

“THIS COULD BE VERY BAD FOR US”: REPRESSION IN *TOUCH OF EVIL*

The border used to be an actual place, but now,
it is the act of a thousand imaginations.

—Alberto Ríos, “The Border: A Double Sonnet” (2015)

Touch of Evil (Universal-International 1958) is often cited as the last important film noir. In an influential essay the screenwriter Paul Schrader elegized it as “film noir’s epitaph” (12), a straggler in a fading genre defined by somber themes and shadowy styles. Writing in 1972 Schrader could not have known that the long post-World War II U.S. economic boom would start closing a year later in 1973 during the last months of the crumbling Nixon Administration. Schrader also may have underestimated the staying power of Orson Welles’s moody thriller, which is highly prescient about America’s dimming global prospects. *Touch of Evil* begins with a breathtaking tracking shot depicting unrest on the U.S.-Mexico line in an explosive bordertown, which becomes a metaphor for the unraveling American doctrine of international “development.” Welles’s camera immediately establishes seedy Los Robles as a culturally dominated landscape. During the course of the movie, however, American hegemony in the Southwestern borderlands falters, following the assassination of a rich American businessman. Miguel (Mike) Vargas, the movie’s “Mexican” spokesman for liberal democracy, expresses alarm that “This could be very bad for us.” His apprehension ripples through the movie as the progress narrative of American internationalism deteriorates into a death drive. Vargas’s personal instability also worsens as he contends with the infiltration of ethnosexual boundaries, signified by the abduction and rape of his Anglo wife Susan. The film will end with a backward glance at the rubble left behind by these neocolonial regimes, denoted by the ravished frontier(s). *Touch of Evil* turns into a tale of imbalance and ruin that identifies an American politico-economic tipping point. Its pervasive imagery of wreckage, sludge, and pollution foretells the ragged end of the “American Century.”

Touch of Evil would be Welles’s last American film. When production began in 1957, it carried Welles’s hopes for a comeback in Hollywood after a decade of self-exile. Welles had a strong social conscience and intended *Touch of Evil* to convey a message about injustice; he guessed correctly that the time was right for Hollywood to address ethnoracial prejudice in America. However, shortly after its sporadic release in the spring of 1958, *Touch of Evil* was upstaged by Stanley Kramer’s chase picture *The Defiant Ones* (MGM 1958), which is often

cited as the first mainstream Civil Rights movie. It dramatized a biracial escape from a southern chain gang, and its Hollywood-style happy ending projected an upbeat future for race relations. By contrast Welles portrays the American “Southwest” as a white supremacist hellhole, a far more negative rendition than the celluloid “South” of *The Defiant Ones*. Welles’s border territory, with its oil-fields and scrublands, strongly suggests Texas — what Cara Koehler calls the “peripheral South in *Touch of Evil*” (69). In the opening scene the shiny 1956 Chrysler New Yorker convertible that rolls towards the border checkpoint has Texas license plates (before it blows sky high).

Welles’s participation in *Touch of Evil* actually began in 1956, when he accepted an acting role in the contemporary western, *Man in the Shadow* (Universal-International 1957). It was produced by Albert Zugsmith and apparently included a handshake deal for Welles to direct Zugsmith’s next picture, which became *Touch of Evil*. *Man in the Shadow* is a *noir* fable about the oppression of Latinos. There are striking similarities between the two movies, since *Man in the Shadow* amounts to a parable about domestic fascism and “explicitly compares a powerful cattleman (played by Orson Welles) to Mussolini” (Imogen Smith 187). Welles (who wrote his own scenes) plays a land baron who brags that his “Golden Empire” has more land than five European countries. His ranch bristles with checkpoints, armed guards, and warning signs that read “Violators will be shot” — iconography that expresses its anti-immigrant prejudice. An upright Anglo sheriff (Jeff Chandler) looks into the murder of a Latino ranch hand. However, in this zone of white rule, the leading citizens turn against the lawman for threatening crony capitalism. The sheriff’s lonely bravery at last inspires the people to rise up against the Golden Empire’s oligarch.

Welles was given a budget of under \$1 million to direct *Touch of Evil*, which was shot during February-April 1957 in Venice Beach, Santa Monica, and a crossroads motel in the desert in northern Los Angeles County. He cleverly transformed Venice Beach into a cinematic “Mexican village on the Texas border” (Richardson 123). The actual settings are stripped of any objective California references and heavily subjectivized by Welles’s camerawork to suggest the scruffy bordertowns of the Rio Grande valley in Texas. In 1957 much of Venice Beach bordered an oil patch, where Welles shot scenes that recall the Texas gusher movie *Giant* (Warner Brothers, 1956). Welles transformed the grimy machinery and dull canal into a fictional oiltown that became “Los Robles,” which functions as a colonial open sewer: “All that lies repressed in the mother country thrives on the surface in the border town” (Krueger 58).

The source novel was *Badge of Evil*, a 1956 crime story by Whit Masterson. This was a pseudonym for the successful San Diego team of Robert Wade and William Miller, who wrote more than 30 crime novels under several pen names. *Badge of Evil* offers conventional reassurance of American righteousness, equality, and virility — although it acknowledges that the justice system

contains bad cops. The novel opens with the death of a rich San Diego businessman, Rudy Linneker, killed by dynamite at his beach house. The protagonist is Mitch Holt, an Assistant D.A. His wife is Consuela (Connie) Holt, an aristocratic Mexican woman who speaks English without an accent (like Miguel Vargas in Welles’s movie). Theirs would have been termed an “inter-racial” marriage during the 1950s, and it subjects them to bigotry in southern California. Mitch becomes suspicious of a pair of detectives, who pin the bombing on a shoe salesman, the lover of the victim’s daughter. Holt clears the shoe clerk, coaxes a confession from the real murderer, and begins an inquiry into the planted dynamite. However, his wife is lured to a skid-row hotel, drugged with a medical narcotic, stripped of her clothes, and framed as a drug addict. The scandal threatens to undermine her husband’s standing. But he solves the case when he persuades one of the policemen to wear a hidden microphone and confront the dirty cop. Holt captures the incriminating conversation on a portable tape recorder; in the gunplay that follows both cops die. Although wounded, Mitch has restored order and justice. He also reaffirms his manhood by taking his wife on a second honeymoon to Ensenada, Mexico.

Universal purchased the rights in May 1956 and hired Paul Monash, a television scriptwriter, to develop a screenplay. He simplified the storyline by introducing an Oedipal circuit and making the shoe clerk *guilty* of killing his prospective father-in-law for the inheritance money. Welles maintained this addition, delaying until the end of his film the disclosure that the shoe salesman confessed to the bombing (Comito, “Continuity Script,” 169, referred to parenthetically hereafter). Further, Monash added several scenes that sharpen the rivalry between the Assistant D.A. and the corrupt lead cop. Welles took over the Monash screenplay in January 1957 and considered himself the sole author (although he retained the scenes created by Monash). Welles’s main innovation was his “introduction of the theme of American racism,” dramatized by racialized border-crossings (Stubbs 183). Further, Welles’s tenebrous presentation of the borderline darkens the film’s socio-political dimension and foregrounds interraciality as a dangerous condition.

The city of Los Robles is seen almost entirely by night — a crude neon strip stitched to an oilfield. Among all his films this bordertown “is Welles’s most palpably realized cinematic city” (Gear 166). Los Robles is a site of wealth production that enriches far-off investors in the global north but leaves local inhabitants fighting over the crumbs. Welles reinforces the movie’s anticolonial politics by flipping the ethnicity of the Anglo Assistant D.A. character. Welles transforms him into a bilingual Mexican government lawyer and narcotics agent, Ramón Miguel Vargas (Charlton Heston, in brownface). Welles also flips the ethnicity of his wife Susan (Janet Leigh), changing her from a Mexican aristocrat into a starchy East Coast descendant of American old money. Welles’s script implies that both Miguel and Susan are well educated, but only the Americanized “Mike” has cross-cultural mobility. Expressed by

the Mexican/American signifiers of his dual name (Miguel/Mike), he holds “power through this hybridity and fluidity” (Fuller 169).

