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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Taunya Lovell Banks  is Jacob A. France Professor of Equality Jurisprudence, University of Maryland School of Law     |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [John Denvir](http://docs.google.com/Traffic-Denvir2.htm)  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/Title?0181865)  [All Movie Guide](http://allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=A230156) |     Materialism seems to motivate most of the characters. Even Helena Ayala, wife of jailed drug kingpin Carlos Ayala, is transformed from conventional young wealthy matron to a ruthless drug trafficker. She does not wish to return to the poverty of her childhood and will do anything, even contract a killing, to preserve her material wealth. | |  | | --- | | **The Invisible and Visible in *Traffic***  by Taunya Lovell Banks  *Traffic*, Stephen Soderbergh's Oscar nominated film, is a disturbing blend of fiction and reality with a semi-documentary feel. Structurally interesting, its multiple discrete plots occasionally intersect in interesting and almost casual ways somewhat reminiscent of the overlapping stories in Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Red* (1994). Also interesting is the cinematography with its very grainy, high contrast shaky video camera scenes of Mexico and the shift to a sleeker crisper camera look for the United States scenes. These camera tricks betray the film's rather imperialistic perspective. Corrupt government officials only seem to live south of the U.S. border.  Billed as a realistic examination of the drug problem, *Traffic* raises no new issues, and provides no new insights or strategies. Perhaps, that is Soderbergh's point. There is nothing new under the sun-the issue is old, and the solutions are obvious. Midway through the film there is a somewhat surreal scene of political party in Georgetown where Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), the fictional federal "Drug Czar," gets advice on fighting the drug war from real-life politicians. Fiction and reality blur as we see Wakefield talking with Senators Barbara Boxer, Orrin G. Hatch, Charles Grassley, Don Nickles and Harry Reid (III). They are joined by former Massachusetts State Governor, Bill Weld. Are their comments or appearances in the film intended as campaign ads? Even Jeff Podolsky, the onetime arts and entertainment editor for George magazine, playing himself, has an opinion on the subject. Was his appearance a plug for the magazine? Sadly, these real-life people come off as disingenuous distractions.  Just as quickly, the film shifts back to full fictional mode as Wakefield, shocked (or "awakened") by the disclosure that his daughter Caroline (Erika Christensen) is using drugs, decides to tour "the front line," the border where he talks with federal and state officials. Some critics called these scenes "preachy," but the officials' comments have a false ring. Wakefield and the public officials, fake and real, seem to be mouthing some "party line" that neither he (the actor/character) nor his conversationalists really believe. The only question is what party, a question *Traffic* never seems to answer.  Eduardo Ruiz (Miguel Ferrer), the ill-fated drug smuggler turned federal witness, says, the United States government, and even the DEA agents, already know that the war against drugs has been lost. The film audience is left to wonder why. Are we losing the drug war because there are so many layers between the really big guys and their market? Is it because of the enormous amount of money generated by the drug trade?  At one point early in the film Monte Gordon (Don Cheadle), the African American DEA agent, tells his partner, Ray Castro (Luis Guzman), that he wants to get to the big guys - the white guys. But we never see the white guys in the film. All the big wealthy dealers are Mexicanos or Mexican-Americans. Perhaps that is an underlying message in *Traffic*, the real powers behind the Mexican-American drug trade are totally invisible and invincible.  Materialism seems to motivate most of the characters. Even Helena Ayala (Catherine Zeta?Jones), wife of jailed drug kingpin Carlos Ayala (Steven Bauer), is transformed from conventional young wealthy matron to a ruthless drug trafficker. She does not wish to return to the poverty of her childhood and will do anything, even contract a killing, to preserve her material wealth. Initially unaware of her husband's real business, Helena overcomes her revulsion quite quickly to take control of her imprisoned husband's business.  The film even attributes economic motivation to the small time African American dealers. Seth Abrahams (Topher Grace), Caroline Wakefield's school mate and drug procurer, tells Wakefield, that the drug traffic prospers in African American communities because street corner dealers can make $500 in two hours selling drugs to upper class whites like himself. This is a hollow effort to relate to African Americans. What the audience does not see is the grim life of these dealers, portrayed so vividly in the television production of David Simon's and Edward Burn's book, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*.  If *Traffic* is truly a comprehensive story about the futility of drug war, Wakefield's journey into a drug infested African American community in search of his daughter is a missed opportunity to tell the story from that community's perspective. Instead, Wakefield enters and leaves the neighbor with the same blinders, his only concern is Caroline. In *Traffic* Soderbergh's primary point is that drugs are a problem in Middle America not just in African American or poor neighborhoods.  The narrative perspective throughout is definitely upper class mid western WASP. Caroline Wakefield is an attractive and popular clean-cut looking blond high schooler. Looks are deceiving, because this straight "A" private school attending all-American girl is a hard-core druggie. Strangely, she never gets that hard-core haggard drug addicted look, perhaps she hasn't been addicted long enough. Caroline looks rosy and even angelic when her father finds her strung out and prostituting herself. Who is in denial in this film, Caroline's mother (Amy Irving) or the director. Despite Caroline's escape from her first bout with drug rehab, we are made to believe that she is recovering with the help of her loving and supportive parents. Many members of the viewing audience, mindful of the high relapse rates, may not be convinced that there is at least one "happy ending" in this otherwise dark film. Once Caroline's somewhat estranged parents (and the family) are reconciled, everything will work out fine-more denial? In this sense *Traffic* is a very conventional film.  Perhaps the most complex character in the film is Javier Rodriguez Rodriguez (Benicio Del Toro), the Tijuana police officer. Most reviewers characterize him as a honest, self-sacrificing, hard working, but poorly paid Mexican law enforcement official. All he asks in return for information about the Tijuana drug cartel is a lighted baseball field for his community. But is the audience being deceived? The final scenes of *Traffic* have Rodriguez riding to intercept a plane load of drugs and approving of Salazar's demise are ambiguous. Rodriguez seems to have moved from a lowly position to one of some authority. An optimistic take is that Rodriguez really is the honest hard-working Mexican counterpart of Monte Gordon. Both persist in fighting what may be a hopeless war. They are the little guys fighting the invisible giant.  *Traffic* suggests that the drug war must be fought at both the real top, as well as the real bottom-drug users, not the false bottom of drug dealers. Rather than imprisoning drug users, we need to remove the reasons to try drugs and provide alternate activities and values. Perhaps that is Soderbergh's real message.  Posted February 7, 2002 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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