

The US–Mexico Border in American Movies: A Political Geography Perspective

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The region surrounding the US–Mexico divide is probably one of the most frequently screened landscapes of North America. Since the beginning of commercial cinema, the border has been a leading or secondary character in dozens of movies, ranging from the obvious westerns to the less obvious horror, science fiction and film-noir categories. The connotations given by the American film industry to the cross-border experience – both from the south and north – connotations, and the meaning of the border that has been assumed to support such interpretations can be considered, from a 'critical geopolitics' perspective, as popular forms of expression of a geopolitical discourse pertaining to the role and standing of the United States relative to its southern neighbour. In order to detect the frames and assumptions of this popular geopolitical narrative, the author takes into account the scripts and the visual representation of the borderscape of a miscellany of about 30 movies, all produced in North America over a period of 65 years.

INTRODUCTION

Along with the open spaces of the West and the fragmented spaces of New York and Los Angeles, the region surrounding the US–Mexico divide is probably one of the most frequently screened landscapes of North America. Along with them, it represents a way of 'narrating' the nation,¹ that is, of embodying its features and qualities in a certain place, or image of place. However, the cinematic versions of Monument Valley and the North American cityscape usually promote (or challenge) the many dimensions of the US national narrative,² while the cinematic border – with its function of interfacing (what is

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considered to be) the Self with (what is considered to be) the Other – figures as a prominent feature in the making of a more internationally oriented geopolitical discourse, narrating the United States in its relations with the Outside.

Certainly, ‘the border was a common setting since the beginning of commercial cinema’³ and American–Mexican relations have been a major theme since the foundation of the film industry.⁴ Indeed, the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, with the dramatic events of the raid led by Pancho Villa on Columbus (New Mexico) in 1916, and of the ensuing punitive expedition, which in the same year saw Villa pursued nearly 300 miles south of the border, coincided with the rise of feature cinema as the dominant form of visual entertainment in the United States.⁵ At the time, movies not only provided the American public with powerful images of the region,⁶ but also produced a popular discourse about the geopolitical reasons for the events. ‘In 1916 alone, seven feature films were released that explicitly dealt with military mobilisation on the border.’⁷ They were quite racist productions in which Mexicans were represented as ‘greasers’ and amply vilified,⁸ while the Americans were generally shown as heroes.

Since then, the border has been a leading or secondary character in dozens of movies, ranging from the obvious westerns to the less obvious horror, science fiction and film-noir categories.⁹ As with any other ‘reel landscape’,¹⁰ the US–Mexico border has been invented and re-invented by the camera, which has selected certain clichés and developed its own topoi. Through the century, the border was depicted as a racialised space, as a gendered area where masculine and feminine stereotypes can be portrayed against a backdrop of colonial fantasies, as a place of contested historical heritage and even as a symbolic landscape of cultural hybridisation and encounter. Because of these many race and gender implications, its narratives and imagined geographies have been the object of research in a wide range of academic fields, from American and Chicana/o studies to literature, film, gender and cultural studies, and cultural geography.

However, the border is, above all, a politically charged place, and its portrayal in popular culture also deserves to be analysed with the instruments of political geography. Indeed, the same signifier (the ‘border’) can have different meanings: in terms of political geography, it implies both the boundary line demarcating the end of sovereignty and the zone of interchange between one state and the other. It can also mean a barrier limiting the free movement of people and goods, a symbolic end of the nation-Self and/or an open frontier.¹¹ A different line of reasoning is involved in each of these different meanings.

In this contribution, I will try to highlight the connotations that the American film industry has given to the cross-border experience over the years – both from the south and north – and the meaning of the border that has been assumed to support such interpretations.¹² From a ‘critical geopolitics’ perspective, I will assume that such connotations are popular forms of

expression of a geopolitical discourse,¹³ pertaining to the role and standing of the United States relative to its southern neighbour.

In order to plumb the deep structure of this geopolitical discourse, I will try to identify the framework upon which it has been built, considering a miscellany of about 30 movies, all produced in North America over a period of 65 years. All these films have to do with the border, the border region or the crossing-the-border experience, and may be arranged into three or four different groups: the 'south of the border' adventure, illegal immigration and trafficking, and the question of cultural separatedness, hybridisation and encounter. Some of these movies are very famous – works of art by celebrated directors, such as Anthony Mann, Orson Wells and John Huston – and have been discussed elsewhere by reviewers and academics. Others are Hollywood blockbusters that have received greater attention from audiences than from critics and intellectuals. Others are merely B movies, that is, low budget productions with little merit and fewer ambitions. Together they form a remarkable body of work belonging to what is commonly defined as 'popular culture' – that is, to the everyday practices, beliefs and 'geopolitical imagination' of 'common people'.¹⁴

SCREENING THE FRAMES I: GOING 'SOUTH OF THE BORDER'

South of the Border (1939, dir. Sherman) is a classic pre-war western starring Gene Autry, 'America's favourite singing cowboy'. It can be taken as a starting point for analysing cinematic representations of the 'crossing the border' experience from a North American viewpoint, since it variously assembles all the ingredients later to become the underpinnings of a long series of movies presenting similar views. It belongs to a generation of movies built around a confusion between the mythic space of the western and the real issues of the day.¹⁵ In terms of popular geopolitics, such movies produced a powerful interaction between icons of the past and present, thereby suggesting that 'the heroic ethic of Western vigilantism had a kind of timeless validity as a means of resolving a social or political impasse'.¹⁶ *South of the Border* is, from this perspective, absolutely intriguing. It is constructed around the character of Gene, who, even if dressed as a cowboy and riding a horse, is a special federal agent on the eve of the Second World War. At the beginning of the story, the singing cowboy is riding south of the border with his pals against open scenery of vast rugged lands and cactuses. He arrives in a small village, where he enjoys the local atmosphere of fiestas and fun, and starts romancing a local *señorita*. But then, following government orders, he is sent farther south to the fictitious region of Palermo (Mexico) to foil the plans of foreign spies who are attempting to gain control of the local oil fields. At the end of the film, he goes back to his *señorita*, only to discover that she has become a Catholic nun. He therefore rides back north with his pals.

