Touch of Evil: that ticking noise in our heads

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Orson Welles directed the filming of *Touch of Evil*, his seventh feature, in early 1957. He got the assignment from Universal Studios in part due to the urging of the film's leading actor, Charlton Heston. It was Welles's first Hollywood film in a decade, and his only one of the 1950s. He had garnered a reputation for prodigality, for being difficult, for being "artistic." He brought in *Touch of Evil*, much of it filmed in the Los Angeles suburb of Venice, on schedule and on budget.

During post-production, however, Welles and Universal executives had a falling out. The studio objected to the manner in which Welles, in his proposed version, had organized the various strands of the narrative. He began a scene, cut to another, returned and concluded the first scene, then cut to the last part of the second. Universal re-edited the film and added a few sequences, against Welles's wishes, to give it a smoother, more continuous feel and to "help" the exposition in certain spots. The director more or less disowned the version released in May 1958, which went virtually unnoticed in the US. It was Welles's last American picture.

Based on a recently found 58-page memo, sent by Welles to studio executives at the time, efforts have been made to restore the film so that it conforms more closely to the director's conception. This new version of *Touch of Evil*, which restores much of the cross-cutting, is currently showing in movie theaters in the US.

The film, based on the pulp novel *Badge of Evil* by Whit Masterson, tells the story of an investigation into the death of a local big shot, Rudy Linnekar, killed by a bomb planted in the trunk of his car, in a seedy American town on the Mexican border. A Mexican narcotics investigator, Miguel "Mike" Vargas (Heston), honeymooning with his wife Susan, (Janet Leigh), becomes involved because he happens to witness the explosion. Meanwhile the couple faces threats and violence because Heston's character is in the midst of prosecuting a drug case against a crime family, the Grandis, that operates on both sides of the border.

Vargas, an honest man, comes up against the efforts of a policeman on the American side, Hank Quinlan (Welles), to railroad the Mexican son-in-law of the murdered man. Infuriated and threatened by Vargas, Quinlan joins forces with "Uncle Joe" Grandi (Akim Tamiroff) to discredit the Mexican official by framing his wife on drug charges and accusing them both of being drug addicts. The scheme unravels primarily because Quinlan's trusted assistant, Sgt. Pete Menzies (Joseph Calleia), becomes disgusted with the methods of his longtime friend and mentor.

Touch of Evil is justly famous for a number of things. First of all, its opening crane shot, lasting several minutes, which follows both the convertible carrying the time bomb and the married pair as they all proceed toward the US border on the Mexican side. Following their progress, the camera reveals a tawdry, impoverished town. At the border checkpoint the newlyweds are waved through after a few routine questions. The blonde woman in the convertible, the rich man's mistress, anxiously tells the border guards and her companion, "I've got this ticking noise in my head." What a line! As the camera returns to Heston and Leigh, who embrace, the bomb explodes. Welles accomplishes more in one shot than most directors do in two hours.

The shot is more than a technical tour de force. The use of one extended take, which visually unifies so many elements, suggests a single, indivisible universe and it is a universe in which a layer of corruption coats virtually everyone and everything.

Touch of Evil is also famed for its look. Critic Manny Farber noted: "Welles's storm tunnel has always the sense of a black prankster in control of the melodrama, using a low-angle camera, quack types as repulsive as Fellini's, and high-contrast night light to create a dank, shadowy, nightmare space." Farber described Calleia's Menzies, "scared out of his wits ... a grey little bureaucrat fitted perfectly into *Touch of Evil* with the sinister lighting and tilted scenes in which he's found, buglike at the end of hallways and rooms."

There are the acting performances. Even the often wooden Heston is good in this film; Leigh, Welles himself, Calleia; Ray Collins as the opportunist district attorney; Joseph Cotten as an aging police official; Tamiroff, chewing up the scenery with his ridiculous toupee; Dennis Weaver as a nervous, twitching motel clerk fascinated and terrified by Leigh's presence; Mort Mills as Schwartz, the only American who helps Vargas out; Mercedes McCambridge (out of *Johnny Guitar*) as a lesbian gang leader who says, "Let me stay. I wanna watch," as Leigh is held down on a motel bed and seems threatened with a gang rape; and, of course, Marlene Dietrich. Dietrich, whom Welles called up one night out of the blue and asked to come work on his film the next day, is Quinlan's old flame, a brothel keeper and fortune-teller of some vague description.

