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Tijuana Desenmascarada

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The principal trope in artistic, cultural, and intellectual representations of Tijuana is space: spaces of the border, spaces of xenophobia, and spaces of liminality. In a nineteen-thirties documentary film of a US border patrol around Tijuana, two policemen are seen driving their vehicle into the desert. They stop at a pure white column, resembling an Egyptian obelisk but inscribed with the words "US-Mexico Border." They proceed to traverse the desert spaces on foot, occasionally dropping on one knee to inspect the sand for traces of *illegales*, *mojados*. They are like Indian scouts fleetingly the center of attention in a Western movie. Cut to a commercial silent movie, *Licking the Greasers* (also known as *Shorty's Trip to Mexico*). Here, *yanqui* cowboys rescue Shorty's (Mexican) girlfriend. As they hightail it for home, they pass by the same white, border-defining obelisk and they are safe once again. The famous monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* could not be a more potent symbol of spatial order and fealty.

Globalspace



During the past 150 years, political and economic relations between the US and Mexico have been characterized by an ever-increasing integration. The nineteenth-century preindustrial period witnessed a border urbanization principally in centers that had been established under eighteenth-century Spanish rule, **[End Page 211]** including Ciudad Juárez and San Diego. The growth impetus later spread to nineteenth-century towns established as civil centers and forts under Mexican rule, including Tijuana in 1840. And finally, after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created the international boundary, it affected towns established as forts and supply stations (e.g. El Paso, Texas), and post-Civil War settlements such as Nogales (Arizona and Sonora), Tecate (Baja California) and San Ysidro (California).

Between the 1900s and 1960, the US economy moved rapidly toward industrialization,

and initial linkages with Mexico were based on agriculture and tourism. Industrial growth and urbanization in the South-West were rekindled after the Great Depression, and consolidated by the second World War. Another boom (this time in agricultural employment) was stimulated by the 1942 US Emergency Farm Labor Program, also known as the Bracero Program. At first, the program employed about 50,000 Mexican workers in US agriculture; by the time it ended (in 1964) over 4.6 million contracts had been issued. Entire neighborhoods sprang up in cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, based largely **[End Page 212]** on temporary residents. In the early fifties, Tijuana was reputedly the fastest growing city in Mexico. But in the recession following the Korean War, US unemployment rose and the government initiated "Operation Wetback" to return Mexican laborers to their homeland. Border cities grew at record levels as returning laborers resettled. In 1954 alone, over one million Mexican *braceros* were deported from the United States. During the sixties the global economy entered a period of economic restructuring, associated with international financial instability, the rise of competitive trading blocs, and the oil crises of 1973 and 1979. One of Mexico's responses to high unemployment was to initiate the Border Industrialization Project (BIP) which authorized the establishment of *maquiladoras* (assembly plants) in specially-designated zones. By 1992, there were over 2,000 such plants in Mexico, employing about half a million workers. ¹ Several drastic devaluations of the peso also affected the industrialization process, and Mexican wage levels tumbled relative to the US. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) simply confirmed what was obvious to most border mavens: the US and Mexican economies were increasingly being integrated and wired into the global economy. The spaces of the borderland became concrete manifestations of the emerging global space.

Localspace



Globalization can be traced in Tijuana's evolving urban form. The city's five principal ecologies are: cattle town, border town, tourist town, industrial town, and emergent metropolis. Prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Tijuana was simply the largest of a collection of cattle-ranching villages stretching across the Tijuana River valley in Alta California. The dominant force in the region was the mission system. The treaty changed all this; the development and settlement of northern Baja California became far more influenced by the US than by Mexico. Tijuana's transition from a cattle town to a truly urban settlement was fueled principally by the economic boom in late-nineteenth century Southern California. Two wealthy Mexican families living in California (the Arguello and Olvera clans) realized that they could take advantage of the region's growth by developing lands they owned in Tijuana. The first plan for Tijuana was created in 1889, modeled after the plan for Indianapolis. ² It **[End Page 213]** consisted of a regular grid layout sliced at intervals by diagonal boulevards reminiscent of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's plan for Washington D.C. and Georges Eugène Haussmann's for Paris. In the early decades of the twentieth century, real estate development was driven by the tourist economy, but only fitfully followed the formal plan structure. After 1916, when a racetrack was constructed less than one-quarter mile from the international border, Tijuana emerged as a playground for US visitors. Prohibition laws in the US (1919-29) led to what has been called the "golden era" of tourism. Downtown Tijuana became awash with gambling houses, bars, cabarets, and prostitution. Then in 1935