His Anglo wife “Susie” lacks these assets. When first seen gliding in high heels across the dingy streets of the Mexican Los Robles, Susie seems to have it all; she presents the radiant “face of white femininity” (Jo Smith 78). Even more, she stands for America’s idealized self-image during the Cold War. She is the resplendent 1950s image of “pure” white womanhood, a totem of Anglo American cultural eminence, economic abundance, and white supremacy. Susan’s outfit exaggerates her hourglass shape, and she is adorned with pearls and bracelets. She is a *figure* of beauty to be seen and followed (the camera loves her). The French film theorist Nicole Brenez has noted that when actresses are transformed by the camera, the “organic” female body becomes substituted by an “effigy before us, a dancing silhouette in images” (Brenez, “Incomparable,” n.p.). *Touch of Evil* evokes this luminous model or manikin of female sexuality — although it does not interrogate entrapment within it. Welles’s seductive camera turns the living actress into a celluloid product of the movie imagination. Film copies itself and multiplies its own evidence with images of Susie’s unblemished face and flawlessly upswept blonde hair. Her bright American presence deepens the surrounding “foreign” darkness that drenches Los Robles. In the flickering dynamics of spectatorship Janet Leigh’s organic body becomes replaced by a gleaming plasticity. Both demure and sexy, Susie is the virginal All-American girl on the day of her marriage (not yet consummated). There is no mistaking her pinup appeal — a visual marker for American plenitude. Susie simultaneously projects female innocence and triggers male desire. She also poses a problematic reminder that, in the social register of the movie, she has brashly outmarried from her Main Line Philadelphia heritage and formalized her physical attraction to a “foreigner.” Her quickie marriage to Miguel links eroticism and contagion. In *Touch of Evil* the threat of racial pollution hangs over Los Robles.

In the liberal-democratic ideology of the movie, Susan (to her credit) has rejected segregation by taking a Mexican husband. She has demonstrated individual agency and frank desire. However, Miguel knows that her WASP family is not likely to be pleased by her marriage, which appears to be a secret. Nor does Susan seem ready for immersion in Mexican culture; she does not speak Spanish. She condescends to a young Latino stranger in a leather jacket whom she nicknames Pancho (Valentín de Vargas). He and his uncle Joe Grandi (Akim Tamiroff, an Armenian in heavy makeup) belong to a Mafia-like family that claims a Mexican-Italian-American identity and operates on both sides of the border. The Grandis form a sleazy counterpart to Los Robles’ “legitimate” business, which consists of siphoning Third World petro-resources, as coded by the derricks that loom over the town. Pump-jacks signify the flow of dollars to power the American economy at the expense of colonized peoples, who are excluded from mainstream commerce and operate only on the bottom margin.

In a subsequent scene outside her “honeymoon” hotel in the Mexican Los Robles, Susan admits her bewilderment within this netherworld (or counter-world). She apologizes to Mike for her repeated gaffes, linguistic stumbles, and cultural insensitivities — “Did I say the wrong thing again?” (81). She appears to find *la frontera* entirely alien, and she fails to decipher its overlapping semiotic codes. Because of these dissonances, we are left to wonder if her attraction to Mike is purely superficial. Her identity as the All-American girl is jeopardized by her physical attraction to a man of color — a dangerous “interracial” urge she fails to suppress. Her sex drive is postulated in *Touch of Evil* as a threat that must be defused. This assumption aligns with the “ideological grain of Hollywood’s containment of female sexuality” in movies of the 1950s (Hanson 166).

Welles noted in his screenplay that Susan and Miguel had fallen in love and married quickly. They seem to have intruded on one another’s lives. As they walk through the Mexican Los Robles, they contrast with the ambient atmosphere of poverty and malaise as the camera constructs a touristic travelogue “south of the border.” Their cozy intimacy contrasts with the commercialized sex figured by the strip joints and liquor stores in the background. In Welles’s fluid camerawork they stroll past shadowy arcades of *Otberness*. They sidestep pushcarts and a herd of goats, images that evoke the border imaginary and establish Los Robles as a colonized place, a city of exiles. These images are part of the liminal “border” locale, where unusual events can be expected. The newlyweds stop to avoid a chrome-plated convertible, driven by a drunken American, accompanied by a woman passenger he just picked up at a cantina. As James Naremore observes, *Touch of Evil* shows “rich northerners using the Latin world as a kind of brothel” (231). However, viewers know that a time bomb has been set in the trunk of the car. The suspense mounts during the long boom shot that tracks the doomed vehicle toward the U.S. border. Welles continually makes us wonder “when the bomb will explode and whether Susan and Mike will be injured along with the couple in the car” (Bywater 31). The woman in the front seat adds to the tension when she complains to the border guard about “this ticking noise” (51) she keeps hearing.

At the same time Miguel chuckles at the border that he is “Hot on the trail of a chocolate soda for my wife” (51), which might be a suggestive reference to “interracial” sexual relations. Or his offer of a soda instead of champagne might initiate a pattern of infantilizing his bride. In contrast to the darkness on the Mexican side, the U.S. border is marked by a bright sign. The border agents recognize Vargas as an important *Mexican* official yet express surprise that he is accompanied by such a glossy American woman. Moments later Vargas will self-importantly characterize himself to Capt. Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles) as a United Nations international “observer” (59). If Vargas is a new kind of transnational Latino diplomat, his bride represents a familiar heroine of Cold War Hollywood movies: the prim American blonde with coiled hair and tailored clothes, who nevertheless may be a sexual cauldron inside — as in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (Paramount 1958), released nearly

simultaneously with *Touch of Evil*. Mrs. Vargas identifies herself to the guards as “barely” a wife (a borderline identity).

Susan’s admission invokes the paternalistic fantasy of honeymoon surrender — the virgin-bride’s discovery of a dormant eroticism that is “foreign.” Crossing borders, of course, is a familiar *rite de passage* in the process of shedding and forming identities. Susie whispers to Mike as they step into the American Los Robles, “this is the very first time we’ve been together in my country” (51). It is never clear why such well-heeled newlyweds are starting their honeymoon in Los Robles, which is decidedly lacking in enchantment. It seems likely that the newlyweds have eloped — their secret marriage is the original narrative repression in *Touch of Evil*. Because the movie’s narrative drive is predicated on the withholding or masking of evidence — explicitly cast as *secrets* — the movie is dotted by erasures, suppressions, and reconfigurations.

We know for sure that Los Robles is a drab and indeterminate space, typified by imbalances, disconnections, fabrications, and “translations” (misinformation) — certainly not romantic idyll. The film situates Los Robles at the steamy crossroads of heterosexual romance and commercialized desire (pornography). As William Nericcio concludes, Los Robles amounts to a cinematic rendering of “*fracture* itself, where hyphens, bridges, border stations, and schizophrenia are the rule rather than the exception” (48). He defines breakdown as the movie’s master trope, splintering the fragile “bridge” of transnational union. Whiteness itself becomes a contested border, prompting a crisis of identity management. As Dominique Brégent-Heald points out, “The US–Mexican border henceforth becomes the stage for a spectacle of often-grotesque proportions.... a surreal environment, where racial and sexual contact/contamination produces uncontrollable or unexpected results” (“Dark Noir,” 129).

When Susan tells Mike they are now in “her country” for the first time, is she intending a *double entendre* of her own about sexual receptivity — a risqué joke similar to Mike’s about a “chocolate soda”? Certainly, the fireworks begin right away when Susie puts her arms around her husband and draws him into an embrace. Susan becomes the volatile figure of the desiring young woman. Her peaches-and-cream whiteness (“invisible” Hollywood ethnicity) is shaded (and intensified) by Miguel’s Latino brownness (“made up” Hollywood ethnicity). The movie figures her touch as dangerously combustible, because “Their kiss is immediately interrupted by an explosion, a metaphorical retort signalling society’s indignation” at their transgressive marriage (Marcus 19).

