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Three Border Films: *El Mariachi, El Jardín del Edén* and *Lone Star*

Through the many changes in American cultural history, from the notion of the melting pot to the current preference for celebrating cultural difference, the border has continued to fascinate. The bulk of discussion on the border focuses on the various issues surrounding the constant movement of people from Mexico to the United States of America. One sign of just how wide the differences between these countries are can be seen, ironically, in the fact that for many North Americans, the crossing of boundaries suggests a movement from east to west. Richard Rodríguez examines his own confusion while growing up in California the son of an immigrant father who still referred to their new home as 'el norte' [the North]. He reflects that 'American myth has traditionally been written from east to west, describing an elect people's manifest destiny' (Rodríguez 1996: 37). The notion that Americans are a chosen people whose mission is to conquer wilderness and if necessary subjugate native peoples to advance the course of what they consider civilisation was enthusiastically taken up by Frederick Jackson Turner. In his 1893 essay 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', Turner (quoted in Taylor 1949: 1–2)describes this expansion in glowing terms and considers it a defining force in America's formation of a national identity:

> American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.

The debate over the significance of the border has continued to the present day and has moved into the arena of popular culture in fictional accounts of intercultural conflict, such as T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*. This best-selling novel chronicles the growing

antagonism between 'Delaney Mossbacher, of 32 Piñon Drive, Arroyo Blanco Estates, a liberal humanist with an unblemished driving record and a freshly waxed Japanese car' (Boyle 1996: 3) and an illegal Mexican immigrant, introduced simply as Cándido. The story follows Delaney's struggle to maintain his image of himself as a non-racist liberal after a car accident brings Cándido into his life and Delaney is forced to confront the reality of the undocumented immigrants all around him. Despite himself, his reaction to the border is one of revulsion: 'The borders. Delaney took an involuntary step backwards, all those dark disordered faces rising up from the streetcorners and freeway onramps to mob his brain, all of them crying out their human wants through mouths full of rotten teeth' (Boyle 1996: 101).

Such texts suggest the gap, both in historical and fictional writing, between the optimism conjured up by the image of the frontier and the horror evoked by the border in the American psyche. The frontier is a symbol of the mythic West so central to the image of American pioneers as trailblazers overcoming savagery to impose order and civilisation. The border, on the other hand, is nothing but a barrier designed to keep Mexicans and other Latin Americans from becoming a burden on American society. In the words of George J. Sánchez:

> The international border [...] implies a dual vision, that of two nations looking at each other over a strip of land they hold in common. It acknowledges that at least two distinct peoples meet in this region, neither having the certain destiny of cultural and military superiority and with conflict being an ever-present historical possibility. While 'frontier' evokes an image of expansive possibilities, 'border' speaks to what is real and limiting between nations and peoples. (1993: 38)

This is not to suggest that borders are altogether successful as barriers. Mexican immigration in particular is often circular, with Mexican men from impoverished regions of their country participating in seasonal labour in North America and returning home with their wages. The fact that many immigrants cross into the United States on several occasions illustrates the permeability of borders. While this coming and going enriches the US capitalist system, the immigrants also contribute to that country's already considerable racial diversity. The long tradition of racal diversity in the States and the continuing arrival of immigrants does not prevent many Americans from viewing immigrants in a stereotypical manner, however. Demeaning, racist images of foreign

peoples are most powerfully communicated not through essays or novels but through one of the most dominant media of popular culture, film.

