

## REVIEW ESSAY

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# One Hundred Years of US–Mexico Border Film

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*This essay examines the structure, content, and evolution of an emerging Border Film Genre derived from an examination of over one hundred years of film concerned with the US–Mexico borderlands and originating from both sides of the border. The task of this particular essay is to demonstrate how film themes change and evolve over time, based on evidence from the film catalogue. The essay examines examples of transition pertaining to: the changing representations of women in film; the difference between Mexican and American filmmakers' portrayals of undocumented migration; generational shifts in bordertown racisms; and the catastrophic consequences of law enforcement's loss of the war against drug cartels, including the 'domestication' of violence and the decay of communities occupied by cartels.*

My goal in this short essay is to introduce a new genre of border film that pertains to the US–Mexico borderlands as evidenced in the film catalogues from both sides of the border during the past one hundred years of filmmaking. The earliest research on a border film genre appeared in the early 1990s, since when a flood of new releases warrants reconsideration of the topic. I focus on the principal thematic transitions during a century of filmmaking, indicating avenues for further investigations. (For a detailed account of this project, see Dear 2023).

### Orientation to a New Border Film Genre

The representation of women in US–Mexico border film during the early decades of the 21st century has undergone a remarkable evolution. First she was a stereotypical *Survivor*, the woman who stoically outlasted all trials and torments; then she morphed into something more powerful, a *Final Woman* capable of transcending survival to affect demonstrable changes in her condition

and surroundings; and finally she was transformed into *Warrior Woman*, a strong, skilled combatant capable of premeditated actions involving courage and leadership in situations of great risk.

Among the most jarring transitions in the recent history of border film is the remaking of a 2011 Mexican film called *Miss Bala* (Miss Bullet, in English) into a 2019 American version with the same name. For clarity I refer to these films as *Miss Bala 1* and *Miss Bala 2*, respectively. In the original film version, a young woman named Laura plans to enter a Miss Baja California beauty competition in Tijuana. She encounters gang leader Lino who coerces her to work as a 'mule' (a cross-border smuggler), promising in return to advance her progress in the Miss Baja competition. He also schemes to use Laura to assassinate a powerful general. Terrified for her life, Laura warns the general of the plot, but in return she is severely beaten by the general's troops and dumped onto an anonymous street of warehouses and factories. She survives, but only just.

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The 2019 American remake, *Miss Bala 2*, involves a female director, a Latina lead, and a predominantly Latinx crew. It replays the opening beauty competition and nightclub killings, but the onscreen violence is more muted in keeping with the film's PG-13 rating (the original was R-rated). *Miss Bala 2*'s heroine, now called Gloria, is transformed into a fable of female revenge and empowerment. The original film is reimagined through a soft-focus haze of glamour as Gloria and gang leader Lino flirt their way toward a Stockholm-syndrome kind of romance. In the film's final confrontation, however, Gloria is the one who seizes a gun, shoots the general, and kills Lino. Instead of a beating, she is escorted to swanky digs to meet her CIA handler. He flatters her that the country needs someone like her to help win the war on drugs. To date, we have been spared a sequel.

In *Men, Women and Chain Saws*, Carol Clover (1992, 35–41) made a case that the most enduring image of the young threatened female in 'slasher' films of the 1990s was of a Survivor, she who does not die. Clover referred to her as the 'Final Girl'. By this account, Laura, *Miss Bala 1*, is a resilient woman who achieved 'Final Woman' status. In contrast, Gloria in *Miss Bala 2* is portrayed as a mutant 'Woman Warrior', a superhero who runs toward danger. This evolution in the Laura/Gloria character was part of the radical transformation of women's roles as reflected in shifting film genres.

The term genre refers to films that share common characteristics relating to themes and styles of filmmaking (such as Westerns, or film noir). The foremost challenge in constructing a 'Border Film Genre' involves the selection of noteworthy films from the vast archives of borderlands-related films accumulated in the century-long catalogues of two nations. I began by defining a 'border film' simply as taking place in a borderland setting, with a thematic focus on the lives of border people and their cross-border connections. To be considered for inclusion in the genre, a film would do more than simply treat the border as *background*. It should reveal the border's transformative impact on person and plot, in essence becoming a *character* in the film. In its most developed form the border would become the topical focus or *subject* of the film (in which case, the film is said to be *about* the border).