The car bomb, which appears to be touched off by Susan’s lips, “is the first of a number of references first to her sexualized body and then to its dangerous nature” (Oliver and Trigo 123). At once Mike states his alarm: “This could be very bad for us” (52). What threat is he referencing? Is it a threat to the reputation of his “developing” native country? Or to globalized law enforcement, which he

represents? Or to the neoliberal narrative of Mexican “progress,” under the control of U.S. corporations and political power (of which he is an emissary)? Or to his marriage, overtaken by bloody events in an assassination scheme? Or to his bride, now an eyewitness to a double murder in a seamy bordertown?

Like it or not, their honeymoon in disreputable Los Robles has turned into a misadventure in “dark tourism.” As defined by Tony Seaton, this is bourgeois leisure travel towards “actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly . . . violent death” and the suffering associated with it (240). The newlyweds have just witnessed the dismemberment of two interracial “lovers,” and the flaming debris poses these violent deaths as a warning about the dangers of cross-border desire. The blast is a telltale sign that in a racialized society, “Desire can only be figured in the very terms of its repression” (Heath I:75). *Touch of Evil* sources this danger in Susan’s overheated body.

Vargas is played by blue-eyed Charlton Heston in brownface with blackened hair and a fake moustache. The casting in *Touch of Evil* has always been controversial. Heston’s role expresses the Hollywood assumption that ethnicity is abnormal yet always performable by white actors. In 1957 Heston was a star, famous for his recent role as Moses in the sword-and-sandal epic *The Ten Commandments* (Paramount 1956). He also had been the leading man in popular Hollywood westerns, like *Pony Express* (Paramount 1953), in which Buffalo Bill Cody brings the mail to Spanish California to lead “Manifest Destiny.” Heston played Andrew Jackson as a victorious Indian fighter in *The President’s Lady* (20th Century Fox 1953). He portrayed William Clark in *Far Horizons* (Universal 1955), which celebrated the Lewis and Clark expedition and American expansionism. In such roles Heston stood for white nationalism — what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha describes as the “pioneering, male ‘American’ spirit always under threat from races and cultures beyond the border or frontier” (69). Heston’s star persona in *Touch of Evil* is therefore ambiguous behind his thin disguise of *Latinness*. Tall and angular, Agent Vargas dresses in a three-piece suit and flashes a Phi Beta Kappa key—a sign of his elite American education and urbanity. Thus, Heston-as-Vargas may actually reinforce images of Latino inadequacy—as if “Heston in brownface mandated how Mexicans should look before they could acquire Vargas’s lawful authority” (Pease 86). The Americanized Heston/Vargas is the only “good” Mexican character in the film, a walking advertisement for cultural mimicry.

Welles’s intention was to portray Vargas as a cosmopolitan U.N.-style official who would undercut monocultural (white) assumptions of Anglo superiority. Idealistic and heteronormative, Vargas is a “model” for the emerging Westernized Hispanic male (although Heston’s inability to speak Spanish is both laughable and a major drawback). Vargas heads the “Pan American Narcotics Commission” (65) to investigate drug trafficking. Vargas’s prestige has enabled him to wed a trophy wife, a blonde grail of 1950s male desire. The attraction

between these elite honeymooners is conveyed in a series of sexually anticipatory scenes, played out in cars and hotel rooms. However, consummation never occurs. It is continually mistimed and postponed as both characters are physically and psychologically worn down by the deterrence they encounter. Part of the eerie fascination of *Touch of Evil* is how its crossed narratives alternately deflate and restore the sexual urgency that Susan and Miguel felt in their explosive kiss at the border.

Another important change that Welles introduced was to racialize the killing of Rudy Linneker (spelled Linnekar in the movie). Welles transforms the murder suspect from an Anglo to a Latino named Manolo Sánchez (Victor Millan). Sánchez had worked for Linnekar's construction company, where he had access to dynamite (the murder weapon). Welles sketches in Linnekar as a racist Texas millionaire, a crass local representative of global capital. He fired Sánchez for "playing around with the boss's daughter" (85), a plot situation that echoes the racialized violence in *Man in the Shadow*. As a Latino (shoe clerk and construction worker) Sánchez is disqualified for the role of Marcia Linneker's lover because of his class and ethnicity. The "evidence" (dynamite sticks) against Sánchez is planted by Captain Quinlan, the detective who has a bigoted hatred of Latinos. This racist obsession is another major addition made by Welles as he constructed the redneck cop Quinlan as a foil for Agent Vargas. Quinlan (who owns a small ranch) views Vargas as a Latino intruder, intent on overturning white rule in Los Robles. Quinlan's suspicions appear to be rooted in a psychotic sexual jealousy of brown-skinned men, which makes him want "to strap [them] to the electric chair" (104), the ultimate subjugation. He believes the rule of law is only for whites — just as white women are only for white men. His sexual anxiety translates into political anxiety over white colonial rule of *la frontera*.

For decades Quinlan has blamed a "half-breed" (119), a biracial *Chicano*, for the sex-murder of his late wife (Nericcio 55). Mrs. Quinlan had an affair with a Latino, and Quinlan believes he strangled her (her fate is nearly duplicated in *Touch of Evil* by Susan Vargas in a gruesome repetition). Back then Quinlan was a rookie cop. He claims he knew the identity of his wife's lover/killer but was unable to get vengeance because the man enlisted and died in combat. In Quinlan's skewed mind his wife's unavenged killing (because the killer escaped Texas "justice") sanctions him to take vengeance on all "murderers" (always Mexicans) by framing them for capital punishment. Of course, Quinlan is a liar and dirty-tricks specialist, so his account of Mrs. Quinlan's death is unreliable. What is certain, however, is his perverse fixation on women's sexual appetites. His obsession results from his impotence, figured by his "game leg" (58), which forces him to use a cane.

Welles's plot invention of Mrs. Quinlan's murder is linked through the movie's sexual coding to the car bombing — the episode that kills the biracial "lovers" in Linnekar's car. As we learn at the end of the movie, the sexually transgres-

sive Sánchez (another “half-breed”) murdered his white wife’s father. However, Manolo was manipulated by the cat-like Marcia Linnekar (Joanna Moore) into planting the bomb. She is driven by greed to inherit “a million bucks” (103) from her father; she and her husband both hate him. Thus, the movie constructs cross-border violence as a “personal” vendetta against the (white) father — a murder plot entangled in inheritance fraud, class resentment, bigotry, and sexual anxiety. Quinlan’s “solution” to the case situates Linnekar’s death within the contours of the family romance and strips the car bombing of any political motive or meaning. Marcia, the movie’s *femme fatale*, is a slinky representation of soiled white femininity. Marcia is Susan’s alter-ego, a dark-haired double to Susan’s radiant blondeness. When first viewed at the death scene, Marcia is wearing pearls and bracelets, a counterpoint to Susan’s showy accessories. Like Susan, Marcia is a white “heiress” who has not cordoned off her body. She takes a Latino lover, secretly marries him (as Manolo tells it), goads him into carrying out the murder, and sets him up to take the fall (101). Later, dressed in “mourning” black for her late father, Marcia departs with her lawyer while the police take Manolo into custody for Linnekar’s murder. She can now use her inheritance to rehabilitate her respectability. Marcia easily evades punishment — or more accurately, the movie displaces her punishment onto her blonde counterpart Susan Vargas.

Linnekar’s companion in death, his “blonde” escort Zita from the Mexican side, is another sexually compromised woman in *Touch of Evil*. “Zita” is a name suggesting a Latina ethnicity (even if only performed). She speaks English to the U.S. border guard but answers “No” when asked if she is an American citizen (51). She is the star attraction in the burlesque show at the Grandi Rancho Grande, a bar and brothel operated by a white madam (Zsa Zsa Gabor) in the Mexican Los Robles. This strip joint is patronized by rowdy U.S. servicemen, roughnecks, and sex tourists; it represents *la zona rosa*, the red-light district in cross-border cities such as Nuevo Laredo/Laredo, Tex. From the opening sequence of border-crossing bodies in Los Robles, “Susan is always potentially interchangeable with Zita, a mirror image” (Heath I: 44). When Quinlan first lays eyes on Mrs. Vargas (outside her Mexican hotel), he views her as nothing more than a “jane” — a prostitute like Zita (65).