Almost from the beginning of film production, Latin American film producers were forced to compete with Hollywood films that were very popular with local audiences and had much better production values because of their larger budgets. Hollywood cinema was immensely popular with Latin American audiences both in their own countries and in the States because of the escapist entertainment it offered and the fact that illiterate viewers could enjoy the scenarios presented. This popularity was not neutral, however, as King points out: 'The development of cinema would [...] constantly redefine and reappropriate the popular. In Latin America local producers had to acknowledge as a given the inscription of Hollywood in popular taste' (1990: 247). Moreover, film's uniquely visual qualities make its images more powerful than any written description. Viewers became attuned to the visual language of film and identified certain racial or behavioural characteristics with certain stock characters, a fact that contributed to the power of stereotypes. Hollywood filmmakers were aware that their perceived influence and cultural domination could arouse antagonism. They therefore went to great lengths to appear to present apparently universal stories that appealed across cultures, although nothing could have been further from the truth in the early days of cinematic practice. Kaplan reflects that:

> Part of Hollywood's imaginary self-construction is that it is not a national cinema, but a universal or global one. One can see this on a simple, literal level in the names Hollywood studios give to themselves – like 'Paramount' and 'Universal'. [...] the universal imagery is meant to apply also to the characters and the content of narratives, i.e., that these are universal human stories true all over the world. The globe symbols insist that Hollywood is not about Americans and American life, but about all human life and behavior. (1997: 57)

Despite this veneer of universality, Hollywood films continue to employ negative stereotypical representations of not just Mexicans but non-North Americans in general. During the Second World War, when America needed the support of Mexico, it pursued a Good Neighbour policy that involved the careful avoidance of negative portrayals of Mexico and Mexicans. Ironically, even Hollywood's attempts to portray the country positively relied heavily on stereotypical presentations of

fiestas spiced with local colour in the form of generic Latin music. Far more common before and after the war were films that featured negatively portrayed Mexican characters, ranging from bandits, greasers and lazy drunks to seductive señoritas.[1] As García Riera makes clear, the entire country was depicted as alien and chaotic: 'Persistía pues la idea de que en México todo podía ocurrir. Los avances modernizadores del país no alcanzaban aún a desmentir una vieja fama; se seguía suponiéndolo "primitivo", o sea, sometido al imperio de la irregularidad y la irracionalidad' [Thus the idea persisted that in Mexico anything could happen. The modernising advances of the country did not manage to refute an old reputation; Mexico continued to be considered "primitive", that is, subject to the rule of irregularity and irrationality] (1988: 95).

Given the wide dissemination of negative images of both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, it is not surprising that Chicano activists in the 1960s who attempted to address the place of people of Mexican origin in the United States used cinema as a tool. Aware of its power to transmit images of cultural groups, these activists created a counter cinema that focused on the difficulties faced by Chicanos in American society and gave them a culture to be proud of that drew heavily on their Mexican cultural roots. Luis Valdéz, who founded El Teatro Campesino [The Peasant Theatre] in 1965 to rally striking farm workers, was among those who recognised the importance of popular culture in shaping a Chicano ideology. His first film, *Zoot Suit* (1981) is an avant-garde narrative that recounts the events surrounding the Sleepy Lagoon Case, when members of a *pachuco*[2] club were tried en masse and wrongfully convicted of murder in Los Angeles. In using film to represent this key event in Chicano history, Valdéz acknowledged the suitability of film for shaping group consciousness. As Shohat and Stam put it:

> The cinema, as the world's storyteller *par excellence*, was ideally suited to relay the projected narratives of nations and empires. National self-consciousness, generally seen as a precondition for nationhood – that is, the shared belief of disparate individuals that they share common origins, status, location, and aspirations – became broadly linked to cinematic fictions. (1994: 101)

1 For a full discussion of this topic, see Noriega 1993: 52-67.

2 *Pachuco* is an often pejorative term used to describe Chicanos who dress flamboyantly to mark their ethnicity.