In synthesis, the film suggests that for the white American man, going south of the border: (1) is always an option, (2) will guarantee an exotic experience and maybe a chance for adventure (and if the situation gets too dangerous, there is always a safe way back), (3) will provide easy romance/sex with local girls, (4) will offer a chance to exert American moral superiority and technological ability in a less developed and civilised context, and (5) will represent a ‘rite of passage’ to adulthood for the individual, as well as for the nation.

All these elements are present, even if variously intertwined, in most of the movies about south-of-the-border adventures, notwithstanding the many different cinematic genres and subgenres they may belong to. However, thrillers, horror movies and sex comedies are usually more tuned to sex and travel, while westerns tend, in the main, to carry a more or less explicit ‘political’ discourse.¹⁷

Indeed, the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo region between Texas and the Mexican border is a common setting for westerns and is repeatedly depicted as an open landscape of vast wilderness in order to emphasise the regenerating role of the frontier experience.¹⁸ Since *The Caballero Way*, an early silent film about the Cisco Kid,¹⁹ westerns set in Mexico have become sufficiently numerous to represent a specific subgenre in their own right. They include such major successes as *Vera Cruz* (1954, dir. Aldrich), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960, dir. Sturges) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969, dir. Peckinpah). Many of these Mexico westerns are so-called ‘professional plot westerns’²⁰ and centre on the adventures of professional fighters taking on an assignment south of the border for money. Major shifts in the mood of American idealism – and in the representation of the nation’s geopolitical mission in the rest of the world – can be discerned from one movie to the next: while *The Magnificent Seven* can be described as the narrative of an altruistic crusade, *The Professionals* (1966, dir. Brooks) and *The Wild Bunch* are infused with cool cynicism mixed with nostalgic eulogy to the past. Nevertheless, all these professional movies share ‘a similar albeit selective code of honour’.²¹ So, notwithstanding the mercenary attitude displayed at the beginning of the narrative, while in Mexico, the American ‘professionals’ cannot avoid becoming involved in the fight of the indigenous people for liberty and freedom, and end up fighting against the local tyrant for the sake of justice and not money.²² Even *The Wild Bunch*, apparently misanthropic and anti-American in its message, does not break the formula: the members of the Bunch may be depicted as brutal bandits at the beginning of the story, but, through their Mexican adventure, they undergo a regeneration (symbolised by Peckinpah’s use of landscape imagery and juxtaposition of confined and open spaces). Indeed, they rise from their ‘lowlife selves to the level of heroes’,²³ who fight their last battle to advance the cause of the revolution.²⁴

In more recent Mexican westerns, elegiac tones tend to prevail over overt political messages. Nevertheless, stereotypes about the cross-border

experience are no less abundant. *All the Pretty Horses*, shot in 2000 and starring big names such as Matt Damon and Penelope Cruz, is a good example. The narrative is a loose adaptation of the first novel of Coran McCarthy's 'border trilogy'.²⁵ It relates the coming-of-age of two young cowboys who, after their ranch in Texas is turned into an oilfield, ride to Mexico in search of the kind of rural society that is disappearing at home. Notwithstanding the beauty of the landscape, the two discover a much less Arcadian reality than expected, finding a ruthless society, where the strongest is always right and justice is biased. After many adventures, including confinement in an extraordinarily violent jail and the cold-blooded shooting of another teenager by the Mexican police, they manage to go back home, but not without a tortured romance between the Latin beauty Alejandra (Penelope Cruz) and the white American Jon Grady Cole (Matt Damon).

The love and sex theme appears to be the staple of many other productions about the south-of-the-border experience. Indeed, very few crossing-the-border movies refrain from mentioning the opportunity of sex and romance. Even the cartoon *The Three Caballeros* (1945) offers a Disneyfied version of the land south of the border as a place for hedonistic revelry and sexual abandon, with Donald Duck shouting 'Hot stuff!' when presented with the vista of Mexican beauties at the beach. A similar perspective is presented in the more recent *The Mexican* (2001, dir. Verbinsky), in which the main character, Jerry (Brad Pitt), is invited by his boss to go to Mexico to look for an antique gun, asking him, 'Do you like sex and travel?'.²⁶

Some movies specifically centre on the sexual aspect of the Mexican adventure (leaving pornographic productions to one side, of course). A good example is *Losin' It* (1983, dir. Hason), a sex comedy that presents the classic Mexican western adventure. The film is the story of a shy young man (Tom Cruise) who decides to cross the border with a group of friends in a quest to lose his virginity. Instead of riding a horse, they are driving a beautiful convertible. And instead of searching for open spaces, they are looking for the closed landscape of the city. They nevertheless enjoy the usual type of adventures. They also spend time in a horrid Mexican jail and have to face many complicated circumstances that blatantly depict the border-crossing experience as a rite of passage to masculinity.

