CHAPTER SIX

" 'Una herida que no cicatriza':[1] The Border as Interethnic Space in Mexican, American and Chicano Cinema"

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Taking as a starting point Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa's resonant description of the border as a wound that does not heal, this essay explores the ways in which American, Mexican and Chicano directors have presented the border in their films. US directors, with some notable exceptions such as independent director John Sayles, have typically portrayed the border as necessary for national security and preserving the American way of life. Mexicans, on the other hand, have perceived the border in distinctly negative terms, as a site of violence and exploitation, although it is not a subject that is often dealt with. Chicano directors, who cannot define themselves in terms of a national identity, have a rather more ambivalent view of the border. The term Chicano is a rather controversial one that requires some elucidation. The term is not synonymous with Mexican-American, for to call oneself Chicano is to suggest a political as well as an ethnic or cultural identity, as Gutiérrez asserts:

> Long used as a slang or pejorative in-group reference to lower-class persons of Mexican descent, in the 1960s the term Chicano was adopted by young Mexican Americans as an act of defiance and self-assertion and as an attempt to redefine themselves by criteria of their own choosing. Similar to the dynamics involved in the shift from Negro to black as the preferred self-referent of young African Americans that was taking place about the same time, young Mexican Americans soon adopted the term Chicano as a powerful symbolic code. The term implied pride in the Mexican cultural heritage of the Southwest and symbolized solidarity against what Chicano activists argued was a history of racial oppression and discrimination at the hands of Anglo Americans.[2]

This definition makes clear the identity conflict associated with belonging to this group, and it is not surprising that films made by Chicano directors about the border very often use this conflict as a trope to examine the difficulties of living between US and Mexican cultures.

Within the three categories of films dealing with the border that are examined here, there is considerable variation. Mexican director Alejandro Galindo's *Espaldas Mojadas*[3] (1953) is, despite its main function as anti-immigration propaganda, a relatively sympathetic look at the life of an illegal immigrant. Mexican director Arturo Ripstein's *La ilegal*[4] and Tony Richardson's *The Border* (both 1979), in contrast, are commercial films that use the border as a lurid backdrop. Chicano filmmakers both address the contentious issues of exploitation, exclusion and conflict at the border and attempt to overturn border stereotypes. The Chicano films assessed here, Gregory Nava's *El Norte*[5] (1983), Cheech Marin's *Born in East L.A.* (1987), Luis Valdez's crossover hit *La Bamba*[6] (1987) and John Carlos Frey's *The Gatekeeper* (2002) all attempt to assess and revise clichéd, racist views of the border region. The ways in which these Chicano films have shaped a more thoughtful view of the border is considered in relation to a more recent American film, John Sayles's *Lone Star* (1995), and Mexican director María Novaro's *El jardín del Eden*[7] (1994). Mexican director Sergio Arau's *A Day Without a Mexi*can (2004) and US director Steven Soderberg's *Traffic* (2000) will also be discussed as examples of films that seek to negotiate issues of difference and accommodation between Americans, Mexicans and Chicanos.

The description of the border that informs the title of this essay is taken from Anzaldúa's seminal study *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which is itself a hybrid that combines critical commentary with personal recollections and observations. Anzaldúa's text focuses on the border as the locus of the divisions and complexities that crystallize the different attitudes towards Mexicans and Chicanos in the US. Her idea of the border as a physical wound that cannot heal not only suggests the trauma and indeed physical violence very often associated with crossing the border from Mexico to the US, but also underlines the fact that the cyclical nature of this immigration means that this process will continue and find little resolution. The problematic nature of living between two cultures is summarised by Anzaldúa as follows:

> *Nosotros los Chicanos*[8] straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos' incessant clamouring so that we forget our language. Among ourselves we don't say *nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos*.[9] We say *nosotros los mexicanos* [10](by *mexicanos* we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between *mexicanos del otro lado* and *mexicanos de este lado*.[11] Deep in our hearts, we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul-not one of the mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders.[12]