Valdéz used this awareness to great effect in his second film, *La Bamba* (1987), which at the time was the most successful Chicano film ever made, grossing over $60 million in the United States alone. The film followed the life and career of singer Ritchie Valens, who enjoyed great success as a pop singer, principally with the song that gives the film its name, until he was killed in the same aeroplane crash as Buddy Holly. Valdéz makes the conflictive relationship between Ritchie and his half-brother Bob, who is portrayed as more authentically Mexican than Ritchie, the focus of the story. The film has been condemned by Chicana film critic Fregoso (1993) as a bland, inauthentic account of Valens' story and as a 'typically conventional rags-to-riches tale'. This negative assessment of the film seems to miss the point, however. Admittedly, the film is conventional, with its embodiment of the American Dream in Ritchie and even in its setting in the 1950s at a time when nostalgic films like *Back to the Future* (1985), which also relied heavily on an appealing soundtrack, were very popular with cinema audiences. Valdéz uses these conventions knowingly, however, infusing them with a Chicano ideology in such a seamless manner that the outcome is never didactic and the film can be enjoyed on many levels. The border in this film is the locus for a very positive transformation on the part of Ritchie, who until he goes to Mexico with Bob has seemed rather ashamed of his heritage and has insisted that he cannot speak Spanish and is American. Bob takes Ritchie to visit a *curandero* [native healer] who instructs him in neo-Mayan rituals and teaches him another way of looking at life. This encounter inspires Ritchie to perform the song 'La Bamba', which gives him his greatest success and makes him appreciate his heritage. The fact that the song is performed in the film by Los Lobos, who themselves represent a crossover success, suggests that the border can be the site of fruitful encounters between two cultures, as the film, with its melding of Chicano iconography and the American Dream motif, underlines. Barrera comments:

> Valdéz is proposing transculturation as a solution both to a social dilemma and to an artistic dilemma. Ritchie Valens here functions as a symbol of the transcultural experience that Valdéz himself is essaying in this film – telling a story about a Chicano subject in a way that will work for both Chicano and mainstream audiences. (1997: 180)

La Bamba's complex mixture of American and Mexican cultures is one indication that it belongs to a genre that I will term the border film. As a precursor to several other films that deal with intercultural conflict, deracination and the border, it features several key elements that are developed in the films that follow. Like Gregory Nava's *El Norte* and Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.*, both made in 1987, *La Bamba* refers to the border and reflects on its meaning. These films, along with the three films that will be discussed in this paper, differ greatly in tone and style. They are nonetheless sufficiently cohesive in their concerns to be considered part of the same genre. All place great emphasis on the family and on identity. In many cases, the characters' family situations function as microcosms of their dealings with the outside world. In *El Mariachi* (1993), the absence of family relationships suggests a void that has been replaced by greed and violence. In *El Jardín del Edèn* (1995), Liz's attempt to create a new family after her divorce mirrors her quest to forge a new identity by embracing the Mexican part of her heritage. In *Lone Star* (1995), the complex relationship between the lovers who discover that they share the same father is indicative of the complications arising from transcultural interaction. The identification of the characters in all three films with different cultures suggests the personal choices involved in identity, which have been commented on at length by Anderson (1983) among others. Another constant in these border films is the deep ambivalence displayed towards the United States. Finally, *El Mariachi*, *El Jardín del Edén* and *Lone Star*, made by Chicano, Mexican, and American filmmakers, respectively, all present thoughtful reactions to the theme of the border. They attempt to examine the frequent cultural clashes that arise in the course of the stories they tell, and they demonstrate, like *La Bamba*, the importance of popular culture in the shaping of identity.

Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi* is set in the border town of Acuna. It chronicles the conflict between a Mexican hero, a wandering musician who gives his name to the film, and a North American drug trafficker called Moco, who controls the town. This conflict is played out largely in terms of the different cultures embodied in these protagonists. The film does not involve a border crossing and does not directly address the meaning of the border. Nonetheless, it raises issues common to many border films: US dominance, the resulting subjugation of human relations to money, as well as the drug trade. The family theme is

introduced rather obliquely, but the point is that the town, which has been dehumanised by violence and US capitalism, is devoid of such relationships. The characters' dealings with each other are based on economic or physical power. They communicate either by telephone or through violent gestures, and they all have nicknames rather than family names. Like the other characters in the film, the protagonist does not have a real name or a surname, but his title, the Mariachi, refers to a Mexican popular tradition of musicmaking and storytelling that is integral to his identity. He is the only character who mentions his family, and he is unique in attempting to honour and further this legacy, as his opening comment underlines: 'Desde que era pequeño quise ser un mariachi, como mi padre, mi abuelo y mi bisabuelo. Mi idea era seguir sus pasos hasta el final y morir con mi guitarra en la mano' [Ever since I was a child, I wanted to be a mariachi musician, like my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather. My idea was to follow in their footsteps to the end and to die with my guitar in my hand].