My choice of films was personal and idiosyncratic. Once background-only films had been eliminated from further consideration, I concentrated on character- and subject-oriented films for further investigation. I adopted conventional standards of appraisal, such as qualities in plot, screenplay, acting, photography, and music, but also retained an eye on authenticity and the film's significance in border film history. I preferred to let the films speak for themselves rather than invoking prior theoretical or philosophical framings. Only narrative feature films (i.e., fiction) were included, although a few documentary and international examples were invoked when they conveyed special insights or perspectives.

Over two-hundred films were considered from both sides of the border, including co-productions: seventy-two of these were retained for detailed analysis and formed the basis for defining my Border Film Genre, and twenty-five (from 1935 to 2021) were identified as the core 'classics' of the genre that are the subject of this essay. The topical emphases in the seventy-two films were Drama (24%), Migration (18%), Mystery/crime (18%), and Westerns (15%, including films about the Border Patrol). Together these accounted for three-quarters of the films comprising the Border Film Genre (Dear 2023, Introduction, ch. 15).

A second challenge was making interpretive sense across such an extensive catalogue drawn from a century of filmmaking in two countries. One example of how pitfalls and confusions arise is *Bordertown*, a 1935 border film noir. Johnny (Paul Muni) is an ambitious Mexican-American in Los Angeles whose law practice fails when it confronts a racist profession. Denied his American Dream, Johnny heads south to Mexico and takes a job at a casino. The casino owner's wife, Marie (Bette Davis), falls hard for him, murdering her husband to ease Johnny's path to her boudoir. For his part, Johnny is infatuated by a white society playgirl who cruelly rejects him.

Such sexual permutations are engaged in the recent marketing of *Bordertown*. The box containing a DVD copy of the film is decorated with a lurid sketch of a very white and sparsely clad Bette Davis, brooding languidly. Behind her looms the figure of a Mexican man (meant to be Johnny?) whose complexion is much darker than actor Paul Muni's. He gazes at her with lust, stretching out his hand as if to grab her. This is, of course, one of the oldest stereotypes in cinema, involving a brown or black male threatening a white female. Except that in the actual film, the violence of *Bordertown* is actually provoked by the white woman's desire for a brown male. Who knows how many DVDs were purchased on the basis of such false expectations? See **Figure 1**.

### Border Film Genre: *Emergence* (1900–1967)

Based on the twenty-five border films identified as classics of the genre, the remainder of this essay describes the structure and evolution of four periods in border film history: emergence, consolidation, Golden Age, and the present day. The key films of each era are listed, even though my discussion of thematic transitions focuses only on a small number of characteristic films.

1936	<i>Vámonos Con Pancho Villa!</i>	Fernando De Fuentes	Revolution
1949	<i>Border Incident</i>	Anthony Mann	Migration
1955	<i>Espaldas Mojadas</i>	Alejandro Galindo	Migration
1958	<i>Touch of Evil</i>	Orson Welles	Crime
1969	<i>The Wild Bunch</i>	Sam Peckinpah	Western



Figure 1. *Bordertown*: Who is the predator?

In the mid-20th century, the era of a distinctive border film genre was announced by the appearance of two ground-breaking films, one from the US and the other from Mexico. A tectonic shift occurred in US border filmmaking with the 1949 release of Anthony Mann's *Border Incident*. The film resembled other border films in adopting the passage to modernity as its creative spark. *Border Incident* imagined an optimistic post-World War II rationality that would demonstrate how binational cooperation among law enforcement agencies could accelerate reconstruction of war-depleted societies. It also conveyed unpleasant truths about the exploitation of Mexican migrants crossing over to work in the US. The film's narrative follows the cross-border voyage of a group of migrants without entry papers, and the dangers they confront: the physical and mental endurance required by the journey itself, the risk of harm from human traffickers and law officers, and exploitation by unscrupulous employers and abusive racists on the other side. Yet the film ends with a triumphant celebration of successful binational efforts to protect migrant workers. There is much smiling and flag-waving from optimistic representatives of the two nations. See **Figure 2**.