This view that the border is not worthy of being recognised by Mexicans or Chicanos stems from the unique history of Mexicans in the US. In the wake of the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, and the subsequent annexation of over half of Mexico's territories by the US government, Mexicans became a subaltern group overnight and became subject to a hostility based on racial conflict that lasted throughout the Depression and the Good Neighbour Policy of World War II to the present day.[13] It is unsettling to note how little the negative attitudes on the part of many North Americans towards Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have changed since the 19th century. Huse, who settled in Santa Barbara in the 1850s, wrote in his diary that the Mexicans in the town were "the dregs of society" and that:

> The greatest part of the population is lazy, does not work, does not pay its debts, does not keep its word, is full of envy, of ill will, of cunning, craft and fraud, falsehood and ignorance.[14]

The failure of a Spanish-language version of his newspaper, the *Santa Barbara Gazette*, led him to reflect that:

> They are habitually and universally opposed to all progress whatsoever, and … they look with decided disfavour upon every innovation which tends in the slightest degree to alter the old hereditary regime and policy which existed under the Mexican government.[15]

This rather defensive view on the failure of a newspaper, which could perhaps have been doomed by his own attitudes to his target audience, is echoed in the suspicion evident in a 1986 special report by the Council for Inter-American Security on the proposed English Language Amendment, which sought to introduce bilingual education in US schools:

> Hispanics in America today represent a very dangerous, subversive force that is bent on taking over our nation's political institutions for the purpose of imposing Spanish as the official language of the United States.[16]

Throughout the 20th century, such negative attitudes towards Mexico prevailed in the media. Former CIA director William Colby declared that Mexican immigration posed a greater threat to the nation than the Soviet Union, while President Reagan spoke of "millions of feet people" invading the country by crossing the border.[17] Citing a poll conducted in 1990 in which American citizens suggested that sixty percent of Hispanics were unpatriotic and that over fifty percent of the same group was unintelligent, lazy and prone to violence, Vélez-Ibáñez asserts that these attitudes reflect the presence of new borders. He adds that: "When such borders are present to

be 'distributed' among Mexican youngsters, their psychological and cultural impact is tragically felt."[18]

Mexico, meanwhile, continues to display an ambivalent attitude both to the Mexican diaspora in the US and to emigration in general. Nobel laureate Octavio Paz's chapter on the *pachuco*[19] in his influential study of Mexican identity, *El laberinto de la soledad*,[20] has done his reputation much damage for its utterly racist and dismissive attitudes towards Chicanos.[21] He suggests that the *pachuco*, an extremely derogative term, is defined by cultural emptiness, as he both rejects Mexico, his culture of origin, and cannot truly belong to the US. He is thus characterised by emptiness and defiance. Paz concedes that this situation may be the result of some trauma, but he expresses no interest in what that trauma may be nor in whether it may be resolved. This ambivalence towards Chicanos is not unique to Paz. For centuries, Mexican officials have sought to dissuade its citizens from travelling to the US illegally or have generally ignored what was considered to be a national embarrassment. Despite the official discomfort with emigration, however, the lure of the North has remained virtually untarnished. In *Crossing Over*, an account of the fortunes of one Mexican family that tries to enter the United States illegally, Martínez notes that the promise of the American Dream and the reality that the border is permeable prove irresistible attractions to impoverished Mexicans despite the dangers they face by crossing illegally:

> The migrants continue to cross, because ideals of paradise die hard, especially for Mexicans, who for several decades have regarded the Rio Grande as a river of life more than of death …They continue to cross despite the tragedies and despite Operation Gatekeeper because the odds remain in their favor. To truly "hold the line," as American politicians say, the United States would have to spend hundreds of billions of dollars … to either build the Great Wall of America or amass all along the line … thousands of troops and all manner of physical obstacles, weaponry, and technology.[22]

Cinematic portrayals of emigration have been rare in Mexican cinema until recent times. The one notable exception to this tendency towards silence on a pivotal issue affecting millions of Mexicans is Galindo's *Espaldas mojadas* (1953). This explicitly cautionary tale about the dangers and disappointments of emigration echoes the government's efforts to dissuade Mexicans from illegal border crossings. Its anti-emigration bias is clear from the outset, as the action of the film is preceded by what is called an Important Warning:

> Nuestro propósito es advertir a nuestros conacionales de la inconveniencia de tratar de abandonar al país en forma ilegal, con el riesgo de sufrir situaciones

> molestas y dolorosas que podían hasta crear dificultades en las buenas relaciones que venturosamente existen entre ambos pueblos.[23]

In the establishing shot, the physical and psychological distance between the US and Mexico is emphasised by a voiceover that accompanies the camera as it pans from the border town of Ciudad Juárez to El Paso:

> De este lado es México, donde todavía se habla en español y se canta a la Virgen con guitarras. Allá, al otro lado, los rascacielos, símbolo arquitectónico del país más poderoso del mundo, donde todos sus habitantes tienen automóvil, radio y televisión.[24]

Although the US clearly wins out in the creature comfort stakes, the superiority of Mexico as a country with a vibrant culture, a distinctive language and a strong religious tradition is strongly suggested. This idea that Mexicans would only ever leave Mexico because of economic advancement is further underlined in a sequence in which a would-be immigrant who is shot by the border patrol insists on being thrown back into the river so that he can die in Mexico.

Espaldas Mojadas was such a success that Galindo made a follow-up in 1977 called simply *Mojados*.[25] As well as noting the public-service dimension of these films, Ramírez-Berg points out that:

> They never resolve and seldom address the central tension they expose: the Mexican peasant lives in a vise (sic), squeezed between starvation at home and exploitation in the United States. Instead, they externalise the problem, ignoring the internal causes of migration.[26]

Not all Mexican films took the subject of the border this seriously. Some, such as Ripstein's *La ilegal* (1979), were formulaic exploitation movies that used the border as the backdrop for sensational melodrama. Here, the protagonist, Claudia Bernal, goes to the US to join her married Mexican lover, who is the father of her child. When his wife manages to persuade him that Claudia is a prostitute, they have her deported and steal her baby. Claudia is forced to return to the US and endure countless humiliations, including working as a dancer in a sleazy bar just across the US border, until she is reunited with her child and can return to Mexico.

In a scene that purportedly demonstrates the humiliation she suffers as an illegal immigrant, Claudia is shown dancing in the bar, dressed in spandex trousers, to the accompaniment of a song called "Who Will Buy my Apples Tonight?" This scene fails to communicate the idea of a degrading ordeal, however, as Claudia appears to thoroughly enjoy the bawdy attention she gets from the drunken, largely male audience. Moreover, Ripstein notes in an

interview with film critic Emilio García Riera, that he had wanted Lucía Méndez, the well-known television actress who plays Claudia, to perform a striptease in this scene in order to underline the exploitation she endures, but that as spandex trousers were, in her opinion, a crucial part of her image, she refused to abandon her signature look. He adds that this is also the reason why, in a previous scene, she crosses the Rio Grande wearing stiletto heels.[27] The director's voluminous discussion of the details of the actress's wardrobe in an interview where he never once mentions the significance of the border in his film underlines the fact that this was a star vehicle that used the border as a shorthand for exploitation and drama, without seriously considering the plight of illegal immigrants. The resolution of the film, which sees Claudia fall in love with a protective Mexican lawyer who delivers her from her irregular status and returns her baby to her, adds to the melodrama of the script and underscores its escapist, sentimental treatment of its subject matter.

In a similar vein, Richardson's *The Border* (1979) exploits every possible negative cliché about the border to add titillation to the improbable tale of a Border Patrol guard called Charlie, played by Jack Nicholson, who despite being a wife beater and taking bribes to supply illegal workers to local businesses, is seen as the saviour of a recently arrived Mexican immigrant, María, whose baby has been stolen by corrupt Mexicans. In defiance of the laws of both nations, he gives María and her brother Juan money to pay a *coyote*[28] to transport them across the border so that she can recover her child. María responds to this offer with incomprehension at first, then sends her brother out of their makeshift home and begins to disrobe, assuming that Charlie will want something in return for his help. He refuses to take advantage of the situation, however:

> Charlie: No. no, no, no, no. No, *señora*, no. You don't owe me anything.
> María: *¿Por qué me ayuda? ¿Por qué?*[29]
> Charlie: I want to feel good about something some time. And, ah, 'cos you have to find your kid and you can't do it alone. You don't understand anything I'm saying, do you?