This cross-racial doubling poses a chilling plot question: Will Los Robles incinerate Susan like Zita? In an overdetermined scene that occurs shortly after her death in the exploding car, Zita is eradicated (again) when Risto Grandi ambushes Agent Vargas by throwing a bottle of acid at him. Risto misses, but the acid splatters on a poster advertising Zita’s act at the Rancho Grande (“20 Sizzling Strippers”). In a stark expression of the movie’s misogyny Zita’s eroticized picture is burned and obliterated (like the Chrysler). This scene also anticipates the violence directed at Zita’s counterpart Susan. The presence of undressed women, raunchy dancing, and tawdry nightclubs on the border in *Touch of Evil* is one of the ways the movie commodifies female sexuality and positions it in subordinate (and vulnerable) relation to male desire.

Marcia Linnekar and Manolo Sánchez portray another “interracial” married couple in the movie — Sánchez insists they are “secretly” married (103). This furtive liaison bears a strong similarity to the Vargas quickie wedding, thus establishing Manolo and Marcia as debased but chiming counterpoints to Miguel and Susan. As he undergoes rough interrogation by Quinlan and his cops, Manolo bitterly acknowledges that Marcia’s unregulated white sexuality was too hot for him. He sees now that she had him “measured for the fall guy” (101) from the start. Sánchez spells out for Vargas the threat that both Latino men are under. He admits to Vargas that he got involved with Marcia because of her father’s money. In a hypothetical question Sánchez asks what he should have done when Marcia physically led him on. Should he have turned her down, rejected any status incentive on his part, and said nobly, “No, my dear, you and I could never be happy together because of your money!” (101)? Perhaps Vargas too has been fantasizing about the “plenty” he married into with Susan, his bride from the Philadelphia Main Line. Was Miguel’s idea all along to dress up a ready-money transaction as a “secret” marriage to Susan? From the start Quinlan sees Vargas as less upright and his blonde wife as less innocent than they seek to appear. Quinlan will attempt to frame them just as he has framed Sánchez (who was guilty anyway, we are told). There seems little doubt that Vargas views Sánchez as his Latino alter ego, trapped for tying his socioeconomic ambitions to an eroticized white heiress. Plainly, Vargas worries “that the public perception of [the Sánchez-Linnekar] interracial romance will reflect badly on his own marriage to Susan” (Pease 92).

Like Rudy Linnekar, Quinlan demonstrates a colonial nostalgia for sexually subjugated women. The Police Captain boasts of his sexual past with the brothel madam and fortune teller, Tanya the “Gypsy” (Marlene Dietrich in heavy makeup). She is a veteran border crosser, emitting multiple racial and gender codes. She and Quinlan constitute yet another “interracial” couple in *Touch of Evil*. The car bombing (which happened on the American side) sends Capt. Quinlan to the Mexican side (where he has no jurisdiction) to find brown-skinned “suspects.” Linnekar’s assassination has disrupted the neocolonial border hierarchy, indexed by the blazing demolition of his big American car. Quinlan acts immediately to restore Anglo primacy. When he crosses into Mexico, he is leaving “civilization” behind and entering a *demimonde* inhabited by dusky people who speak a language he cannot understand; they deserve only the iron heel of white authority. He pronounces the entire Mexican population guilty, “Every last one of ‘em” (159), regardless of who planted the bomb. Quinlan intends to “solve” Linnekar’s murder — Zita’s death already has been repressed — by arresting Sánchez.

Welles’s *Touch of Evil* is structured as a tale of two policeman who compete to solve the murder; both resort to vigilante tactics. The movie charts the psychological deterioration of each cop. The plot matches Vargas’s indignant (and accurate) accusation that Quinlan is a crooked cop against Quinlan’s contempt for Vargas as a racial upstart whose marriage maps his outsized career ambitions. In a racist register Quinlan understands that Vargas’s claim to legitimacy

as a transnational official is based on his claim to Susan’s unblemished white body. These psychosexual dynamics lead Quinlan to instigate a smear campaign aimed at Susan Vargas — tarnishing her is the quickest way to undermine her husband.

Welles’s script adds still another subplot, the growing marital stress between Miguel and Susan. This tension is triggered by Vargas’s frequent absences, which he justifies by citing his responsibility to the law. The first of these separations occurs early in the movie, when Susan is left on the street on the Mexican side and approached by a young man. He addresses her in Spanish, incomprehensible to her. He hands her a note that asks her to follow him across the border to the American Los Robles. As Susie considers this, her bravado mingles with her insecurity. She wants to be a counterpart to her husband, an intrepid investigator searching for clues. Yet this Latino male poses a sexual threat. Susan claims to be experienced with male aggression — “I understand very well what he wants!” (54). She does not yet comprehend that her body has put her in peril on the border. Susan believes she can deflect danger with bourgeois social etiquette — “Tell him I’m a married woman!” (54). She also indulges in the nomenclature of tourism to dub this Latino male Pancho. She simultaneously sexualizes him as a “Latin lover” and stereotypes him as a subaltern. In doing so, however, Susie shows her female vulnerability as she finds herself surrounded by leering strangers speaking a “foreign” language. This scene establishes that miscommunication will be an index of strangeness and menace on the border. This “explosive” situation is a repercussion of the opening car blast, which has shaken the border regime.

Susan seeks safety with her husband. Her threadbare hotel room on the Mexican side is the first of four locations in *Touch of Evil* in which Susan is on or near a bed, although never *in bed* with Miguel. Because of their “interracial” marriage, their “need to sleep in hotels [is] a kind of allegory for their inability to find a place where they belong” (Matlock 117). When Susan undresses in the “privacy” of her darkened room, a flashlight flares upon her body, forcing her to cover herself. In this scene the intrusive male gaze — identified with Pancho Grandi — penetrates her window from across an alley. Susie is objectified like Zita, another sex object in a corset, “framed in the spotlight on the window-stage” (Heath I: 45). The probing light challenges Susie’s right to possess her body; it also reinforces the fusion of Zita and Susie as figures of sexist exploitation. This symbolic groping infuriates Susan. She shouts at the voyeur and (in a reaction formation) throws a light bulb at him. Soon another male intruder — her rattled husband — pushes through the door and tells her to switch on the ceiling light. Does Susan wonder if Miguel is just another Pancho, “staging” her like Zita and expecting a *performance*? Susan gives every indication of being tired of stage-managing her life to suit male demands. She also knows she is not being viewed by her husband as she would like: as a *desiring* woman on her wedding night. In this scene the newlyweds quarrel for the first time, opening a fissure in their romantic bond. The psychological distance and physical separation between them widen as the film progresses.

In this hotel sequence Miguel seems less adept at navigating bedrooms than international borders. Susan has breached his paternalist expectation of female passivity. He also seems unable to comprehend that his absence might anger her. Further, he senses that she is accusing him “of placing his marriage to the law above his conjugal responsibilities” (Pease 82), a sexual taunt. Obviously, Susan’s feelings are hurt, since on their wedding night her husband “chooses to explore the bombing mystery rather than her sexual mystery” (Chapman 104). Vargas seeks to reassure her by defending his country. “This isn’t the real Mexico,” he reasons, “All border towns bring out the worst in a country” (77). This exchange sharpens his politico-sexual anxiety about his role as a spokesman for Mexico’s “official” progress narrative of neocolonialism. However, Miguel’s sense of inadequacy only worsens: “I can just imagine your mother’s face if she could see . . . our honeymoon hotel.” Miguel’s fascination with American status and need for Anglo approval push him to endow his mother-in-law with clairvoyant power to see across the U.S. border and relegate him to subordinate (excluded) status. He imagines he is already being blamed for neither deserving nor defending his wife. His fear of being *externalized* (“south of the border”) is activated; he foresees his exile despite his impersonation of whiteness. Susan’s mother thus joins Rudy Linnekar as disapproving Anglo parents who look down on a Latino son-in-law. Note that Miguel has merged Susan and her mother into a chilling and vengeful feminine threat. He agrees to Susan’s request to be lodged at a “safe” (unracialized) motel on the American side (81).