Four years after *Border Incident*, Alejandro Galindo's *Espaldas mojadas* (*Wetbacks*, 1953) was released, eventually winning recognition as a Mexican border classic. The film offers an intensely negative view of the US: Americans are represented as obsessively materialistic, racist, and violent; they erect observation towers along the militarized borderline and instruct border guards to shoot to kill any undocumented migrants. In



Figure 2. *Border Incident*: Binational partners in law enforcement celebrate their success.

contrast, this Mexican portrait of migration emphasizes the ordinary heroism and nobility of decent citizens bound for *el norte*. While not flinching to convey the hazards involved in crossing the line, *Espaldas mojadas* focuses more on the inner torments of the migrant—loneliness, alienation, and confusion relating to identity and belonging. The migrants find comfort and relief from enduring cultural values and traditions of the homeland, especially religion and family. Sentimental ballads interrupt the film's action at regular intervals to reinforce these foundational attachments.

The depth of Mexican traditions and US materialism is encapsulated in the on-screen relationship between Mary and Rafael. Mary is a *pocha* (Mexican-American) who helps the Mexican migrant, Rafael, to navigate his new life in the North. Later, as her tentative tryst with Rafael turns to love, she changes her name to the Spanish equivalent, María. By the time the couple are preparing for their return to Mexico, María has adopted other Mexican ways, including a subordinate gender role. Notably, *Espaldas mojadas* establishes the border as a space of fusion embracing people on both sides. In this hybrid/*mestizaje* ecology, north- and south-bound crossings are everyday events, and altered identities are commonplace (even though they may not always be permanent).

### Border Film Genre: *Consolidation* (1970–2000)

1983	<i>El Norte</i>	Gregory Nava	Migration
1987	<i>Born in East LA</i>	Cheech Marin	Comedy
1991	<i>Como Agua Para Chocolate</i>	Alfonso Arau	Revolution
1991	<i>Cabeza de Vaca</i>	Nicolás Echeverría	History
1994	<i>El Jardín del Edén</i>	María Novaro	Migration
1995	<i>Lone Star</i>	John Sayles	Western
1998	<i>La Otra Conquista</i>	Salvador Carrasco	History
1998	<i>Bajo California</i>	Carlos Bolado Muñoz	Fantasy

The last decades of the 20th century witnessed an upsurge in undocumented migration into the US from Mexico and Central America, and steady growth in the number of films focusing on the borderlands. The best-known of these films is undoubtedly *El Norte*, a moving account of a brother and sister who flee from persecution in their home country, only to encounter tragedy in the US. The era was also marked by diversification in thematic concerns, including comedy, history and spirituality (respectively, in *Born in East LA*; *Como Agua para Chocolate*, *Cabeza de Vaca* and *La Otra Conquista*; and *Bajo California*). Perhaps the most representative film of this era was *Lone Star*—an ambitious account of the lives of three generations of white, black, and brown people in a small Texas border town. Its crowded screenplay addresses racism, incest, and miscegenation, corruption and murder, perilous crossings by undocumented migrants, guilt, and memory. The narrative underscores how borderlanders’ lives are configured by the existence of many borders (internal and external, literal and metaphorical) beyond the physical bulk of the international boundary and its infrastructures.

The devil at the center of *Lone Star* is Sheriff Charlie Wade, a corrupt lawman justifiably regarded by brown and black residents alike as a race-baiting killer. Wade is eventually murdered at a Darktown saloon owned by Otis Payne, a stalwart member of the local black community. Years later, the new town Sheriff, Sam Deeds, sits alongside the white manager of a local bar who nods approvingly in the direction of a black woman and white man affectionately sharing a booth. The bar owner avows he is happy that black and white people nowadays can sit together unimpeded, but insists that: “to run a successful civilization, you’ve got to have your lines of demarcation”, telling Sam how former Sheriff Wade understood that: “most people don’t want their salt and sugar in the same jar”. See **Figure 3**.

By now, the younger generations in the town have begun trampling on traditions. Sheriff Sam’s overly strict father has favored a Mexican mistress with whom he has a daughter named Pilar. Unaware that they have the same father, Sam and Pilar develop an affection for each



**Figure 3.** *Lone Star*: Are lines of racial demarcation disappearing?

other even though they are vigorously kept apart by their parents. Later in life, Sam and Pilar are free to affirm their love. Pilar removes one obvious hurdle blocking their union by revealing that she is no longer able to have children. Seeking further assurance of Sam’s willingness to face the stigma connected with the “big sin” of incest, Pilar is defiant: “all that other stuff, all that history. To hell with it, right? Forget the Alamo”.

