

The Movies On My Mind:

Touch of Evil -- written and directed by Orson Welles; re-edited by Rick Schmidlin and Walter Murch.

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After the triumph of Citizen Kane in 1941, Orson Welles' career floundered as the former wunderkind morphed into a perennial Peck's bad boy. Increasingly, the Hollywood establishment found the style and content of films like The Lady From Shanghai (1948) problematic. Welles' imperious and erratic character, abetted by gargantuan bouts of eating and drinking, further compounded his difficulties with the system. Touch of Evil, written and directed in 1958, was touted as his comeback movie, the first in a five picture deal with Universal Studios.

It's likely that Universal executives assumed a chastened Welles would deliver a routine crime drama with an entertaining quantum of the master's touch. Instead, he created a hellish excursion through a extravagantly decadent Mexican bordertown milieu. Here was William Carlos William's 'ischio-rectal fossa of mankind': a locale foully stained with lust and greed and racial prejudice -- an issue which still lay uncomfortably outside the provenance of most mainstream Fifties movies. Welles' telling of his tale was deemed idiosyncratic as its content, particularly his staccato crosscutting between parallel plot lines.

Welles displayed his characteristic restlessness after completing a project by immediately flying off to Mexico, where he began filming Don Quixote (it would never be finished). Behind his back studio apparatchiks hastily cut his work to their own meagre measure; shooting new scenes, clumsily re-editing others. Touch of Evil opened to mixed reviews, then quickly vanished.

Within a few years, it was hailed as a subversive masterpiece. Its substance and style went on to inspire a legion of directors, from the French New Wave -- notably Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard -- to American filmmakers like Curtis Hanson (Hanson has stated that LA Confidential

[1997] was strongly influenced by Touch of Evil).

But Welles himself never directed a Hollywood picture again. Over the years he hawked jug wine, boomed portentous voiceovers, recited Shakespeare on the Johnny Carson Show, acted in often inferior films, all to cobble together funding for flawed, but brilliant attempts to rise from his own ashes, e.g., The Trial (1963) and Chimes at Midnight (1967).

Welles did get to view Universal's version of Touch of Evil prior to its release. He promptly fired off a 58 page memo to the studio, explaining in detail how his central concepts could be restored to the satisfaction of all concerned. His graceful, well- reasoned pleadings went utterly unheeded. But the memo survived, as well as pristine prints of Welles' original footage.

Using cutting edge technology, a dedicated Universal team headed by Rick Schmidlin and Walter Murch, assisted by Welles scholar Jonathan Rosenbaum, re-edited Touch of Evil, following Welles' instructions to the letter. Due to their efforts, forty years after the fact, viewers can finally see the picture the great auteur wanted them to see.

Welles' screenplay was adapted from a second-string potboiler by Whit Masterson. The film's narrative mainspring is the demolition of small time bigshot Rudy Linnekar and his current bimbo, moments after Linnaker drives over the border between the seedy Mexican town of Los Robles and its unnamed American counterpart (the locale Welles used for both was Venice, California, in its down-and-out pre-hippie days).

Touch of Evil's establishing sequence, from the furtive planting of a bomb in Linnekar's car to its detonation, lasts three minutes and forty seconds. It unspools in one astonishing take: Welles' mobile camera slithers through streets crooked as his characters' motives, effortlessly swooping and diving as it tracks the doomed couple. Along the way another couple is glimpsed walking hand in hand: Mike Vargas, an elite Mexican narcotics cop (Charleton Heston, his familiar craggy good looks rendered obscurely unsettling by swarthy makeup, black hair and moustache), and his new American bride Suzy (cherry-pie fresh, ripe for victimization, Janet Leigh's Suzy uncannily

foreshadows her role as the doomed Marion Crane in Psycho [1960] two years later.)

The titles which formerly obscured Welles' magisterial establishing sequence have been removed in the re-edit, so that one can fully savor the initial impact of Welles' sleazy, seductive bordertown mise-en-scene. Henri Mancini's idiomatic score has been carefully pared down, permitting one to hear more clearly the director's signature deployment of overlapped dialogue and relevant ambient sound -- e.g, the tinny country music on the car radio that obscures the bomb's ominous tick-tock.

Vargas has just incarcerated a powerful member of the Grandi crime cartel in Mexico. In the midst of his honeymoon, he insists on leaving Suzy to join the investigation into Linnekar's murder on the American side -- "because it looks bad for us". Naive Suzy is easily conned into a meeting with family boss Uncle Joe Grandi (vintage Hollywood's all-purpose ethnic, Akim Tamiroff, in an Edward G. Robinson sendup no less menacing for its over-the-top absurdity). Grandi implies Vargas' nosing around his family's dirty business will put her husband and Suzy in harm's way. The implicit racism of her dismissal -- she calls him a "greasy little man" -- sorts as oddly with her Mexican marriage as her earlier calling Uncle Joe's nephew/messenger "Pancho".

Enter Chief Detective Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles), an ex-alcoholic, foul-mouthed, unkempt, and limping hulk, still haunted by his wife's violent death long ago. He's become a local celebrity by solving a string of murders with the help of his devoted sidekick Pete Menzies (Joseph Calleia's poignant performance as Menzies led one critic to muse that the film's truest love exists between the two cops). Quinlan bristles with suspicion; growls bigoted barbs at Vargas; then quickly announces that the perpetrator is a frightened young Mexican shoeclerk, the lover of Linnekar's daughter. At the youth's apartment Menzies discovers dynamite in a shoebox; announces proudly that Quinlan has once again found his man. But minutes before Vargas himself had discovered the same box, empty.

