

SE HABLA ESPAÑOL: A CERTAIN TENDENCY IN THE WESTERN FILM¹

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All along this frontier the outlands of two countries come together to form a culturally sovereign province. [...] From the scrublands of South Texas and Cohauila to the fierce basins and ranges of the Big Bend and Chihuahua to the desert dunes of Arizona and Sonora, its people are mostly of a nature less wholly Mexican or American than an amalgam of both, a nature as distinct and remote and isolate as the borderlands themselves.

James Carlos Blake, *Borderlands* (1999)

We do not yet have full control of the border, and I am determined to change that.

George W. Bush (May 15, 2006)

The American West has often been represented as a space of promise in film as well as in other artistic expressions. In the United States, the migration westward evokes ideas of reinvention, adaptation and renewal, and feelings of uniqueness and national destiny. The westward expansion and the frontier experience are repeatedly associated with the emergence of the United States as a distinctive nation, and in this process towards national uniqueness and exceptionality the West transcends its geographical character to include concepts such as language, race, history, or religion. These identity factors, together with a number of political and social practices, are invoked as the determining attributes that help breed the United

States as a distinctive nation-state. Yet, the borderlands that we have come to identify as the West often emerge as dynamic and vibrant regions that challenge any homogenizing notion like a “national language”, a “national (written) history”, a “national race”, etc. In this sense, as Jean-Luc Nancy noted in a different context (1993: 1), the West is a paradox. These borderlands have become both the site where genuine U.S.-ness is to be found and, at the same time, an empty signifier where the struggle for significance is played out—a signifier that shows its fundamental nature to be unlike any other because it is defined by the frontier, which guarantees representation while, at the same time, bars and excludes specific voices from being represented. The real vocation of the West seems to be representation and exclusion. The frontier both facilitates and challenges representation; the experience of the frontier is part of a historical process of nationalization and simultaneously a response to the homogenizing forces of this process. There is a battle for national distinctiveness that has been fought in the borderlands while, at the same time, these borderlands always invite a redefinition of the national character.

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From this point of view, as many scholars have observed (see for instance Gary J. Hausladen 2003), the West is as much a place as a process, both a geographical location and a number of social interactions that are broadly identified as the experience of the frontier. In these places I repeatedly call the borderlands, identities and history always appear in the process of becoming, always fluid, flexible, and subject to reinvention. This seems at odds with the traditional view of the frontier as the explainer of the development and the direction of the country and the individualistic, hard-working, self-sufficient character of its citizens. Again, there is a paradox here: on one hand, the U.S.’s exceptional identity is located in the westward journey and the frontiering experience, and presupposes the control of the frontier while, on the other, the West as frontier has always been that space where meaning or identity emerges and re-emerges from the encounter with the other; it has been the bar that separates signifier and signified and that defines the West as both inclusion and exclusion, a bar that, paradoxically, both promises and negates co-presence, interaction, and transculturation. As Margaret García Davidson points out (1996: 178),

[t]he uniquely American metaphor of the frontier as a wild, unsettled expanse of land with unlimited opportunity has been transformed into an academic discourse about borders, where multiple intersecting cultures engage in complex interactions of resistance and accommodation, conflict and assimilation.

The purpose of this article is to reexamine the West as a site of conflict over representation and identity, or, as Fisher puts it, a “civil war within representation” (1991: xiv). My intention is to look at a number of films about borders, both