As this scene makes clear, María, her brother and the other Mexicans in the film are not, in fact, its focus. As Maciel puts it:

> *The Border* is nothing more than a vehicle for the acting talent and star power of Jack Nicholson. The narrative and the supporting actors are all secondary to a typical Nicholson characterisation of contemporary man-at odds with the values and corruption of the system-who has to make a choice between good and evil, accommodation or resistance, complacency or turmoil.[30]

Moreover, in presenting María as an uncomprehending, helpless figure who must be rescued by a benevolent Westerner, the film replicates stereotypes of powerless Latinos established in films such as *The Mission* and, most notably, *The Magnificent Seven*, which, as Coyne observes, attempts to be a revisionist Western but:

> Still constructed American national identity in white and male terms, and remained chiefly preoccupied with home-grown components of American experience.[31]

Nava's *El Norte* (1983), by way of contrast, is a film by a Chicano director that seriously engages with the issues and conflicts relating to the border and border crossings. Nava's film is best known for its portrayal of a lengthy border crossing through a disused sewer that has harrowing consequences for its protagonists, Rosa and Enrique, a brother and sister fleeing US-backed political oppression in their native Guatemala. The film's greatest achievement is the way in which Nava keenly observes the limitations of the American Dream by examining how borders continue to exist for the pair even after they have settled in the US. In a humorous but ultimately poignant sequence, Enrique learns that Chicanos cannot escape the prejudice their Mexican heritage arouses, while Rosa discovers that being in the US does not mean living with Americans.

Enrique's co-worker, Jorge, mocks a bus boy called Carlos for not speaking English, despite his Mexican heritage, calling him a *pocho*, a word that Enrique has never heard:

> Enrique: ¿Y qué es un pocho?
> Jorge: Un Chicano.
> Enrique: ¿Cómo, Chicano?
> Jorge: Pues, es ciudadano americano, pero tiene familia que viene de México. Por eso tiene que hacer la misma mierda de trabajo que nosotros.[32]

Immediately after this exchange, the camera pans through a Mexican neighbourhood of Los Angeles, where Rosa has lunch with her friend Nacha and is struck by the absence of North Americans:

> Rosa: Nacha, ¿Tú sabes dónde están los gringos? Mira la calle no más. Igualito que en México, que lo dicen.
> Nacha: Ay, Dios, tú no crees que los gringos van a querer vivir con los mexicanos, ¿verdad? No. Ellos viven allá en sus colonias.[33]

Marin's *Born in East L.A* (1987) similarly uses humour to deconstruct the immigrant experience. In this film, the protagonist Rudy is mistakenly deported and forced to undergo a transformative odyssey that leads him to

appreciate his Mexican roots. One of his numerous attempts at crossing back into the US involves him stowing away in the camper van of a seemingly respectable, middle-aged American couple, who are revealed to be smuggling large quantities of drugs over the border. Here, the stereotypes of Chicanos as drug-dealing criminals and Americans as virtuous and law-abiding are subverted. Ultimately, Rudy, who has displayed considerable ambivalence towards his Mexican heritage, returns home and learns to appreciate both sides of his culture.

In the same way, Valdez's *La Bamba* (1987), the most commercially successful Chicano film to date, features a journey south that has a positive effect on a Chicano character who has previously dismissed his Mexican heritage. *La Bamba* has been lambasted by numerous critics for being an uncritical celebration of a Chicano's quest to achieve the American Dream. Shohat and Stam argue that: "In *La Bamba*, the class ascendancy of the Chicano character lends allegorical spice to the American dream."[34] Such interpretations fail to appreciate the fact that Valdez has transcended binary oppositions of Mexican and American, assimilated and authentic, or *gringo* and greaser, to create a parable that exemplifies the ways in which both cultures can come together in ways that create a new and unique Other that draws from the best aspects of both. This exchange is exemplified in Ritchie's visit to a Mexican brothel, where he hears the song that will become his crossover hit for the first time.