**Border Film Genre: *The Golden Age* (2000–2021)**

2000	<i>Traffic</i>	Steven Soderbergh	Crime
2003	<i>Yo la Peor de Todas</i>	María Luisa Bemberg	History
2004	<i>And Starring Pancho Villa ...</i>	Bruce Beresford	Western
2008	<i>Sleep Dealer</i>	Alex Rivera	Fantasy
2008	<i>Purgatorio</i>	Roberto Rochín	Migration
2009	<i>Sin Nombre</i>	Cary Joji Fukunaga	Crime
2010	<i>Machete</i>	Robert Rodríguez	Fantasy
2015	<i>Sicario</i>	Denis Villeneuve	Crime
2015	<i>600 Millas</i>	Gabriel Ripstein	Crime
2016	<i>Transpecos</i>	Greg Kwedar	Migration
2019	<i>Ya no Estoy Aquí</i>	Fernando Frías de la Parra	Migration
2021	<i>Sin Señas Particulares</i>	Fernanda Valadez	Drama

Around 2000 there was an explosion of film releases concerning the Mexico-US border, a predictable consequence of the prominence of the activities of Mexican drug cartels on both sides of the line, but also stimulated by the subsequent fortification along the Mexico-US borderline. Part of this trend was driven by the exciting emergence of a new wave (*buena onda*) of Mexican filmmaking at the end of the century (Wood 2021, xvii–xix). The films expressed inventive and entertaining departures into worlds of fantasy (e.g., *Sleep Dealer*, 2008), comedy (*And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself*, 2004), and resistance (*Machete*, 2010), again involving both sides of the line. See **Figure 4** and **Figure 5**.

The release of *Traffic* in 2000 signaled the emergence of what I refer to as a ‘Golden Age’ in border filmmaking, epitomized by blockbuster, big-budget films addressing the organization of drug trafficking on a global scale. *Traffic*’s action takes place simultaneously in Tijuana, Washington, D.C., and Southern California. The Tijuana story concerns rivalries among corrupt law enforcement agents and military personnel engaged in the war against drug lords. The Washington, D.C. plot features US government efforts to develop more effective



**Figure 4.** Before the wall, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso border, 2011. Boundary monument number 1 is in the background at the right side. The border line was unenclosed, permitting encounters and conversation across the line.



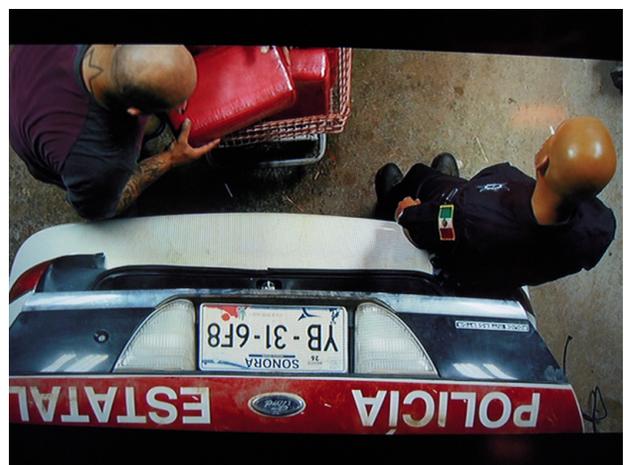
**Figure 5.** After the wall, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso border, 2020. The US Department of Homeland Security constructed fortifications to prevent communication across the line. The fortification ends at the hilltop on the upper right.

ways of preventing drug trafficking. And the Southern California episodes feature Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officials who are building a case to prosecute a local drug lord, even as they are outfoxed by a local Anglo female drug trafficker.

Time and again, *Traffic* returns to the existential and moral dilemmas confronting individuals on both sides who are caught up in the trafficking business and the parallel universe of the drug cartels. The film paints the borderline as a porous space where crossing over in both directions is a daily routine not only for the *narcos*, but also for schoolkids, workers, and family members paying attention to shopping, health needs, recreation, and commerce (such connections are discussed in Dear 2015 and Payan 2014). As one *Traffic* character attests, the enormity of daily transborder connections is evidence that: “the border is disappearing”.