She gets to comment on Quinlan when the policeman shows up at her door, perhaps echoing some in Hollywood who hadn't seen Welles in person--the once-dashing actor-director who now weighed nearly 300 pounds--in nearly a decade. "I didn't recognize you. You should lay off those candy bars.... You're a mess, honey." Later she proclaims his imminent doom when he asks her to read his fortune: "You haven't got any.... Your future is all used up." And she gets the final word, as Quinlan lays dying in a dirty, polluted canal: "He was some kind of a man. What does it matter what you say about people?"

Touch of Evil is about racism and American chauvinism, and the haves and have-nots. Within the film's universe there are two "interracial" marriages: Leigh and her Mexican husband, Linnekar's daughter and hers; the latter marriage also crosses class barriers. Both unions are commented on. The border guards are surprised to discover this white woman married to a Mexican man, even a prominent one. When she is pointed out to Quinlan as Vargas's wife, he comments nastily, "She don't look Mexican either." During the interrogation of Sanchez (Victor Millan), the husband of Linnekar's daughter, Quinlan observes that he doubts the slain man wanted to have a "Mexican shoe clerk for a son-in-law."

Although she's married to Vargas, Susan is capable of sneering at Mexico and Mexicans. When she's accosted by a young man in the street, unbeknownst to her one of the Grandi gang, she disdainfully calls him "Pancho." Later Uncle Joe asks her why she called his nephew Pancho. She doesn't know. "Just for laughs, I guess," is the best she can do.

The film is also about the police, police corruption, police terror and the abuse of power. This film was made, after all, in the wake of the McCarthyite witch-hunts. Welles was never blacklisted, but he might as well have been. (He certainly was denounced as a Communist sympathizer by the Hearst press.) It can't be considered an accident that he

didn't direct a film in the US between 1947 and 1957. His ideas weren't welcome and he didn't feel comfortable in the atmosphere that prevailed. By 1957 the civil rights movement had begun in earnest; Quinlan, from a certain point of view, fits one's picture of a Southern redneck sheriff.

Vargas stands up to Welles's character, who has "solved" the case by planting dynamite in Sanchez' apartment. They later have this exchange:

Quinlan: Our friend Vargas has some very special ideas about police procedure. He seems to think it don't matter whether killers hang or not so long as we obey the fine print.

Vargas: Captain, I don't think a policeman should work like a dog catcher in putting criminals behind bars. No! In any free country, a policeman is supposed to enforce the law, and the law protects the guilty as well as the innocent.

Quinlan: Our job is tough enough.

Vargas: It's supposed to be. A policeman's job is only easy in a police state.

Touch of Evil is about sex, sexual fear and frustration, impotence, voyeurism, exhibitionism. Poor Janet Leigh, a blonde goddess, is peered at, leered at, spied on, drugged, stripped and violated metaphorically on a number of occasions. Sexuality is associated with a bombing, a strangling, a mock gang rape. But then no sexual relationship is ever consummated in the film. Every time Heston and Leigh start to kiss, they're disturbed. Even their intimate conversations on the phone are interrupted, usually by Vargas's being called off to duty. Repression--what doesn't take place, what isn't allowed, what isn't completed--dominates.

Both married couples, in fact, are separated the entire film. For their part Linnekar and his stripper girlfriend are blown up in the first scene. No one has a mate. Quinlan's wife has been murdered years before; Dietrich has no use for him. He has aged badly and is so overweight. She casts doubt on his sexual capability. He suggests, "Well, when this case is over, I'll come around some night and sample some of your chili." She says drily, "Better be careful. Maybe too hot for you." The strongest feelings are expressed by Menzies for Quinlan. When Dietrich is asked, at the end, if she liked Quinlan, she replies: "The cop did. The one who killed him. He loved him."

Much of the film's power comes from the complicated relationship of Welles to his character. The director/actor explicitly denied any such complexity: "It's a mistake to think I approve of Quinlan at all. To me he's hateful; there is no ambiguity in his character. He's more than a little ordinary cop, but that does not stop him being hateful." The film's images suggest a less simple reality.

A purely sociological reading of *Touch of Evil*, or any serious work, will never prove satisfying. There is far from a one-to-one relationship between the nightmarish world of the film and American social reality of the 1950s, although clearly the former speaks to and illuminates the latter in significant ways. A spectator content simply to ask him- or herself, "Are these accurate portrayals of cops, politicians and hoodlums, or of the relations between them, or of the milieus they inhabit?," will derive something from the film, but he or she will avoid its richest and most suggestive ingredients. *Touch of Evil*, looked at closely, includes virtually nothing "realistic." The somewhat banal story grasps at certain essential qualities of immediate reality, but if the film did not represent a relatively autonomous intellectual and moral arena in which Welles worked at the themes and problems that obsessed him from an early age, it would have little enduring value.