However, after a few miles on a desert highway in Mike’s convertible (an angular 1956 DeSoto “Fireflite”), Susie once again becomes the desiring woman. This is plainly an invitation for a honeymoon restart under the stars, away from the cobweb of Los Robles. Susan becomes the dynamite in the convertible, ready to burst into flames (like Zita). She expresses the ambiguous “vision of cinematic modernity” that Janet Leigh conveyed to movie audiences in the 1950s (Armstrong n.p.). In *Touch of Evil* she appears both insistent and distant, “sizzling” and frosty, assertive and passive, resistant and receptive. Leigh becomes a liminal agent who experiences and incites both desire and anxiety. She shape-shifts from scene to scene in *Touch of Evil* with dizzying results, from “sex kitten to virginal bride and back, sometimes in the space of a single shot . . . and when she vanishes or appears, we hold onto our seats for fear of spinning out of control, reminded with a jolt just how easily our locus of identification can become uncalibrated” (Kuersten n.p.).

Yet Mike abandons her for the Linnekar case, and she checks in alone at the windswept Mirador Motel. This bizarre episode is Welles’s most extended addition to *Badge of Evil*. It stages Susan as perhaps the most mistreated woman in *film noir*, subjected to prolonged psychological and physical abuse. She takes a long look at the brush surrounding the straggle of cabins. The camera positions her as utterly isolated. The motel “Night Man” (Dennis Weaver) peeps at her through her cabin window, an extension of the pattern of prying eyes Susie

has endured. He cannot even glance at her bed, which acts as an accelerant to his fantasies. He refuses to touch the sheets, which might ignite her dangerous sexuality. The Night Man's voyeurism foreshadows the sexual depravity ahead.

When she is alone, Susie talks on the phone with Mike. This breathy conversation includes the only time in the movie she calls him by his Spanish name “Miguel.” Reclining on her pillow, she drowsily admits to “just listening to you breathe. It's a lovely sound” (99). While Susie purrs, the soundtrack plays a dreamy soundtrack, a prelude to sexual surrender. This intimate scene portrays the most obvious overlap in the movie between femininity and arousal. So far theirs is a *mariage blanc*, unconsummated after their wedding. In this scene the camera positions Susan's desire as a sleepy *latency* to yield to male initiative (she lies back in bed with one knee raised). Her body language expresses her passive eroticism and need for a male to “awaken” it. In other words the movie recycles the sexist fantasy of dormant female desire — the so-called “sleeping beauty” model of women's sexuality” (Tyler n.p.). In this phone-sex exchange Susan lounges in a bustier, displaying her *décolletage* (for the male movie-gaze). She is inscribed as the amorous woman of the *boudoir* (moist from bathing), letting her hair down. At last Susan is set to experience the passion she arouses in others. This scene is her only sexualized episode in the movie not marked by trauma. It is notable that Miguel, who has borrowed a telephone from a blind woman to make the call, cannot “see” his adult wife and continues to infantilize her.

This scene also draws on routine tropes of feminine excess that threaten danger — the eroticized woman as a liability to men. Welles comes close to implying that sexualized women put men at risk. Welles's ambivalence was displayed in his previous Hollywood film *The Lady from Shanghai* (Columbia 1948), a *noir* movie that overrepresents the female body. He cast “pin-up girl” Rita Hayworth (his estranged wife) as the sultry Elsa Bannister; he bobbed her famous hair and dyed it blonde to turn her into an Anglo Circe (on a witch-yacht named *Circe*). Elsa is a schemer who grew up in the exotic (interracial) Far East, where she became “a perversely magical ensnarer of men” (Fischer 38). Her Chinese birth, fluency in Cantonese, and shady past call up Orientalist tropes of Asian immorality. Elsa admits to being a gambler, cheat, and impostor — her Cantonese name is Xinlin Zhang. She is always a figure of female artifice. As in *Touch of Evil*, sexual extortion lies at the center of *The Lady from Shanghai*. Elsa's crippled and impotent husband Arthur Bannister (an obvious precursor to Quinlan) has got something on his bombshell blonde wife (we never learn what it is) and blackmailed her into marriage. However, he lacks her sexual mobility and power. His lameness symbolizes the male anxiety expressed in the Circe myth of “castration by a sexually aggressive woman” (Friedrich 68). Bannister uses his wealth to leash Elsa to him. However, the twist in *The Lady from Shanghai* is that Bannister's “manipulative control of Elsa has paradoxically left him slavishly dependent on her, completely and inextricably bound to her” (Pippin 242). Their hostile dependency is a parody of marriage; it ends in a shootout in which they kill each other over and

over in a *mise-en-abîme*, a hall of mirrors. The childless white *femme fatale* cannot be rehabilitated, only eradicated.

Susan's romantic reverie at the Mirador Motel is interrupted by a loud radio and tough talk heard through the cabin walls. The disorderly music forms an "acoustic mirror," which presages her discordant fate. Susan's fright in this claustrophobic scene is part of a celluloid strategy in which she "is confined within increasingly restricted spaces over the course of the film," a process of female isolation that intensifies her incapacity (Silverman 56). Susan thus "is aurally assaulted with the teenage gang's raucous rock and roll well before she is physically assaulted by the gang itself" (Leeper 238-239). Her physical defilement is made spectacularly perverse in *Touch of Evil* as Welles achieves a Hollywood first by mixing a highway motel, drug party, motorcycles, hot rods, leather jackets, sex, and rock and roll. The film implies that Susie is gang raped.

Her violation is registered by the entrance of a male and female cohort of sex predators. For Susan, pinned to the mattress, there is no escape. Luz Calvo observes that the *mis-en-scène* emphasizes Susie's Anglo sexual innocence by presenting her in "baby doll pajamas — a sartorial regression, for she has changed from the provocative lingerie she wore earlier when talking to her husband on the phone" (77). In a broader sense the scene also dramatizes American cultural panic, figured as the pollution of the white female body. Susie is surrounded by brown-skinned intruders who circle her bed and claw at her. When Pancho commands, "Hold her legs" (128), he signals a sexual assault, staged as a *danse macabre* of male predation. A close-up shows Pancho's demonic face as he darts his tongue out like a snake — a venomous image of phallic attack. A lesbian biker (Mercedes McCambridge in brownface) growls, "Lemme stay. I want to watch" (128), which implicates the viewer as a participant. In this horrific scene Welles seems to continue the decades-long tendency (beginning in Hollywood's silent era) to code Mexicans "as natural-born, violent, and hypersexualized criminals" (Brégent-Heald, *Borderland*, 183).

Stephen Heath argues that Susan's unwilling white body "centres" the movie's fulcrum of racially triggered (and repressed) desire (I: 74). However, her body is more a vortex than a hinge. Unable to control the periphery (border) of her flesh, she becomes a whirlpool of eroticized violence. Susan's gang rape represents a hideous "contrast to her unfulfilled love-life with her husband" (Zatz 72). Welles generates great power in the image of Susan's agonized fall, which invokes the ancient taboo against pulling down any "idealised construction of female virginity" (Blundell 44). As Susie sinks down, the door closes on this unwatchable female catastrophe: here lies "Susan raped and annihilated" (Heath II: 112). Welles's veiled camera at once appeases the Production Code and represses the shocking content of the crisis.

Viewer distress over this implied gang rape is later mitigated (but not canceled) when Uncle Joe is told by female gang members they were only putting "on a good show to scare her" (135). However, there is no confirmation that this disclaimer is true. The scene as filmed implies that Susie is forced to submit to leather-clad "banditos." Welles upends gender conventions in *film noir*, in which good wives are supposed to be shielded from physical assault and subjected instead to "mental" pain; only bad women are sanctioned to endure bodily mistreatment. In *Touch of Evil* we witness the violation of the All-American girl. At the same time her whiteness becomes her husband's weakness. Susan's rape turns her sexualized (now desecrated) body into a weapon to be used against her upright (now castrated) husband. Note that the same "Mexicans" who assault Susan take Miguel's (phallic) pistol from her (yonic) suitcase, which lies kicked aside on the floor of her cabin. Quinlan later fires the same stolen pistol at unarmed (emasculated) Vargas in the showdown under the border bridge.

