

# The official version

## Traffic, directed by Steven Soderbergh, written by Stephen Gaghan

By Joanne Laurier  
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Steven Soderbergh's latest film, *Traffic*, inspired by a British television miniseries, is set in the world of drug trafficking. There are three intertwined strands to the narrative. In a Mexican border town, two slightly jaded policemen (Benicio Del Toro and Jacob Vargas) are pursuing drug smugglers. The bust brings the street cops, whose normal activities involve small-time schemes to rip off American tourists, inexplicably into a confrontation with the military. A leading general, who is aggressively hunting down members of the Obregon drug cartel, subsequently induces one of the policeman to join his team. The general, in fact, turns out to be connected to a rival cartel.

In San Diego two Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) undercover agents (Don Cheadle and Luis Guzman) have apprehended a mid-level trafficker of the Obregon cartel (Miguel Ferrer), who has agreed to testify against his Mexican-born boss (Steven Bauer), a respectable businessman living in a wealthy suburb. The cartel penetrates DEA security and kills the witness. The drug baron and his wife (Catherine Zeta-Jones), once innocent but now complicit in her husband's dirty business, are again free to oversee the all-powerful drug empire.

Meanwhile, the Ohio State Supreme Court Justice Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas) has just been named by the president to head up the anti-drug offensive. As the dedicated, uncompromising Wakefield prepares to supervise the country's anti-drug task force, he is oblivious to his 16-year-old daughter's (Erika Christensen) increasing heroin addiction. In the end, Wakefield walks away from his new position to support his daughter's rehabilitation efforts.

The film is not uninteresting to watch. Soderbergh, who shot the film himself, has an undeniable flair. And some of the interconnections and transformations—for example, the Zeta-Jones character—have a certain dramatic appeal. So too the upper middle class ennui of Wakefield's daughter and her friends. (Although the film unpleasantly implies that while the addiction of wealthy teenagers is a terrible shame, nothing can be done about the wretched fate of poor kids. The black neighborhood portrayed is virtually nothing more

than a drug distribution center.)

The performances in general and Del Toro in particular are convincing. As is almost inevitable in a work that is the product of “investigative reporting,” however, the characters tend to be the mere fleshing out of certain recognizable types: the crusading reformer, the hard-working, rough-edged “street” cop, the sleazy drug lord. At times the characterizations teeter on the verge of ethnic stereotype. All in all, the drama is muted and flat. The Douglas character embodies the Hollywood fantasy of modern-day liberalism; the only problem is that such figures hardly exist today, if they ever did. His Olympian incorruptibility never rings true.

The issue of drugs is not a small one in the US today, and in many countries. It impacts on the lives of millions and millions of people—those addicted, those in prison on drug charges, those in neighborhoods where drug dealers operate and so forth. It contributes to the social and psychological misery of many. Soderbergh points out the extent of the problem, noting that “everyone knows someone who has been touched by it, whether it's a friend or family member.”

If the problem is so pervasive in society, if drugs, as the director suggests, is one of the “key social issues in our culture today,” then it would appear to follow logically that one should examine the society that produces such a plague in order to locate the latter's causes. For all its pyrotechnics and for all the fanfare that has surrounded the movie, *Traffic*, disappointingly, doesn't carry out any such investigation. The viewer may know more about the details of police work and the operations of drug cartels by the end of the film, but is he or she any closer to grasping the essence of the *social* problem?

Taking on such an indisputably critical issue and dealing with it honestly would require a different approach than the one taken by the filmmakers. Is it in fact possible, in the first place, to deal honestly with the drug issue if one accepts wholly and uncritically the official version, i.e., more or less, the policeman's view of things? *Traffic* is a breathtakingly establishment work.

In the production notes, screenwriter Stephen Gaghan declares: "I went all over the country to research the story. In Washington, D.C., meeting with the policymakers—the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the head of the Association of Police Chiefs, the DEA, members of think tanks from the right and the left, journalists at *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* — ... These were people with multiple graduate degrees who were working in public service for their country, for the American people." Making an appearance in one scene, a Georgetown cocktail party, are Senators Barbara Boxer and Orin Hatch, the latter an extreme right-winger. There was a time when serious artists would have been ashamed to be associated so intimately with such politicians and police agencies.

Indeed the filmmakers' main premise seems to be that the American government and its branches comprise a pure, undiluted, drug-fighting machine. Despite this stalwart machine's best efforts, drugs flow freely into the United States because law-enforcers are hamstrung by restrictive laws and budgetary constraints, while drug lords operate without limitations in the backward societies. Family values must kick in where the system breaks down. This combination of fantasy and half-truths obscures the real issues.

A recurring refrain in the production notes is that there is no easy answer to the drug problem. But *Traffic's* unpardonable weakness is precisely that it settles for easy and superficial answers. None of the complex realities, which lie behind the problem of drugs, are explored: the growth of poverty and social inequality in Mexico and the United States, the history of relations between the two countries, the social interests (including large numbers of corrupt US officials and policemen) that benefit from the commerce in illegal drugs, the socio-psychological source of drugs' attractiveness for great numbers of people. None of this is seriously touched upon.

The look of the film is another strong statement of the wrong sort. There are three distinct visuals: gritty yellow color for the Mexican scenes; less gritty but dark color for the scenes in the black ghetto where the drugs are distributed; and clear, full color for the scenes involving the upper middle class. Regardless of Soderbergh's intentions, in a piece with such a conventional message, the color delineations tend to reinforce some dangerous prejudices.

Apparently, the movie leads one to believe, Washington is fighting the good fight against lawless, amoral peoples. If the existing structures and procedures prove helpless, what's left? The reality is that the United States has intervened in the past and threatens to intervene more forcefully in the future in poor countries under the pretext of eradicating

drugs. *Traffic* may unfortunately contribute to the atmosphere in which it is increasingly argued that one or another Latin American country should be invaded and "cleaned up." The film's creators' liberal blindness and complacency, in my view, has placed them in this unsavory position.

*Traffic* was named Best Picture of the year by the New York Film Critics Circle and won the Best Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor awards at the Golden Globes. There is considerable speculation that both *Traffic* and *Erin Brockovich*, also directed by Soderbergh, will score one or more Academy Award nominations. Steven Soderbergh is now considered one of the hottest film industry commodities.

Soderbergh is a filmmaker who has demonstrated in the past considerable technical skills and creativity. Unfortunately, his recent work has grown increasingly predictable. He began his career making films that were intelligent, personal and even, in a general sense, oppositional. After the box-office failure of his most daring project, *Schizopolis* (1996), and faced therefore with the possibility of isolation or even ostracism, he apparently drew the conclusion that if you couldn't fight them, you had to join them. A lack of perspective left him vulnerable to this conclusion. It's a loss.

In a recent interview the director revealed that those years represented an artistic turning point: "I was beginning to realize that I had marginalized myself. And if I wanted a career of any length at all, I needed to do a better job of working on both sides of the coin ... you can't just let things like that slip by or you'll have a whole career of making *Schizopolis*. Then you're screwed." This blunt statement helps explain why *Traffic*, in its critical elements, has a spirit that is thoroughly establishment. (It is a sign of the times that the film is considered "daring" and "unconventional," perhaps too much so for an Academy Award nomination, simply on the basis of its formal maneuvers.) One still hopes that Steven Soderbergh will change course.

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