physical and cultural, where this conflict is dramatized. Films like *The Ride Back!* (Allen H. Miner 1957), *Man from Del Rio* (Harry Horner 1956), *The Bravados* (Henry King 1958), or *Lone Star* (John Sayles 1996), stage, in the highly codified scenario of Hollywood filmmaking, the myth of the frontier and the development of a nation all over again in the encounter with other local and subjugated cultures (Hispanics in these cases) that had settled the land many centuries before the Anglos brought their the new social order. In films like these, these cultures do not merely resist the received myth of the West nor are they made visible in the narrative in revisionist fashion, but they enter a “civil war within representation” and reveal a hybrid national identity or cultural *mestizaje* both at an individual and at an institutional level. Renato Rosaldo describes borders as “permeable and porous”, borders “allow for exchange”, he says, and “suggest a complex space that contains both the tensions maintaining separateness between distinct entities [...] and the inevitable blurring [...] due to proximity and the process of *mestizaje*” (as quoted by García 1996: 184). In the aforementioned films, the national monomyth of the frontier becomes polyphonic; the borderlands are defined by the mixture of cultures, by interaction and dialogue, and by the blurring of boundaries; and the stories develop into a search for identity in the light of this multiplicity of voices. As James Carlos Blake writes in the autobiographical short story that opens his volume *Borderlands*, the people of these places form a different cultural region, they “are mostly of a nature less wholly Mexican or American than an amalgam of both” (1999: 2). As I write these words, thousands of Hispanic immigrants stage demonstrations protesting against a House bill passed in December 2005 known as the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. The proposed legislation would make it a felony to be in the country illegally or to provide assistance to illegal immigrants. With these demonstrations, Hispanic immigrants wanted to assert that they are not criminals, that they are needed in the United States and that they deserve full citizen rights. Protesters carried United States flags along with flags from their countries of origin, and chanted in English as well as in Spanish, and held up signs proclaiming “We Are America”. This mishmash of traditions and identities that swept the streets of more than 140 United States cities according to the organizers, ensued a lengthy debate in the media and in academic circles, thus revealing to what extent these rallies had challenged geographical and cultural borders. The protesters seemed to assert a mixed identity that forces the country (whose distinctive character is believed to be a work in progress profoundly determined by immigration and the treatment of minorities) to imagine itself once more and find its place on a new hybrid cultural map. The true historical processes played out in the borderlands have been obscured by the need for a metanarrative that would endow the nation with a creation myth, a coherent fable that locates U.S.-ness not in a multicultural

dialogue or “amalgam” but in the conquest and the control of the West’s local cultures more akin to George W. Bush’s words in a televised speech from the oval office on May 15, 2006 where he spoke of the need to “have control” of the border and with it, I dare say, to regain control of the line that separates signifier and signified, that is, control of representation.

The westward expansion has played a significant role in the way the United States has imagined itself as a nation. We have inherited a discourse about the identity of the United States that goes back to Frederick Jackson Turner’s theses and locates the true essence of the United States in the social specificity of the frontier; the uniqueness of the country amounts to the result of what Turner calls the “perennial rebirth [and] fluidity of American life”, a “social development [that] has been continually beginning over again on the frontier” in the contact with “the simplicity of primitive society” (1996: 2-3). For Turner, the advance of the frontier had above anything else, a strong nationalizing effect. The frontiering experience promoted the formation of a distinct and exceptional nationality and the development of social and political institutions; and both national identity and institutions were determined by the hard conditions of the westward journey, the landscape, and the contact with indigenous populations. These conditions, Turner believed, precipitated individualism, democracy, a social organization based largely on the family and a dislike of control.

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History as submitted by Turner presents the West as a place to be conquered in a neat and orderly logic in what was to become the mythic narrative of expansion of a nation that strove to find a distinct identity in the 19th century after the war of 1812 against the British. In this mythic design, Mexicans and Native Peoples appear not as different cultural realities in a multicultural space but as immoral and criminal others whom an expanding nation “conquered” (Turner 1996: 2). This thesis became the favored and privileged interpretation of the West and has dominated cultural expressions since. As Doreen Massey notes, “the identity of places is very much bound up with the histories which are told of them, how those stories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant” (quoted in Campbell and Kean 1997: 124). Frontier mythology, namely the concept that there has been a moving western frontier that has determined U.S. history, has been fundamental in the representation of U.S. culture and identity as one marked by hardships, opportunities, success, individuality, masculinity, self-reliance, adventure, hard work, violence, and a superior design that excluded other ethnic groups. This frontier mythology rests on ethnic conflicts and on exclusion; it rests on the conflict between Anglo-American culture and the cultures of other Americans (as well as on the silence of women). Standing in the East looking west, this space has been interpreted as a territory of opportunity, but standing in the West looking east or in the South looking north, the same region acquires totally different meanings.

As was said above, the West is more than a geographical place, it is, Campbell writes, “a multicultural, multiaccented, multilayered space whose various cultures exist both separately and in dialogue with all the others that exist around them” (2000: 2). In other words, the West first and foremost designates a conflict over representation that has been lost to the numerous stories that would become the West’s official history.