Another movie of interest in this vein is *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996, dir. Rodriguez). It is not a sex comedy but a sort of splatter/pulp movie, in which the border is a symbol of the transition to adult life and the passage from life to death (and eventual resurrection). Its narrative and structure are compound, with the movie constructed as a splatter, Tarantino-style film in the first 'American' half and as a horror movie in the second 'Mexican' half. The story narrates the escape of two vicious criminals, the Gecko brothers (Seth, played by George Clooney, and Ritchie, played by Quentin Tarantino), who leave a trail of corpses behind them on their way to the Mexican border. Over the border, the criminals turn victims as they stumble across a biker

bar called Titty Twisters, where beautiful Mexican women dance naked for the pleasure of the male clientele and that proves to be nothing less than a house of vampires. By fighting the hideous creatures – complete with frenzied images of disembowelled and decapitated female bodies²⁷ – the two killers undergo a baptism of fire and purification through blood. While the weaker of the two, Ritchie, is unable to resist and becomes a vampire himself (and in this new role has to be destroyed by his own brother), the most determined of the pair, Seth, is victorious. At the end of the night, as a kind of new Cortés, he exterminates the monsters, recasting himself from villain to hero. Symbolically dead as a killer, he is reborn as a man. The image of the border as a ‘magic curtain’ through which one passes into a ‘different world’²⁸ is pushed to the extreme, it marking a change in life itself.

SCREENING THE FRAMES II: FROM SOUTH TO NORTH

Whereas all the films discussed to this point present crossing the border southward as an easy option, attempts to go *El Norte* from the other side are usually shown as being much more difficult and requiring getting through a much less penetrable barrier. Mexican narratives are more complex and tend to treat the border as a limit as well as a gateway.²⁹ American narratives, on the other hand, usually restrict their descriptions of the ‘south to north experience’ to illegal immigration (and, as we will see later, drug trafficking).

Probably the first commercial movie about this sensitive topic was shot in Mexico. It was *Pito Pérez se va de bracero* (1947, dir. Riera), a comedy-drama in which the villains are a group of Italian ‘coyotes’ (*coyote* being the term used for immigrant smugglers). However, the American film industry tackled the issue during the same period with a more political agenda. The first relevant Hollywood film in this vein was *Border Incident* (1949, dir. Mann), a film noir with an abnormally large amount of violence for the time. The film shows the illegal traffic of *braceros*, their brutal disposal by the very men who were supposed to recruit and protect them, and the (successful) attempts of the Federales and the American forces to stop the traffic. Notwithstanding its attempt at being anti-racist,³⁰ the movie typecasts Mexico with the usual stereotypes. Thus the technology of the American police is constantly compared with the Stone Age primitivism of the Federales, an attitude exhibited in other movies from the same years. For instance, in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948, dir. Houston), one of the characters says, ‘The Federales don’t operate in our American way. They’re not fingerprint experts, but they can follow any trail’. And the Mexicans are often pigeonholed as the classic *estúpido* (again, we can compare *Border Incident* to *The Treasure*, where one of the characters says, ‘Americans may be greedy, but the Mexicans are so stupid they can’t tell gold from sand’).

Border Incident was the benchmark for a long series of American movies dealing with crossing the border from the Mexican side. Since its release, Hollywood productions have shown going to *El Norte* as a question of legality/illegality, immigration, smuggling and law-enforcement – a set of issues never tackled when moving in the opposite direction. While illegal immigration is an issue that ‘open minded’ film-makers dramatise for the American public so as to create a benevolent attitude to the poor immigrants, their good intentions are invariably paternalistic towards the ‘poor peasants’. Moreover, in all these movies the American male is always central, their main characters being invariably white or, as we will see in more recent productions, white-looking. They always handle the situation from the US side and always fall in love – openly or secretly – with a female illegal who needs their protection. Plus, the difficult circumstances faced by the illegals, their quasi-enslavement, the risks they run and the brutality of their treatment never fail to suggest a clear ‘stay at home’ discourse. Also as regards the landscape, the scenery of untouched nature and beautiful open spaces of the south-of-the-border movies is turned into a fragmented backdrop, visually dominated by physical barriers and divides (images of the border range from the river to a barbed wire fence and a daunting patrolled wall).

The list of movies on this subject is quite long and includes expensive productions starring big Hollywood names, such as *The Border* (1980, dir. Richardson) with Jack Nicholson, as well as B movies and independent productions. Sharing a general moralistic stance, these movies, when seen chronologically, portray an evolution in the treatment of the figure of the coyote. Cast as the unqualified villain in early productions, the coyote has progressively transformed into an almost moral figure and, more recently, the ultimate western hero. In *Border Incident*, for example, *braceros* are presented as the victims of the tragic situation created exclusively by the greed of the smugglers. Indeed, notwithstanding their role in making the border so difficult to cross, the United States and Mexico are shown cooperating to stop the traffic, whose only criminals are shown as the brutal ‘slave merchants’ (as the movie title was aptly translated for the Italian version). In *The Border*, Mexicans continue to be shown as victims, but the relationships among patrolmen, coyotes and Mexicans are slightly more multifaceted. American border patrol agents, for instance, can be corrupted and they collaborate with the coyotes (such as Jack Nicholson’s partner, who asks for money in exchange for letting immigrants in). At the same time, the coyotes are represented as high-minded characters, smuggling illegal immigrants into the States but not hesitating to shoot anyone carrying drugs.