What these films display is a much more multifaceted view of the border regions that goes beyond the stereotypes of crime, exploitation and law enforcement to consider the complex issue of the negative and positive results of cultural exchange. These tendencies have continued to be developed in two films that appear to have been inspired by these Chicano directors' varied and thoughtful responses to the borderlands. The opening scene from Mexican director Novaro's *El jardin del Eden* (1994) shows a Chicana named Liz who is insecure about her Mexican heritage and has moved to Tijuana to stage an alternative art exhibition that showcases some of the contradictions and frustrations of living between cultures. In one of the exhibits, we hear a man recite a passage in Spanish-accented English: "I speak Spanish therefore you hate me. I speak English therefore they hate me. I speak *Spanglish* therefore they all hate me."

This parody of a grammar drill highlights the tensions and cultural divisions created by language, one of the key markers of cultural difference, and sets the scene for a drama that explores the cultural conflicts that result from the engagement of Mexican, Chicano and American cultures at the border. Sayles' *Lone Star* (1995), which is also set in a border town called Frontera, focuses on a sheriff called Sam Deeds, the son of deceased legendary sheriff Buddy Deeds, who through his investigation of an unsolved murder learns a great deal about his own identity. The film is structured

around a series of discussions and debates that demonstrate the racial tensions in a town where the ascendant Mexican population is gaining control over the power structures that were previously the preserve of white North Americans. In one such scene, Sam has a conversation with a disgruntled bar tender:

> Bar tender: Now, I'm as liberal as the next guy…
> Sam: If the next guy's a red neck.
> Bar tender: But I gotta say, I think there's something to this cold climate business. You go to the beach, what do you do? You drink a few beers, wait for that fish to flop up on the sand. You can't build no civilisation that way. But you got a cold winter coming on, you gotta plan ahead. And that gives your old cerebral cortex a workout.
> Sam: Good thing you were born down here then.
> Bar tender: You joke about it, Sam, but we are in a state of crisis. The lines of demarcation are getting fuzzy. To run a successful civilisation, you have got to have your lines of demarcation, between right and wrong, between this 'un and that 'un. Your daddy understood that. He was a, what do you call it, referee in this damn *menudo*[35] we got down here. He understood how most folks don't want their salt and sugar in the same jar.
> Sam: Boy, if you mixed your drinks as bad as you mix your metaphors, you'd be out of a job.
> Bar tender: You're the last white sheriff this town's going to see. Hollis retires next year. Jorge Guerra's going to take over. This is it, right here, Sam. This bar is the last stand. *Se habla* American Goddamit!

The late 1990s and early 21st century saw few films that dealt with the issue of the border in a serious manner. Arau's *Como agua para chocolate*, the 1991 crossover hit of Mexican cinema, was set on the US-Mexican border, yet, like *Gone With The Wind*, to which it has often been compared, it focuses on the story of star-crossed lovers far more than on its location. The border is barely mentioned in *Como agua para chocolate*, except in a subtitle that establishes the location of a sequence in the film, so that the effect is one of adding local colour to a film that revels in the presentation of Mexican gastronomic delights at the expense of any sustained social or historical commentary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this appealing version of a Mexico whose only conflicts are romantic ones remains one of the most successful foreign-language films in the US, grossing over $19 million by 1993.[36]

Another film that met with great success with Mexican audiences was Serrano's *Sexo pudor y lágrimas* (1998),[37] described by King as: "A slick bedroom comedy about the disintegrating relationships of modern couples."[38] Here, the focus is resolutely on the Mexican middle class and their romantic lives, as is the case in another late 1990s box-office hit, Montero's *Cilantro y perejil* (1997).[39] The latter centres on the disruptions caused by a couple's separation before their eventual reconciliation. Ostensibly a romantic

comedy, it is a moralistic and didactic film that seeks to communicate the evils of divorce. The single reference to the border here occurs when a psychologist bemoans the negative influence that US values have had on Mexican society. Furthermore, the two greatest box-office and critical successes both in Mexico and internationally in recent years, Iñárritu's *Amores perros* (2000) and Cuaron's *Y tu mamá también* (2001), while stylistically and technically innovative, again concentrated on domestic issues rather than on the Mexican diaspora or US-Mexican relations.