If for a moment the significance of the epic frontier narrative was ever in danger of losing its grip on U.S. society, the cultural expressions that followed, Hollywood’s films among them, helped solidify and perpetuate a set of values and certainties about gender, race, and land that ultimately would become a synonym for U.S. national identity and purpose. The architects of the West as we know it now have been the artists in visual media. Painting, photography, sculpture, and film, among other cultural expressions, have become the site where the country has pictured itself as a singular nation. Yet, these expressions have never rendered a single coherent image. Turner provided the country with a tidy and orderly history of its origins and relentless progress but the “perennial rebirth” and “fluidity” referred to above rather situates the Anglo-American West in terms of struggle for representation, in terms of transformation and renewal in the collision and contact with other cultures. What I would like to call attention to is that Turner’s West is both the result and the evidence of a battle over representation where some stories have crossed over into the official narrative (or signifier) establishing a creation myth that carries particular values about race, gender, and social and political organization, while below the visibility line lies a stronger multifaceted collective history that is part of this creation myth just the same and makes itself present at different times and in different ways.

These invisible or silenced stories are an indissoluble part of the reality of a community and cannot be buried forever. They usually make themselves present when a society is faced with a changing world and is compelled to deal with new challenges and to ask itself questions that didn’t occupy a significant position on the country’s agenda before. The Turnerian West of unequivocal certainties about the course of the United States has been extensively revised, especially since the 1950s. At the time, old agendas about the identity of the country became more attentive to diversity due, largely, to the impact of social movements (namely civil rights and women’s movements) and changes in sexual roles. In addition, another significant tryout for the reductionist myth of the West was the impact of postmodern theory. Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin’s assault on mythography and Michel Foucault’s critique of traditional historicism offered different ways of looking at the West. Neil Campbell (2000) has gone over the significance of these theorists for the unifying representation of the frontier. Walter Benjamin argued that “[history] is thoroughly dialectical, and threads may have

been lost for centuries that the present course of history erratically, inconspicuously picks up again” (in Campbell 2000: 12). And Foucault, in *Power/Knowledge*, expresses himself in similar terms when he rejects the “functionalist coherence or formal systematization [of history]” (1980: 81) and denounces the fact that in the writing of history, some particular local stories, episodes, or incidents are obscured and hidden while others are exalted, elevated, and made somehow dominant.

All these landmarks had a decisive effect on the understanding of historicism. History (or the past) is not immobile. On the contrary, it is always in the making from the vantage point of the present, and challenges such as the impact of social reforms or postmodern theory mentioned above force society to distrust and question coherent historical arrangements and their interpretation, and, in the case of the West, its mythic representation. When the West started to be revised in the changing social context of the 1950s, a number of relationships that Turner had left out started to be articulated. This new perspective also constituted a denunciation of the theory that history was a seamless linear narrative driven inescapably by relations of cause and effect. The traditional representation of history as unfolding linearly in time excluded this revisionist movement back and forth in time that guarantees the unearthing of hidden stories and gives them visibility due to new, unexpected, and contemporary circumstances and adds new layers to the relationships between different cultures of the West. The task of the cultural critic, Campbell suggests (2000: 12), is to explore the fragmented heterogeneous threads of history, history’s multiple lost stories and silenced voices, but not necessarily to rewrite them into a similar epic narrative. The significance of this approach for the narratives of the West is inspiring: to rearrange these fragments and articulate, says Campbell, “not a unified and totalizing story but one in which many voices speak, many, often contradictory, histories are told, and many ideologies cross, coexist, and collide” (2000: 20).

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I will examine briefly several films in which the totalizing epic story of the West is challenged by the presence of the Mexican-American other (their values, their experiences, their points of view, etc.) These western films show that the West is more dynamic than it had been shown to be, that the historic movement identified as the “frontier” did not close in 1890, but that it is an unsettled region that calls into question the single mythic Anglo-Saxon version of history and the harmonious and unambiguous identity that supposedly emerged from it. In these films, mythic U.S.A. cannot sidestep the conflict over identity and national purpose; it is, on the contrary, forced to renegotiate its identity in the cultural clash and the tensions of the borderlands.

