

**Round Table: *Dreaming On: Recent Representations
of the Mexico-US Border in Contemporary Cinema***

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There is no stopping the American Dream. The foundational myth in the history of the United States, this powerful cultural concept has morphed and metamorphosed in various ways in the course of time and has continued to prove its resilience, overcoming and adapting to such historical developments as the end of the geographical frontiers, the successive national disillusionments of the last century, and, more recently, globalization, transnationalism and other potential threats. Occupying a minor part in the national imagination for a long time, the Southern border has returned with unexpected force in recent decades as a result of seemingly unstoppable migratory movements, not so different conceptually from those which originated the American Dream in the first place. The inescapable materiality of this border, with its daily stories of suffering, repression, paranoia, and death, has not prevented cultural representations and cultural theory from reconstructing and reinventing its beleaguered topography as one more facet of the old myth.

Critical theorization of the border has emphasized its intrinsic paradoxical nature. Dividing lines are always created by contact and, therefore, the points through which two bodies, cultures or countries are separated automatically become what they have in common. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable drives. It is not that any frontier can easily be opened and turned into a crossing, but rather that “delimitation itself is the bridge that opens to the other” (De Certeau 1984: 127). The border is always already a bridge, at least a potential one. That border/bridge becomes a war zone when protection of one’s territory and oneself from the other prevails. But the border is also a contact zone, which Gloria Anzaldúa, to distinguish it from the border as a dividing line, calls the ‘borderland’: a positive and fruitful space of interaction between several cultures (1999). As borderland artist Guillermo Gómez Peña claims in his cultural and political manifesto “The Border Is”, “Border culture means boycott, ilegalidad, clandestinidad, contrabando, transgresión, desobediencia binacional ... But it also means transcultural friendship and collaboration among races, sexes and generations. It also means to practice creative appropriation, expropriation, and subversion of dominant cultural forms” (1993). The Mexico-US border has produced the ‘border film’ and this round table seeks to call attention to the growing importance of this genre by focusing on three specific movies from the last decade.

All the Pretty Horses (Billy Bob Thornton, 2000) dramatizes the problematic transition from Old West stereotypes to the New West realities. Based on Cormac McCarthy’s 1992 National Book Award winner novel, the movie explores the resilience of frontier mythology in modern times, portraying the Texan-Mexican border as a hybrid and dialogical realm, with multiple points of contact and intersection between myth and reality. Mexico is romanticized as the last frontier and identified with the mythic freedom and individualism of the Old West. However, the cultural border turns

out to be more difficult to get across than the physical or even the linguistic one. Its hero, John Grady Cole, is unable to obtain spiritual regeneration through his immersion into the violent and chaotic world of the borderland territory between Texas and Mexico. His initiation into manhood becomes basically an initiation into evil through different rites of passage, often dominated by the overwhelming presence of violence.

Mexico, due to its power to suggest the mythic conditions of the Wild West, becomes emblematic of a lost time and serves as escape-valve for those who feel displaced in the U.S. and search for an identity according to archetypal frontier values. However, Thornton's movie also deconstructs the archetypal mythic view of the frontier and of Mexico, in particular, as an idyllic territory, as a promised land and the lost cowboy paradise, exposing the artificiality of a series of romantic preconceptions about particular places, or "false geographies", to use Barry Lopez's terminology (1990: 55). It also debunks popular visions of Mexico as a wild, unsettled territory with unlimited opportunity, emphasizing instead its borderland condition and the interaction of cultures and languages in a basically hybrid context.

These border heroes live physically and metaphorically on a liminal territory between the United States and Mexico, and also on an unstable space between myth and history. *All the Pretty Horses* certainly rejects traditional binary oppositions to build a fictional territory that, to borrow Edward Soja's terminology, may be defined as a "third space", full of intersections, negotiations, and exchanges (1996: 4). The borderland in Thornton's movie as a whole also resembles to a certain extent Annette Kolodny's concept of frontier as "that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct cultures first encounter one another's 'otherness' and appropriate, accommodate or domesticate it through language" (1992: 2). In the end, the frontier in *All the Pretty Horses* turns out to be a multicultural, chaotic, and hybrid space, where the Old and the New West are involved in a continuous dialogical process of exchange and overlapping.