An up-to-date version of the coyote is presented in the B movie *On the Borderline* (2000, dir. Oblowitz), which combines the two main ‘border dramas’ of our time: people smuggling and western nostalgia. It is the story of a young married couple, Nicky and Luke, from Detroit, who, on the drive to Pomona, California, stop at the border town of El Corredor (marked by

street signs as 'The Edge of America'). Their money is stolen, so to earn some dollars to reach their final destination, Nicky starts working as a waitress in the town's diner, while Luke, unable to find anything better, agrees to help the local coyote smuggle immigrants. Despite being forced into this situation, Luke remains one of the 'good' guys of the story, along with Nicky and Connie, a motherly Mexicana. In the tradition of the genre, the coyotes could be expected to play the villains. And villains they are. Nevertheless, the most captivating character is Dean, the head coyote, who is portrayed as a dashing handsome young man (by actor Bill Sage), able to steal the couple's money, almost seduce Vicky simply by dancing with her, force Luke to participate in the smuggling, kidnap the girl, and almost kill her. He is shot at the end, but not without reciting an elegiac hymn to the West in what is probably the most interesting sequence of the movie: 'People think the West is dead. It just doesn't look like a John Wayne movie anymore. It ain't dead. It's just updated. We traded our horses in for pickup trucks.' 'And your cattle for illegal immigrants?' 'That's right.'

More conventional in its characterisation of the coyotes as the bad guys, but innovative in the casting of the (male) hero, is *The Gatekeeper* (2001, dir. Frey), an independent production, written, directed and acted by former University of San Diego student John Carlos Frey. The movie, which won nearly ten awards at various film festivals around the United States, takes its title from Operation Gatekeeper, a program introduced by the US government in the early nineties aimed at limiting undocumented workers from crossing the border. It is the story of Adam Field (played by Frey), a half-caste US patrol agent who, thanks to his good looks and green eyes, succeeds in posing as an American, hiding his half-Mexican origins even from his American fiancée. In his attempt to become perfectly white, he gets involved in a white racist organisation that acts against immigration. Following their suggestion, but without any support from his superiors, Adam goes undercover on the other side of the border to expose the illegals' routes into the States. His plan, however, goes awry and instead of being rescued by the organisation as he is crossing the border, he ends up, together with other immigrants, in the frightening reality of a sort of enslavement camp in central California. Here is forced to work in a clandestine laboratory producing drugs and also witnesses the rape and killing of a Mexican woman by a gang of coyotes. He obviously cannot avoid taking the side of his fellow victims. The movie poses interesting questions about the quest for a white identity and the self-imposition of white supremacy beliefs by a half-Mexican character; but it cannot help falling into the usual mould, screening Mexican women as the inevitable victims, Mexican men as basically unable to protect them and the (white-looking) American hero as the only character strong enough to deal with the situation.

Cross-border immigration as a cinematic subject is not only reserved to pseudo-documentaries and dramas. Other Hollywood productions have

variously referred to the subject. Two science fiction blockbusters deserve mention: *Men in Black* (1997, dir. Sonnenfeld) and *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004, dir. Emmerich). Science fiction, for the chances it offers to depict a distorted – and sometimes reversed – portrait of its contemporary reality, is a very suitable vehicle for addressing sensitive geopolitical issues and discourse.³¹ *Men in Black*, which is set on a planet Earth populated by human beings and aliens in different disguises, is a clear metaphor for the US immigration question. The issue is explicitly tackled in the opening scene, in which the border patrol stops a truckload of illegal immigrants being smuggled across the border into the United States. The movie resolves the issue of immigration in terms of assimilation and blending (to be accepted, ‘good aliens’ are supposed to be properly disguised as humans, preferably white, while bad aliens are constantly metaphorically referred to as ‘bugs’).

The Day after Tomorrow is another highly political movie, aimed at the environment debate and US environmental policies. Set in the present day, the movie depicts the sudden and catastrophic onset of a new Ice Age, supposedly caused by global climate changes that will follow the greenhouse effect. It therefore openly attacks the US government’s decision not to sign the Kyoto agreement and, more in general, accuses the developed world of being the cause of global warming and the resulting global freeze. Indeed, the developed world is also the north of the planet. It is shown as the principal victim of its own inconsiderate environmental policies: in the new Ice Age, the north will be entirely covered with ice, while the south will have a more temperate climate. In this situation, the only chance for survival for the American people will be to flee across the border into Mexico. The movie therefore shows thousands of refugees trying to cross a suddenly hostile border – and Mexican authorities relenting to the tidal wave of immigration only after the US promise to write off all Latin American debts, as if to say that the freedom of Americans to cross the border is a matter of luck and not a given.

SCREENING THE FRAMES III: TRAFFICKING (FROM SOUTH TO NORTH, AGAIN)

The US–Mexico border not only represents a barrier to human mobility (at least from the southern perspective), but it is also a marker of sovereignty, denoting the different systems of laws and values of the two states. Flows of goods are controlled, too, in some cases being restricted by various regulations and taxes and, in others, supported by varying degrees of strictness in the application of similar rules. At any rate, the smuggling of illegal goods is quite a common activity. Since the first half of the last century, one of the main problems of trans-border relations has been the import of drugs into the United States from Mexico. Hollywood has not missed the chance of focusing on this theme.

Of the long series of films centred on cross-border drug traffic, one of the first is probably *Borderline* (1950, dir. Seiter). It is the story of two undercover agents (Fred MacMurray and Claire Trevor) who infiltrate a drug smuggling ring in Mexico. But since neither of them is aware of the other's identity, they suspect each other of being crooks. Although spiced up by the obligatory love story between the two main characters and some sparkles of humour, the movie is quite racist. The Mexicans are constantly depicted as *estúpido* and sleepy or, if awake, as distracted by some triviality rather than doing their job properly. The Mexican police, for example, are very easy to set up, while all other Mexicans are cast as servants or drivers – with the females longing for white males. Mexicans are not even capable of being villains, with the head of the gang an American character (played by Raymond Burr).