These films ask to be read as westerns, engaging themselves in a mythic language or formula popularized by innumerable films before them. But, as westerns, these

films are primarily about other films. The classic western formula registers how community develops out of lawlessness or how the region moves from a rural economy to capitalism (often dramatized in the building of the railroad, the telegraph and the telephone, banking, mining, commerce, trade, etc.) For John Cawelti, for instance, this formula involves a setting “on or near the frontier” (1970: 35), “at a certain moment in the development of American civilization, namely at that point when savagery and lawlessness are in decline before the advancing wave of law and order, but still strong enough to pose a local and momentarily significant challenge” (1970: 38). This narrative logic entails three significant roles, “the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this group, and the heroes” (1970: 46). The western hero is defined by his courage, integrity, independence, altruism, and uncomplicated masculinity. He is the ultimate upholder of the law and the guardian of a nascent society, but he has chosen to stay away from the responsibilities this society carries. Maybe this figure has survived in the popular imagination because he corresponds to the traditional U.S. hero as described by Leslie Fiedler, “a man on the run, harried [...] anywhere to avoid ‘civilization’ [...] and responsibility” (1960: xx). In a brief description of western writing, Robert Rebein notes that the essential image of the western is “the lone rider traversing the western landscape”, and the “classic western story, told from the perspective of this rider, is about the moment when he discovers that he is not alone” (2001: 111). Rebein, following Leslie Fiedler, who already observed that the heart of the western is the encounter with the other, writes that western stories are about landscape—who it belongs to and how it should be lived in—and the encounter in that landscape with an alien other (1968: 21). This alien other or hero’s antagonist often reveals dialogical subtexts that pose problems to the general scheme of the film and to the U.S. imaginary as a whole. The films I want to examine are about “the encounter with the other”, about “how [the landscape] should be lived in”, and about the cultural conflicts and the values and priorities of society. As westerns, these films reveal the subjugated cultures, the shame, and the anxieties beneath the myth and the divine destiny allocated to the Anglo-Saxon race, and renegotiate the multiculturalism of the borderlands and of the country as a whole.

Men from Del Rio

In *The Ride Back!*, a low budget black and white film from 1957 directed by Allen H. Miner and produced and co-starred by William Conrad, Texas Marshall Chris Hamish (William Conrad) crosses the border down into Mexico in search of Kallen (Anthony Quinn), a fugitive who has been accused of a double murder and has fled

to the Mexican town of Cerralvo to avoid an unfair trial. Kallen is a U.S. citizen of Mexican origin and Hamish's job is to find him and take him back to justice in the United States. Arresting Kallen proves relatively easy and the rest of the film concentrates instead on the ride back to the United States referred to in the title. The film seems to follow the classic western formula outlined above: the development of community out of lawlessness, and, as Cawelti noted, this formula requires the roles of the savage or outlaw that threatens the community and of the hero who restores order. However, in the opening credits two singular key ideas become visible, the concern over geography and borders as Hamish locates the town of Cerralvo on a map and traces the course to follow, and, bracketed together with these geographical concerns, the confusion and alienation of the western hero. Hamish is not the flawless bigger-than-life U.S. hero of other Hollywood films. On the contrary, he is a tormented and dark figure; not the nation's mythic self-image but a melancholic loser. From the very beginning he is presented as a disturbed, confused and fragmented character. The film was shot in black and white and relies on expressionistic techniques for the psychological characterization of Hamish and the examination of the frontier. In the opening credit sequence, the visibly fragmented and nearly grotesque representation of the hero is matched by a stark *mise-en-scène* with austere contours and harsh light contrast that makes the images intense, violent, and heavy with symbolism. Hamish, the all-U.S. hero, is isolated; as Marshall he is an essential part of society but in these opening shots he is defined by his badge, gun, and shackles and represented as cut off from all social ties. Besides, this is not the conventional lively Marshall's office of a John Ford or a Howard Hawks film but a void with no links with the community. In the rest of the film the same expressionistic techniques are employed to expose the mental condition of the hero (this goes back to the early westerns by William S. Hart) and the gloomy view of the frontier. While in the opening section these techniques are blended with the anxiety over maps and geographical boundaries, in the rest of the film the dark characterization of the hero is connected with his social function and his impact on social institutions. Kallen, the Anglo-Mexican antagonist played by Anthony Quinn, conveys a number of ideas and values that act upon the myth of the West (so embedded in the U.S. imaginary) in disturbing ways. When Hamish, who has been introduced to us not only alone but fragmented and without any social bonds, arrests Kallen, his position as western hero is questioned once again, and this time in more explicit terms. Hamish is not a winner and is not the stoic lone hero of other films either; and Kallen seems everything Hamish craves for: Kallen is not alone, on the contrary, he has a woman who loves him, he has a home and a simple and satisfying way of life, he has friends who would kill the Marshall for him and, briefly, he is part of a fairly pleasant community.