The Mariachi's reverence for the past and frequent comments on the contrast between the past and the present elevate him to the status of social commentator in the film. He is dismayed by the open violence and commercialisation that he sees around him. He is ridiculed by a bartender when he seeks work, as the bartender shows him that he has a whole band instead of paying one Mariachi. With this, a sombrero-clad man plays an electric piano programmed to make pseudo-musical sounds. The Mariachi's reaction to this humiliating encounter shows his disappointment at the lack of reverence given to the traditions he attempts to continue: '¿Qué le pasó a los días en que los guitarristas eran dioses, como mis antepasados? La tecnología nos comprime, robándonos la cultura, convirtiéndonos en máquinas' [What happened to the days when guitar players were gods, like my forefathers? Technology restricts us, robbing us of our culture, turning us into machines].

This encounter, as well as the confusion between the Mariachi and Azul, who carries an arsenal of weapons in his guitar case, suggest that the Mariachi is an anachronism in a society obsessed with technology and money. In her analysis of the film, Rose (1993) goes further, suggesting that the entire structure of *El Mariachi* replicates the situations that arise so often in *corridos*, the types of songs that the Mariachi sings and that played a key role in the evolution of Mexican-American culture and identity. Rodriguez also makes use of a

conventional Western plot, involving a lone hero in a corrupt town with an attractive female saloon owner. This plot echoes that of many Westerns, including *Destry Rides Again* (1939). Rodriguez may well have taken this particular film as a template, for the mockery Destry suffers because of his distaste for guns is replicated in the taunting the Mariachi receives when he asks for a soft drink in a hard-drinking town. Rose sees Rodriguez's appropriation of cinematic standards as knowing and ironic:

> Rodriguez uses the clichés to make an interesting point: his hero's *mejicano* dream – his familial destiny of carrying on as a mariachi – has lingered past its expiry date (this subtext becomes clear from the moment he enters town, when he passes a dusty bust of the one-time revolutionary President, Francisco I Madero). (1993: 182)

Ultimately, the Mariachi is unable to resist the corruption he is surrounded by. His battle with Moco culminates in a shootout at Moco's ranch. Realising that Domino, the saloon owner who Moco loves, is in love with his rival, Moco shoots the musician in the hand. This act provokes the Mariachi to kill intentionally for the first time, leaving Moco dead. As one would expect, Moco's men simply leave his body on the ground where he fell, as he is of no use to them dead. The Mariachi takes his leave on Domino's motorbike, carrying her dog and the case full of weapons with him. This conclusion is ominous to say the least. The Mariachi's survival can be seen as some kind of defeat of the American's power, although it is doubtful that anything will change in the town, as Moco is likely to be replaced by one of his men. The Mariachi, meanwhile, has proved unable to resist the corruption brought by US capitalism and technology. In contrast to his arrival on foot carrying his guitar, he leaves town on a motorcycle with a case full of weapons. There is a strong possibility that he has lost his ability to play his guitar and therefore a great part of his identity and heritage. Moreover, his replacement of his guitar with a case full of weapons implies that he is no longer a foil to Azul, for whom he has been mistaken throughout the film, but has become him. The film's trajectory shows that the meeting of different cultures in an environment with no family relations as a mitigating influence and a complete lack of reflection on identity will end in disaster. Throughout the film, the contrast between the evil Moco and the good Mariachi has been as clear as in a silent film. This level of differentiation allows for no development or compromise. In the end, there are no winners in this film, and the Mariachi's survival has been bought at the terrible price of a loss of identity and the death of his cultural legacy.

