

ON THIRD THOUGHTS: THE AMBIVALENCE OF BORDER CROSSING IN TOMMY LEE JONES' *THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA*¹

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ABSTRACT. *The tragic story of Melquiades Estrada in Tommy Lee Jones's prize-winning 2005 film could easily be one of the case histories in Oscar Martinez's already classic Border People (1994), which brings together personal narratives that deal with cross-border migration, transnational interaction, irregular labor, ethnic confrontation and border control. Born and raised on the Texan-Mexican border, Jones is not unfamiliar with these dynamics taking place in border regions, which prove to be a unique human environment deeply marked by transnational processes and, yet, also signs of resistance on both sides to fully embrace or reject the other culture. The Three Burials is a serious attempt at incarnating the spirit of the place, documenting accurately its mixed culture, and describing the pain that most of its inhabitants suffer from. Several reviewers have rightly argued that Jones' film, like Unforgiven (1992) and Lone Star (1996), "offers another twist on the Western genre, breaking conventions and proving that there is vast unexplored territory within the traditional gun-slinging setting of the frontier." Elements such as the laconic use of language, the central role played by landscape or the paramount importance of violence and death are clearly reminiscent of a genre whose main conventions are still being fruitfully used for new purposes. Nevertheless, it would be an unpardonable critical blunder to think of Jones' film as a mere continuation of a tradition that was mainly characterized by its excessive Manichaeism and its conviction that justice will be eventually recovered. This article argues that the message that Jones eventually sends to the audience is one full of ambivalence and ambiguity, and if some degree of*

¹ The research carried out for the writing of this article was partly funded by two projects sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (codes: FFI2011-23598) and CSO2011-24804).

justice is established at the end of the film, as Roger Ebert (2006) has noted, it is a 'poetic justice' more than a literal one.

Keywords: Border milieus, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, Western movies, cultural interaction, border theory, interpretative strategies.

A VUELTAS CON NUESTRAS INTERPRETACIONES: LA AMBIVALENCIA DE LOS CRUCES DE FRONTERAS EN *LOS TRES ENTIERROS DE MELQUIADES ESTRADA* DE TOMMY LEE JONES

RESUMEN. *La trágica historia de Melquiades Estrada en la galardonada película de Tommy Lee Jones (2005) podría ser perfectamente uno de los retratos recogidos en el clásico de Oscar Martínez Border People (1994), que recopila testimonios personales sobre la migración transfronteriza, los intercambios transnacionales, los conflictos interétnicos y la militarización de las fronteras. Al ser natural de la frontera entre Texas y México, Jones conoce a la perfección todos estos fenómenos que ocurren a diario en su región y que generan un paisaje humano único, condicionado por estos procesos transnacionales, pero que a su vez se resiste a aceptarlos o rechazarlos por completo. En este sentido, Los tres entierros es un meritorio intento de encarnar el espíritu de la región, documentando con rigor su cultura híbrida y describiendo el dolor que sus habitantes padecen. Algunos críticos han afirmado que la película de Jones, al igual que Unforgiven (1992) y Lone Star (1996), "da otro giro al género del Western, al retocar sus convenciones y demostrar que queda un aún mucho territorio por explorar en estos violentos contextos fronterizos". Elementos tales como el uso lacónico de la lengua, el papel central que juega el paisaje o la importancia primordial de la violencia y la muerte son claramente reminiscentes de un género cuyos códigos fundamentales son hoy utilizados por cineastas con otros propósitos. Sin embargo, llegar a la conclusión de que la película de Jones es una mera continuación de la tradición del Western, con su visión maniqueísta de la realidad, sería un imperdonable error interpretativo. Este artículo defiende que el mensaje final que Jones manda al público está repleto de ambigüedades y ambivalencias, y que si se establece cierto grado de justicia es recuperado al final de la película, como sugiere Roger Ebert (2006), se trata de una "justicia poética" más que literal.*

Palabras clave: Contextos fronterizos, *Los tres entierros de Melquiades Estrada*, películas del oeste, intercambios culturales, teoría de la frontera, estrategias interpretativas.