In *The Ride Back!*, once Hamish has taken Kallen into custody, the two characters are forced to ride together and the spectator's sympathies shift from one to the other in an array of conventional frontier episodes. The western hero has traditionally established his moral authority in society while avoiding other social responsibilities, most notably those associated with the family. However, in a number of 1950s westerns, the hero stops wandering and fixes his attention upon a conventional harmless job and a home that in the end are denied him. The decade opened with a significant fatalistic representation of the western hero, the one portrayed by Gregory Peck in *The Gunfighter* (Henry King 1950). In *The Gunfighter*, Peck stars as a gunman who returns home with the intention of abandoning life as a drifter and marrying his former sweetheart. Yet, he cannot escape his legend and is marginalized and, eventually, killed. And similar discourses are found in *Shane* (George Stevens 1953), where the hero is not killed but whose dream of a community, a farm, and a family is denied him.

The same themes that dominate *The Ride Back!* pervade *The Bravados*, another Henry King big-budget production starred by Gregory Peck. In *The Bravados*, Jim Douglas (Gregory Peck) obsessively trails four runaway outlaws into Mexico because he believes they raped and murdered his wife. He methodically kills three of them, each time casting a darker shadow over the western hero. After his wife was murdered, Jim Douglas abandoned his ranch and his daughter in search of vengeance. Yet, Douglas had been misinformed by the real murderer and kills three people that were innocent of this particular crime. By the time he tracks down the fourth one, a Mexican citizen by the name of Luján (Henry Silva), the spectator is compelled to weigh the lunatic traditional western hero embodied by Peck against an underprivileged and yet amiable and openhanded Mexican family with obvious biblical connotations. The ending overflows with Christian imagery. Luján and his family embody the values Douglas has abandoned and show him the way to redemption.

As usual, in *The Ride Back!* and in *The Bravados*, borders are a sign of physical and cultural divisions but, as was said above, borderlands create the conditions for interaction, exchange and mixing. From this perspective, the Anglo-Mexican antagonist embodies the cultural values the U.S. hero lacks or longs for. In *The Ride Back!*, Kallen, the Hispanic antagonist, is easily recognizable as the member of a community who seems to preserve the principles traditionally associated with the land and the frontier. During the film *The Ride Back!*, while Kallen appears cool and calm, Hamish is always sweaty and nervous, and, although he seems to hate his job and the society he belongs to, he regards this assignment to bring Kallen to court as his last opportunity to have his share of the U.S. myth. Similarly, in *The Bravados*, the traditional attributes of the western hero (courageous, mysterious, and unsociable) also make him hardhearted, resentful and mean. On the contrary,

the Hispanic character (though only in the final twist of the story) becomes a symbol of the values Jim Douglas has thrust aside, most notably the institution of the family, and grants Douglas an opportunity to redeem himself.

If the primary thematic concern of many earlier western films was the development of the community and the building of the nation, films like *The Ride Back!* *The Bravados*, or *Man from Del Rio*, another low-budget black and white western film that features Anthony Quinn as the antagonist of society at large, seem more concerned with the values of these nascent communities. In *Man from Del Rio*, the Anglo-Mexican character is a fast-drawing rambler (always driven by righteous motives, though) that is employed as sheriff of an unmanageable border community to keep outlaws at a distance but who is banned from the very society he helps to preserve. As Michael Coyne has observed, “during the 1950s, Westerns grew increasingly skeptical of American society’s intrinsic merits” (1997: 69). In all the films mentioned so far, civilization, society, humanity, and the identity of the country as a whole seem to depend, to a certain extent, on citizens of Mexican origin and the treatment they receive, and, by extension, on the social integration of an alien local culture and the acceptance of this culture’s values and principles, that is, on some sort of *mestizaje*.

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Digging up the past

In most of the aforementioned westerns, the Hispanic characters are full U.S. citizens. One must bear in mind that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had made all Mexicans of the annexed territories U.S. citizens at a stroke. Since then, as contemporary films such as *Lone Star* illustrate, the question of social integration remains not fully answered. Not unlike the 1950s films dealt with above, *Lone Star* (John Sayles 1996) reveals something about the complex construction of identity in a multiethnic society. The film shares with other depictions of the New West the attempt to represent the ethnic and social variety of the western landscape, but it represents the New West as a place of divisions and borders. *Lone Star* (part western, part murder mystery, part drama) is also a film about history. In this respect, two ideas dominate the film. First, history has been written by those who held the power in each period of time —as one character puts it early in the film, “the winner gets the bragging rights”. And second, the experiences and beliefs of those who have been subjugated by power and wiped out from official history remain on the margins of history, and although they are often buried and invisible, they are nonetheless part of the reality of the community, create tensions, and constantly threaten to come to the surface.

