

# MOVING PICTURES AND PEOPLE ACROSS THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *SIN NOMBRE* AND *THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA*

Valerio Coladonato, Sapienza Università di Roma

## *Abstract*

The declining sovereignty of nation-states intensifies the symbolic functions performed by physical borders. The frontier between Mexico and the U.S. is one of these ideologically charged places: it plays a defining role in national identities and narratives, and contributes to their hybridization. Nevertheless, in films involving a partnership between the U.S. and Mexico, critical discourse is predominantly shaped by separate “national” paradigms. The paper considers as case studies two films concerned with border narratives: *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) and *Sin nombre* (Cary Fukunaga, 2009). Their critical reception is traced by examining reviews, articles and interviews both in the U.S. and in the Mexican press. The central premise of the two movies is, in fact, a journey towards the opposite side of the frontier (South-bound in the former, and North-bound in the latter). Concerns regarding the permeability of the national territory – which characterize contemporary surveillance culture – are filtered through the movies’ genres and their different *mise-en-scène*. Migration emerges as the primary geopolitical framework through which the films are interpreted: the emphasis lies on the economic dimension and/or the “national security” issues; hence, the dynamics of cultural hybridization are significantly overlooked.

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Journeys between Mexico and the United States are a long-established cinematic trope: as Adrián Pérez-Melgosa has recently shown, throughout the history of this medium a continuous flow of “transnational affect” has been carried by moving images across the American continent.<sup>1</sup> As part of a complex network of cultural productions dealing with the frontier, “border films” play a fundamental part in shaping opposed national identities, while paradoxically contributing to the hybridization of cultures. These cinematic journeys are deeply involved in contemporary issues of geopolitics and international relations, to the extent that “each appearance of a new policy to regulate relationships between Latin America and the U.S. shows rhetorical strategies similar to those present in a series of films concurrently produced.”<sup>2</sup> My paper will focus on two films among the many that, in the last decade, have portrayed journeys between Mexico and the U.S.: *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) and *Sin nombre* (Cary Fukunaga, 2009). In particular, I will address the critical reception of these two movies, highlighting how the discursive formation that stems from “border films” is also embedded in geopolitical dynamics.

In addition to the journeys depicted in the movies, the other relevant *movement* is that of films themselves – as they are distributed internationally, shown in festivals and theaters, and in their subsequent life on multiple media platforms. Focusing on the specific interpretive community of film reviewers and journalists, it is possible to highlight a key passage in this process: as Ulf Hedetoft has argued, film critics act as “mediatic gatekeepers,” and play a fundamental part in determining the national belonging of a cultural product within public discourse. This categorization, in turn, further contributes in shaping the films’ reception among the wider audience.<sup>3</sup>

My primary sources are a sample of 94 articles which appeared in the U.S. and Mexican press. These can be roughly divided in the following categories: movie reviews (45); interviews with the director, screenwriter, or cast member (19); reports of festival award ceremonies (15); reports of film pre-production (8); editorial pieces discussing the film in relation to other political issues (7). The articles were either all published at the time of the films’ commercial releases, or else they coincided with their screenings at international film festivals – in particular, the 2005 Cannes Film Festival for *The Three Burials*; the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and Guadalajara International Film Festival for *Sin nombre*.<sup>4</sup>

Borrowing Janet Staiger’s expression, we could define reviewers as “perverse spectators:”<sup>5</sup> their interpretations depend only to a certain extent – if at all – on the normative reading suggested by the filmic text. Rather, the critics emphasize selected elements of the films, according to both individual and contextual factors. Staiger claims that a key operation in cinema reception is that of “rehierarchizing” cultural elements.<sup>6</sup> I find her suggestion particularly useful for the purposes of this paper. My goal will be to observe how reviewers interpret *The Three Burials* and *Sin nombre* – and in particular what elements they stress, omit, or rehierarchize while providing a national categorization of the films, and discussing issues of migration and cultural identity.