Susan's abduction shames and maddens Vargas: *He made his white wife a boundary; now she has been infiltrated.* At this point Vargas begins a recuperative narrative, which amounts to a male defense against impotence. To ward off accusations of ineffectuality, he launches a vigilante campaign to restore his authority. Vargas chases down the gang at the Rancho Grande strip club, where he smashes Pancho's face on a jukebox. This assault is an expression of projected sexual rage and disguised inadequacy, a compensatory public performance of "tough" masculinity. In a routine Hollywood formula male sexual anxiety is transformed into violent melodrama. Vargas's vigilantism far outdoes Quinlan's rough interrogation of Sánchez in the Linnekar case. Like Quinlan, Vargas is a lawman who failed to protect his white wife from "half-breed" contamination. He must enact revenge to rehabilitate his masculinity.

The viewer learns that Susan was injected with sodium pentothal, leaving needle marks to suggest that she is a heroin addict. Gang members blew marijuana smoke into her tangled hair, tore off her pajamas, and carried her away in a sheet. She is taken to Grandi's shabby hotel in Los Robles on the American side. This is her second arrival, and her two "visits to the sleazy Ritz Hotel bookend this honeymoon with horror" (Matlock 117). Still unconscious, she lies across a dilapidated bed between a barred headboard and footboard, another cage in which to be displayed. Her bare shoulders and legs imply nakedness. Her head is at the foot of the bed, implying moral inversion. Susan is a far cry from the confident newlywed who strode in high heels past Los Robles' dingy alleys. She now lies in a flophouse where delirium rules. Her perfectly coiffed look has been reconstituted by images of sexual abjection. Film theorist Nicole Brenez makes this point about celluloid bad dreams:

Reality and hallucination are presented in the same plastic and sonic terms; it is no longer the protagonist who becomes delirious but the film

itself. Trauma no longer functions merely as a narrative cause or motor; it becomes a structuring principle. (Ferrara, 128)

In *Touch of Evil* sexuality itself becomes warped and frightening, a sinister transaction linked to misogyny, bigotry, perversion, addiction, and murder. Los Robles is a closed system; the Ritz Hotel becomes an analogue for the foul world.

It gets worse. Quinlan strangles his criminal partner Joe Grandi with Susie's discarded stockings (a cathected object) and leaves his body slumped across her bedstead in a parody of sexual exhaustion. This homicide is a reenactment of his own death drive (as in a Poe story); Quinlan's "forgotten" cane (at the crime scene) will reveal his guilt as a killer. Uncle Joe's corpse prefigures Quinlan's death, shot in the back by his partner Sergeant Pete Menzies (Joseph Calleia). Grandi's strangulation further recalls the garroting murder of the late Mrs. Quinlan. As the grisly scene plays out, Susie lies semiconscious on the hotel bed, her legs moving spasmodically in a simulation of orgasm. The room is lit by a flashing neon sign, a blinking light that again stages Susie as a cognate to Zita's "sizzling" striptease act: The hostage's body is painted as a spectacle. Along with the rape at the motor court, this groaning pantomime constitutes another brutally inverted love scene. Quinlan plays out his fantasies of domination, reenacting the sexual subordination of a "wife." In his psychotic imagination Susan's thrashing legs confirm his ability to rule a woman in bed. Thus, in the perverse sexual politics of *Touch of Evil*, "marriages" — much like the codified agreements between crony capitalism and state apparatuses — are based on deception, violence, and coercion. Like treaties between empowered and voiceless parties, marriage becomes a form of assault, subordination, and silencing.

When Susan regains consciousness, she reels onto a fire escape, where metal bars constitute yet another cage/stage. She tries to break out of the claustrophobic spaces in which she has been confined since arriving in Los Robles. However, this effort only emphasizes her debasement. She is gawked at by pedestrians below, who "see" her as a deranged prostitute wrapped in a sheet. When Mike roars by in his convertible, he signifies his lack of recognition: "Touched by evil, her half-naked and now polluted body is transformed and becomes invisible to her husband" (Oliver and Trigo 117-18). Susan has fallen from a WASP princess to a deviant. She no longer registers in her husband's perception as his pristine bride. Her sordid new identity is invisible — in a word, repressed. He is unaware of his failure to "recognize" her in her tramp persona. Perhaps this scene more than any other ruptures the boundaries between objectivity and subjectivity and opens a space for the liminal or "uncanny" encounter (horror) on the borderline.

Quinlan rearranges the crime scene at the Ritz Hotel to make it look like Mrs. Vargas murdered Grandi during a drug-and-sex spree. Quinlan mingles his obsessive memory of the "half-breed" (who slept with and strangled Mrs. Quinlan) with his contempt for the Mexican American Grandi. As Nericcio observes,

“*Touch of Evil* is a movie crafted between two strangulations,” the gruesome one we see, and the one Quinlan recounts (54). These two murders are separated by more than 30 years yet seem fused in Quinlan’s bourbon-soaked brain. His frenzy “fulfills” his long-sought revenge for his wife’s murder. Or perhaps this scene implies that Quinlan himself throttled his young wife and projected the blame onto an imaginary Mexican killer — his original repression and frame-up of a Latino. Quinlan acts out what Deborah Barker calls the southern rape complex: “the fear that white women will choose the ‘dark’ man and that white men will lose their exclusive ‘possession’ of white women” (139). Quinlan’s racialized fantasy leads to Grandi’s murder. It also transposes Susan’s image onto the late Mrs. Quinlan’s, reinforcing the Oedipal construction of Captain Quinlan’s rivalry with the usurper (Agent Vargas) for “possession” of the white wife.

Mrs. Vargas is viewed next in jail, where she is in custody on Quinlan’s charges of murder, drug abuse, and prostitution. Susan’s inmate status represents the most degraded version of femininity in the movie. Her sexuality is now blatantly pathologized and criminalized. She droops across a jail cot — incarcerated, stripped, and surveilled. The cellblock becomes another slum hotel. Being behind bars further exposes her to the eyes of men and signifies her abject condition in Los Robles: *She is a prisoner of her body, which certifies her guilt*. She is assigned a whore identity *ex post facto* to rationalize the sexual abuse she *already* has suffered. When she regains consciousness, she is terrified and humiliated. She begs her husband, “Take me home” (146), a plea for quarantine within the patriarchal home. The whole movie has existed as a pretext to render Susan prone, unclothed, assaulted, and helpless. She is to be taken home “for safety” (81) and situated as a colonized body.

Even so, Quinlan’s frame-up is upended by the evidence of his cane, which he “forgot” at the murder scene; its recovery unravels the case against Susan. Vargas turns the tables and “frames” Quinlan by using a pseudo-legal method — wiring Sgt. Menzies with a hidden microphone. Holding a portable tape recorder, Vargas skulks along the darkened catwalks and gangways of Los Robles’s oilfields, which resemble the prisons of Piranesi — dark stairways to nowhere. Quinlan moves toward his doom, just as Linnekar had in the opening shot. The final progression of the main characters back toward the international border forces “the narrative into a huge circular path where closure repeats opening” in a violent repetition and erasure (Zatz 74). Vargas outdoes Quinlan by using high-tech “dirty tricks” to complete his revenge. In the gunplay at the border bridge Quinlan fatally shoots Menzies with Vargas’s stolen pistol. Quinlan lumbers down an incline to wash the blood from his hands. But by extension Vargas has blood on his hands too, since he pushed Menzies into carrying out this sting to entrap Quinlan. Slouched in a tattered armchair on the trash pile below the border bridge, Quinlan takes a breather. He is still trying to reclaim his American throne on *la frontera*. He plans to shoot Vargas for “resisting arrest,” then pin Menzies’s murder on the dead Vargas. How-

ever, Menzies (mortally wounded) blasts Quinlan from atop the bridge, ending the Captain's corrupt reign and saving Vargas's life. Thus, both American cops die at the river — actually a stagnant canal, which is figured in the movie as the U.S.-Mexico border. This bog is ground-level zero in Los Robles. Welles's fixation on death, leakage, rubbish, and scum in *Touch of Evil* constitutes an elaborate visual metaphor for an international regime in decomposition. In a scene that predicts the surveillance society to come, Vargas hands the secret recording to Assistant D.A. Al Schwartz (Mort Mills) as "evidence" to close the case. The border remains a legality-free zone, where the law neither belongs nor functions (except as a tool of oppression). Vargas scrambles up the littered embankment to escape these dangerous backwaters. He joins his bride, but their reunion only shows what is missing: Susan's "exoneration" cannot restore her radiant look or her voice, which have been repressed.