In terms of the cinematic traditions that Rodriguez has incorporated in *El Mariachi*, the ending marks a movement from a gentle, postmodern Western with a non-violent protagonist who defends tradition to a violent film whose central character is an action hero who has survived because of his skill with arms and his acceptance of technology. Hollywood violence seems to have engulfed the originally charming film hero. Unwittingly, the conclusion also foreshadows the way in which Rodriguez himself, who went on to direct the conventional, banal action movie *Desperado* (1995), has been swayed by Hollywood's influence.

María Novaro's *El Jardín del Edén* [The Garden of Eden] is a multifaceted story set mostly in Tijuana, the legendary border-crossing town between Mexico and the United States, where a twenty kilometre steel wall separates the two countries and where two cultures meet. As Paranaguá points out: 'the focus of the film is Tijuana itself, simultaneously a characteristic Mexican microcosm and a mythical "place on the edge" which used to be Hollywood's brothel and a cosmopolitan crossroads' (1995: 270). The film has an episodic narrative that tells several different stories of people and cultures coming together. Serena is a young widow with three children who has come to settle in Tijuana. Felipe is a young peasant who wants to cross into America and who befriends Serena's son Julián. An American, Frank, lives in Tijuana devoting himself to the study of whales. His sister, Jane, comes to visit her Chicana friend Liz, who is organising an exhibition of alternative Chicano videos. The sheer scope of the film means that many of the individual elements cannot be developed in sufficient detail to make them effective. For this reason, this analysis will focus on the characters of Liz and Jane, who are central to the film's theme of Mexican-American relations on the border.

El Jardín del Edén opens with a shot of the physical barrier that is the border. This steel barricade frames the film, appearing also in closing scenes. Novaro uses these images as a powerful reminder of the physical presence of the border in Tijuana. They form the backdrop to her examination of the metaphorical meaning of the term with regard to the

borders between one identity and another and between Mexico and the US. There are notable divisions between the Chicana Liz, who is insecure about her heritage and who speaks poor Spanish, and the Mexicans in the film. Liz's staging of the exhibition is an attempt to come to terms with her Mexican heritage. When she mentions this work to Felipe, a poor farmer, he responds uncomprehendingly, however, and seems puzzled why anyone would undertake such an enterprise. Although the alternative videos Liz works with are considered a popular medium, when they are seen in the context of an art gallery, they become artefacts of high culture, a culture that Felipe does not relate to. Moreover, he is concerned with survival and his attempts to cross the border to escape poverty. It is doubtful that he can relate to Liz's search for her identity, and through his eyes her quest seems rather self-indulgent.

Liz's sincerity is clear, nonetheless. The viewer becomes part of her attempt to define her place in Mexican culture, as we accompany her in viewing films that reflect the uncertainty of Chicano identity. In a particularly moving scene, Liz weeps as she watches an interview with a Chicana woman who admits that she was so Americanised that she did not realise the emptiness that her negation of her Mexican culture had left in her. Liz clearly relates to this woman but the fact that she is removed from her experience by watching it on a screen, as we watch her, further underlines her sense of isolation. Liz's embarrassment about her halting Spanish, an obvious marker of her difference, also points to her discomfort and confusion as the product of a mixed culture. Liz's foil is Jane, the carefree American who glides through Mexico exploring her fascinations with one or other aspect of its culture. Novaro describes Jane and Frank as 'muy buenos gringos' [very good Americans] (Platas 1999: 266–267) and Jane is certainly an appealing character in many ways. She becomes involved with Felipe, whom she helps when he is attacked during his first attempt to cross the border. Her naivety is also presented as rather arrogant, however, and her careless intervention in people's lives can cause offence and seem insensitive. Her friendship with Liz is tested during the following exchange, when she comments dismissively on her video project:

> Jane: I don't want to be some *turista*, watching life from the outside as if life were like, like one of these videos of yours.