### *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

In *The Three Burials*, Melquiades (Julio Cesar Cedillo) is an undocumented Mexican migrant whose accidental murder along the Texan border is concealed by patrolman Mike (Barry Pepper). When Melquiades’s friend and fellow cowboy Pete (Tommy Lee Jones) discovers the circumstances of the murder, he forces Mike to exhume the corpse, and carry it on a perilous South-bound journey. They travel across the desert in the attempt to locate Melquiades’s family and home village in Mexico, and to give him a proper burial there. The journey proves to be transformative both for Pete, who reconsiders his ruthless treatment of migrants, and for Mike, who has to face the unreliability of the information provided by Melquiades.

*The Three Burials* is the directorial debut of Tommy Lee Jones. In a career spanning over four decades, the Texan actor has built for himself a loner, tough guy star-image, upon which this movie builds and expands. As all reviews point out, Lee Jones conceived the project as a creative partnership with acclaimed Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, whose previous works included internationally awarded films such as Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Amores perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003). In interviews and public appearances, both Lee Jones and Arriaga have stressed the equality in their working relationship, which has been described as “an excellent

example of Anglo-Hispanic co-operation.”<sup>7</sup> The balance of this relationship, though, seems to shift in the accounts of reviewers from the two different countries.

In the U.S., the majority of articles focus on the leading role of Tommy Lee Jones, as well as on his transition behind the camera and his successful effort in directing actors.<sup>8</sup> By highlighting Lee Jones’s domineering and intimidating *persona*, the articles depict him as “in control” of the set.<sup>9</sup> Some accounts emphasize the friendship between director and screenwriter, based on the common passion for hunting in the border area; in doing so, they implicitly draw a parallel between Lee Jones and Arriaga on the one hand, and the characters of Pete and Melquiades on the other. Conflating Lee Jones’s directorial role and the character he plays onscreen, the articles seem to deny the central premise of the film, which is to undermine the dominant position of the Anglo man in the Hollywood western genre. As Camilla Fojas shows in her study of Hollywood portrayals of the Southern frontier,<sup>10</sup> *The Three Burials* stands in a revisionist position with regard to the genre: the film exposes and subverts U.S. fantasies on Mexico, and their foundational role in American identity. Fredric Jameson has argued that in the age of globalisation “individual narrative representations through which the national destiny can be fantasized” undergo significant changes in their form and structure.<sup>11</sup> Such a deconstruction of the “national allegory”<sup>12</sup> is not registered by U.S. reviewers of *The Three Burials*: on the contrary, the “hierarchical interracial and transborder relations”<sup>13</sup> between the protagonists of the film remain largely unnoticed.

Conversely, in Mexico most of the critical attention for *The Three Burials* was raised by the award to Arriaga’s screenplay at the 2005 Cannes film festival. This event was framed as the recognition of a national talent in a highly prestigious setting. Nevertheless, the commentaries are quite paradoxical: Mexico’s “pride” often seems dependent on foreign recognition, as in the “praise” to the Mexican cast received from Lee Jones.<sup>14</sup> Overall, these reviews highlight the national belonging of successful professionals in the film industry, but do not touch upon the Mexican identity of the film’s characters, and the related issues of immigration and discrimination (which on the contrary are widely discussed in U.S. articles).

The Mexican press’ celebration of Arriaga’s success is quite striking, considering that *The Three Burials* was a U.S. and French coproduction.<sup>15</sup> In comparison, similar achievements by other coproductions which actually involved Mexican companies were substantially overlooked – such as Rodrigo Plá’s *La zona* (2007), which garnered awards both at the Venice Film Festival (2007) and at the Toronto International Film Festival (2008). One possible explanation for this different treatment is that, whereas *La zona* overtly criticizes surveillance culture and the class system within the country, *The Three Burials* displaces social conflict into foreign territory.