Although not the main theme, drugs also play a significant role in Orson Wells' *Touch of Evil* (1958). The movie, set in a squalid border town, centres on the interaction between two policemen: Mexican investigator Mike Vargas (Charlton Heston) and American police chief Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles). Vargas, a Mexico City policeman, is in town with his American wife, Susan (Janet Leigh), to investigate the local traffic in drugs and arrests a member of the drug-dealing Grandi family. Meanwhile, a murder, organised on the American side of the city, is committed on the Mexican side. The main suspect appears to be Sanchez, a young Mexican who has a relationship with the daughter of the victim, a rich American businessman. But Vargas suspects Quinlan of planting evidence against him and begins investigating the police chief. Meanwhile, the Grandi family intimidates Vargas by kidnapping his wife, who is threatened with rape and set up as a drug addict. The movie, underrated at the time of its release but today regarded as a masterpiece, has many attractions besides its quality and style. In addition to Quinlan's legendary line, 'Let's go back to civilisation', which he says when leaving the Mexican side of town, and Vargas' famous, 'This is not the real Mexico ... Border towns bring out the worst in a country', the movie offers a highly symbolic cityscape – as fragmented and as complex as the relationships in the city – and more than one stereotype. From the beginning, it suggests that Mexico is a land of easy sex, opening with a shot of a neon sign advertising 'Girls'. The entire episode of Susan's kidnapping hinges on the presumption that Mexicans are sexually promiscuous and prone to the abuse of illicit drugs. Even the comparison between the two policemen makes the American look the better character. Quinlan, although corrupt and grotesquely fat, is indeed the strong man of the story, while his Mexican counterpart, notwithstanding his good manners and better intentions, not only fails as an investigator, taking the side of a culprit, but also as a husband, his inability to protect his wife representing his 'ineffectual masculinity'.³² However, the movie at least recognises that Mexicans are capable of being masters of their own lives. They are not

typecast simply as extras or servants, as in *Borderline*, but are equal to their role as villains.

More than 40 years later, a similarly complex effort to deal with the subject was attempted by Steven Soderbergh in *Traffic* (2000), an all-star Hollywood blockbuster that won four Academy Awards (including best director, and supporting actor for Benicio Del Toro). Shot in many different locations, sprawling from the slums of Mexico to the corridors of power of Washington DC, *Traffic* tells four different stories, all interconnected by the common theme of drugs. Although the many different locations were chosen to convey the pervasiveness of drug culture and trafficking in America, the movie begins at the Mexican border and develops three of its narratives in the area between Tijuana and San Diego. Even in the fourth story, set in Washington, Robert Wakefield, the head of the American drug force, played by Michael Douglas, visits the border.

The first scene of the movie introduces Javier (Benicio Del Toro) and his partner Manolo (Jacob Vargas), two moderately honest Mexican cops, as they stage a drug bust near the border. It is immediately made clear, however, that they lack the means to pull off the bust: first, the smugglers tell each other, 'Don't worry, it's just the police', then a Mexican Army squad takes over the arrest – later it is discovered that the head of the Mexican Army, General Salazar (Tomas Milian), is working against the Tijuana drug cartel on behalf of another drug cartel from Mexico City. Other interconnected narratives centre on Robert Wakefield's teenage daughter, who, despite her father's job as head of the drug force, is a drug addict herself. On the flip side, there is drug lord Carlos Ayala's glamorous wife Helena (a pregnant Catherine Zeta-Jones), who is oblivious of the source of her husband's wealth until he is arrested, but then quickly takes over the business in order to maintain her lifestyle. Meanwhile, two US cops (Luis Guzman and Don Cheadle) are handling Eduardo (Miguel Ferrer), a mid-level trafficker in Carlos' organisation who promises to be a fundamental witness in the case.

In *Traffic*, the intricacies of the plot are accompanied by many subtleties, making the movie quite elegant in its portrayal of a large number of characters and multiple story lines. The landscape becomes a symbol through the use of different coloured filters: images of the Mexican landscape are coloured with a washed-out yellow, while the North American scenes are shaded with a cold blue. Only San Diego is represented in real life bright colours, as if to imply that the borderscape reality exists as the coming together of the two complementary sides. The movie is also loaded with clear political messages: in the face of such a pervasive and devastating social problem as drug trafficking and use, Washington politicians are 'a cadre of Gucci-loafered hypocrites', as remarked by an enthusiastic reviewer, while law enforcement is bound to fail. The whole idea of curbing drug traffic by enforcing the law seems questionable. Indeed, the only results the police get are from information they get not from good-hearted civilians, but from

competing drug cartels. The amount of money made by the cartels gives them plenty of resources and the police cannot compete. Soderbergh's warning is, therefore, not to combat drugs by prohibition but through preventive measures and caring for young people who need it. Notwithstanding its good ideas, the movie is not without its racial stereotypes. In fact, all the Mexican policemen, apart from Javier and Manolo, are portrayed as corrupt and brutal. By contrast, the American police, while inefficient, are invariably honest. In addition, drug dealers are shown as black people living in inner cities, while white people are cast either as distracted spectators of the tragedy (such as the Washington politicians) or as victims (such as the judge's innocent and pure daughter). None of them is involved in the traffic (the California ring is in the hands of a character named Carlos). This is the opposite of *Borderline*, proving that racism may change its mask but never dies.

SCREENING THE FRAMES IV: IN-BETWEENNESS

Of course, depicting the border not only involves crossing it. In film, *la frontera* is also a place to live, a region where you can work and sometimes make money. The borderland atmosphere is powerfully captured in movies such as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Touch of Evil* and *Traffic*, which all depict a unique place of opportunity that also thrives on vice and drugs.

