her, he is stepping into the dream of his past, when he would bring over a case of whiskey and spend a few nights. His seeing her is a pathetic attempt at wish-fulfillment; at times one feels she doesn't exist but in his mind. Tanya is a dream creature Quinlan can never recapture. She can only fulfill dream functions for him, and one is prophecy. When he asks, "Read my future," she answers, "You haven't got any... your future is all used up."

If Tanya's place exists in the realm of dreams, the Grandi motel belongs to the nightmare. The surreal, funhouse image of the music speaker sets the atmosphere for the room and what's to come when Susan first enters. Add to the speaker, the night man, first seen looking through the window, with whom Susan can barely communicate. Probably a not-so-distant relative of Norman Bates in Psycho (two years later), the night man is a grotesque figure added to heighten the twisted quality of the scenes at the motel. The nightmare is built up by the comic yet menacing whispering Susan hears coming through the wall, by the deafening music—and by the entrance of the Grandi guys and dolls, straight out of Nicholas Ray.

These and other elements all build to a climax we never see. It is characteristic of the film that a certain turbidity surrounds what actually did happen to Vargas' wife. The leather girls in a later response to boss Joe say, "Like you said, we put on a good show." Joe notes, "When she wakes up, she's gonna think something really happened." All we know for sure is that she was shot with sodium pentothal. One has the distinct impression that
the Grandi dolls could have been lying; and rape certainly isn't out of the question on the part of the guys. This confusion may be the result of production problems, but Welles is also making the comprehension of reality as difficult for the viewer as it is for those in the film.

A final taste of nightmare comes when Susan finally wakes in the hotel room. She looks up into Grandi's bloated eyes and runs screaming to the window. On the balcony, she shrieks and yells for help, but no one at first hears her above the noisy throngs of the main street midway. When people finally do hear her, they look up, laugh, and wave to the traumatized girl on the balcony. To complete the dream quality of this scene, Welles has Vargas, madly searching for his wife, drive directly beneath her as she yells out his name.

Welles best achieves this pervasive sense of distortion, dream, and barely contained insanity with his camera: his style is wedded to and expressive of his content. The opening scene is done with one continuous shot: it begins with the camera tracking the unknown assassin to the empty Linnekar car; it then rises up and above the street to begin reverse tracking the parallel action of the Vargases and of the doomed car until both parties reach the border. With this one opening shot, Welles sets the manic tone for the rest of the film.

After the explosion, Welles reverse tracks Vargas to the back of the bar where Quinlan and company have gone in search of clues; then, after the acid misses Vargas, the camera tracks him chasing his assailant. Later, when Quinlan storms out of the room where he's been accused of framing Sanchez, Welles uses a low-angle, reverse tracking shot as Quinlan, looming over the camera, mumbles his "thirty years of dirt" line. When Swartz tells Vargas his wife has been accused of murder, Welles cuts for an instant to a black prison door filling the screen and then to a fast, low-angle track of Swartz and Vargas running through the cell block to find Susan. With these tracking shots, Welles creates a sense of portentous exhilaration, sometimes bordering on hysteria.

For his opening shot Welles uses a wide-angle lens that completely distracts us from the dialogue to the energy of this scene, with Vargas and Swartz driving through a canyon of buildings lining the narrow street. Welles then cuts to a jittery, high-angle tracking shot of the car as it speeds away. Here, the simple motion of a car through space becomes a brief hallucination where buildings merge and flow backward against the current of forward movement. In both a literal and metaphorical sense, this movement is the energy of Welles' cosmos.

Welles uses deep focus wherever possible, adding a sense of confusion to certain scenes by not guiding our eyes to any one focal point. For example, we see Vargas in the blind woman's shop talking on the phone; at the same time, we look out through the shop window and see Menzies arguing with an adamant Grandi in the middle of the street. Here, the combination of a medium and a long shot provides parallel actions; and we are constantly distracted from one to the other. In the scene at the Sanchez apartment,
Welles supplants cross-cutting with a master shot using deep focus, keeping everyone's hysterics in focus.

When Quinlan leaves Tanya's place in search of the voice calling him, Welles first frames him with an extreme low-angle long shot—which is then followed by a high-angle, overhead shot, catching him from up above Tanya's doorway. The combination of these two shots summarizes Hank Quinlan's story in the film. The low angle generally serves to bring out his power, prestige, and control over a given situation; the high angle signals a sudden end to the world he knows and functions in. We are suddenly looking down on him for the first time in the film, and the introduction of this new perspective is enough to augur the events to come.

Shortly after leaving Tanya's with Menzies, Quinlan stops to look at an oil rig. Within the black ribs of the towering structure is a huge pump, raising and lowering its shafts into the ground. As Quinlan stares at the pump and talks of his turkey farm, his dirty job, and all he never got from life, the camera rises and falls with the pump. Here again, Welles' very form conveys his content: that movement in conjunction with the pump mirrors the rise and fall of Quinlan's reputation and, ultimately, of his life. After Quinlan shoots Menzies on the bridge, Welles uses a tilted long shot to follow Quinlan's bulk as it moves through the soiled night from the bridge to the water. This shot not only plunges us deeper into the Wellesian madhouse, but also expresses Quinlan's delirious state of mind and sets the probability for the symbolic attempt to expiate his guilt by washing Menzies' blood from his soiled hands. Indeed, Welles' camera throughout the film is constantly striving to create the world of his characters—rather than simply capture it.

A Nightmare Character

In terms of character, Welles only gives us one with any real dimensions: Hank Quinlan. He is a man who made his accommodation with the evil and filth around him long ago—only to have Vargas, the "starry-eyed idealist," upset that accommodation and hasten his descent into the trash heap waters of the final scene. (Can this be Welles' view of his own future? The film often looks like a brutal exercise in self-debasement. One can read Quinlan's falling backwards into the slime as Welles' personal nightmare.)