Stephen Heath established that the film's narrative logic pivots on the theft and "restitution" of Susan's body (I: 68; II: 93). Although defaced at the end of the movie, she has been returned to her role as Mrs. Vargas. She has been re-clothed in the garments she wore as a bride in the opening shots. However, boundary markers such as her necklace, earrings, bracelets, and brooches have been subtracted; her dirty hair hangs loose. Her missing pearls serve as a reminder that Susie's bridal femininity has been lost in the identity disturbances on the border. Her body's borders were overrun. Mike too has been dirtied and cut down. His shirt is ripped; and his vest, watch fob, jacket, and tie are missing — all emblems of his Americanized authority. These amputated items signify his symbolic castration. The panic attack he had two nights before at their honeymoon hotel in the Mexican Los Robles has come true. He failed to protect his white wife, leading to his own male "border" crisis.

Yet in a burst of nostalgia Mike proclaims, "It's all over, Susie. I'm taking you home. Home" (167). Only *his* words are heard in this scene; Susie is offered no counter-narrative. His intention is to exculpate himself and reconstitute Susie as the All-American bride. However, her stolen jewels and rumpled clothes have tarnished his fantasy of sleeping with the goddess. The violated woman becomes the symptom of male failure. He consoles himself by reaffirming the paternal notion that femininity is delicate and needs to be sequestered. In other words *one paternal illusion replaces another*; the fantasy of female surrender gives way to the wish for female internment. However, in order for Susan to be welcomed home, a process of desexualization must occur. She must disavow her erotic power in favor of domestic passivity.

And what about Susan's fantasies? We can see that Susan's closing kiss in the car in the ending scene is not a repetition of her eager "dynamite" kiss in the opening sequence. The groom is in the bride's arms again. However, they now share a sense of bourgeois victimhood in a destabilized world, which requires them to negotiate new terms (borders). Mike asked for too much from his Main Line

princess-bride; he buries his face in the protective angle of her neck (minus her pearls). Susie too is seeking forgiveness. Her explosive body blew their world apart, and only her reproductive capability can restore it. She shows contrition by letting her hair fall over her shoulders; her body has been rescripted to signify the conciliatory woman of religious representation (Nancarrow 111). This transformation reminds us that penitence is a performative aspect of repression. Susan's touch conveys consolation rather than stimulation. There are now so many secrets to conceal. The Vargases are a sex crime in search of an alibi.

The conspiracy to neutralize female sexuality aligns *Touch of Evil* with Fifties gender-biased Hollywood narratives of feminine containment within marriage, such as *The Tender Trap* (MGM 1955) and *The Seven Year Itch* (20th Century Fox 1955). As in these comedy-dramas Susan must accept male redirection (Hanson 166). The movie overdetermines Susan as the reconsolidated "good" wife. Taking up married life, however, Susan will be called upon to renounce the limited power her body has given her to "translate" with men — she lacks the sexual polyphony of Elsa in *The Lady from Shanghai*. It is no wonder that *Touch of Evil* offers only a limp "happy ending" to the newlyweds. Perhaps Welles hints at a potential future of transnational (wedded) harmony. However, a paternal strategy is required to purify the bride's body "from all this ... filth!" (147), as Miguel insists. Disinfection is thus a precondition for Susie's readmission into the patriarchal home. Not only her body but also her reputation ("my wife's name") must be made "clean.... Clean!" (149). After Los Robles at least her appearance can be touched up. Thus, in *Touch of Evil*, what is validated is not truth but prestige: Renovating the *image* of the ideal white wife is central to the project of containing it. White women cannot be (or appear to be) more desiring ("sizzling") than men — otherwise paternal stability will buckle.

This chastened last car scene is the movie's Oedipal bookend. Miguel and Susan in the convertible rewrite the beginning shot in which Linnekar and Zita "sizzled" and were blown up. As Heath reminds us, "the other side of the murder of the Father [is] the possession of the Mother" (II: 93). The visual repetition of cars suggests the differing fates of these crisscrossing bodies. Driving off in the pale light, Miguel and Susan are trying to forget the hangover of Los Robles. Further, they are trying on new roles in their sexual exchange. As the now nurturing (formerly desiring) mother-wife, Susan clings to her now emasculated (formerly phallic) son-husband Miguel. The only way out of the dirty world of Los Robles is through family life. As recent sociology informs us, nothing has been more important to interracial identity changes than the increasing number of domestic/romantic "partnerships across ethnoracial lines, and the children these unions produce" (Jiménez, Fields, and Schachter 110). Indeed, all along "the film seems to be nudging us toward some eventual American future of interracial marriage" (Thomson 337). Such fictive unions date back to the dime novels of the early twentieth century, which promoted marriage between whites and Latinos as a form of narrative closure (Rodríguez 104). Un-

like other interracial couples in the movie, the Vargases become forerunners of a “mixed-race” future that reaffirms the conformities of married life. The meaning seems clear: Female sexuality must be rehabilitated through procreation. Giving the woman a baby becomes “the final solution to the problem of female desire” (Silverman 69). This exchange is a regressive reinforcement of society’s views in the 1950s that motherhood is the only acceptable role for a woman: “Like other potentially explosive postwar forces in America, the female bombshell could be ‘harnessed for peace’” — but only within the married home (May 107-108). Susan’s victimization thus repeats itself in a cloistral future. Her bridal sexuality becomes the movie’s most radical erasure, reminding us that any hint of maternal sexuality “is one of the most repressed elements of film noir” (Oliver and Trigo xxvi). The couple’s renewed partnering may express their potential to map a generative time ahead. However, it underscores the movie’s backward glance by reifying the need for female “security” under male observation.

But where is this regressive utopia situated? If Mike and Susie are to be the harbingers of a neoliberal society attained through ethnic assimilation, then their married home in Mexico City must nurture it. It will have to be an orderly “space of constant translation” (Jo Smith 86), policed by Agent Vargas. Susan’s seclusion will be contrasted by her husband’s mobility (and absence). In an emerging transnational world, female sexual hygiene and gender compliance will be constantly patrolled. The dominant neoliberal narrative of bureaucratic rationality will assert women’s need to be safeguarded: private desire must yield to civic order. As we know, retrograde or obsolete discourse of this kind can easily lead to inscribing submissiveness as an essential element of “modern” female sexuality. As Alyson Spurgas foresees, such a reinscription of gender codes under the guise of neoliberalism “might easily turn into a form of *husbandry*,” a renewed exaltation of male authority (Spurgas n.p).

Consistent with the source novel *Badge of Evil*, the Vargas marriage might suggest a promising new internationalism. This understanding would accord with the upbeat 1950s American narrative of Mexican “development” under American political guidance (Schmidt 25). This message was widely disseminated during the Cold War to promote American access to Mexican raw materials (petroleum) and Mexico as a rising market for American consumer goods. However, this progress narrative of a technologically regulated new order is undercut by the movie’s pervasive imagery of darkness, dirt, and rot.

The neoliberal but inconclusive politics of *Touch of Evil* should come as no surprise. From the 1940s onward, Welles’s movie work had mingled “clear imperial practices alongside its left-wing political themes” (Fuller 164). Thus, the emergent pluralistic future implied by the ending rests on colonial scaffolding. To its credit *Touch of Evil* puts “the onus of corruption, of evil itself, on the United States” rather than Mexico (Kun 362). In this way *Touch of Evil* seeks to align itself with the promise of the Civil Rights movement, which promoted

the gradualist message that American injustice could be corrected through legalized racial tolerance. Welles suggests that in America the binary color line will fade as redneck cops are supplanted by unbiased cops-of-color. Even the Italian-Mexican-American gangsters in *Touch of Evil* are advocates for cultural assimilation rather than outright opposition to Anglocentrism. Yet the movie's One World philosophy is also a product of the Cold War. *Touch of Evil* offers reassurances of prudent social progress but proposes no redistribution of Euro-American economic resources or *rebalancing* of the global economy. As Homi Bhabha observes, in actuality Welles's film makes little advance beyond the prevailing imperialist “discourses of American cultural colonialism and Mexican dependency [and] the fear/desire of miscegenation” (69). Like other tentative postwar explorations of multiculturalism, *Touch of Evil* foregrounds the colonial sexual encounter, constructed from an Anglocentric perspective within weakening racial boundaries.