President Lázaro Cárdenas ordered all gambling establishments to close, but it was too late to break Tijuana's ties with the US. By 1950, the returning *braceros* had inflated the city's population to just under 60,000 people, more than tripling 1940 levels.

Between 1950 and 1980, Tijuana was one of the fastest-growing cities on the continent. By 1980, it had over 700,000 inhabitants, almost half of Baja California's population. About two-thirds of this growth was due to migration from the Mexican interior. Development was propelled by the expansion and diversification of the region's economic base, principally through the BIP-inspired [End Page 214] *maquiladora* expansion. (Tijuana went on to employ almost two-third of Baja's *maquila* workers.) Other government programs provided further impetus, including the National Border Program (PRONAF) which was designed to beautify border cities in order to attract tourists. The Mesa de Otay industrial park just to the east of Tijuana was one such development; the redevelopment of the city's flood-prone River Zone was another. Set alongside these government and private sector economic development programs was the explosion of spontaneous *colonias populares*--irregular housing settlements established by newly-arriving residents who could not afford the high rents in serviced portions of the urbanized area. By the mid-eighties, Tijuana and neighboring San Diego had effectively become a single functional urban region. San Diego was a sprawling, decentralized metropolis of two million inhabitants. Tijuana had a population of one million, its residents largely concentrated within approximately eight miles of the city center. Whereas San Diego's suburban expansion was relatively orderly, Tijuana's peripheral expansion was chaotic and dense.

Nevertheless, a symbiotic pairing was established, as it was in twin cities elsewhere along the border (e.g. Brownsville-Matamoros, Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, and El Paso-Ciudad Juárez). As Larry Herzog observed, these "transfrontier" metropolises embraced two contradictory dynamics: "the traditional cities, as defined by national culture, and the integrated metropolis, defined by evolving social, cultural, and economic processes that connect the United States and Mexico across the border on a daily basis."³ It is hard to predict which of these two cultures (national or migrant) will prevail, but Tijuana is already the most heavily trafficked border crossing in the world--about fifty million people make the crossing legally each year.

Filmspace/Borderspace

The spaces of the border, *la frontera*, loom large in the history of Mexican cinema. In her definitive study of the border in Mexican movie-making, Norma Iglesias identifies the characteristic obsessions of *frontera* films: migration, agricultural work, drugs, undocumented workers, poverty, and racism.⁴ [End Page 215]

First Period: 1938-69

In early Mexican films, the border was referred to simply as a place of transit, and migration to the US became the central theme of movie-makers. The border was a place of danger, where hopes and lives could be realized or ruined. Images of loss and tragedy

were countered by movies with more assertive approaches to Mexican cultural identity and nationalism. Typical of these was *Primero soy mexicano* (1950, Joaquin Pardave), a comedy about cross-border relations, in which *un pocho* sings of his true identity:

Si me gustan los hot cakes Digo hello sin dar la mano Y aunque pida ham and eggs: !Primero soy mexicano!	Yes I like hot cakes I say hello without shaking hands And though I ask for ham and eggs I am a Mexican first and foremost!
No hot cakes, sino tortillas, Ham and eggs tampoco hermano; !Primero soy mexicano! De esos que hay para semilla.	No hotcakes, but rather tortillas, No ham and eggs either, bro' I am a Mexican first and foremost! A prototype for future generations
Ancho charro y no texano Guayabera y no chamarra; La moda a mi no me agrada !Primero soy mexicano!	A wide charro's sombrero and not a cowboy hat A guayabera and not a dress shirt Fashion means nothing to me I am a Mexican first and foremost!

Toward the end of this first period, Mexican filmmakers began to turn their attention to mimicking Hollywood westerns, which were to remain a popular staple of studio production until the late seventies.