The border not only marks the limit of sovereignty. It is also a national marker that, after being superimposed across a landscape that is identical on either side, has become so entrenched in the local cultural landscape as to become of cultural significance in itself. 'The border is a boundary line between nations that are meant to be different'.³³ Therefore, living on the border means living in the midst of a process of differentiation – that is, in the place where opposites are produced so as to distinguish one side from the other (masculine/feminine, civilisation/barbarism, master/servant and so on).³⁴ Simultaneously, the border is a place of encounter and a paradigm for intercultural exchange and transcultural crossing and mixing. Living on the border means experiencing hybridisation in a region that may have different visual forms and norms but cannot avoid a state of in-betweenness.

The border as a contact zone has long been disregarded in film. Manufacturing differences has been the most common option for American filmmakers, while typecasting border figures as 'the trope of absolute alterity' has made the border a landscape of 'otherisation'.³⁵ Only in the nineties has the question of hybridisation and multiple identities become a subject of interest, the major work in this vein being John Sayles' much acclaimed *Lone Star* (1996). An independent production, *Lone Star* went almost totally unnoticed in Italy and many other European markets, but has been much acclaimed by American reviewers and audiences. The movie is set in the (fictional) town of Frontera, a Texas border town mostly populated by

Latinos. When some skeletal remains are discovered in the desert, Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) investigates. He believes his own father, the town's previous sheriff, may have been the murderer, since the bones are those of Charley Wade, the corrupt sheriff his father was reputed to have run out of town. But his father, the archetypal hero of the 'white West', was a legend in his time, and now the city council, under the illusion of re-establishing white supremacy in the city, plans to name the new courthouse after him – despite the fact that Sam is bound to be the last American sheriff in town. Various political, racial and family tensions in the small community are revealed through the experiences of other African American and Mexican characters. The most striking of these is Pilar (Elizabeth Pena), the Mexican-American teacher who was Sam's girlfriend and is now facing a school board angry about her multicultural approach to the history of the Alamo. *Lone Star* has been quite widely discussed by academics³⁶ and certainly warrants it for its progressive stance, its depiction of the border region in all its ethnographic complexity, and, more importantly, the attention it devotes to such fundamental issues as received history. The movie is constructed around the themes of the shaping of memory (and memories) and the making of place(s) – symbolic landscapes becoming not only a feature of the film but also the main theme of the narrative. Despite its many merits, the movie has received criticism as well.³⁷ Rosa Linda Fregoso, for example, remarks that whiteness is still privileged, and, although it is 'no longer the white racist masculinity that framed race relations in a previous era, a new benevolent patron *amigo* of Mexicans and blacks is figured in the personas of Buddy and Sam Deeds'.³⁸ The film may tell the audience that the time of the arrogant white character is over, but being white still seems to be an advantage. In addition, the ethno-racial encounter is represented allegorically through the reunion of the two lovers, Sam and Pilar, and this is still a white man–brown woman relationship, which, in Fregoso's terms, can be regarded as a way of recycling 'colonialist fantasies'.

IMAGINARY (POLITICAL) GEOGRAPHIES OF THE BORDER

As a contested landscape and a multidimensional place, the border between the United States and Mexico has been presented and re-presented by the American film industry in many different guises and with many different interpretations. These films have ranged from the openly racist movies of the period of the Columbus raid and the punitive expedition, in which Mexicans had to be portrayed as inferior enemies, to the melodramas of the post-Second World War period, the political 'Mexico westerns' of the 1960s and the progressive movies of today. They have moved forwards from making Mexicans look inferior to examining acquired meanings and otherising processes. Notwithstanding, stereotypes about gender and race appear to be

very difficult to eradicate. American movies, even when presenting a progressive political discourse, seldom succeed in escaping from standardised categories of inferiority/superiority. So, when confronting – on any level – the question of international/inter-ethnic relations, they almost inevitably present a white male, possibly of American descent, in the leading role.

The North American white supremacy discourse also figures in the cinematic representation of the border. Indeed, the US–Mexico divide can be portrayed in numerous different ways that fall, from the perspective of political geography, within different definitions of the notion of *border*. In a movie such as *Lone Star*, the border is represented as a borderland (a *transfrontera*) – that is, as a region that is culturally unique and the by-product of the meeting of two different cultural regions. It is a place for encounter and transculturation, which can be defined, using Mary Louise Pratt's terminology, as a 'contact zone',³⁹ in which *mestizaje* and cultural syncretism are the norm rather than the exception. However, even in a situation of contested identities, undermining the privileged position of whiteness as the medium for interracial contact seems quite difficult to achieve: it is still only the white man who can cross the racialised border.

Movies such as *Touch of Evil* and *Traffic* treat the border as a region too, but, instead of being focused on questions of race, gender and culture, they look at cross-border relationships based on economic transactions. The border as a marker of different sovereignties allows – and stimulates – illegal trafficking, smuggling of forbidden goods and lawlessness.⁴⁰ The borderland presented in these movies is therefore a zone whose uniqueness lies in the economics of crime and vice. In such a scenario, which certainly 'brings out the worst' in the two countries, Mexicans may or may not be cast in the role of villains, but they are invariably relegated to a subordinate position, both in terms of race and gender: if women, they are the marketable objects of easy sex; if men, they may be variously typecast as corrupt, stupid or ineffectual, but never the hero of the story.