> Liz: You think that's what I'm doing? Standing back and watching? Do you realise how little you know about me, for instance? You're usually too busy, you know? Listening to yourself, floating around with your little notebook. Quitting jobs, liking everybody. Falling in love with Huave women.
> Jane: Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry. It was a terrible example.
> Liz: I'm planning my own work, you know? Trying to hear my voice, as you say. And it hasn't been easy coming down here on my own with Lupita. Yes, Lupita! I gave my child the wrong name. I wanted a Mexican name and I couldn't even spell it right.
> Jane: Lupita, that's a great name. I love that. I do, I think it's great, Lupita.

This argument reveals the distance between the friends. Jane, like Liz, is trying to find herself by attempting to be a writer, but Liz has much more at stake. She is endeavouring to recover something that she has lost, like the woman whose interview moves her, and trying to give her daughter a sense of her heritage. Jane's glib refusal to acknowledge these difficulties seems thoroughly naïve or even indifferent. The film's other major conflict, this time between a Mexican and an American, also involves Jane. She and Felipe travel to a rural part of the United States largely inhabited by Mexican workers. They come upon the funeral of a child whose body is to be sent to Mexico to be buried. Jane interrupts the ceremony to give the mother of the child money, an action that infuriates Felipe. He rebukes her for her insensitivity and suggests that her attempt at generosity has wounded the pride of the funeral party and reduced them to the status of beggars. Again, Jane cannot understand why this is such a personal issue to him, and the incident marks the end of their relationship.

On the basis of these two incidents, the film would appear to present a rather negative perspective on intercultural engagement, but this is not the case. Instead, Novaro explores the difficulties involved in these relationships but also the pleasures that people of different cultures can share. Felipe and Jane dance to Mexican music and enjoy several meals together. He in turn delights in hearing her descriptions of the north. Liz fares better in her attempts to integrate in Tijuana, befriending Serena and other women and hearing her daughter speak Spanish for the first time, although again there is considerable irony here. Liz is proud and delighted to hear her daughter speak Spanish, presumably as she believes that this linguistic ability reflects the child's ability to assimilate into Mexican culture. What she does not realise is that she is praising her

child for mouthing a string of obscenities, which are undeniably a testament to her linguistic prowess but not perhaps what her mother intended her to learn. Ultimately, Novaro's film is not a conventional narrative that winds up its various threads in a convenient conclusion. The process of reaching an understanding between different cultures is fraught with sensitivities and complications that she fittingly presents in an open-ended manner, raising intriguing questions about identity rather than providing facile solutions. Ultimately, however, the characters' efforts to appreciate each other's cultures are frustrated by a linguistic barrier that, like the border itself, is indicative of the deeper lack of real engagement between Mexicans, Chicanos and Americans.

John Sayles' *Lone Star* is also set on the border, in the town of Frontera. Again, the narrative is quite complex and involves various subplots. The main focus is on a sheriff named Sam Deeds, who has succeeded his father, Buddy, in the position. As the film opens, the body of notoriously corrupt sheriff Charlie Wade, who preceded Buddy Deeds, is found in the desert outside the town, leading Sam to suspect that his own father killed him. Sam attempts to solve the mystery surrounding the body while rekindling his high-school romance with the Mexican-American Pilar. As in Novaro's film, relations between the races in the town are complex and often contentious. As teenagers, Sam and Pilar were forbidden to see each other because, they believe, of racism. Pilar's mother, Mercedes, considers herself American, constantly urges her staff to speak English and dials the number of Border Patrol at the sight of what she terms 'wetbacks.' Her ambivalence towards her heritage is paralleled by the constant discussions about race in the wider community. As the critic Curtis observes, the film shows the power shifting between the feet of the town's Anglos and Mexican-Americans:

> Valdéz is proposing transculturation as a solution both to a social dilemma and to an artistic dilemma. There are arguments about what to teach in Texas history classes, arguments about whom to back in political races, arguments about whether to speak English or Spanish, arguments about letting government contracts and whom should be honored with public monuments. (1996: 7).