An interrelated element was the film’s positioning within the contemporary debates on U.S. immigration policies. *The Three Burials* was released at a particularly delicate moment:<sup>16</sup> the construction of the security wall along portions of the U.S. Southern frontier was being planned, within the framework of the militarization of the border area. In her poignant analysis of the wall’s political effects, Wendy Brown writes: “by shifting migration to more geographically challenging areas, the barrier has dramatically increased both migrant deaths and the rate of permanent, rather than temporary migration into the United States.”<sup>17</sup> Embedded in the surveillance culture that followed the events of 9/11, these policies “set the stage for the abuse of power by police and rise of paramilitary groups.”<sup>18</sup> With its focus on the violent actions of a border patrolman, the film was interpreted as a protest against the U.S. government projects<sup>19</sup> – a reading that seems influenced

and facilitated by Lee Jones' public statements.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Sony Classics studios re-released the film in occasion of the economic boycott organized by undocumented immigrants on the 1 May 2006, and destined five percent of the profits to the protests' organizers.<sup>21</sup>

In both cases, the U.S. press coverage of the film makes no mention of the responsibility of the Mexican government in the policies concerning immigration, therefore treating the issues as internal affairs, rather than as a matter of international relations. Another striking absence is the failed recognition of the transnational affective ties exemplified by the return of Melquiades's body to Mexico. Adrián Félix has analyzed the implications underlying the practice of the posthumous repatriation of migrants in the light of the widespread references in Mexican popular culture to the desire to return to the homeland.<sup>22</sup> By downplaying this aspect, the articles simultaneously remove *The Three Burials* from this broader cultural framework, and overlook one of the central devices of the movie's potential engagement with global audiences.

### *Sin nombre*

*Sin nombre* details the North-bound journey of migrants from Central America and Mexico, in their attempt to reach the United States traveling on freight trains. Among them, we find Sayra (Paulina Gaitan): her father has returned to his native Honduras with the goal of bringing her with him to New Jersey. We also meet Casper (Edgar Flores), a teenager who is escaping from the violent Mexican gang of Mara Salvatrucha with which he is affiliated. On the train, migrants are exposed to robberies and physical dangers, such as the risk of falling on the tracks. Sayra and Casper help protect each other along the journey, but at a river crossing, while the girl makes it to the opposite shore and enters the U.S., the boy is reached by a gang member and fatally shot.

*Sin nombre* was also the debut feature for then 31-year-old Cary Fukunaga.<sup>23</sup> In the articles on the film, one of the most frequently scrutinized issues is that of the director's mixed "identity." Fukunaga's complex background is defined through several and at times contradictory labels. Whereas U.S. articles tend to frame him as a "national" director ("California-born, NYU-schooled"<sup>24</sup>), there is a tendency of the U.S. Spanish-language press to highlight the diversity of Fukunaga's origins.<sup>25</sup> Such discrepancies eloquently show the relational aspect of identity: as Stuart Hall puts it, cultural identities are "the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture," therefore they do not constitute "an essence but a *positioning*."<sup>26</sup>

In this specific case, the origin of the director appears relevant because, in the journalists' discourse, it is supposed to guarantee the "authenticity" of the film: in other words, it is inextricably connected to the dialectics between "realism" and "entertainment." This symbolic opposition is what most clearly differentiates the Mexican from the American reviews. Critics from south of the border praise the accurate portrayal of teenage gang life,<sup>27</sup> and of the difficulties and dangers of the migrants' journey. Most of them relate this accuracy to the fact that, while researching for the screenplay, Fukunaga embarked on the same perilous journey.<sup>28</sup> Such an aesthetic judgement minimizes the formulaic aspects of the plot, which draw consistently on the tropes of migration narratives in recent cinema;<sup>29</sup> the sanction of the film's aesthetic value and "originality" can be



seen as a self-legitimizing strategy that simultaneously validates the reviewers' position<sup>30</sup> and inscribes the film into the canon of national cinema.