Received 19 April 2013

Revised version accepted 20 September 2013

1. INTRODUCTION

In his well-known volume *Border People* (1994), Oscar Martínez claims that there are four or five key processes that characterize border areas nowadays and that, as a result of these processes, borderlanders are likely to deviate from the lifestyles and norms of behavior of citizens living in the central areas of the countries involved:

The unique forces, processes, and characteristics that set borderlands apart from interior zones include transnational interaction, international conflict and accommodation, ethnic conflict and accommodation, and separateness. In their totality, these elements constitute what might be called the borderlands milieu. (Martínez 1994: 10).

Although, as this author admits, we should expect great variation in how these processes are articulated on different border areas –given the diversity of cross-border exchanges and the profound differences in their histories–, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands provide an excellent case study for the exploration of those dynamics, since, due to their age-old cultural, social, and economic interactions, one can find perfect illustrations of all those features. As a matter of fact, Martínez's book could be described as a collection of case histories from this region aimed at revealing the rich variety of experiences produced in a milieu that, "being subject to frontier forces and international influences," is bound to generate rather unusual ways of life: "Borders simultaneously divide and unite, repel and attract, separate and integrate" (25). Bearing in mind the contradictory –not to say completely schizophrenic– forces at work in this environment, it is not surprising that most literary and film representations of life on the borderlands throughout the 20th century have been mostly unflattering, with themes such as violence, lawlessness, prostitution, illegal crossings, corruption, etc., often taking centre stage in the stories (Cortés 1993: 64-65). This contribution aims to demonstrate that a significant shift may be underway in these representations at the outset of the new millennium, as Tommy Lee Jones' film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) puts forth a much more intricate and ambivalent picture of the borderlands. As the director explained in an interview for *Positif* magazine:

L'idée a été de faire un film qui était quelque part une étude sur les contrastes sociaux entre la rive nord et la rive sud de la rivière, comment les choses sont les mêmes et différentes, ce que sont les éléments sociaux, moraux, émotionnels, éducatifs qui créent une passeport entre les deux communautés des deux côtes. Un bon cadre auquel vous pouvez accrocher une série d'événements qui peuvent donner naissance à d'autres thèmes. (Ciment and Niogret 2005: 9).



Figure 1. Film Poster of *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005).

Indeed, having been born and raised on the Texas-Mexico border, the director is not unfamiliar with the kinds of phenomena taking place in border regions, which combine a shared history and intense socio-cultural blending with signs of reluctance on both sides to fully embrace or reject the other culture. Lowenthal remarked over two decades ago that three traits define the bilateral relationship between the two countries in the area: “proximity, interpenetration, and asymmetry” (1987: 77), and although those characteristics may have evolved over time, they remain integral components of the border culture. Jones’ prize-winning movie can be said to incorporate some of those key traits defining that culture, for one of the filmmaker’s primary aims is surely to come as close as possible to capturing “the spirit of the place.” In order to do so, he packs the story with elements of bilingualism, economic interdependence, transnational media, border control and interethnic tensions that give the viewer a sense of the opportunities but, also, the risks that borderlanders face on a daily basis. As a matter of fact, Jones has explained that the plot of the film is based on a real incident that occurred near the Rio Grande at the turn of the 21st century, when a young man of Mexican descent –but the holder of an American passport– was accidentally killed by three U.S. marines who were chasing some drug traffickers (Ciment and Niogret 2005: 9). Assisted by the skillful hand of scriptwriter Guillermo Arriaga, the director built a narrative that delves deep into the dual loyalties that are likely to emerge in border contexts in which daily life activities are likely to create socio-economic ties that traverse national boundaries. Yet, as will become evident in my analysis, despite Jones’ fascination with transnational phenomena –be they social, cultural or economic–, there is still a strand in his work that may find its roots in the old-time tradition of the American Western (see Figure 1).