As in the case of Thornton's film, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) can be said to retrieve some of the elements of traditional cowboy and Western movies, and to recast them into more contemporary realities and post-modern 'ways of seeing' that tend to question some of the staple codes of the genre. Habermas (1992) and others have detected much fluidity and permeability in border territories, but also evident signs of contestation and conflict. In Donnan and Wilson's opinion, "Just as borders may be both bridge and barrier between these [national] spaces, so their crossing can be both enabling and disabling, can create opportunities or close them off" (1997: 107). *The Three Burials* explores the tensions and contradictions that emerge when people decide to cross state borders and cultural boundaries between countries –the US and Mexico– that have historically thought of each other in terms of stereotypes and myths.

To some extent, *The Three Burials*... inserts itself within the tradition of the Western due to its laconic use of language and its fascination with open spaces, as well as the pervasiveness of violence and death in the plot. Yet, despite the presence of all these elements, it would be inaccurate to read the film as a continuation of that tradition. Indeed, scriptwriter Guillermo Arriaga and director Jones join efforts to delineate a new frontier in which universal themes such as home, friendship, loyalty, revenge and, even, culture begin to acquire all kinds of new nuances. The main driving force of the plot is the unusually close friendship struck by modern-day cowboy Pete Perkins and undocumented Mexican immigrant Melquiades, which in many ways is reminiscent of other relationships –across racial lines, too– described by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). This partnership is replaced, in the second half of the movie, by another male dyad, as Perkins forces Melquiades's murderer, border

patrol officer Mike Norton, to accompany him across the border with the Mexican's corpse in tow. This journey becomes a huge ordeal, involving both redemption and self-discovery for the two white Americans who are unexpectedly placed in the position of the cultural Other. At the climactic moment of the movie, the two fellow travelers are brought to experience in their own flesh a feeling quite familiar among migrants who cross any borders: that the place where they have arrived is not what they had anticipated and that the journey they have undertaken has not brought them any closer to happiness.

A very cheaply made movie, *Monsters* (Gareth Edwards, 2010) falls outside the industrial and generic parameters of the other two films analyzed in this round table. Its story is fantastic enough: in the present day, as a consequence of NASA experiments, the northern half of Mexico has been invaded by extraterrestrial creatures. The Mexican and US governments have designated the area an "infected zone". A US news photographer and the daughter of his boss have to travel across the infected zone in order to reach the US border. In the course of their journey, as in classical stories, they experience important changes and fall in love with each other. The creatures are crucial in this evolution. Although the filmmakers have insisted that they did not have the US-Mexican border in mind when they imagined the "infected zone", and that *Monsters* has therefore nothing to say about the border, the implications and reverberations are more than obvious: the geographical location of the action is described in detail, including "real" maps of the US and Mexico onto which the infected zone is superimposed. Given the generalized perception of real places like Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana as beyond recuperation and redemption, the fact that in the film the danger area has spread down to occupy the northern half of Mexico is also consistent with cultural fears and anxieties. The geographical and conceptual proximity between the infected zone and the real borderlands becomes the best illustration of the film's method of combining science-fiction and reality.

Once the metaphorical connection between monster space and borderlands is firmly anchored in our minds, the reconstruction of the film's space as the borderlands becomes more and more complex, and the connections proliferate. The nature of the infected zone as an area in which habitual logic does not apply reflects the way in which the real borderlands between the two countries have been described and represented; the travelers through the borderlands are initially extremely wary and afraid, but their contact with this in-between world, with the unknown and unexpected, makes them more interesting, tolerant and sensitive; the creatures, and even the Hispanic-looking mercenaries that populate this half-deserted world, become gradually humanized and less scary. Hiding behind the apparent triviality and fantasy of its narrative premise, the film questions preconceptions about the borderlands and reverses some of the commonplaces of border representation, pointing the way forward to new interventions in this increasingly varied and sophisticated genre.

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