U.S. articles also highlight the "authenticity" of the film which "feels very real,"<sup>31</sup> but at the same time they compare such a characteristic with what they identify as its other constitutive if somewhat diverse element: melodrama. On the one hand, due to its brutal depiction of violence and the attention to the details of the immigrant experience, *Sin nombre* is framed as a "political" film:<sup>32</sup> its "documentary" look, achieved through a reliance on long shots and natural lighting, certainly contributes to this.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the focus on the romance between Sayra and Casper, as well as the carefully crafted *thriller* plot, relate to the conventional structures of Hollywood genres. A review compares *Sin nombre* to a high-grossing film which also dealt with the reunion of a hispanic immigrant family: "where Patricia Riggen shamelessly milked *Under the Same Moon*'s melodrama, Fukunaga's startlingly impressive first feature is almost ruthless."<sup>34</sup> A complex set of symbolic oppositions is at play here. First of all, we find a gendered and hierarchical division of roles and genres – an opposition between feminine emotional excess *versus* the more culturally legitimate masculine restraint, and between the escapism of melodrama and the "ruthlessness" of the political film. Secondly, these categories also imply a contrast between what is considered American and non-American cinema. *Sin nombre*, then, appears troubling because it stands both within and outside of the paradigms of American cinema – it acts, in a way, as an intruder.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the hybrid cultural condition of the film is hardly ever recognized.<sup>36</sup>

A different approach can be observed in Mexican reviews which try to locate the film within a discourse of pride for the resurgent national cinematography.<sup>37</sup> For instance, they emphasize the role of producers Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal,<sup>38</sup> who supported *Sin nombre* with their company Canana; but the same reviews often omit the fact that the project was developed within the Sundance Labs, and the film's visibility was guaranteed by the awards for directing and cinematography at the 2009 Sundance film festival. Hence, *Sin nombre* is rarely discussed as a U.S. and Mexican productive partnership. Only during its pre-production a certain degree of economic collaboration between the two countries was acknowledged.<sup>39</sup> Once the film was released and its plot and aesthetics took center stage, the public discourse around *Sin nombre* became increasingly concerned with the attribution of a singular national framework. To understand this shift, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model still seems relevant: the moments of production and reception of a cultural text are not necessarily characterized by the same power relations, and therefore each one of the different practices that articulate the process of communication "retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence."<sup>40</sup>

As a general tendency, the reviews and articles on *The Three Burials* and *Sin nombre* show a few common features on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border: they discuss and re-frame the films' meanings in the light of several extra-filmic elements, such as the background of the directors, screenwriters, cast members and crews, as well as the circumstances of the films' production. Both movies are perceived as being composed of heterogeneous, conflicting cultural elements: in addressing their aesthetic value, the critics suggest (often implicitly) a resolution to these underlying tensions. Their judgement, then, is closely related to contextual factors.<sup>41</sup>

The most recurring signifier around which this resolution occurs is that of the "nation." This can undoubtedly be related to the territorial dimension of the newspapers, and to the role that traditional media play in maintaining a sense of imagined social homogeneity, even in the age of

globalization.<sup>42</sup> As Andreas Hepp writes, suggesting a “transcultural approach” to media reception, “the borders of the cultural thickenings people belong to do not necessarily correspond with the territorial borders, while at the same time territories still have a high relevance as a reference point of constructing national community.”<sup>43</sup> This ideological ambivalence helps to explain the insistent concern of the media on physical national borders: also in its cinematic representations, the U.S.-Mexico border is “a space that resonates with trauma, a wound that refuses to heal, and so it becomes the object of tremendous cultural work.”<sup>44</sup>

According to Wendy Brown, the recent global tendency to erect spectacular barriers along the borders is a way to compensate for the declining sovereignty of nation-states: “[t]he new walls often function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise and that they also performatively contradict.”<sup>45</sup> Walls such as the one on the U.S.-Mexico frontier do not secure political or economical boundaries – in fact, they often aggravate the conditions of insecurity that they are supposed to minimize. Nevertheless, widespread consensus on their necessity can be attributed to the sense of stability that they deceptively promise.<sup>46</sup>

The overarching geopolitical dynamic that shapes the two films’ reception, then, is the pattern of migration between the two countries. As Fojas writes, media coverage of the border area often “den[ies] the realities of economic and political interdependence between Mexico and the United States and act[s] as symbolic blockades to cross-border dialogue.”<sup>47</sup> I would argue that, among the articles that I have considered, this is particularly true in the case of film reviews, whereas interviews with directors and reports of the films’ production tend to partially acknowledge such an interdependence. Where the disavowal is most evident is in the discussion of the hybrid cultural status of the two movies: as I have pointed out, the formal and narrative features of the two films cannot be contained within a singular aesthetic tradition, but the reviews tend to overshadow the degree to which both films exceed and redefine national paradigms.