Although recast into more contemporary circumstances and globalized processes that tend to complicate some of the staple elements of the genre, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* can be said to retrieve certain basic ingredients of classical cowboy and Western movies. Lexi Feinberg notes that, like other recent films such as *Lone Star* (1996) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), Jones’ film “offers another twist on the Western genre, breaking conventions and proving that there is a vast unexplored territory within the traditional gun-sliding setting of the frontier” (2006). This fact becomes especially clear in the

second half of the movie in which, as will be seen below, there are several themes and motifs that are remarkably reminiscent of the Western tradition. The centrality of death and violence, a very laconic use of language or the key role played by the surrounding landscape, are all elements that, as Jones has acknowledged, he borrowed from directors such as John Ford and John Huston. Referring to the movie, Zimmermann observes that “the cowboy’s corpse, bones, and graves serve as an opportunity for the living –both their fellow characters and their audiences– to revisit the stories and the myths of the West. It seems obvious that the legends, the stories of the western hero are somehow intricately linked to the hero’s death” (2008: 223). As this author explains, *The Three Burials* replicates many of the motifs that are characteristic of the Western hero’s journey away from society and in search of justice: a manly friendship, the desire for revenge, crossing various thresholds, antagonists and helpers, and so forth. However, given the complexity of the contemporary border milieu, it would be erroneous to assume that the simple and satisfying endings often provided by classical Westerns would be possible in the case of Jones’ movie. Jim Kitses rightly argues that rather than relying on the Manichaeism, super-heroism and villainous superficiality that were common in Westerns, the director strives here “to incarnate its spirit [that of the border world], document its culture and describe its pain” (2006: 18) (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. A different type of Western?

Being a resident of the Texas-Mexico border, Jones is of course aware of the profound transformation undergone by the borderlands –or what Anzaldúa also called “la Frontera” (1987)– in the last two decades, and of the intense debates that have arisen after border controls and the construction of the wall were intensified

after the mid-1990s. According to Habermas and other experts, international boundaries have now become much more fluid and permeable, although signs of contestation and resistance to that fluidity are still very prevalent (1992). Of course, the U.S.-Mexican border provides ample evidence of both phenomena since, after the passing of the Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s, it has the world's greatest volume of human and commercial traffic (İçduygu and Sert 2010: 12), and has also become the scene of much crime and human rights violations. In Charles Bowden's opinion,

Borders everywhere attract violence, violence prompts fences, and eventually fences can mutate into walls. Then everyone pays attention because a wall turns a legal distinction into a visual slap in the face. We seem to love walls, but are embarrassed by them because they say something unpleasant about the neighbors –and us. (Bowden 2007: 120).

It is no wonder that borderlanders should entertain extremely mixed feelings about the number of irregular migrants crossing the border and the often dramatic measures to try to control the flows. After all, it is difficult to establish one's position regarding these issues when a constant battle is going on between one's needs and fears. Donnan and Wilson note that "just as borders may be both bridge and barrier between these [national] spaces, so their crossing can be both enabling and disabling, can create opportunities or close them off" (1999: 107). *The Three Burials* looks closely into the problems and paradoxes that emerge when people decide, for various reasons, to cross state borders and cultural boundaries between two countries that have historically thought of each other in terms of myths and stereotypes rather than promoting a peaceful coexistence. Jones' film can be seen to combine similar doses of traditional aspects of the Western, which tend to impose an identity on a person or a place, and a more complex vision of life on the border which, in Velasco's words, "se convierte en una pesadilla en la que el espacio está preñado de desconfianzas ancestrales [...], un espacio en el que no es posible reconocer una realidad 'normal'" (2003: 25). Of course, this combination of archaic patterns and myths with troubling aspects of contemporary realities on the borderlands is bound to produce all kinds of ambivalences and contradictions that are not easily resolved.

2. ELEMENTS OF THE WESTERN TRADITION

That the legacy of the old Western tradition is immediately perceivable in *The Three Burials* is beyond any doubt for several reasons. On the one hand, most reviewers have incorporated into their discussions of the movie comparisons with such classics as John Ford's *Rio Grande* (1950), Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the*