Second period: 1970-78

Mexican political reforms (*apertura politica*) in the sixties and seventies introduced a new dynamic into the local movie industry. Most notable was the appearance of films concerned with Chicano political movements. Westerns remained popular, and the earliest films on drug trafficking appeared. If the previous period of frontier cinema in Mexico outlined its basic themes, the second defined with much greater clarity the erosion of national and cultural [End Page 216] identity associated with border cultures. To this extent, *el cine fronterizo* of the seventies foreshadowed the development of "cultural hybrids" that were to become a dominant characteristic of present-day Tijuana.

Third Period: 1979-89

In the last epoch identified by Iglesias, the border becomes predominantly a space where violent mythologies of the drug traffic are played out by *los hijos del contrabando* (or, the Contraband Kids). The period also witnessed the rise of the *sexy-comedia*, which poked fun at US immigration authorities, *la migra*. One such movie was *Mojado... pero caliente* (1988) which promised provocatively that "to be a wetback (*mojado*) is ... Hot!" ⁵ A further thematic variation is the elevation of the tragic potential of the border spaces. The honorable struggles of poor people to improve their lives are presented against a backdrop of desperation, stoicism, God, and death.

El otro lado: Hollywood Vistas



In Mexican cinema, the border hothouse produced a delirium of otherness with its own distinctive aesthetic. In contrast, Hollywood cinema tended to view Mexico and the border as an endless repository for cowboy and comedic adventures, at least until *Touch of Evil* (1958, Orson Welles). For the most part, it still does. But Welles's classic film noir altered this perspective irrevocably. Adopting fairly conventional narratives of corruption, xenophobia, justice, and betrayal, Welles conjures up a dark borderscape of claustrophobic intensity. Nicholas Christopher stressed that the "city as labyrinth" was the key to entering the psychological and aesthetic frameworks of film noir. ⁶ Welles represents the labyrinth both literally and metaphorically on the screen. The actual border is almost never visualized, as characters amble, stumble, and run through anonymous streets. Janet Leigh, playing wife to Charlton Heston's Mexican cop, is literally led into an urban labyrinth for a fateful meeting with an underworld leader. Later, she is again led (this time unwittingly by her husband) to a deserted desert motel where, in scenes shot with equivalent claustrophobic **[End Page 217]** intensity, she is drugged and sexually compromised. And over everything looms the enormous figure of Welles himself, playing the corrupt detective Hank Quinlan. It is Quinlan who defines what passes as law in the city; it is Quinlan who casts the metaphorical shadow of a bloated northern neighbor across the border into Mexico.

Another paradigmatic moment in Hollywood's frontera history is *El Norte* (1985, Gregory Nava), which is actually about a Guatemalan brother and sister who depart for Los Angeles to escape political persecution. However, the movie's pivotal moments take place in Tijuana, where the couple patiently, desperately attempt to arrange an illegal border crossing. They finally cross over after a harrowing journey through rat-infested pipelines, an experience which ultimately has tragic consequences after the couple arrive in LA. More recently, Nava continued his bittersweet exploration of the immigrant experience in *Mi Familia* (1996). Still, Hollywood has almost invariably viewed the border as a source of humor and buffoonery. In *Three Amigos!* (1986, John **[End Page 218]** Landis), a group of Hollywood Western movie has-beens (played by Steve Martin, Chevy Chase, and Martin Short) are offered good money to strut their stuff in a Mexican village. Only later do they discover that they will be expected to take on a vicious bandit who is terrorizing the village. Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.* (1987) satirizes border life in Tijuana and LA, discovering Mensa-levels of stupidity on each side as well as (naturally enough) redeeming doses of homespun humanity. More "serious" Hollywood westerns have blazed adventuresome trails into Mexico ever since Shorty went looking for his girl. Popular themes include saving a beautiful woman (e.g. *The Professionals*, 1966, Richard Brooks); escape from the law (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969, George Roy Hill); mercenary battles (Sam Peckinpah's definitive *The Wild Bunch*, 1969, and John Sturges's equally canonical *The Magnificent Seven*, 1960); and law enforcement (*The Border*, 1982, Tony Richardson) In most of these movies, the border is little more than a narrative convenience, unless it affords the opportunity for some spectacular diversion (such as fording a rain-swollen Rio Grande, or mounting an ambush).

