

# A Review of Stephen Soderbergh's Movie, *Traffic*

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There is no question that movies have had a profound influence on public opinion in many areas of our cultural life. Classic films like *The Snake Pit*, *The Three Faces of Eve*, and even *Silence of the Lambs*, have educated or miseducated the public about mental illness more than any textbook or psychology course. Likewise, *Twelve Angry Men*, *The Caine Mutiny*, and, recently, *Erin Brokovich* have shaped public opinion about the law. On the smaller screen, television shows on a law theme that have great popularity include *The Practice*, *Law and Order*, the long running *Ironsides*, and even *Ally McBeal*. Films about drug addiction include *Leaving Los Vegas*, *Trainspotting*, and perhaps the best of the lot, combining law, psychiatry, and the drug problem, *Traffic*.

*Traffic*, directed by Stephen Soderbergh, graphically interlaces three parallel stories about the epidemic of cocaine and heroin moving across the border from Mexico, as the efforts of the American Drug Czar and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to stem the tide play out. Meanwhile, we see the wanton destruction of young lives, which is the end result. Benicio Del Toro and Jacob Vargas play two Mexican state troopers caught in the web of official corruption that makes drug traffic possible, while Michael Douglas plays a conservative Ohio Supreme Court justice who becomes appointed as the drug czar. His 16-year-old daughter, played by a very talented Erika Christensen, freebases cocaine and prostitutes herself between private school and family dinners, while the judge and his wife drink cocktails and reminisce about their own drug use in the 1960s.

Catherine Zeta-Jones plays the wife of a prosperous San Diego businessman (played by Steven Bauer) whose fortune, unbeknownst to his wife, rests on the importation of drugs.

Sadly, the plot was derived from the headlines and the personal experience of Stephen Gaghan, the screenwriter, who was himself addicted to drugs for many years, and like the young woman in the film, came from a privileged background.<sup>1</sup> Because of his will and intelligence, he was able to turn these experiences into a work of art, which, in my opinion, should be required viewing for anyone involved in psychiatry or public policy.

Through the clever cinematic device of adjusting the timing of the film processing chemistry, the Mexican scenes are tinged sepia, the privileged life of the judge is light blue, and the southern California scenes are in bright sunshine. Director Stephen Soderbergh generates a fast-paced story, contrasting and blending the lives of these disparate and desperate characters. Anyone who has treated drug and alcohol abuse or has dealt with the consequences of crime, degradation, and disease which are the inextricable results of substance abuse, will resonate with the realism of this movie. The film contains graphic scenes of drug use, violence, and sex which is not erotic but sad. The general public may think that this graphic representation is merely fiction, but it is all too accurate to be simply exploitation.

As the film opens on a stifling Mexican desert, two policemen intercept a shipment of drugs, only to have their superiors arrive and confiscate the goods before they have a chance to do the job themselves. These two honest cops, friends and rivals, struggle to

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advance their own agendas at the same time as the forces of crime and corruption buffet them. Awash in enormous amounts of money and the temptation to help themselves to some of it, they track down dealers and buyers. In this complex plot, one does not know who the good guys are or whom to trust. Without revealing the twists of the movie's plot, let me suggest that ethical behavior is more difficult when loyalty and betrayal may result in death.

Across the border in California the innocent wife and mother, played by a pregnant (in real life) Catherine Zeta-Jones, undergoes a transformation from suburban idle-rich soccer Mom to tigress guarding her cubs when her husband is arrested and accused of drug trafficking. She learns what a woman has to sell and what only money can buy, when trapped in the web of conspiracy between the law and the lawyers. The courtroom scenes are accurate and will reverberate with forensic psychiatrists who have testified in criminal matters.

Meanwhile, Michael Douglas, as the straight-shooting ambitious idealist, learns the hard way that drug abuse is not just for the poor or the congenitally depraved when a father's worst nightmare strikes close to home. Money and power are impotent in the face of addiction, and the concept of free will becomes a metaphor for helplessness when cocaine is involved. He learns that the war on drugs, which he is to wage as the new drug czar, may require more than public relations and diplomacy for victory. The scenes involving his daughter and her preppy friends expose the denial, which characterizes the world view of adults dealing with teenagers in this time of vanishing childhood and the myth of adolescent innocence.

More than 30 years ago, as a medical student in inner city Baltimore, I listened as a lecturer in first year psychiatry described the "Marshall Plan of the Inner City." He explained why domestic drug use was an essential part of the war on poverty. It is a very simple fact in economics that poor people who cannot afford consumer goods can get a large-screen color television from their local drug addict for only \$100. The scheme works like this. A drug addict burglarizes a house in suburbia to get the television; the suburbanite reports these losses to his/her insurance company in a slightly inflated form and gets a check to replace them; the insurance company raises rates and makes a profit on its investments; the appliance store then profits from selling new merchandise; the Teamsters profit from transporting it, the longshoremen from unloading it, and the Asians who

manufactured the appliances are all better off. Because the drug user now has enough money for his daily fix, he is happy; those police who look the other way in return for bribe and protection money thereby supplement their salaries so that our taxes can remain low. An occasional drug user will overdose and die. But this, of course, reduces the cost of medical care in the end. The producers of cocaine and heroin and their whole enterprise provide hard cash to Latin America, reducing the dependence of these poor countries on foreign aid. However, this cynical view of the drug trade is close enough to the truth to illustrate that the complexities of legal, medical, and social problems may be more powerfully expounded on the large screen than they are at congressional hearings and in newspaper editorials.

This award-winning film has exposed the myths of the drug epidemic by contrasting the wealth and influence of the kingpins and their corrupt bankers and attorneys, with the poverty and suffering of the lower level minions who are the couriers and street level dealers. We see the decline and fall of a pretty, blond, private school girl in her prim uniform to the depths of degradation as she sells her body for heroin, and the torture and terror suffered when the unwritten contracts of crime are enforced. Statistics or epidemiologic studies could not more eloquently explain the futility and the absurdity of the war on drugs and our ineffectual efforts to treat its victims. The 19 billion dollars a year that we spend losing the war on drugs is simply recycled back into the profits of South American drug producers and the tax-exempt economy of domestic drug consumption, which is a major part of the gross national product. The war on drugs has escalated with not only monetary costs, but with millions of lives wasted in prison, essentially persecuted for suffering from a disease, the lepers of our modern times.

This film has already caused many in government to reassess the war on drugs. Senator John McCain was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, "I saw *Traffic* with my 16-year-old daughter and it had a very powerful effect. It's caused me to rethink our policies and priorities." I would recommend that everyone see *Traffic*, a film that is entertaining, disturbing, and graphically real.

#### References

1. Lyman R: Gritty Portrayal of the Abyss From a Survivor. *New York Times*, Monday, February 5, 2001, p E1