Head of Alfredo García (1974) or, more recently, *The Border* (1996) directed by Tony Richardson. All these directors found great inspiration in the highly volatile, culture-clash-saturated context of border country and this fact helped their best artistic skills to emerge. Philip French noted in *The Guardian* that Jones has made an “excellent modern western” by using one of the recurrent motifs in the tradition: “a man’s entitlement to the dignity of a Christian burial, either out on the plains or in a simple frontier territory” (2006). Although the title of the movie highlights the importance of this motif in the development of the plot, there are other components in *The Three Burials* that inevitably frame it within the Western tradition. There is, for instance, the desert landscape which, as is the case in most films of the genre, becomes one of the main players in the story. Cinematographer Chris Menges does a superb job of bringing alive the hostile environment of the desert north of Chihuahua and integrating it into the horseback journey of the hero(es). Ebert argues that many of the surprises and learning experiences that the two main characters go through during the journey would have been impossible outside the “kind of doomed landscapes” that Menges’ camera-eye so proficiently captures (2006) (see Figure 3). Yet, the soundscape is almost as important as the visual dimension of the movie, as it very subtly reinforces the emotions and thoughts that most of the characters are unable to put into words. This is true, of course, of the friendship and devotion that flourishes between the Mexican immigrant Melquiades Estrada (Julio C. Cedillo) and the rancher Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones), but also of the anger and sullen despair that assail the latter after his partner’s murder. On the other hand, beyond these cinematographic strengths, there are certain thematic strands in the movie –closely related to the socio-economic dynamics in border milieus– that can easily be traced back to the Western tradition. Due to space limitations, I will refer below only to four aspects that would definitely require closer scrutiny to establish to what extent they remain faithful to that tradition and in what other regards they may be breaking new ground.



Figure 3. “Doomed landscapes”.

As mentioned earlier on, *The Three Burials* is characterized by an exceedingly economical use of language that barely manages to convey to the viewer what is going on in the characters' minds. In Jane Tompkins' opinion, "Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real" (1992: 49). In Jones's film, we hardly hear any of the characters –be they male or female– uttering more than three or four sentences in a row and, whenever they gather the confidence to move beyond that limit, the shadow of uncertainty about whether they are not being properly understood interferes. This extremely reduced and terse use of language is linked to another common element found in movies about the American frontier: loneliness and isolation. In this regard, French observes that "most people in this big country are sad and disappointed," and they live "disconnected existences of their own" according to various legendary codes (2006). There is little doubt that Pete Perkins, the protagonist of the story, who is a foreman on a ranch, resembles the typical Western loner, with no family, few friends, and only a married woman to speak of as a lover. But if the protagonist can be seen to lead a rather vacuous life fully devoted to his trade, nothing else can be said about all the other characters in the movie who, for different reasons, seem to loathe their miserable lives in this harsh environment. Curiously, the only character providing a bit of succor to the protagonist in this depressing social milieu is a foreign ranch hand, the title character, who, despite having abandoned his homeland and his people, appears to have the resilience to adapt to a mostly hostile place. Zimmermann notes that, due to that difference, Pete "must construct a reality around Melquiades –friend, shepherd, cowboy, innocent, other–," which sets him apart from all the other people in the border community (2008: 221) (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Melquiades Estrada (Julio C. Cedillo), friend, cowboy, and innocent.

Two other themes often appearing in cowboy stories and also retrieved in *The Three Burials* are violence and death. According to Kolodny (1984) and Tompkins (1992), the recurrence of these two topics is probably related to the genre's opposition to the "discourse of domesticity": "[...] Westerns, in a reaction that looks very much like literary gender war, privilege the male realm of public power, physical ordeal, homosociality, and the rituals of the duel" (Tompkins 1992: 42). As a matter of fact, the main victim of this violence in Jones's film is an undocumented Mexican laborer, Melquiades Estrada, who, interestingly enough, exhibits some of

the features that have often been associated with female characters in traditional Westerns. Mel is represented as a meek and soft-spoken person who is happy to work hard in order to make enough money to return to his homeland. To argue that immigrant workers, underprivileged individuals, marginal social groups, etc., are beginning to act out the role(s) that women used to play in old Westerns may sound a bit far-fetched, but sometimes the similarities are just overwhelming. One obvious parallel is that, in spite of his language difficulties, the shy and easy-going Melquiades is one of the few characters in Jones' movie who tries to verbalize his feelings, and he makes his friend understand what he really means. There are several flashbacks in the film in which Pete Perkins recalls earlier conversations with the Mexican where it becomes clear that the immigrant cowboy has developed personal ties and a confidence in his partner that the latter would never have expected from his co-ethnics. Anthony Lane claims that "only viewers with advanced sexual radar, [...] would pick up a blip of desire between Pete and his pal" (2006: 94), but the fact is that, as later developments of the story show, there must be something more spiritual linking the destinies of these two individuals. The second half of the movie, in which Pete embarks on a torturous journey of retribution across the border with the Mexican's corpse and his murderer, reveals to us the true dimension of the old-fashioned loyalty and devotion that the rancher –now turned into avenger– felt for his foreign friend. Ebert is right when he remarks that, like in old Westerns, all the characters in Jones' film "have two avenues of communication: the public and the personal," but the latter becomes evident only in their subsequent actions (2006).