Welles stops short of envisioning a postcolonial time ahead or a liberated society. Like other Hollywood films of the decade, *Touch of Evil* represents “a containment of the subject in a narrative economy of voyeurism and fetishism” (Bhabha 68). Welles provides a panoramic view of cultural disorder, environmental degradation, and economic stagnation from which the fast highway is the only way out — for privileged whites and bourgeois people of color who mimic them. The movie peeks into the colonial netherworld to demonstrate exploitation and oppression but offers no vision of redemption. Further, none of the subalterns depicted in the movie is empowered to tell his own story. The oppressed masses are not portrayed as makers of history. The movie renders Third World people only as forlorn occupants of deathtrap driven by the U.S. In the movie's finale the colonized cast of stateless “half-breeds” simply disappears. They vanish with the racial hybrid Tanya when she fades into the darkness and mist. This is the movie's indeterminate political “adios” without a promise of resistance. The people of the border — portrayed as subjugated and venal — are simply dispersed, not elevated to the status of historical subjects with political aims and responsibilities. In *Touch of Evil* it is the technocrat-cop Miguel Vargas who “makes” (fabricates) history with secret tape recordings on behalf of the transnational police state. The Latinos of the borderlands remain historyless phantoms, who slip across the screen without a trace. In the end even the car-bomber Manolo Sánchez is deprived of any revolutionary standing. He dynamites Rudy Linnekar's car not as an act of anticolonial opposition but as a self-defeating expression of sexual anxiety. He was only a pawn of his acquisitive white wife, now an heiress. He seems headed for the electric chair, another scapegoat of the color line. Similarly, the only Mexican commerce we see in *Touch of Evil* is conducted not by militant anticapitalists but by gangsters. Theirs is a cutthroat microeconomy that parodies the macroeconomy that dominates and deprives them. They are subsumed by “the processes of projection and abnegation that would pin white criminal activities on dark bodies and deploy them as racial metaphors for white crimes” (Lott 563).

However, we should not forget that the real achievement of Welles's film "was radical then and it's radical now: the touch of evil is not Mexico, it's the United States" (Kun 362). The absence of a radical consciousness among the oppressed in Mexico is not the "crime" depicted in this thriller. The crime is American white supremacy; it has been destructive to the oppressed and harmful to the oppressor. Once again, the card-reader Tanya is perceptive. Astounded by Quinlan's dissipation, she concludes, "You're a mess, honey" (69). The landmark achievement of *Touch of Evil* is that it foretells a diminishing future for the U.S. If bordertowns bring out the worst in countries, "then they are metaphors for what those countries really are" (Krueger 58). Captain Quinlan is America's drunken, bigoted ensign of excess. He stands for neoliberal capitalism, which asserts that unregulated economic gain prevails over social justice. But the Captain has splurged too long, run up the bill, made a mess, and gotten sick. Excess has led to *imbalance*; his borders have broken down. It turns out that Quinlan's American naïveté was as deep as Susan's in failing to perceive the gathering crisis on the frontier(s).

Touch of Evil forecasts that the U.S. must cede the benefits of neocolonialism, including cheap access to gushing oil and sizzling bodies. Shortly before Quinlan topples over backwards into the dirty drain that situates the international border, he surveys the oil wells — skeins of darkness on the neoliberal terrain. He marvels at the machinery "pumping up money" (156) for America. His slurred insight describes the flow and accumulation of capital, a resource redirection that constitutes Latin American-U.S. "relations." This is the mechanized dynamic of wealth transference from the Third World to Uncle Sam. Even the relation between man and machine is a techno-capital border war, a demolition derby to the finish.

The greasy *mis-en-scène* of the ending border shootout is framed by the weapon-like derricks that tower above Los Robles — an update of William Blake's factoryscape of "dark Satanic Mills." The oil-producing territories of production are sites of domination, looting, shooting, and leftovers. The sulfurous borderlands reinforce the conclusion that multinational corporations are poisoning the world through "free" trade and "pure" profit incentives. With Quinlan's death in the slurry seeping from this scrap heap, little overtly seems to change; but his passing is an ominous sign for American hegemony. The overarching Western financial regime still spans the globe like the viaduct that arches over the gutter where Quinlan dies — a transnational bridge that holds together a repressive "peace." Yet the surrounding labyrinth of drills, pumps, pipes, valves, and gauges — including the rusty remnants of abandoned equipment — is also a signifier. It reminds us of the rumbling disturbances, underground vibrations, and repressed forces that pulse beneath the sludge. In this way *Touch of Evil* notifies us that change will not be deferred indefinitely. Early in the movie D.A. Adair (Ray Collins) alerted us that Tanya might "bring out the crystal ball" (68) to tell Quinlan's future. In the finale the camera dwells on his obese corpse, drifting face-up in the scum. Only moments earlier Quinlan had urged

Tanya, “Come on, read my future for me.” She stared long and hard and replied, “You haven’t got any.... Your future’s all used up” (150). The fortune-telling lady on the Mexican side foretells his doom and the dismantling of the American project. Her prediction holds out no “salvation history” for Quinlan. Her words ring through the finale and bolster the movie’s historical and political valence.

Tanya’s pronouncements proved eerily prophetic. In May 1958 — as *Touch of Evil* was being released to mostly empty seats in American moviehouses — Venezuelan protesters shocked the U.S. by pummeling Vice President Richard Nixon’s Cadillac during his “goodwill” tour of South America. Angry crowds prevented his motorcade from reaching Simón Bolívar’s tomb in Caracas, where the American delegation was to lay a “ceremonial wreath.” The convergence of Latin American rage and American arrogance resulted in a battered motorcade and a near assassination of the Vice President. However, the similarities between Nixon’s Cadillac and Linnekar’s Chrysler did nothing to attract audiences to Welles’s movie, which foresees the breakdown of U.S. influence abroad. Far from being a film noir straggler, *Touch of Evil* was ahead of its time in spotting the ticking time-bomb inside chrome-plated America. The anti-U.S. riots in Caracas would prove to be a harbinger of colonial antagonism towards Western regimes. Intensifying global resistance to American liberal-idealism and the capitalist world-system would erupt into warfare within a few years in Vietnam, where America’s role as worldwide policeman would be opposed and jolted. This disastrous foreign intervention would set off a wave of revolutions in neocolonial (“underdeveloped”) countries around the globe against the multinational apparatus of monopoly-finance capital. These tremors would shake the American-centered world system as well as the concept of the U.S. as a “super-state,” which had prevailed in Washington, D.C., since the 1940s.

However, in May 1958 Nixon quickly retreated from Caracas, repressing his explosive encounter with Third World anger and learning nothing from it. Similarly, a few months later Universal-International would repress *Touch of Evil* by withdrawing it from release, concluding it was too gloomy for commercial viability. There was as yet no mass audience for a movie that raised questions about American misdirection. Then the Hollywood studios would repress Orson Welles, whose prescient film noir set in the U.S. Southwest had called attention to official misconduct, economic exploitation, and ethnoracial injustice. *Touch of Evil* would be Welles’s downfall as a commercial filmmaker and his last directing job in America. Yet he lived for almost three more decades before succumbing in 1985 to a heart attack at age 70. He lived long enough to see American triumphalism shudder to a halt in the early 1970s during the disastrous Nixon Administration, when American prosperity began to reverse. Before Nixon resigned in disgrace in 1974, he had presided over the start of a long downturn in U.S. economic history. However, in 1958 Welles had already brought out the crystal ball to foresee this national decline, represented by Captain Quinlan’s slimy splashdown on the Mexican border.

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