

# Traffic and structure movie review sample

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The 2000 film “ Traffic” is an incredible piece of ensemble cinema, and it unquestionably follows an ensemble, rather than a single protagonist, structure. It describes three different but interconnected stories about drugs, their use, and the measures taken to fight against them.

According to Linda Cowgill (Plots Inc. Productions, 2003), “ the key ingredient in all great ensemble films is dramatic unity - the synthesis of thematic ideas and plot movement - which enables the screenwriter and filmmaker to integrate the lines of action and construct the framework for the film's plot.” This is exactly what occurs in “ Traffic.” The overriding theme director Stephen Soderbergh explores is the toll drugs, their manufacture, and their distribution take on all aspects of the supply and demand chain. He also uses three distinct story arcs to present the plot elements and the different perspectives within that thematic ideal: the new U. S. drug czar and the police who support him, determined (sometimes misguidedly) to fight a war on drugs; two Mexican cops, corrupt, but still trying to do the right thing; and a besieged drug-dealing family working to ensure the uninterrupted flow of drugs into the United States.

The effect of using the ensemble structure is that we, the viewers, are able to see more than one perspective of the movie’s theme. We move between the different characters and situations to see how the same action or event affects each one individually and the group as a whole. For example, we see the induction of the new drug czar, Judge Robert Wakefield, eager to learn about the drug trade so as to eliminate the flow of drugs into the U. S. At the same time, though, unbeknownst to him, his daughter, Caroline, is experimenting with a number of different drugs, ultimately leading to her

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arrest, and to Wakefield's potential embarrassment. And in another turn, Carlos Ayala, a high-level drug distributor near the Wakefield's, and quite probably Caroline's supplier, is arrested by the DEA, leaving his wife to run the family business. His trial sweeps up a number of secondary characters, such as the police protecting a witness who will testify against him, and the Mexican cops, who are drawn into a battle between competing drug cartels eager to seize on the void his arrest leaves in the chain.

Each of the main characters also follows the arc of the three-act film structure of exposition, confrontation, and resolution. For example, in Act I, we are introduced to Javier Rodriguez, a Mexican cop, who, like all his compatriots, is on the take and feels no compunction about being so. The first plot point, or reversal, comes when he is recruited by General Salazar to help wipe out one of the drug cartels in Tijuana, and he is drawn into the action, learning only later that Salazar heads the competing cartel, which is his motivation for "cleaning up" Tijuana. In Act II, he comes into conflict with his partner, Manolo, when the latter gets greedy and tries to head off on his own endeavor. When Manolo is killed, Javier reaches the second plot point, realizing to some extent that what he is doing is wrong, and he makes a deal with the U. S. police to take down Salazar and his cartel. The resolution of Act III comes when the cops kill off Salazar and Javier gets what he wants from the U. S. - lights for the baseball stadium so the kids can be safe while playing. In a nice piece of filmmaking, Javier passes Mrs. Ayala on the streets of Tijuana after his meeting with the police, just as she is heading to a meeting with one of the Mexican drug cartels to take over the distribution of cocaine to the U. S. in the absence of her husband, effectively showing the

different characters in the same place at the same points of their structural arcs.

I believe that this film would have been hurt if it was based on a single protagonist, since we wouldn't have been able to see the scope of the drug problem in the two countries - it would have been too convoluted or forced, and there would not have been enough time to develop the richness of the characters and their situations. With the ensemble structure the director could use each story as a single element of the larger problem and, by showing all the characters' arcs, could provide a richness of detail not otherwise possible.