Structured around a conventional murder mystery reminiscent, for example, of *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak 1946), *Lone Star* emerges as a rich, complex and challenging story that explores present-day race relations in the small fictional town of Frontera, Texas. As opposed to Hollywood's fondness for solitary protagonists, the film is the multi-character portrait of a small border community. Its most recognizable attribute is that the investigations carried out by Sam (Chris Cooper), the local sheriff, grant exceptional visibility to U.S. citizens of diverse ethnic origins, make possible the exposition of numerous points of view, instigate a revision of the multicultural reality of the country, and ultimately promise to reexamine and weigh up the past and the role of history in the promotion of a distinctive United States national character. *Lone Star* is a conscientious and poignant analysis of the function played by history in the perpetuation of traditional concepts of the nation-state and of national identity and of its consequences. The film features Anglos, Mexican Americans, and African Americans in the major roles and endorses a revision of the country's past and national identity by bringing to light their multiple stories and the complex interactions between the different ethnic communities. In *Lone Star* the Texas borderlands become a symbolic landscape that can only be articulated as a site of conflict and interaction that has been —and is being— colonized and settled by different individuals from different cultural backgrounds with different stories to tell. But the film goes beyond the personal experiences of an ethnically diversified community and draws attention to the mechanisms employed to authorize and perpetuate the official version of history and to the purposes it serves, thus emphasizing a dilemma that besets contemporary multiethnic societies, the need to find a balance between traditional historiography and the recognition of cultural pluralism.

Lone Star is triggered off by and structured around the discovery of the corpse of Sheriff Charlie Wade (Kris Kristofferson), a metaphor for the most racist and shameful part of history erupting into the present. The investigation is led by current sheriff Sam Deeds, who interrogates everybody who might shed light on the mysterious murder of Wade. The whodunit structure of the film makes accessible different buried stories about the Southwestern community of Frontera as Sam gives voice to a number of secondary characters in these borderlands while trying to find out who killed Sheriff Wade. In this way, the spectator gains access to a multiplicity of voices and to their experience of the frontier. The narrative structure of *Lone Star* resembles conventional murder mystery narratives. It cuts back and forth between past and present and among diverse story lines to articulate its arguments about the social function of history and the role it continues to play in societies still damaged by racial tensions. Yet, for the most part, the film chooses to concentrate on the history of the West, and more particularly on the independence of Texas, and to challenge the narrow vision that views it as a

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homogeneous colonization epic in which the land was conquered and settled following a pristine logic that has come to be regarded as the initiation myth of a God-anointed race with recognizable attributes shared uniformly by all ‘Americans’ and where U.S.-ness can unmistakably be claimed to reside. Instead, *Lone Star* regards the West, not as a land free for the conquering by the best exemplars of one chosen race, but as a meeting place, accentuating its multicultural, dialogic, and dynamic nature. And the nation’s cultural identity is here viewed, not as a recognizable static essence rooted in the country’s historical accounts, but as a more vibrant and fluctuating mood and as a number of values and social and political ideals born out of contact, exchange and hybridization. Thus, the myth of the West is opened up for revision and the once excluded local experiences of the frontier provide a complex and discordant picture that stands in opposition to the dominant unitary myth. The national development that Turner associated with a West where local cultures were excluded is depicted in *Lone Star* as a composite social web created by the interconnected experiences of a multicultural community. In *Lone Star*, traditional unifying history becomes dialogue as the protagonist interrogates members of all ethnic groups. It is true that these long-buried voices are, in a sense, authorized by the leading figure of Sam, an Anglo male sheriff, but, as happened in the other films referred to above, the construction of a national identity appears here as a complex issue that can only be articulated through co-presence and through the mixture of their frontier experiences.

