

Touch of Evil

By Michael Sragow

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Orson Welles's "Touch of Evil" takes viewers on a jolting ride through a seedy town on the U.S.-Mexico border, circa 1957. At every turn, the glamorous stars — Charlton Heston and Janet Leigh, as a determined Mexican prosecutor and his new American wife — come up against a couple of charismatic grotesques: a baggy-pants crime boss named Grandi, played by Akim Tamiroff, and a tainted American police captain named Quinlan, played by Welles himself. Their jeopardy-riddled journey makes for one of the freest, riskiest, and raciest melodramas ever financed by a Hollywood studio.

The picture opens with a mind-blowing traveling shot that starts at the level of the belt-buckle and then swings left and right and up, as a quick and shadowy figure sets a time bomb and places the device in the trunk of a car. Continuing in one unbroken shot, the camera pulls away into a panoramic view of the border town of Los Robles, then floats down to follow Mr. and Mrs. Vargas (Heston and Leigh) as they prepare to cross from his country to hers on foot. ("You folks are American citizens?" the border guard asks pointedly, before congratulating Vargas on a bust.) The Vargases reach the checkpoint just as the millionaire and the blonde in the car do — and the blonde complains, "I've got this ticking noise in my head."

The Vargases kiss. Welles cuts — and Kaboom! Welles nails down the movie's mood, setting, plot, and even its racial friction in one audacious piece of virtuoso camera choreography. (The shot clocks in at three minutes and twenty seconds.)

For four decades, movie lovers savored this shot despite opening credits that Universal Studios draped over it in 1958 — along with a Henry Mancini score that added to the surface excitement while diluting the atmosphere and obscuring the ticking-bomb progress of the car. But in 1998, producer Rick Schmidlin hired editor and sound designer Walter Murch to put "Touch of Evil" into the audiovisual shape Welles had outlined in a fifty-eight page memo protesting the studio editing of the film. In the Murch reedit, available on DVD, you get to see this



Charlton Heston grimaces at a bullying Orson Welles. Courtesy Library of Congress

sequence — one of the most influential in movie history — without opening credits and with an ominous aural backdrop, including the doomed vehicle's car radio that operates like a tracer in the viewer's mind.

When this keen-witted version opened theatrically, some fans missed the Universal-cum-Mancini credit sequence; the hardscrabble splendor of the reediting didn't jibe with their memories of the cheap-to-sublime thrills they had when discovering this movie classic in a 1950s drive-in or on 1960s late-night TV. Of course, in 1998, Murch anticipated the controversy; as he told me then, the traveling shot had become "the Ten Commandments for a number of filmmakers" even in its tarted-up state. But, as Murch went on to explain, "Universal had dropped those titles on it simply, I think, because that's the only way they could deal with a three-minute shot. And because you had titles, Henry Mancini had to write 'title music.' We replaced the Mancini music with the kind of aural tapestry that Welles wanted: complicated, overlapping sounds from car radios, nightclubs, tourist traps, strip clubs." (In the course of their work, Murch and Schmidlin obtained an additional twelve-page memo and nine pages of music notes and also referred to production records and Welles's personal copy of his final shooting script.)

Admirers of Welles in general and this movie in particular may disagree on the studio edit and the Murch reedit. Both version should remain in release. But the dynamism and solidity of the 1998 "Touch of Evil" go way beyond the opening sequence and only augment the strengths that won the film its first renown.

When Welles signed on with Universal to direct and write as well as act in “Touch of Evil,” he wasn’t slumming — after nearly a decade abroad, he was fighting for the chance once again to become an American artist working in America. He thoroughly revamped the script, based on a serviceable *policier* called “Badge of Evil” (written by Robert A. Wade and H. Billy Miller under the pseudonym Whit Masterson). He made anti-Mexican racism a key issue, told the story from three different points of view, and brought a tragic dimension to his heavy of heavies — Quinlan, an obsessive police captain with an adoring henchman, an instinct for finding culprits, and a penchant for framing them. (Quinlan proved to be one of his signature roles as an actor and persona: the archetype of the big man whose own excesses help bring him to his knees.) Reversing the racial makeup of two key characters, Welles turned the putative hero (Heston) into a Mexican supernarc and his new wife (Leigh) into a spunky Anglo from Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love.

But Welles did his most glorious work during shooting on the backlot and in Venice, which stood in for the border town of Los Robles. It was, for him, a homecoming. “When Welles went to Europe,” Pauline Kael wrote in her rave review of Welles’s 1966 “Fallstaff,” “He lost his greatest asset as a movie director: his sound” and “compensated by developing greater visual virtuosity.”

Back in America for “Touch of Evil,” Welles took his camera wizardry to new heights while cooking up a soundtrack as dense, unruly, and alive as “Citizen Kane”’s. (The climatic bugging of Captain Quinlan eerily resembles Murch’s sound-and-image wizardry on Francis Coppola’s surveillance thriller “The Conversation.”) And Welles managed to meld old colleagues like Joseph Cotton, Ray Collins, Tamiroff, and Marlene Dietrich, young stars like Leigh and Heston, and seasoned Hollywood hands like Joseph Calleia into a *melodramatis personae* vivid enough to anchor a gutter-baroque extravaganza. Dietrich in particular, is sensationally mordant, predicting Quinlan’s fate in her Tarot cards — “Your future’s all used up” — and later delivering his epitaph: “He was some kind of a man.”

All those creative priorities are reflected in Welles’s fifty-eight page memo, which Universal wisely duplicates on

the DVD. Near the top Welles writes, “I assume that the music now backing the opening sequence of the picture is temporary” and goes on to sketch his inventive ideas for the aural texture. But he soon argues with amazing force and specificity against new cutting rhythms, studio-inserted additions, and, in particular, glued-together sequence that he designed to play out in two pieces. Welles’s goal is always to maintain the integrity he built into the screenplay. “What’s vital,” he writes, “is that both stories — the leading man’s and the leading woman’s — be kept equally and continuously alive.” As Welles describes his “original storyline,” it’s all about the testing of a honeymoon couple by a violent incident that engages the man’s professional conscience and subjects the wife “to a series of indignities which irritate and bewilder her and which her husband fails to completely appreciate.”

The Murch-Schmidlin reediting restores that critical male-female balance, thus intensifying the payoff to Susan Vargas’s frightful night in a motel — a precursor to Leigh’s nightmare motel stay in “Psycho” — and heightening her perilous confrontations with Akim Tamiroff’s comic-grotesque crime boss. And some deft celluloid surgery near the end of the reedit deepens what Curtis Hanson (the director/cowriter of “L.A. Confidential”) — a fan of the 1958 version — once told me was “the most heartfelt love story in Welles’s body of work, between the corrupt but larger-than-life Captain Quinlan, played by Welles, and his partner, played by Joseph Calleia. Quinlan is assisted, idolized, loved by his heartsick deputy, who would rather die for him than betray him — and who ultimately does both.” As this version of “Touch of Evil” makes dark-crystal-clear, it’s a classic because its brave emotions match its towering bravura.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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