To conclude this section, one last issue that clearly connects *The Three Burials* with the Western tradition is the focal importance of justice. In her book *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia N. Limerick states regarding the evolution of this question on the American frontier:

The West was once the Wild West, the old image held, and then, heroically, law and order were introduced and the wilderness mastered. But the image both exaggerated the significance of lawbreaking in the past and underestimated its significance in the present. (1987: 173).

As this historian contends, even if a frontier territory or a border milieu is subjected to more rigid law enforcement and closer surveillance, there are still going to be outlaws taking advantage of the vulnerability of strangers or the opportunity for quick profit. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, borders seem to have the innate tendency to attract crimes and violence that are only occasionally punished. One could argue that the spark that sets off the intricate plot of Jones' movie is precisely an act of extreme –if unintended–

violence that is deliberately overlooked by the law, since the victim is an “illegal” immigrant without a family. As happens in many Westerns, once the “hero” realizes that the law is going to do nothing to bring the culprit(s) to court, he decides to take justice into his own hands and will do anything –often disregarding the law– to re-establish some “fair balance.” This is what Pete Perkins tries to do in the second half of the movie when he kidnaps Mike Norton (Barry Pepper) during the night, the Border Patrol officer who killed his friend, commands him to disinter Melquiades, and forces him to take the body on horseback to the victim’s village in Mexico. The journey to Melquiades’ final grave is orchestrated as a fierce battle of wills between Perkins and Norton, during which both of them make some unexpected discoveries and, at least partly, redeem some earlier mistakes (see Figure 5). Motskin has said about this painful journey that “the violence that Pete uses [against Norton] has a purpose. It is a violence for justice. His violence doesn’t excuse him, but at least he doesn’t use violence to cause damage. He uses violence to try to teach someone” (2006: 28) This reading of the film would certainly be in tune with what was expected from old Westerns; however, it is unclear whether it offers a satisfactory answer to the broader questions that the film seems to pose, questions that are related to the longstanding lack of mutual understanding between the U.S. and Mexico.



Figure 5. A fierce battle of wills between Perkins and Norton.

3. CONTEMPORARY TENSIONS ON THE BORDERLANDS

As noted earlier on, despite the presence in *The Three Burials* of those aspects highly reminiscent of Western films, it would be an interpretative blunder to read Jones’ movie as a mere continuation of that tradition. In fact, several specialists have remarked that, like *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Once upon a Time in Mexico* (2003), Jones’ film provides an excellent example of how the genre “continues to

evolve in interesting ways,” and offers significant “evidence of the Western’s versatility” to accommodate contemporary issues (Kitses 2006: 18). The work manages to preserve a number of the idiosyncratic features of old Westerns, while at the same time challenging some basic conventions and expanding the genre in completely new directions. Indeed, as I have suggested above, the director and the scriptwriter Guillermo Arriaga joined efforts to portray a new border context in which universal themes such as home, loyalty, revenge and, even, justice begin to acquire all kinds of intriguing nuances. Martínez notes that “isolation, weak institutions, lax administration, and a different economic orientation prompt people on the periphery to develop homemade approaches to their problems and unconventional means of carrying on mutually beneficial relationships across an international boundary” (2006: 4). Jones’ innovative –and, some would argue, postmodern– film provides evidence that border people hold a view of the boundary and the function(s) it should serve very different from that held by their compatriots in other parts of the countries. The particular economies of the region, the intense socio-cultural interaction and active hybridization, and the diverse types of mobility and transfers that borders stimulate have turned it into a unique and fascinating place to be studied through the camera-eye. As Jones put it in an interview: “C’est fascinant, ironique... et tout à fait credible. Le public adopte une autre perspective sur l’ironie de cette frontière, dont le franchissement peut causer votre mort, et le caractère illimité de l’amour que se portent ces deux cultures” (Ciment and Niogret 2005: 12) (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Biculturalism and bilingualism on the border.

