

Trouble at the Border

(By Toshio U.-P.)

“We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.”

~Indigenous saying

Borders traced between independent nations are very much a source of tensions, conflict and separation. In the examination of two major works of cinema each from different eras and parts of the world, we meet characters attempting to cross from their native or authorized side into a foreign zone. These same characters are in turn subjected to scrutiny/bias, discrimination and even enslavement or incarceration. In this short analysis of two film classics, we will study the role of the border in the narrative and talk about characters venturing into borderland settings for opportunity, work and envisioned emancipation.

In Orson Welles’ film noir classic Touch of Evil (1), the action takes place in a fictional industrial U.S.-Mexico border town called Los Robles, when a car crossing the border into the United States’ side detonates from a planted dynamite car bomb killing its two American passengers. This major disruption in the film’s opening scene forces Mexican narcotics expert Mike Vargas to put a pause on his honeymoon with his new American bride Susie to investigate the act of terror exacerbating pre-existing tensions at the border. The incident also draws a slew of senior American law enforcement officials to the gloomy borderland setting such as the powerful and cutthroat Police Captain Hank Quinlan. While Vargas follows proper legal procedure in his attempt to uncover the ring of organized crime behind the car bomb attack, he soon finds himself at odds with the senior commanding officer Hank Quinlan who is revealed to have certain biases each time he inevitably assumes control of cases from the more powerful and entitled American side of the border.

In acclaimed Scandinavian co-production Pelle the Conqueror (2), we meet Lasse and his young boy Pelle as they cross the watery border into the Danish island of Bornholm from their impoverished part of Southern Sweden. Hoping to find work and prosperity as they enter the small port town, they are greeted with a rude welcome and instantly treated like second class foreign vagrants. Desperate to fit in, the father and son, who lack proper documents or visas, eventually accept being taken by carriage to a nearby work farm called Stengården where they are immediately exploited for cheap labour while being housed in sub-standard conditions with many other poor foreign workers. While father Lasse eventually comes to terms with the fact that he may never leave the slavery of Stengården, Pelle dreams of seeing or ‘conquering’ the world once he feels sufficiently independent in his state of young boyhood.

According to a recent 2025 publication on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands (3), “[t]he borders we create are exclusive and are furthermore manifestations of colonization, imperialism, and racial stratification”. For instance, as seen in the subordinate status of

Mexican characters depicted in Touch of Evil, “discriminatory conditions [...] persist despite citizenship status and a sense of belonging” (3). In Pelle the Conqueror, Swedish immigrants Lasse and Pelle are treated similarly to Mexican migrants by the Danish locals who have “the belief that [they][...] are a burden on the welfare system and underserving recipients of public goods rather than pawns of cheap labor and producers of cheap products.” (3)

Sources:

1. Touch of Evil (1958). Dir. Orson Welles. Universal-International. USA. 111 min.
2. Pelle the Conqueror (1987). Dir. Bille August. Svensk Filmindustri and Kærne Film. Sweden and Denmark. 157 min.
3. “Walled-Barriers, Migration, and Resistance in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands”, Edited by Andréanne Bissonnette and Élisabeth Vallet, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 2025. p.260-261, p.269.