The only notable Mexican film in recent years to deal seriously with the US-Mexican border is Arau's *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004). Although this film is more concerned with the contribution of Mexicans to the US labour market than with the border region per se, it does feature numerous sequences dealing with the role of the Border Patrol, as well as a memorable protest by Anglo-Americans who seek to stop immigration. These protests are led by George McClaire, who outlines the concerns of his group to a TV reporter as follows:

> We are Americans. Simply defending our land and our values from those who would cross that border. Without permission. White people are disappearing and it's our country. They come here, take our jobs and get on welfare and bring their drugs into this country and steal. Steal our way of life.

Another reporter in the film, Lila Rodríguez, who takes the unlikely professional name of Lyla Rod in a bid to avoid being pigeonholed as a Latina, becomes the focus of the rest of the film, as she appears to be the only Latina who does not disappear. Much of the appeal of *A Day Without a Mexican* lies in the way that, through the blending of a quasi-documentary style with the science fiction genre, it manages simultaneously to entertain and inform in a manner very similar to that adopted by Marin in *Born in East L.A.* The film is ultimately a comedy that uses the science-fiction paradigm to great effect, literally depicting Mexicans as aliens in order, paradoxically, to underline their humanity rather than their otherness and make a strong argument for their right to be treated with respect in their adopted land. The film has, perhaps predictably, garnered vitriolic responses from the Right-wing U.S media. A reviewer in the *National Review* is typical in his sarcastic response, which outlines ideas for scripts inspired by the film:

> How about a movie titled *A Day Without Los Estados Unidos*, in which Mexicans wake up one morning to find that the continent ends at the Rio Grande? They have no market for their goods, nowhere to export their surplus rural poor, and no one but themselves to blame for the corrupt, decrepit state of their government and economy.[40]

Such defensive responses to the film fail to engage with the issues the film raises–the valuable work provided by Mexicans, their racist treatment at the hands of many Americans, and the absolute refusal of many to recognise their presence except as a statistical problem that should be sent back to Mexico, a view clearly shared by the reviewer cited above.

Frey's *The Gatekeeper* (2002) is a notable contribution to Chicano filmmaking on the border. In a scenario that reprises the story of Richardson's *The Border* to a large extent, this film focuses on a disillusioned Border Patrol officer, Adam Fields, played by Frey. His situation is complicated by the fact that his hatred of illegal immigrants is partly the product of his own identity crisis as a Mexican-American who is deeply ashamed of his ethnicity and goes to great lengths to conceal it. As the film opens, he is seen to deliberately shoot an illegal immigrant who attempts to escape capture by the Border Patrol, an offence for which he is reprimanded and suspended from duty for three days. Fields is engaged to an American woman and appears to be more interested in using her to assimilate into mainstream society than in the relationship itself. His racist views find their clearest expression in a scene in which he dines at her family's home:

> I'm a little fed up with the fact that it is illegal to be in this country without proper documentation and we as Americans do absolutely nothing about it. I think it's about time that we get the word out.

Fields' problems in both his career and his personal life become a crisis when he is summoned to the bedside of his dying mother, whose existence he has ignored for ten years. Angry at what he sees as the ineptitude of the Border Patrol and utterly conflicted about his own ethnicity, he engages in a plot by a far-Right group called National Patrol to tape an illegal border crossing by Mexicans, posing as an illegal immigrant himself, so as to provide evidence of how great a threat this group poses to the US. This plan goes badly wrong when he is captured by people traffickers and forced to engage in drug manufacture, along with a group of real illegal immigrants. The story here is a much more sombre version of Marin's border odyssey, as Fields learns first hand about exploitation and racism and consequently comes to reevaluate and accept his own Mexican-American identity.