When the question of the movement of migrants from Mexico into the United States is tackled, the border tends to lose its regional dimension and is depicted as a political divide. In terms of political geography, movies such as *Border Incident* (1949), *The Border* (1980) and *The Gatekeeper* (2001) represent the border as a demarcated boundary – that is, a line that embodies the political separateness of the two states. No longer a zone of encounter or trafficking, the border acquires the characteristics of a barrier. Established to delimit the territory of the United States, it can be crossed by non-US citizens only with the (patronising) permission of the Americans. From this perspective, illegally crossing the border is bound to bring about dire consequences, including death and enslavement in the worst cases, and ghastly disappointment in the best. Indeed, none of the movies dealing with the question of illegal immigration to the United States ever presents a successful outcome for the illegals. In addition, the political divide does not imply

a parity in relations between the two states: while the two police forces are sometimes shown collaborating to stop the human traffic, substantial differences remain in the depiction of the people 'trafficked' (the Mexicans), the people who organise the trafficking (the American coyotes) and the people who have the 'right' to patrol the fence (the American forces).

Going south of the border from the American side is a totally different story: it guarantees adventure, nostalgia, sex and love, and an opportunity to display the American geopolitical 'mission'. Seen from the north, the US–Mexico border loses its role as a political boundary and is represented as America's last frontier. It is not a barrier but an open gate. It is the place where it is still possible to enjoy the taste of freedom (lawlessness) that characterised Turner's experience of the frontier. In this case, it is a symbolic landscape, fictitiously constructed by so many narratives that it has become real. Again, it is a gendered landscape, where – in contacts with an Other that is traditionally constructed as inferior and passive – it is still possible to fantasise about a gender and race supremacy that is increasingly being erased in other areas of the national narrative.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The US–Mexico border is certainly one of the most depicted screenapes in American film. A signifier with more than one meaning, the border has been turned by American popular culture into a powerful icon, framed and reframed in the making of the complex narrative of national Self in its relation with the external Other. From a critical geopolitics perspective, the cinematic border can be defined as a representational practice, the popular form of expression of a geopolitical discourse pertaining to the role and standing of the US relative to its southern neighbour. By analysing this practice, it is possible to reveal the assumptions at the root of this discourse.

These assumptions can be detected in the visual representations of the border and the scripts of movies about the border and the crossing-the-border experience. Via the investigation of more than thirty feature movies, it has been possible to identify several ways of depicting the border: that is – in political geography terms – as a borderland, as a border economic region, as a demarcated boundary and as a frontier. All these different depictions make their own geopolitical assumptions. Together, they form a powerful geopolitical representation of Self and Other.

In this representation, the dual rendering of the US–Mexico border as a closed boundary for the Mexicans and an open frontier for the Americans highlights the United States' double standard in its relations with the rest of the world, in which the United States does not see itself as an equal among equals, but as the champion of the geopolitical mission of civilising and democratising the less developed Other, on the one hand, and as the

more powerful neighbour that can decide who is and is not allowed to enter its territory, on the other.

From this second perspective, the border between the United States and Mexico can also be used as a geopolitical metaphor, symbolising not only the political separation between two sovereign states, but also, on a different scale, the fundamental divide between the Haves and the Have-Nots – that is, between a first world, which is easy to leave but inaccessible from outside, and the rest of the world, which is extraordinarily difficult to leave but easy to enter. Obviously, the same border does not have the same meaning from both sides. At least this is the way things currently stand – although, as science fiction movies such as *The Day after Tomorrow* remind us, to be on the right side of the border, or on the wrong one, is just a question of luck.

NOTES

1. As stated by Daniels, ‘national identities are co-ordinated, often largely defined, by “legends and landscapes”; by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient and promised home-lands with hallowed sites and scenery. The symbolic activation of time and space, often drawing on religious sentiment, gives shape to the “imagined community” of the nation. Landscapes, whether focusing on single monuments or framing stretches of scenery, provide visible shape; they picture the nation. As exemplars of moral order and aesthetic harmony, particular landscapes achieve the status of national icons’. See S. Daniels, *Fields of Vision. Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England & the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1993) p.5. This is true for landscapes that are the product of the works of painters and designers, which are the focus of Daniels’s research, but also for literary and cinematic landscapes. See J.R. Short, *Imagined Country, Society, Culture and Environment* (London and New York: Routledge 1991).

2. M. Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought: Narrating Race, Nation and Gender* (New York: New York University Press 1999).

3. C.F. Fox, *The Fence and the River. Culture and Politics at the U.S.–Mexico Border* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1999) p.76.

4. R.L. Fregoso, ‘Recycling Colonialist Fantasies on the Texas Borderlands’, in H. Naficy (ed.), *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (London and New York: Routledge 1999) pp.169–92.

5. See Fox (note 3) p.76.

6. Postcards also served this purpose, which, as stated by Fox (note 3) p.77, ‘satisfied the public’s hunger for images of the war, especially for those who did not have access to movie theatres’. See in this regard P. Vanderwood and F.N. Samponaro, *Border Fury. A Picture Postcard Record of Mexico’s Revolution and U.S. War Preparedness, 1910–1917* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press 1988).

7. See Fox (note 3) p.76.

8. These films depicted the persecution of national and racial stereotypes developed as early as the 1830s, when American popular literature began demonising Mexicans as lazy, stupid and cruel. At the beginning of the twentieth century, silent films also had their input, providing images of Mexicans as bandits attacking white people. See L. Holtzman, *Media Messages. What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation* (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe 2000) p.225.

9. In this regard, see D. Maciel, *El Norte. The U.S.–Mexican Border in Contemporary Cinema* (San Diego, CA: Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias 1990).

10. A. Horton, ‘Reel Landscapes: Cinematic Environments Documented and Created’, in I. Robertson and P. Richards (eds), *Studying Cultural Landscapes* (London: Arnold 2003), pp.71–92.

11. A classic contribution on this topic is W. Prescott, *Political Frontiers and Boundaries* (Chicago, IL: Aldine 1987). See also D. Newman, ‘Boundaries’, in J. Agnew, K. Mitchell and G. Toal (eds), *A Companion to Political Geography* (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2003), pp.123–37.