But *Lone Star* not only displays the aforementioned preference for dialogue, it also sides with Foucault as it questions the traditional linear representation of history and, in an effort to understand the past, combines all points of view and all kinds of knowledge. The film’s generic backbone serves to reveal that different things happen simultaneously from different perspectives and, in so doing, it challenges the country’s culture and historical identity by contesting the official unifying past and its control of representation, and by providing instead a complex multicultural history as the alternative to understand the distinctive national character. Not unlike the historian, who chooses to follow a number of academic protocols rooted in a particular theory of history, the heroes of the western and of the murder mystery represent two different approaches to history and society, either as a cohesive monumental narrative or as a web of multiple contradictory stories and shifting viewpoints. Traditionally, the western and the detective film feature a solitary male protagonist committed to restoring order to a community while preserving his individualism from the community and from women. The hero of the western stands up against the challenges a nascent community faces, gets justice for the people and, in the meantime, rewrites history from his point of view and redefines certain assumptions about the society. Similarly, the hero of detective fiction brings violent justice to a threatened community, although he lacks the totalizing point

of view of the western protagonist and is often deceived and misled by a world that he cannot completely figure out. The task of these two film icons of masculinity bears a resemblance to that of the historian but, while the hero of the western rewrites history into a narrative of epic proportions that has often been regarded as a reliable record of the past of the United States, the mission of the detective protagonist is to find, contrast, and evaluate information, thus admitting to a myriad of different points of view. While the western hero has a complete hold over the events, the hero of classic murder mystery films is not always in the know. The former often focalizes the action for the spectator while the latter frequently knows less than the spectator. The protagonist of detective fiction has access to different points of view, deals with missing elements, recreates the past, restores the order of things, but is prone to defeat and ruin. Although films that relied on the conventions of the western often found it easy in narrative terms to present history as the linear monolithic version of the white male hero, *Lone Star* exploits instead the instability and the potential of the detective film structure to challenge traditional views about history and to facilitate the introduction of silenced stories and subaltern voices.

Lone Star breaks the illusion of historical continuity and liberates the forces that are locked up in a linear explanation of the past. For traditional historiography, the course of history conforms to linear relationships and corresponds to the inevitable progress of the nation-state across time. The historian has often tended to assemble a fallacious continuity that in turn deemed necessary and inescapable the uneven and inequitable forms of progress and social development that went together with Eurocentric imperialism of the sort described by Turner in the United States, and that left many social groups on the edge of society along the way. Unlike classic westerns, *Lone Star* is a multi-plot multi-protagonist film and not everything revolves around the figure of the hero or is focalized by him. Unlike early epic westerns where larger-than-life heroes lead an unequivocal narrative that mirrors traditional historical accounts about the westward expansion, *Lone Star* manages to circumvent the Eurocentrism and determinism of the western by denying the hero the possibility of channeling all the information it provides the audience with. *Lone Star's* intricate narrative contains seven elaborate flashbacks as well as many verbal accounts about the past. In *Lone Star*, the narrative often shifts from the present to the past and back to the present without any cut or dissolve. The past enters the present sequence of events as if past and present forever happened together, as if time was done away with and past and present actions occupied the same space at the same time. This is one of the most startling visual characteristics of the film. For example, Chucho Montoya's flashback narrates the murder of Eladio Cruz, a cold-blooded homicide that so far seems to have gone ignored. After Sam symbolically crosses the border line that serves to institutionalize the

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Hispanic as a threat to the U.S. nation, to its values, and to its morals, Montoya consents to tell him what he knows about Eladio Cruz and there is then a seamless transition back in time as the camera first tracks in on Montoya's face and then left to show a bridge where Eladio is changing a flat tire sometime in the 1950s. When Montoya finishes the account of what he actually saw from under the bridge where he had hidden, the camera tracks up to show Sam on that same bridge in the present. These unobtrusive shifts in time disrupt the coherent order and the homogeneous logic often found in historical accounts. Not only do previously overlooked stories counter the old mythic representations of the country's past, thus substituting the conventional monologue found in traditional history for a multifaceted dialogue, but also argue for a new kind of history that is propelled not by simple linear cause-effect relationships but by discontinuity. *Lone Star* seems to side with Foucault (1993: 154) as it puts forward a version of the past where disruptions deprive the spectator of the "reassuring stability" found in the illusory continuity of time-honored history. The flashback structure of *Lone Star* substitutes for the linear view of history found in the western for a revisionist movement back and forth in time that both guarantees the unearthing of lost stories, undermines the homogenizing force of traditional historical accounts where national identity has been made to reside, and gives visibility to new social and cultural relationships. The activity of investigation digs up the threads of history that had been lost for many decades—the lost events and the suppressed voices of the borderlands and of the colonization of the West—and the stylish flashbacks underscore that the past holds many voices that threaten to disrupt any conformist account of the past. As was noted above, these stories are part of the reality of a community just the same and cannot be silenced forever.