Thirdspace: Culturas Híbridas

Imperceptibly and almost without comment, Tijuana has emerged as the second largest city on the western seaboard of North and Central America. It has done this through a fortuitous combination of proximity to a booming Southern California plus some homegrown political and economic strategies to encourage economic development. Now, as the world's attention shifts from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, Tijuana's global connections will likely ensure that the city plays a significant role in the emerging Pacific century. At the same time, this openness to global trends has turned Baja California into a leading center of political ferment in Mexico. ⁷ Commercial cinema on both sides of the border will take several years to catch up with the rapidly changing political, economic, and social scene in Tijuana. In contrast, independent filmmakers have already documented the sea-changes in Baja (so, too, have Mexican writers and intellectuals). For instance, Frank Christopher's *The New Tijuana* (1990) is an insightful overview of political ferment in the *colonias*: poverty alongside great wealth, the rise of the *maquiladoras*, the love-hate relationship with *gringo* tourists, and the urban redevelopment of the downtown and River Zone. **[End Page 219]**



Even more compelling is the evocative vision of border history in *Fronterilandia* (Jesse Lerner and Rubén Ortiz Torres, 1995). In a lyrical juxtaposing of current fears about lost cultural identity and the Disneyfication of Tijuana, Lerner and Ortiz Torres identify a second key trope in the burgeoning border vocabulary: the cultural hybrid. Cultural production in present-day Baja California is a consequence of the tensions between the twin poles of Los Angeles and Mexico City, with Tijuana as their fulcrum. According to Néstor García Canclini, two tendencies embody the hybridization process: dislocation and deterritorialization, the former linked to migration, the latter to globalization. ⁸ As a consequence, the paradigmatic emblem of contemporary border environments is the production of *culturas híbridas*. Tijuana, in Canclini's terms, is one of the major laboratories of postmodernity. It is emblematic of Homi Bhaba's "thirdspace," the liminal location between cultures. Guillermo Gómez-Peña speaks of the Tijuana-San Diego border as "the gap between two worlds" ⁹ --a metaphor for many things, including a literal crossing, a spiritual passage, and a place for struggle and transgression. Debra Castillo has captured the essence of the dynamic of hybrid cultures: the potential for crossing, or not crossing, to the other side is a **[End Page 220]** constant presence in border-dwellers' lives. ¹⁰ An alternative mental cartography is thus being invented at the hybrid borderspaces. In it, national and regional identities, as well as other elements of cultural conditioning, are brought into question. Federico Campbell's writings are permeated by the enduring contradictions of Tijuana: between "land and sea, United States and Mexico, fence and shoreline, English-speakers and Spanish-speakers." ¹⁰ Borderspaces are places where hybrid cultures are being constructed between global and local spaces, and nourished in the liminal spaces of otherness. In the works of independent filmmakers, we glimpse the unmasking of Tijuana as a future world city.

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Notes

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- [2.](#) David Piñera Ramírez, ed., *Historia de Tijuana* (Tijuana: Universidad Autonoma de Baja California, 1985).
- [3.](#) Lawrence Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, & Politics on the U.S. Border* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1990) and *Changing Boundaries in the Americas* (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1992).
- [4.](#) Norma Iglesias, *Entre Yerba Polvo y Plomo: Lo Fronterizo visto por el cine Mexicano*, vol. 1 (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1991a) and *Entre Yerba Polvo y Plomo: Directorio de Pélculas Fronterizas*, vol. 2 (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1991b).
- [5.](#) Norma Iglesias, vol. 1, 50.
- [6.](#) Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: The Free Press, 1997).
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- [8.](#) Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- [9.](#) Rouse, Roger, "Mexican Migration and the Space of Postmodernism" in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, ed. David G. Gutiérrez (Wilmington: Jaguar Books), 247-63.
- [10.](#) Debra A. Castillo, "Borderlining: An Introduction" in Federico Campbell, *Tijuana* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 1-26.
- [11.](#) Federico Campbell, *Tijuana* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).