Furthermore, in its framing of the potential spectatorship for *The Three Burials* and *Sin nombre*, the discussion of the films does not fully recognize the potential link between their narrative, and those subjects who lead predominantly transnational lives (for instance, those who possess dual citizenship).<sup>48</sup> A few articles mention the potential appeal of these movies for the *latino* community in the U.S., whose very presence is a “challenge to the neat binary opposition between Anglo and Latin America.”<sup>49</sup> On the whole, however, “American” (as in belonging to the United States) and “Mexican” are construed as two distinct and unequivocal categories. In this sense, the articles mostly provide negotiated readings of the films – although the “particular and situated logics”<sup>50</sup> to which these readings respond do not give them an oppositional value, but rather deploy the categories of the hegemonic viewpoint. Regardless of their diverse political attitudes towards migratory issues and policies, in fact, the articles frame migration either as a primarily economic phenomenon, and/or as a “national security” issue; but they fail to discuss its cultural implication, and the profound transformations of subjective and collective identity that it sets in motion.

1 Adrián Pérez-Melgosa, *Cinema and Inter-American Relations. Tracking Transnational Affect*, Routledge, London-New York 2012.

2 *Idem*, p. 5.

3 Contemporary cinema is caught in a “tension between its transnational forms of production, dissemination

- and (sometimes) contents, and its routinely national modes of reception, decoding and interpretation, based on national identities, cultural history and aesthetic traditions, as well as on particular readings of the world informed by a given national *habitus* and certain foreign stereotypes.” Ulf Hedetoft, *Contemporary Cinema: Between Cultural Globalisation and National Interpretation*, in Mette Hjort, Scott Mackenzie (eds.), *Cinema and Nation*, Routledge, London 2000, p. 262.
- 4 The period considered for *The Three Burials* is the month of May 2005 (Cannes Film Festival), and the months between December 2005 and February 2006; for *Sin nombre*, the articles date to the period spanning from January to April 2009. I have focused on general-interest newspapers, positioned across the political spectrum and based in diverse locations within the two countries – for Mexico, *El Norte*, *El Universal*, *Excelsior*, *La Jornada*, *Milenio*, *Mural*, *Reforma*, *Unomásuno*; for the United States: *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Denver Post*, *Deseret News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*; despite their relatively limited outreach, I have included some U.S. based Spanish-language newspapers: *El Diario La Prensa* (New York), *El Mensajero* (San Francisco), *El Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale), *La Voz Nueva* (Denver), *La Opinión* (Los Angeles).
  - 5 Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York University Press, New York 2000.
  - 6 On these aspects, see in particular chapter 2, *The Perversity of Spectators: Expanding the History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema*, in *Idem*, pp. 28-42.
  - 7 “[U]n excelente ejemplo de cooperación anglo-hispano,” Hernando Olivares, “Western con realismo magico,” in *El Sentinel*, 25 February 2006.
  - 8 See for instance Susan King, “In a word, ‘fascinating;’ Tommy Lee Jones proves an unconventional director in his first time out, ‘Three Burials,’” in *Los Angeles Times*, 15 December 2005; the focus on Lee Jones is so strong that one reviewer writes: “Tommy Lee Jones has gotten such a huge bolt of attention off ‘*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*,’ it’s easy to forget the screenwriter. That would be a mistake and an injustice.” Stephen Hunter, “‘Three Burials’: A Jones for Justice on the Border,” in *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2006.
  - 9 Sam Allis, “In his latest film, Jones is just where he likes to be: in control,” in *Boston Globe*, 2 February 2006.
  - 10 Camilla Fojas, *Border Bandits. Hollywood on the Southern Frontier*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2008, in particular pp. 187-195.
  - 11 Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1992, p. 37.
  - 12 For a critical discussion of Jameson’s concept, which was originally formulated in relation to Third-World literature, see Imre Szeman, *Who’s Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization*, in Caren Irr, Ian Buchanan (eds.), *On Jameson. From Postmodernism to Globalization*, Suny Press, Albany (NY) 2006, pp. 189-211.
  - 13 Camilla Fojas, *Border Bandits*, cit., p. 25.
  - 14 See Adan Garcia, Gustavo Arechiga, “Elogia Tommy a mexicanos,” in *Mural*, 8 October 2005; and Elizabeth Hernández, “El cine mexicano se ve bien bonito en el extranjero,” in *El Universal*, 23 May 2005.
  - 15 Although the credits do not list Mexico among the countries of production, a reviewer ironically asks: “Estados Unidos/Francia y – por que no? – Mexico” (“United States, France and – why not? – Mexico”), Gustavo Moheno, “Obra Maestra,” in *Reforma*, 18 November 2005.
  - 16 See for instance Noe Sotelo, “El cine ha sido muy conservador,” in *Reforma*, 24 February 2006.
  - 17 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2010, p. 38.
  - 18 Anna Ochoa O’Leary, “Close Encounters of the Deadly Kind: Gender, Migration, and Border (In) security,” in *Migration Letters*, vol. 5, no. 2, October 2008, p. 113.
  - 19 For example in Stephen Hunter, “‘Three Burials,’” cit.
  - 20 In several interviews, Lee Jones voiced his opposition to the immigration policies of the Bush administration. See Don Bain, “A timely tale of border relations/Un cuento apropiado sobre relaciones fronterizas,” in *La Voz Nueva*, 21 June 2006.