The recipient of four Oscars in 2001, Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2001) was celebrated as a key film dealing with the US-Mexican border through its exploration of what is commonly termed the drug crisis. Its tripartite structure follows three separate narratives. The first is the story of newly appointed US drug czar Judge Robert Wakefield, who resigns soon after the discovery that his 16-year-old daughter is addicted to freebase cocaine. The second narrative follows Helena Ayala, the wife of a wealthy businessman, Carlos Ayala, who is revealed to be a major drug dealer indebted to the Obregón

brothers of the Tijuana drug cartel. Prompted by threats that her young son will be harmed if she does not address her husband's $3 million debt, she herself becomes a drug trafficker. The final narrative is set south of the border. General Salazár, while ostensibly engaged in the war against drugs in much the same capacity as Judge Wakefield, is an utterly corrupt figure. Honest anti-drug policeman Javier Rodríguez Rodríguez and his partner Manolo are drawn into the General's web. When Manolo crosses the General by trying to sell information gleaned through his work with him, he is executed, leaving Javier to defeat the General's regime.

Even this very general summary suggests the complexity of the plot, which deals far more with the US than it does with Mexico. Although Buscombe makes the following observations about Western films that feature Americans who travel to Mexico, he could have been writing about *Traffic's* US-centred view of drugs and the border:

> Mapped on to the clash between the traditional and the modern is another: the opposition of emotion and intellect. It's as though the map of North America were anthropomorphised-at the top is the head, seat of rational thought; below the belt are raging passions. Mexicans are headstrong, driven by elemental forces of love, hate and revenge. They laugh a lot, they sing a lot, they die a lot. By contrast, the men from the north are in control, both of themselves and of the Mexicans they have come to help.[41]

The Mexico presented by Soderbergh marks little evolution from the patronising, US-centred scenarios that featured decades before in Westerns, despite the fact that *Traffic* makes a valiant attempt to convey the complexity of the drug problem. The three interwoven stories take the viewer from Capitol Hill to San Diego to Tijuana and even Mexico City in a bid to show its wide-reaching implications. It features both major Mexican cartels, the Obregón-controlled Tijuana cartel and the Juarez cartel led by Porfirio Madrigal. Despite the film's inclusion of locations both north and south of the border and its panoply of characters, it remains predominantly focused on the US and views the drug problem as a crisis for the American family.

This focus is emphasised long before Judge Wakefield learns of his daughter's addiction. In his first press encounter after being appointed drug czar, he is asked why the drug problem is so important and he replies: "Because it's an issue that affects all families." Throughout the film, Judge Wakefield represents the US judicial system, which is seen to be scrupulously honest and generally composed of individuals who are motivated by justice rather than self-interest. Wakefield informs himself of the gravity of the drug problem by travelling to the US-Mexican border and taking a tour of the grandly abbreviated EPIC (El Paso Intelligence Center), which gathers information on drug trafficking at the border. He is shocked to

learn that Mexico does not even have a drug czar, although soon after this General Salazár, who has already been introduced as a merciless torturer, becomes his counterpart south of the border.

Their meeting in Mexico illustrates the chasm between them. Salazár could not be more unlike the model of righteousness presented by the American government officials in the film. Wakefield does comment sardonically on the self-interest of those he meets in Washington, describing the city as: "Like Calcutta-you're surrounded by beggars, only these beggars are wearing fifteen hundred dollar suits, and they don't say please or thank you." Yet this quip, coupled with a suggestion by his predecessor that he has taken the position of drug czar in return for a later higher court appointment, are pale indications of impropriety when the US situation is compared to that of Mexico. Salazár proclaims to Javier that he longs to crush the Tijuana cartel, saying "Quiero chingar la cartel de Tijuana,"[42] using expletive language that is far removed from Wakefield's claim to want to wipe out drugs for the sake of the family. When they meet after Salazár's appointment, the differences between the men, and by extension their countries, are further underlined. Wakefield is unaware that Salazár's desire to wipe out the Tijuana cartel is the result of his employment by the rival Juarez cartel, and, ironically, he congratulates him on the good work he has done in attempting to defeat it. Even this unawareness on his part is a confirmation of his own high standards, as he himself would never consider engaging in such corruption. Moreover, he has already shown himself to be deeply committed to the treatment of drug addiction, and he is stunned into silence by Salazar's comments on this matter: "Treatment of addiction? Addicts treat themselves. They overdose, then there's one less to worry about."