A few film reviewers have complained that the first half of Jones’ movie may appear a bit choppy and disorienting due to the “non-linear overlapping stories” which, in some instances, seem unnecessary and gratuitous (Feinberg 2006; Lane 2006: 94). It is true that viewers may occasionally feel confused by some leaps in the storyline when they have not managed yet to get a firm grip on the motivations of the main characters. Nevertheless, Arriaga’s trademark approach to film narrative

as a highly fragmented puzzle that the audience needs to put patiently together gathering the pieces of evidence that pop up in front of their eyes seems particularly appropriate for volatile and rapidly-changing environments, such as the borderlands, which constantly call into question “the lack of fit between national culture and state sovereignty and domain” (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 12). It is no coincidence that the early stages of the film represent issues such as bilingual communication, local economies, the enforcement of the law –or the lack of it–, and internal and external migrations. All these topics, in one way or another, tend to transcend the boundaries of the single state and culture, often posing questions about the nature of what José David Saldívar calls the “*transfrontera* contact zone”: “the Janus-faced border line in which peoples geopolitically forced to separate themselves now negotiate with one another and manufacture new relations, hybrid cultures, and multiple-voiced aesthetics” (Saldívar 1997: 13). *The Three Burials* seems to be aware from the start of this difficult negotiation going on among different peoples, and its disjointed structure could be interpreted as an invitation extended to the audience to take a stance regarding the conflicts represented on the screen. Jones explained to Marianne Gray in *Sight & Sound* that the main theme of the movie was to ask the question: “What is the right thing to do?” and he would like spectators to take away “the realization that it’s possible to look across the river and see yourself” (2006: 18).

Manickam has noted that film images of the Mexican in Hollywood cinema have changed quite dramatically in recent times, becoming much more “realist and multidimensional,” thus being more “sympathetic” than in the classic Western tradition (2009: 128). According to this author, this change could be explained by the more active participation in the industry of foreigners and border dwellers –such as Arriaga and Jones–, but also because “transnational practices,” which cross national boundaries, have become an enticing theme to deal with on the screen. There is little doubt that the first half of *The Three Burials* presents a significant investment in terms of depicting the type of processes that take place in border territories and how those processes affect the lives of individuals on both sides of the boundary –in Jones’ movie marked by the river–. The use of both Spanish and English, and the swiftness with which characters come and go from this “*transfrontera*” milieu, strikes the viewer as different and gets her/him ready for the unusually complex realities s/he is going to witness. Manickam observes that in Van Horn, Texas, the small town in which the early action of the movie takes place, “las dos empresas más importantes tienen que ver con los inmigrantes mexicanos –la patrulla de la frontera y los grandes ranchos” (2009: 129)–. And we soon realize that the fate of the title character is going to be inextricably linked, for various reasons, to these two

“businesses.” On the one hand, there is the unexpectedly close friendship that we see developing between Melquiades and Pete Perkins, as the latter tends a helping hand to the Mexican immigrant from their very first encounter on the ranch. Not only does Perkins help the newly-arrived migrant to find employment in his country but, as several scenes convey, he is also concerned about his companion’s emotional wellbeing. In turn, Melquiades shares with the rancher certain confidences and, eventually, gives him the heavy responsibility of returning his body to his homeland, should anything happen to him in the U.S. (see Figure 7). On the other hand, in the early stages of the film we are also privy to the Nortons’ arrival and settlement in the small Texan town. While Mike has serious difficulties in adapting to his job as a border patroller, Lou Ann (January Jones) feels utterly alienated in a context where she feels invisible and unable to connect with the local folk. Certainly, one of the ironies in the film derives from the fact that Van Horn seems as unwelcoming and hostile to migrants as it is to nationals coming from other parts of the country, for they also see their sense of identity dislocated by the local practices. In Anzaldúa’s well-known description, “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (1987: 3). Given these conditions, it is no wonder that most of the characters represented in *The Three Burials* should feel lonely and depressed, since the place displays “an appalling poverty of spirit” (Ebert 2006) (see Figure 8).



