

Drug world

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [January 31, 2001](#) issue

Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* places international drug trade in the broadest possible context, taking viewers into the lives of various people touched by cocaine trafficking. The film's tight script--an extraordinary balance by screenwriter Steven Gaghan of disparate storylines--and Soderbergh's terse, jumpy direction make it a riveting journey.

There's Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas), an Ohio senator just appointed U.S. drug czar; his sensitive and intelligent daughter Caroline (Erika Christensen), who like many privileged children can find nothing more real in life than cocaine; and Javier (Benicio Del Toro) and Manolo (Jacob Vargas), well-meaning Mexican cops caught up in the war between a drug syndicate and the Mexican government, which wants the market to itself. Acting as American counterpoints to these two cops are Montel (Don Cheadle) and Ray (Luis Guzman), federal agents responsible for safeguarding a prisoner (Miguel Ferrer) who's the star witness in the prosecution of seemingly respectable millionaire seller Araya (Steven Bauer). Araya's socialite wife (Catherine Zeta-Jones) must decide what to do with hubby in prison, blackmailers threatening her son and another baby on the way.

That Soderbergh and Gaghan make this tangled story a clear, suspenseful drama, each storyline perfectly synched with the others, is only one of several triumphs. Another is that a movie with such a volatile subject can be so unpreachy. Though the film challenges U.S. drug policy, it also allows us to feel the rightness of a drug lord's conviction and the nobility of the government agents doing their Quixotic job. In a two-and-a-half-hour movie, only the too-rosy finale (a paean to Narcotics Anonymous-style programs) and Wakefield's unconvincing conversion to liberalism smack of propaganda.

Through such strategies as assigning different colors to each of the film's locales and using jump cuts that occur during a single shot, mimicking the gaps in our observational capacities, Soderbergh makes the film feel realistic and objective while reminding us that what we are seeing is just one of many perspectives.

The movie triumphs perhaps most of all in its performances. Del Toro has drawn raves for his inscrutable-yet-sensitive turn as Javier, perhaps the most decent character in the film. In his performance as Wakefield, Douglas navigates nicely between a politician's toughness and a father's pain, while Christensen as his daughter perfectly conveys that teenage blend of naïve idealism and vapid selfishness. Topher Grace as the callow prep who becomes her first dealer is nothing short of brilliant--we've all met kids as witty, smart and amoral as he is. In fact, the film's portrait of upper-middle-class teens is one of its richest contributions, unerringly written and acted.

The movie's tone and pacing are so understated and fast that viewers aren't really let into the emotional lives of the characters. Devastating things happen to these people, but the pain we feel is mostly that of a sympathetic outsider. If that's a flaw, perhaps it's an unavoidable one for an essentially political film. But with characters so well drawn, one would like something more.

Still, there's craftsmanship and power in almost every frame of *Traffic*. It's a film that should be seen by kids, lawmakers and political pundits.