Wakefield's deep belief in the importance of treating addiction is borne out when he addresses his first press conference as drug czar. He realises midway through a speech heavy with family-centred rhetoric that helping his daughter to recover from her addiction is more important to him than his high-ranking position:

> The war on drugs is a war that we have to win and a war that we can win. We have to win this war to save our most precious resource-our children. Sixty-eight million children have been targeted by those who perpetuate this war, and protecting these children must be priority number one. There has been progress and there has been failure, but where we have fallen short, I see not a problem, I see an opportunity, an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past while laying a foundation for the future. This takes not only new ideas but perseverance. This takes not only resources but courage, this takes not only government but families. I've laid out, I've laid out a ten-point plan that (long pause). I can't do this. If there is a war on drugs, then many of our own family members are the enemy, and I don't know how you wage war on your own family.

Wakefield, even while bowing out of his responsibilities as drug czar, is a noble, dignified figure who refuses to let his family suffer for his career. Salazár is an utterly corrupt despot whose duplicity speeds his downfall, as the truth about his war on the Tijuana drug cartel is exposed, and the young police officer Javier takes over from him. Javier is arguably the only positive Mexican character in the film. Although the corruption endemic in the police force means that he accepts bribes from members of the public, this transgression is somewhat mitigated by the fact that he earns only $316 per month. Moreover, he is suspicious of Salazár from the beginning of his dealings with him and is sickened by his violent methods.

Overall, however, while Soderbergh strives to achieve some balance in his depiction of the two nations, particularly through the introduction of this sympathetic character, he fails to present the full picture, as Richard Porton observes:

> While it would be silly to deny that Mexico is rife with corruption, the film, either wilfully or naively, sidesteps the long history of collusion between the American CIA and members of the Elite in Central America whose best interests are served by the efficient proliferation of their drugs.[43]

Certainly, Mexico and most other Latin American countries have granted the military virtually untrammelled influence in government, with disastrous consequences, but the US has very often supported these regimes. Salazár is not an unlikely figure given this history, but what is damaging in the film's contrasting of Wakefield and Salazár is that the US emerges as a bastion of decency and righteousness. The treachery and addiction that prove shocking there are not surprising south of the border, where it seems that no one is untainted by dishonesty and violence. Porton's comments about the lack of attention to US support of corrupt regimes in Latin America is not the only hollow note in the film, moreover. Wakefield's constant concern for the rehabilitation of drug addicts is not reflected in reality. The real-life drug czar of the Bush administration shows little concern for treating addicts, as Schlosser points out:

> Much like the previous baby-boomer who occupied the White House, Bush has taken great care to appear "tough" on drugs. His attorney general, John Ashcroft, has vowed to "escalate the war on drugs." His drug czar, John Walters, previously called for stiffening the criminal penalties for marijuana and has attacked drug treatment in words that bring to mind the late Harry J. Anslinger. Providing treatment to drug users, Walters argued, is "the latest manifestation of the liberals' commitment to a 'therapeutic state' in which government serves as the agent of personal rehabilitation." Instead of

> expanding drug treatment, the Bush administration plans to expand drug testing.[44]

The utopia suggested by Soderbergh's view of US drug enforcement agencies is a fantasy, therefore, and one against which Mexico cannot but be compared in a negative manner. Soderbergh was rightly applauded for what is a generally thoughtful consideration of the drug problem, but his view of Mexico unintentionally reinforces some of the most pernicious stereotypes that have dogged this nation since the invention of cinema.

The films discussed here evidence an engagement with the border that does not deal in facile oppositions but examines the historical, cultural and social tensions behind the prejudices carried by different communities about what they regard as the Other. Their focus on characters who are insecure and often confused about their own identities also suggests that borders can be internal as well as external, and that the line on a map is not a sufficient representation of the complexities of the divisions between cultures and peoples. I leave the final word on the subject to Guillermo Gómez-Peña, an alternative performance artist who has devoted much of his career to exploring representations of the border. Gómez-Peña captures the increasing complexity and pervasiveness of borders well when he says that: "For me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border within me, and I find new borders wherever I go."[45]