Quinlan himself stops at nothing to defend a reputation based on frame-ups, for his reputation is all he really has. We see his petty stature in the opening explosion scene when everyone, including the district attorney, awaits his arrival and then circles about, respectfully waiting for his appraisal of the situation. He is in command of this little world until Vargas asks, "What makes you so sure it was dynamite?" That questioning of his authority is the beginning of a conflict eventually challenging and finally destroying Quinlan's self-styled concept of justice, which built the Quinlan record and thus his prestige.

All he has is his record of cases broken, and nothing must be allowed to threaten that possession. When the threat becomes readily apparent at the Sanchez house with Vargas discovery of the dynamite chicanery, Quinlan
walks out and accurately predicts that “somebody’s going to be ruined.” His highly personal ethic has collided with Vargas’ absolute morality, and thus the film develops around people trying to save themselves or others from what they see as some form of evil. Grandi is fighting for his brother; Vargas, for “justice” and for his wife; and Quinlan for his universe.

Each attempt Quinlan makes to save himself furthers his destruction. With each shot of the film, Quinlan drops to a new level of deterioration. Quinlan, a physical monstrosity to begin with, is perpetually stuffing chocolate bars into his mouth or is munching on something else. When he returns to alcohol, he is almost always drunk. His clothing becomes increasingly disheveled; he messes himself with the egg; and he’s always leaving his cane about. When not eating or drinking, he has a disgustingly large cigar jammed into the center of his mouth with his cheeks puffed out and his eyes bulging. By the end, he is messed with Menzies’ blood and is sitting in a chair on a trash heap: he has become a piece of garbage. (Did Welles, in 1958, see his life amounting to Quinlan’s and his artistic vision of the world, like Quinlan’s personal vision of justice, failing in its search for vindication?)

Can anything vindicate Hank Quinlan? After he dies, Swartz tells Vargas that Sanchez has finally confessed and that Hank Quinlan, a great cop, had been right all along. The immediate effect of the news is to redeem and ennoble the Captain in regard to this and all the other cases. Yet the nature of the plot, especially in regard to Quinlan’s past, lends credence to the possibility that Sanchez merely cracked under third degree methods and confessed to something he didn’t commit. Moreover, our suspicion that Quinlan might have murdered his wife and our witnessing his conspiring with and killing Grandi do little to improve his character rating. On the bridge, he tells Menzies that all those framed were guilty anyway (he simply had evidence planted to substantiate his hunches!). Finally, when he’s pointing a gun at Vargas in the last scene, Vargas asks how he plans to get away with telling the others that he shot Vargas for resisting arrest. Quinlan answers, “They always believe me.”

The crisis of the film for him is that “they” might stop believing him, yet he still clings to his pre-Vargas world. More important is that he reveals the nature of his reality in that line. For the truth is what people believe to be true. Quinlan had the power to create truth—the power to fashion his own reality and have others make it theirs as well. It is precisely this power of Quinlan’s that had contributed so much to his identity and had enabled his workable compromise with the evil of Welles’ world.

Welles adds a final note on the film, on himself, and on Quinlan in the last scene. Tanya is standing with Swartz. They are looking out at Quinlan’s floating corpse. In response to Swartz’s request for a comment, Tanya rhetorically asks, “What does it matter what you say about people?” Welles is invalidating all the words of the film through the one character able to transcend what’s taken place. Even her own short eulogy for Quinlan seems to negate itself with vacuity: “He was some kind of man.” She makes no
judgment; nor does Welles in his world of omnipresent evil. He just leaves us—alone in the funhouse and far from the borders of moral and psychic certainty.

On first viewing *Touch of Evil*, one thinks Welles has lost hold of his film. Subsequent viewings, however, reveal the extraordinary control he has over his material. The inner logic of the film takes so long to appear because of the distorted world Welles labors to create with his fluid camera, persistent imagery, and seedy locations—his soiled lighting, manic score, and jagged plot. If memory can be relied upon, there is a near-total absence of fades or dissolves in favor of constant cross-cuts between scenes to reflect, accelerate, and somewhat confuse the action. In short, his direction comes very close to merging the form and content of his film, and in this wedding lies his brilliance.

Welles thus gives us a film about the mad, evil underside of humanity—and about the journey of his characters through this nightmare. In the end, it’s our nightmare too; and, like Vargas, we want to get out as soon as possible—lest we land on the trash heap with those for whom borders don’t exist.

---

*Touch of Evil*

1958, Universal-International, 93 minutes

Directed by Orson Welles; producer, Albert Zugsmith; screenplay by Orson Welles, from the novel *Badge of Evil* by Whit Masterson; cinematography by Russell Metty; art direction by Alexander Golitzen and Robert Clatworth; editing by Virgil Vogel and Aaron Stell; music by Henry Mancini; additional scenes directed by Harry Keller (uncredited).

*Cast:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlton Heston</td>
<td>Ramon Miguel Vargas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Leigh</td>
<td>Susan Vargas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orson Welles</td>
<td>Hank Quinlan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Calleia</td>
<td>Pete Menzies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akim Tamiroff</td>
<td>Uncle Joe Grandi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanna Moore</td>
<td>Marcia Linnekar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Collins</td>
<td>Adair, the District Attorney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis Weaver</td>
<td>Motel night man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor Millan</td>
<td>Manolo Sanchez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalo Rios</td>
<td>Risto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Sargent</td>
<td>Pretty Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlene Dietrich</td>
<td>Tanya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Joseph Cotton, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Mercedes McCambridge, and Keenan Wynn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>