Farber identified Welles's "career-long theme," and this is something of a commonplace, as "the corruption of the not-so-innocent Everyman through wealth and power." Complementing this, Andrew Sarris has observed that "every Welles film is designed around the massive presence of the artist as autobiographer. Call him Hearst or Falstaff, Macbeth or Othello, Quinlan or Arkadin, he is always at least partly himself, ironic, bombastic, pathetic, and, above all, presumptuous."

These points are no doubt true, but I think they miss something essential. If Welles were simply an egoist who despised corruption, even one with a remarkable flair for drama, I'm not certain his film work would continue to resonate as it does. ExposÃ©s of police misdeeds are not uncommon, even in contemporary American cinema. The quantity of evildoing by cops recounted in *L.A. Confidential*, a shallow and forgettable work, far outdoes anything in *Touch of Evil*. And it is not even the sense that corruption is all-pervasive that distinguishes Welles's films. On the contrary, many modern films paint a far bleaker picture.

To a certain extent this is the point. Welles, it seems to me, brings out both the necessity of corruption, its inevitability given the nature of contemporary society, and at the same time, its *non-necessity*. (People are *touched* by evil and corruption, it is not something essential to their being.) He is fascinated above all by the human personality and its almost infinite capacities. His concern with his own personality, although not untouched by self-aggrandizement, is of a relatively objective character. He studies himself, his responses to people and events, his progress, even his own degeneration, as a scientist-artist-autobiographer, and presents his results in the form of the characters he creates.

I think Welles, like an Oscar Wilde, was not so much enamored of his own powers, as he was deeply concerned by the problem of *engendering such powers in others*, so that the general public could "make itself artistic." There is a deeply democratic streak in his work. He believed that everyone could feel what he felt, see what he saw. (His efforts to produce classic works in an innovative style for mass audiences in the late 1930s provide an obvious reference point.) And he knew or intuited enough about life to understand that what prevented people from living as they could was fundamentally social in character.

The affinity for Shakespeare, which Welles felt from boyhood (his first reading primer was *A Midsummer's Night Dream*), was natural. Here were the world-historical, monumental individuals, some tormented, others grotesque, in whom he found the confirmation of his own feelings about himself and others. Figures not "larger than life," as they are often rather thoughtlessly described, but the norm, at least potentially, in a future in which the average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx, and beyond.

But that is the future. In the present, personality presents a problem. I think Welles was deeply disturbed and intrigued by the degree to which breadth of personality tends to be bound up in the present social order with corruption and moral depravity. So many of his works seem to involve a tragic acceptance that one can't be grand and ambitious in this world without doing evil.

"The less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life--the greater is the store of your estranged being." This is Marx on Welles's characters, or it might as well have been. For all of his protagonists--Kane, Arkadin, Quinlan--the piling up of success or power at one pole inevitably involves a psychic and sexual shriveling up at the other.

Welles is not moralizing. It's the human cost, *the waste* that drives him crazy. It's the disproportion between the capacities of his heroes and the pettiness of their actual pursuits and accomplishments--accumulating money, power, fame--that wounds him to the quick.

(If we think of his work as semi-autobiographical, there seems to be an element of harsh self-evaluation in this. Aren't we being encouraged, in his later films, to think of Welles as an artist who was seduced by the film industry, who squandered his talents, who completed only a fraction of the work he set out to do? Whether this self-criticism is entirely just is another question.)

This discrepancy holds true for Quinlan, the corrupt small-town policeman, too. His entrance is prepared, like Henry V's. We hear about him before we see him. He is legendary, "our local police celebrity." His car tears up to the scene of the crime. We first view him from below as he

struggles to pull himself out of the back seat. He immediately exhibits his intuitive genius. He *is* a great detective. (The man he tries to frame up proves to be guilty.) More than that, he dominates every scene. Vargas is upright, but he never has the impact of Quinlan. Half the time Vargas runs around like a chicken with its head cut off. He neglects his wife and places her in danger. He pursues Quinlan, but without the help of Menzies (who says, "I am what I am because of him [Quinlan]"), he never would have exposed the detective.

And yet Quinlan is filthy, a monster, a murderer. Welles has made himself toad-like, bloated, malevolent. But, even so, his end is tragic. People shouldn't become what he becomes, or die like he dies, a big, fat ridiculous animal floating away in a pool of dark, oily, garbage-filled water. To make such a horrible man a tragic figure and to make an audience feel his tragedy, without sentimentality, even as it despises him, is the mark of a great artist.