- 21 Nora Alicia Estrada, “‘Los Tres Entierros de Melquiades Estrada,’ dirigida por Tommy Lee Jones. Alistan en Los Ángeles su ‘Día sin Mexicanos,’” in *El Norte*, 30 April 2006.
- 22 Adrián Félix, “Posthumous Transnationalism: Postmortem Repatriation from the United States to Mexico,” in *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2011, pp. 157-179.
- 23 Fukunaga’s script obtained the support of the Sundance Labs for his script for *Victoria Para Chino* (2004), “a short movie based on the true story of a group of immigrants smuggled into Texas in a refrigerated truck only to be abandoned there,” causing the death of 19 of them. Ellen McCarthy, “Director Is Making a ‘Nombre’ For Himself,” in *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2009.
- 24 Dan Zak, “A Disarming Debut,” in *The Washington Post*, 3 April 2009.
- 25 Among the labels attached to him, we find: “cineasta americano-japonés” (“Japanese-American filmmaker”) and “mitad japonés y mitad sueco” (“half Japanese and half Swedish”); the most elaborate account reads: “Cary Joji Fukunaga, de raíces asiáticas y escocesas, creció en Oakland, en el Este de la Bahía. No lleva sangre latina, pero tuvo un padrastro chicano y una madrastra argentina” (“Cary Joji Fukunaga, of Asian and Scottish roots, grew up in Oakland, in the East Bay. Latin blood is not in his veins, but he had a Chicano stepfather and an Argentinian stepmother”), Katia Fuentes, “Sin nombre, una historia como la tuya,” in *El Mensajero*, 29 March 2009. The reference to the missing *sangre latina* unveils widespread cultural expectations that, given the topic of the film, a specific “ethnic” origin of the director would be demanded.
- 26 Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation*, in Robert Stam, Toby Miller (eds.), *Film and Theory. An Anthology*, Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2000 (1989), p. 707.
- 27 Several reviews include passages such as this one: “No hay nada falso en la descripción de los infiernos sociales en los que se desarrollan las pandillas centroamericanas” (“There’s nothing fake in the portrayal of the social hell in which central American gangs develop”), Ernesto Diezmartínez, “Un ángel con cara sucia,” in *Reforma*, 15 May 2009. See also Carolina Martínez, “Gana realidad a ficción,” in *Mural*, 8 June 2009.
- 28 For instance, see Ana Cristina Enríquez, “Vive director su propia película,” in *Reforma*, 9 March 2009.
- 29 An overview of these narrative tropes is in Thomas G. Deveny, *Migration in Contemporary Hispanic Cinema*, Scarecrow, Blue Ridge Summit (PA) 2012.
- 30 Similarly to the strategies described by Pierre Bourdieu in *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Minuit, Paris 1979 (eng. ed. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Routledge, London-New York 1984).
- 31 Jeff Vice, “‘Sin Nombre’ tells harsh and vivid tale,” in *Deseret News*, 17 April 2009; see also Reed Johnson, “Crossing borders. Director Cary Joji Fukunaga found the gritty essence of ‘Sin Nombre’ by following the immigrants’ tracks,” in *Los Angeles Times*, 8 March 2009.
- 32 Hernando Olivares, “De lo políticamente correcto al cine documental-comercial,” in *El Sentinel*, 25 April 2009.
- 33 Dan Zak, “A Disarming Debut,” cit.
- 34 Steven Rea, “Stark brutality of crossing the border,” in *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 April 2009.
- 35 Writing from the U.S. city with the largest community of *latinos*, the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer opts for a metaphor that explicitly recalls the surveillance of the U.S.-Mexico border: he describes Fukunaga as “a post-racial filmmaker, who can slip easily past the stolid walls of movie genres and steer clear of the cultural sentinels who stand guard over language barriers.” Reed Johnson, “Crossing borders,” cit.
- 36 According to Marwan M. Kraidy, the hybridization of cultural products offers “foreign media and marketers transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities.” Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2005, p. 148. For a different perspective, see Homi Bhabha’s important theoretical contributions on hybridity as a strategy of resistance in postcolonial and global scenarios: Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London-New York 1994.
- 37 See for instance Nora Alicia Estrada, Ana Cristina Enríquez, “Llegan a EU rudos y con nombre,” in *El Norte*, 9 March 2009; Dalila Carreño, Carolina Martínez, “Entienden el alma y la vida de los Maras,” in *Reforma*, 17 May 2009.



