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| **MY TAKE FEATURE ARTICLE** | | |
| ***John Denvir***, who teaches constitutional law at USF Law School, is editor of Legal Reelism: Movies as Legal Texts, available at local bookstores or through [amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/).          **"**  How do you reconcile **loyalty and ideals** in a pervasively corrupt institutional culture?  **"**            **"**  Soderbergh has shown Gordon and his partner as classic Hollywood **"buddies."** Audiences expect one buddy to **revenge the death** of another.  **"** |  | NO ONE COMES OUT CLEAN IN "TRAFFIC" |

by John Denvir

   Stephen Soderbergh's hit "Traffic" illustrates a dilemma which confronts all of us at one time or another. Where does commendable loyalty to the group end and disloyalty to your own ideals begin?

   There are four protagonists in "Traffic." First, Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), the federal judge who is appointed to be the national "drug czar. The second is Javier Rodriguez Rodriguez (Benicio Del Toro), who is a Mexican cop in Tijuana fighting the drug cartels. The third is Helen Ayala (Catherine Zeta- Jones), who starts the movie as a La Jolla housewife. And finally there is Montel Gordon (Don Cheadle), who is an agent in the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Each is faced with facts which show that his or her group is at worst corrupt, or at least ineffective in achieving its designated goal.

   Wakefield slowly discovers from personal experience that the much-publicized "war on drugs" is not being won. His own daughter becomes an addict and his dealings with her problem finally convince him that the whole "war" metaphor is misplaced when you are talking about your own child. She doesn't need a warrior; she needs a father. Wakefield resolves the tension between the policies promoted by his organization and his own analysis of what drug addicts need by resigning his prestigious position to return home to help his daughter. It's not an easy decision because he has up till then been an outspoken supporter of the old policy; also one suspects he will pay a political price for his change of heart. Soderbergh portrays Wakefield as a hero.

   Rodriguez faces an even more difficult dilemma. Everywhere he looks he finds corruption. At first, he and his partner sign up with the forces of the Mexican drug czar to help him shut down the Tijuana drug cartel. He is a zealous employee until he discovers that the Mexican drug czar himself is in the employ of a rival drug cartel. Furthermore, his partner has sold information to the American DEA, an act which culminates in the partner's death. How do you reconcile loyalty and ideals in a pervasively corrupt institutional culture? Forced to make up his own rules, Rodriguez finally decides to sell the information on the whereabouts of the corrupt Mexican drug czar to the DEA, but for a price--that the DEA build a new baseball field for the kids in Tijuana. Still, he feels like a traitor betraying an employer who has always treated him well. But in the morally compromised world in which he lives, he's a hero and Soderbergh shows him as such..

 Helen Ayala is the pregnant wife of a successful La Jolla business man who finds out that the husband is a major drug lord. She discovers the truth when federal agents pull her husband from their home. Her group is the family, and she has to face the fact that the family is firmly connected with large-scale criminal activity. She decides to accept the corruption and fight for her husband's release, even if that requires conspiring to murder a key witness. Ayala is hardly a hero, but Soderbergh does permit us to understand her dilemma and her attempt to choose between unpalatable alternatives.

   My problem is with Soderbergh's portrayal of Montel Gordon. He portrays Gordon as a hero even though the logic of the movie shows him to be a fool. Unlike the other protagonists he has no sense of the morally ambiguous climate in which he operates. The film time and time again insists on the ineffectiveness of the War on Drugs. Gordon himself is reminded at least twice that any supply he confiscates is quickly replaced by other smugglers and that this war can't be won. Still Gordon chooses the path of denial and continues the game of cops and robbers even after it has resulted in his partner's death. The last scene of the movie shows Gordon smiling to himself as he leaves the home of the drug dealer who ordered his partner's death, having planted a bug. The audience is invited to share in Gordon's anticipation of revenge for his partner's death, even though his obsessive pursuit of "bad guys" will certainly do damage to the Fourth Amendment and might well end with Gordon's own death.

   Why does Soderbergh paste on the "smiley face" ending? One possible is that he shares Gordon's satisfaction that the bug has been planted and that the War on Drugs will continue, but, as I have indicated, this is very hard to believe within the structure of the rest of the movie ,which shows that the War on Drugs cannot be won. Another possibility is that Soderbergh is playing with the audience, allowing us to see through his happy ending to the film's darker implications. Good art sometimes makes you work to understand it. I hope that is true, but still cannot dismiss the possibility of a more cynical explanation. Soderbergh has shown Gordon and his partner as classic Hollywood "buddies." Audiences expect one buddy to revenge the death of another. Soderbergh decided to satisfy this audience expectation, even if it undercut the message of his film.

   If the third explanation is the correct one, we must admit that Soderbergh would not be the first artist to dampen his message to improve his profits. Preston Sturges did the same thing in the ending of "Sullivan's Travels" and Shakespeare tacked on an incomprehensible happy ending to "Measure for Measure." Still it seems a shame. As the "Traffic" advertisements say, " No one comes out clean." Least of all the director.

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