Vargas eventually winks out the secret of Quinlan's successes -- vital evidence planted

without Menzies's knowledge. Meanwhile, Suzy is kidnapped by Uncle Joe's hoodlums in a scheme to indite her as a degenerate addict and implicate Vargas as a dope dealer. Quinlan strikes a devil's bargain with Uncle Joe, in aid of bringing Vargas down. He then proceeds to strangle Grandi in a tawdry motel room where Suzy lies drugged, to make it appear that Vargas killed Uncle Joe over turf or wife or both. Quinlan is ultimately unmasked and killed. Vargas and Suzy, still dazed from her ordeal, are united. The clerk's confession that he indeed did blow up Linneaker is tossed to the viewer almost as an afterthought: ironically, Quinlan's original suspicions on that score were absolutely on target.

In their hapless efforts to address what they saw as a need for greater clarity in Touch of Evil's labyrinthine plot, Universal's henchmen largely succeeded at unhitching the parallel narrative streams of Vargas' sleuthing after Quinlan's iniquities, and Suzy's abduction. As a result, the studio's version registers as more static, and is frequently confusing. Re-establishing Welles' intricate switching between the two story lines accelerates the film's momentum and energizes one's apprehensive alertness, setting the stage even more adroitly for a climax which is as extraordinary as the reknowned opening.

Welles' finale elegantly reprises the vertiginous crane and dolly camera movements of Linnekar's murder. Wearing a wire provided by Vargas, the disillusioned, heartbroken Menzies walks with his erstwhile mentor through a surreal landscape of pounding oil derricks (due to this scene, similar blasted locales would background subsequent generations of action thrillers). Vargas desparately stumbles around, behind, and below the pair with an inadequate receiving device, seeking to capture Quinlan's confession.

The despoiled terrain specifically invokes Quinlan's befouled moral condition, but also speaks to the general state of corruption prevailing in Welles' Hobbesian universe, ridden with rapacity and rancid greed. Here and elsewhere one is struck by the director's affinity for the means and themes of early Twentieth century European Expressionist art (e.g. Grosz, Klimt, Schiele) and

cinema (e.g. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari [1919], M [1931]).

Touch of Evil's subject matter, its intense chiaroscuro, skewed camera angles, grotesque physical distortions -- all resonate with the Expressionists' nostalgia for the gutter; with their sinister insinuations of unruly aggression and transgressive sexuality (the re-edit undoes the studio's suppression of Welles' clear inference that Suzy has been raped as well as drugged by Grandi's goons.)

An oneiric irrationality, emblematic of much European Expressionist art and previous Hollywood film noirs (many created by emigree German directors), pervades Touch of Evil. For instance, it's patently preposterous that Vargas would pursue racket busting and newly wedded bliss at the same time, and in the same dangerous milieu. Vargas repeatedly attempts to rescue Suzy, even as he persistently exposes her to ever more profound degradation and mortal risk. The logic reconciling such glaring contradictions resides in the unconscious. It's often revealed in Freud's 'dreamwork' -- which Touch of Evil evokes more powerfully than any noir effort, before or since.

Freud portrayed the dream's uncanny realm as a kingdom of misrule, where the id forever threatens to reign supreme, and the unconscious thrives upon forbidden desire and debauched urges. In the Freudian andere lokalitat -- the nightmarish "other place" -- of Los Robles, Welles strips bare Vargas' repressed dark side.

Here one discovers Vargas' disavowed violent proclivities, projected upon the unremittingly evil Grandis; Vargas' consciously disavowed prejudice against Anglos; Vargas' latent mysogeny, and his attendant fear of the feminine redeemed by exuberant rape fantasies; all fomented by the presence of Suzy -- his delectable, disturbing exogamous object choice, with her alarming breasts and airy, country-club racism.

Welles mocks the irrationality of the classic Hollywood happy ending even while staging one. Mike and Suzy's terminal reunion is so hectically conjured up as to seduce the viewer into denying the scarifying traumata visited upon her, which Vargas' patent derelictions have enabled. In

real life, Suzy would probably plunge into a profound post-traumatic disorder; doubtless bearing her husband enormous, perhaps unhealable anger.

Touch of Evil's cast of minor characters is compelling as its leads, including major stars and Welles cronies in trenchant cameos. As Quinlan's past Spanish whorehouse love, decked out in frightwig and garish makeup, an almost unrecognizable Marlene Dietrich deflates Quinlan's beery nostalgia with one of the most famous anti-romantic ripostes in movie history: "You ought to stay away from those candy bars, honey -- you a mess..."

Quinlan is a mess indeed, perversely splendid in his utter ruin. One speculates his creator was no stranger to this fallen hero/anti-hero's struggle between light and dark, order and chaos, rule and misrule. Welles epitomized that struggle both in Touch of Evil's milieu and the literal mortification of his own person. The director bloated his face, swelled his body into an obese parody of his corpulent, but still handsome self. Eerily anticipating the wreckage of his subsequent decline and fall, he became what he beheld.