12. In this essay, I will take into account at least three of the four elements outlined by L. Zonn, 'Tusayan, the Traveler and the IMAX Theatre: An Introduction to Place Images in Media', in L. Zonn (ed.), *Place Images in Media. Portrayal, Experience, and Meaning* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1990) pp.1–5, for analysing the images of places in media: the medium, the place, the collection of individuals who created the image. Discussing audience, the fourth element, is more complex, since common visions associated with a specific place or with a certain landscape either can or cannot be shared by different audiences. From a critical geography perspective, however, we may consider them as the result of a certain geopolitical discourse, locally embedded and historically produced.

13. G. Ó Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics* (Mineapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1996), and G. Ó Tuathail and S. Dalby (eds), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge 1998).

14. As stated by J. Burgess and J. Gold in their seminal study *Geography, the Media and Popular Culture* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm 1985) p.I, 'Raymond Chandler is as valuable a source as Thomas Hardy, and the *Daily Mirror* has as much to say about the nature of places as the *Geographical Journal*'.

15. In fact, in those years 'a great number of B Westerns were produced in which cowboys vested with the aura of the Old West did battle with problems and villains from the modern world – gangsters, corrupt political bosses ... Nazi agents', R. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press 1998), p.273.

16. Ibid. p.276.

17. Since, as J. Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1998), p.199, rightly points out, 'the western, with its ritual expectation of the "ride to Mexico" for manly adventure, for sex and drink but also for self-aggrandizement, is fundamentally a genre of imperialism'.

18. L. Engel (ed.), *The Big Empty. Essay on the Land as Narrative* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press 1994).

19. The Cisco Kid was introduced by O. Henry in a series of short stories that were later collected and published in *Heart of the West* (1907). His adventures were portrayed in about 30 movies (the first silent, the last shot in 1994) as well as in a television series that ran for 156 episodes from 1950 to 1956.

20. W. Wright, *Six Guns and Society. A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1975), and N. Carroll, 'The Professional Western: South of the Border', in E. Buscombe and R.E. Pearson (eds), *Back in the Saddle Again. New Essays on the Western* (London: British Film Institute 1998) pp.46–62.

21. M. Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London: I.B. Tauris 1997), p.158.

22. There are also comedies in a similar vein. In *Three Amigos* (1986), for instance, some American actors posing as western heroes unwittingly come to the aid of some poor Mexicans.

23. Engel (note 18) p. 227.

24. They die fighting, but not without demonstrating their American superiority, since they know how to handle military technology (in the form of a machine gun) much better than the locals.

25. The other two volumes of McCarthy's trilogy are *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*.

26. *The Mexican* cannot be listed among movies about the border, since Jerry goes to Mexico by plane. It is interesting all the same because it reveals a self-consciousness about stereotyped American attitudes towards their southern neighbour, while being a victim of the same stereotypes it is trying to highlight. For example, two of the characters are shown renting a car when they land in Mexico. Both of them ask for a 'Mexican car', instead of accepting the perfectly acceptable American make offered by the rental firm. Also, when in Mexico the Americans are shown speaking in a very stupid and condescending way – 'I no fuck around, *entiende?*' says one of them to a Mexican. 'Do you have a speech impediment?' is the Mexican's answer. On the other hand, Mexico is portrayed as a crazy country where anything can happen, including dying in a *noche de fiesta* and people speaking with dogs, all in a lethargic society that is apparently sleeping off its own past.

27. See A. García, 'Casting out the serpent: Eroticised Violence and the Mexicana Body in Hollywood Cinema', *Diálogo*, No.6, Winter/Spring 2002.

28. *The metaphor of the border as a 'magic curtain' is introduced by T. Torrans*, The Magic Curtain: The Mexican–American Border in Fiction, Film, and Song (*Texas Christian University Press: Fortb Worth 2002*).

29. S. Vaquera-Vasquez, 'Wandering in the Borderlands: Mapping an Imaginative Geography of the Border', *Latin American Issues*, Vol.1, 1998, section VI.

30. After Mexico's participation in the Second World War, it was no longer the time for openly racist, overtly anti-Mexican movies, such as those produced in the years of the Punitive Expedition. In addition, immediately after the end of the war, the United States launched the so called Bracero Program, under which Mexican workers could be legally hired in America. Notwithstanding this bilateral agreement, many Mexicans did not undergo the bureaucracy required to get legal permission and illegal immigration continued to claim its many victims.

31. R. Kitchin and J. Kneale (eds), *Lost in Space. Geographies of Science Fiction* (London: Continuum 2002).

32. See S. Mains, 'Imagining the Border and Southern Spaces: Cinematic Explorations of Race and Gender', *Geojournal*, 2004, pp.253–64.

33. Fregoso (note 4) p.170.

34. See Fox (note 3).

35. Fregoso (note 4) p.178.

36. Among the others, see Clark-Jones, Limón (note 17), Fregoso (note 4), Shapiro (note 2), Mains (note 32); and J. Burton-Carvajal, 'Oedipus Tex/Oedipus Mex: Triangulations of Paternity, Race, and Nation in John Sayles's *Lone Star*', in E. Shoat and R. Stam (eds), *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2003) pp.129–52, W. Somerson, 'White Men on the Edge. Rewriting the Borderlands in *Lone Star*', *Men and Masculinities* 6 (3 January 2004) pp.215–39.

37. See Limón (note 17), 1998, Fregoso (note 4) and Burton-Carvajal (note 36).

38. See Fregoso (note 4) p.183.

39. The notion of 'contact zone' is introduced by M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London & New York: Routledge 1992).

40. See Maciel (note 9).