- 38 On the star figure of Gael García Bernal as “symbol of a transnational, post-national, and diasporic new Mexican cinema” (p. 20), see Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo. Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2006.
- 39 See for instance Liliana Lejarazu, Jesús Díaz, “Unen fuerzas Canana y Universal,” in *Reforma*, 7 December 2007; John Jurgensen, “Filmmakers: An Outsider’s Look Inside Mexico - A U.S. director’s immigration drama wins backing from Mexican cinema stars,” in *Wall Street Journal. Eastern edition*, 13 March 2009.
- 40 Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, in Id., Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language*, Hutchinson, London 1980, p. 128.
- 41 Such dynamics has been widely discussed in ethnographic studies on intercultural media reception, starting from the seminal work of Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*, Oxford University Press, New York 1990; an overview of the development of these studies can be found in Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences. The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Sage, London-Thousand Oaks (CA) 1993; for a discussion of the ethnographic approach in the context of globalization, see Marwan M. Kraidy, Patrick D. Murphy (eds.), *Global Media Studies. Ethnographic Perspectives*, Routledge, London-New York 2003.
- 42 See David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity*, Routledge, London-New York 2000.
- 43 Andreas Hepp, “Transculturality as a Perspective: Researching Media Cultures Comparatively,” in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2009, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1221/2657>, last visit 4 August 2013. The author refers to the concept of “cultural thickening” as formulated in Orvar Löfgren, “The Nation as Home or Motel? Metaphors of Media and Belonging,” in *Sociologisk Årbok*, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1-34.
- 44 Camilla Fojas, *Border Bandits*, cit., p. 13. Here the author is referring to Gloria Anzaldúa’s fundamental book *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco 1987.
- 45 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, cit., p. 24.
- 46 *Ibidem*, see in particular chapter 4, *Desiring Walls*, pp. 107-134.
- 47 Camilla Fojas, *Border Bandits*, cit., p. 2.
- 48 On this aspect, see Michael Peter Smith, Matt Bakker, *Citizenship across Borders: The Political Transnationalism of El Migrante*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 2008.
- 49 Adrián Pérez-Melgosa, *Cinema and Inter-American Relations*, cit., p. 143. The all-encompassing category of *latino* or Hispanic is problematic when applied to subjects with diverse backgrounds; furthermore, the critics’ discourse significantly overlooks the subjects who identify with Chicano culture, whose deconstruction of current ideas of “nation” is even more radical.
- 50 Stuart Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*, cit., p. 137.