Fifteen years after *Traffic*, another border *narco* blockbuster hit the screens. *Sicario* (Assassin, Denis Villeneuve, 2015) uncovered a dystopian world in which the war against drugs had been won by the cartels. FBI agent Kate meets Matt, who is not your typical suit-and-tie FBI agent but instead an untidy, flip-flop-wearing long-hair who enjoys reminiscing about the good old days in Colombia when there was only one cartel to combat. Today, he tells Kate, too many cartels and law enforcement agencies clutter the battlefields, each vying for small, temporary gains in territory, which they know will be lost again tomorrow. The drug war will never be won, he explains, because the rules of engagement are constantly changing. His Mexican partner warns Kate that “nothing will make sense to your American ears. And you will doubt everything that we do. And in the end, you will understand nothing”. See **Figure 6**.

*Traffic*'s optimism and *Sicario*'s cynicism were complemented in the border film catalogue by a series of representations of the personal consequences of drug wars. *600 Millas* (*600 Miles*, 2015) moved beyond their international choreographies and orchestrated violence to focus instead on the depth of cartel penetration into the everyday lives of community and individuals on both sides of the line. This shift of scale has as its subject the domestication of violence. *600 Millas* is a Mexican production focused on the illegal sale of guns from the US to Mexican cartels, colloquially known as the ‘Iron River’ (Grillo 2021). It is a demanding job and sometimes the US agents and Mexican drug lords do favors for each other. One day, agent Hank is kidnapped by Arnulfo, a young and naive cartel foot soldier who hopes to curry favor with his uncle Martín, a local cartel leader. Instead, his uncle is infuriated that his nephew has dragged a US agent into the heart of his operation.



**Figure 6.** *Sicario*: Law enforcement officers in Sonora assist cartels to deliver their product.

After breakfast, Martín orders his nephew to kill Hank. In the panic that ensues, Arnulfo instead kills his uncle. Hank escapes with Arnulfo and together they drive northward. Before they reach the US, Hank abandons him in the desert without food, water, or a weapon, effectively a death sentence. The full enormity of Hank's collusion, brutality, and betrayal is underscored in the film's preternaturally quiet finale. At the breakfast table in his home, Hank leisurely discusses the upcoming day with his wife. It is impossible to reconcile the banality of their chit chat with the horrific acts Hank committed a few hours earlier amidst Uncle Martín's breakfast kitchen.

### **Border Film Genre: *Narcolandia* (2021- )**

Many of the best films of the on-going Golden Age in border filmmaking originate in Mexico (Iglesias-Prieto 2015). These dramas explore the diffusion of cartel power and consequent distortions in the social order, creating territories sometimes called *Narcolandia* (literally, drug-land). Especially noteworthy films in this category are *Transpecos* (2016), which is focused on effects in the US, and *Ya no estoy aquí (I'm No Longer Here, 2019)* on the Mexican side.

A key film in this trend is *Sin señas particulares (Identifying Features, 2021)*, and not only because it is directed, produced, and written by two women using an almost all-women crew and mostly non-professional actors. This is a striking drama depicting how migration to the US is connected to the rise of cartel-dominated hinterlands in small-town and rural Mexico. A young man named Jesús decides to leave his family home and cross over into the US. Time passes without word from him so his mother begins to investigate, determining that he had traveled on a bus that was attacked by *sicarios*. In an effort to find the truth, she travels through emptied landscapes now under cartel control. The former residents have fled, and those who remain inhabit isolated caves and holes dug into the ground. One night the mother is intercepted by cartel lookouts and is surprisingly confronted by her son, who was coerced after the bus attack into becoming a *sicario* himself. Jesús arranges his mother's escape

but thereafter she is little more than a devastated, silent ornament.

Already I have begun a deeper analysis of the rich and varied film catalogue of the new border film genre, the potential of which is detailed in *Border Witness: Reimagining the US-Mexico Borderlands through Film* (Dear 2023). I hope that the opportunity signaled here will encourage others to extend this field of inquiry, perhaps taking up the extensive catalogue of documentary filmmaking as well as border filmmakers in countries beyond Mexico and the US.

### **Acknowledgments**

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