Lone Star denounces the racist and chauvinistic grip on history through the affirmation of the complex relations that still hold in Frontera; its story illustrates that, as Foucault observed (1993: 154), we exist "among countless lost events". Furthermore, *Lone Star* translates social anxieties over the new wave of immigrants into film genre language. In the era of Latino immigration, *Lone Star* offers, through the manipulation of genre conventions and genre expectations, an understanding of the new social and cultural challenges that besiege U.S. society. Sayles' film lays bare the mechanisms at work behind history's apparent transparency and how these affect our everyday relationships. The unspoken fears of the classic *noir* films of the post-war years over masculinity or the red menace become, in *Lone Star*, immigration and racism. The past is more complex than historical accounts suggest and comprises many experiences that may make themselves present at different times and in different ways, usually when a society is faced with new social circumstances and is compelled to deal with new challenges and to ask itself questions that didn't occupy a significant position on the country's

agenda before. As Walter Benjamin pointed out (1997: 362), “[history] is thoroughly dialectical, and threads may have been lost for centuries that the present course of history erratically, inconspicuously picks up again”. When the West started to be revised in the changing social context of the 1950s, a number of relationships that Turner had left out, most notably the treatment of the natives and the role of women, started to be articulated. In much the same way, as the twentieth century came to its end, a series of unexpected incidents, from the 1992 Los Angeles riots that followed the acquittal of the white police officers accused of beating Rodney King to the more recent Katrina tragedy or the controversy over the new immigration bill, demystified the myth of racial harmony inherited from the Reagan administration, brought to the surface a previously hidden reality, and presented society with new challenges.

The uses to which Hollywood films are put are many and varied, but, above all, they are complex and contradictory. Ideological interpretations of popular films have tended to identify the conventions of the western film with a mythology that was to explain and justify the providence of the Anglo-American race. An assortment of miscellaneous discourses and artistic expressions have tended to associate the uniqueness of the country with the notion of a moving western frontier that discriminated between superior Anglo-Americans and vile subaltern races. But the mythological interpretation of the frontiering experience, while a feature of the western genre that is to have some bearing on the interpretations of all films past and future, took shape at a precise moment in history and was never the national ritual often associated with western films as a whole. As film historians have noted, films change alongside larger social transformations and the frontier mythology as we know it was an effect, first, of World War II and the post-war years (see for example Coyne 1997; Neale 2000; Simmon 2003) and, second, of a canon that makes some conventions stand out and ignores others and that, as a consequence, gives prominence to certain selected films. This is not to say that post-war films offered a homogeneous standardized mythical view of the expansion westward. On the contrary, films addressed social issues before the war and continued dealing with social tensions afterwards. The films examined here reveal that film conventions in general and the conventions of the western film in particular were often taken advantage of to articulate discourses that challenge any complacent view about the westward expansion or the distinctiveness of the country. Films like *The Ride Back!* do not fulfill generic expectations as regards the position and values conferred on the white male in the United States and it unmistakably compels the audience to weigh the hero (and the film genre system as a whole) against the actual deviations from the narrative formula that the audience hypothesizes. Forty years later, *Lone Star* resorts to conventional generic devices (borrowed from the western film but also from the detective film) to

articulate numerous diverse discourses about the past and the identity of the country. U.S. society has never been monocultural, monolingual, or monoracial. Quite the opposite, as Cody, a colorful racially prejudiced bartender laments in *Lone Star*, U.S. society is a “damn *menudo*”. Language betrays Cody, who ingeniously mixes English and Spanish, and who seals one of his stirring expositions bellowing “*Se habla* American, goddamn it!” to his clientele. *Lone Star* tears down the frontiers that the conquest mythology erects between the different cultures, it gives the silenced characters of the traditional western myth an opportunity to voice their version of history, and, with its manipulation of film genres and story time, it also underscores that the role of the critic is to articulate the contradictory discourses that coexist in the same cultural ground rather than succumb to the film’s illusion of ideological coherence.

Notes

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