The first of these arguments, which takes place in a school classroom, powerfully suggests the different interests represented by various members of the town's population. Pilar attempts to justify her

revisionist teaching of Texan history by saying that she is trying to communicate the complexity of cultures coming together in both negative and positive ways. A white woman responds: 'If you're talking about food and music and all, I have no problem with that. But when you start changing who did what to who...' Her response suggests that history is only composed of facts and that elements of popular culture are trivial and unimportant historically. Of course, this is far from the case. Mercedes, who goes to great lengths to present herself as American, still listens to Mexican music at home and has not changed the records in her restaurant's jukebox for years. Sam and Pilar revive their relationship listening to these old tunes. Sayles is keenly aware of the importance of these cultural elements and also of the weight of the past on the present, as the many flashbacks in the film attest. As Andrew writes:

> Sayles [...] pans the camera to left or right, or up and down, to show an event from the past in exactly the same spatial setting. The result – which, as it were, involves the camera crossing temporal borders – not only suggests that the past is always with us, exerting an influence on the here and now, but even allows Sayles to show, by beginning a 'flashback' with one character in the present and then ending on another character in the present, that what we are seeing is a shared memory. (1998: 103–104)

The influence of the past on the present is particularly notable in the case of Sam, who has lived his entire life in the shadow of his father. When he introduces himself to an elderly woman as Sheriff Deeds, she replies 'Sheriff Deeds is dead, honey, you're just sheriff junior'. Deeds' desire to have a relationship with Pilar, whom his father expressly forbade him to see as a teenager, is undoubtedly on some level an attempt to forge his own path by defying his father's wish. The film's examination of the meeting between members of different cultures takes an ironic twist here. Pilar's words about the complexities of cultures coming together in both positive and negative ways take on new resonance as she and Sam learn that their parents kept them apart not out of racism but because they are both Buddy's children. Significantly, they discuss their future as they sit in front of the blank screen that was once the town's drive-in cinema. They decide to forget the past and stay together, defying all convention. The screen's presence both reminds us that their story is a fiction and conjures up cinematic narratives of star-crossed lovers. It also

presents a blank slate for the future, however, for their solution to the problem of their shared paternity is to attempt to block out the past. The characters' decision to ignore the taboo of incest suggests a positive refusal to be controlled by the past and a determination to fight for a new cultural identity that would seem to be a meeting across the border. This radical conclusion also fits in with the general movement in the community of Frontera of shrugging off the yoke of American paternity and forging a new beginning.

The three films present diverse scenarios structured around the physical and symbolic presence of the border. *El Mariachi* is the only one that suggests a decisive solution to cross-cultural conflicts, although its bloody conclusion, which features the death of traditional culture through the corruption of the protagonist by American dominance, is hardly proposed as a model to emulate. The other films point to the need for compromise and constant striving to overcome the boundaries between cultures, even if, in the case of *Lone Star*, this means violating other social norms. Both films approach the cultural misunderstandings they portray as part of everyday life and as even humorous. For instance, when a character in a subplot of *Lone Star* tells his friend that his black girlfriend's family will not mind that he is white because they suspected that she was a lesbian and will be relieved that she is marrying a man, he replies: 'It's always heart-warming to see a prejudice defeated by a deeper prejudice'.

Returning to the difference between the frontier and the border, *El Mariachi*'s profound pessimism with regard to cultural difference reflects a quintessential view of the border as an unassailable barrier. The other films suggest a great deal of hope in their presentations of cultural difference, although they lack decisive conclusions. *El Jardín del Edén* seems to end on a note of stasis, as the characters demonstrate naïve goodwill but cannot overcome the obstacle of linguistic comprehension. *Lone Star*'s final scene suggests that a meeting between cultures is possible only when American domination, symbolised by the characters' shared paternity, is acknowledged and ignored.

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