Figure 7. Sharing confidences with Pete Perkins.



Figure 8. Feeling out of place.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume that nothing beautiful and edifying could grow in this rather barren setting. Lorey, for instance, concludes his compact study of phenomena in the area by saying that “despite lingering asymmetries and conflicts over land, water, migration, the environment, and other issues, the society of the border has been remarkable in its adaptation to rapid change and in its

capacity to receive migrants seeking new opportunities” (1999: 179). Of course, it would be inaccurate to state that Jones’ film offers a pleasant and positive view of the border milieu, but there are signs in the movie suggesting that traditional perceptions of the region as a place of violence and corruption are far too simplistic. To begin with, the unusually intimate friendship struck up by the protagonist and his foreign friend becomes the main driving force of the story, as the viewer observes how the kind of ethnic and class boundaries that often circumscribe human relations begin to tumble down when the characters find in each other a sort of surrogate son and father, respectively. One would even venture to compare this unlikely companionship with the close bondings –also established across racial lines– described by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. It is the intensity of the sentiments that develop between these two men that explains the grief that the rancher feels when he learns that his Mexican friend has been killed and his uncontrollable urge for revenge when he is told who committed the murder. As pointed out earlier on, representatives of the law not only fail to choose the right side and to protect the citizens’ rights but, in fact, both the Office of the Sheriff and the Border Patrol are seen to behave in rather insidious ways: hiding the identity of the murderer and preventing Perkins from claiming his friend’s body, which is dumped into a pauper’s grave under the inscription: “Melquiades, Mexico.” (see Figure 9). This fact, however, does not imply that everybody enlisted in these security forces is necessarily corrupt and, for instance, after Norton viciously beats up some Mexican wetbacks, he is immediately reprimanded by his superiors who, besides expressing their reprobation of gratuitous violence, also seem aware of the flaws in their control system: “Well, somebody has to pick away the strawberries.” Bowden remarks on this point that “the closer one gets to the line, the more rational the talk becomes because everyone has personal ties to people on the other side. Everyone realizes that the wall is a police solution to an economic problem” (2007: 138). Likewise, although Lou Ann tends to blame her own and her husband’s failure to adapt to the new context on the boredom and narrow-mindedness that seem to be inherent to the place, she finally realizes that the problem may not be so much out there but, rather, in the downturn that her marriage takes when the couple moves to Texas. Assisted by Rachel (Melissa Leo), a local waitress, the young woman begins to see that, beyond the dispiriting image initially projected by the small border town, there are all kinds of interesting human stories taking shape there that are worth her attention. Indeed, her brief date with Melquiades goes a long way in this direction, since she must realize *a fortiori* that there are other people who do not enjoy her privileges in status, language and cultural capital or economic means (see Figure 10).



Figure 9. A friend's humble grave: "Melquiades, Mexico".



Figure 10. A brief, fun date with Melquiades.

But, of course, it is Mike Norton's radical transformation during the second half of the movie that seems most arduous and proves more integral to the overall meaning of the filmic narrative. Although I have remarked above that none of the characters in Jones' *opera prima* are as flat and archetypal as those we find in old Westerns, Norton comes very close to representing the traditional villain. Besides killing good-natured Melquiades, he reacts with defiance and threats, when he is accused by Perkins of having done so. Nevertheless, their long journey through the desert and, then, in Coahuila, Mexico, provides him with a number of enlightening encounters and realizations that compel him to revise his understanding of the border and his own earlier (mis)conduct. Most importantly, he learns that the international boundary should not simply be read as something dividing people into different categories. As Manzanos puts it, "the wall or border is not the impenetrable ring of protections that creates a metaphysics of the pure, but the site of a constant crossing, of conjunction and disjunction" (2007: 22). This is the invaluable lesson that Norton gradually internalizes during the redeeming journey in which Perkins forces him to become an undocumented migrant in Mexico (see Figure 11). In the end, he tearfully recognizes that the shooting of Melquiades was a foolish accident occasioned by his own insecurity, and on his knees he asks for forgiveness in front of an old picture of the victim's alleged family. Zimmermann is probably correct when he affirms that, despite returning the body to its home and making the Border Patrol officer pay for his crime, Perkins does not succeed in achieving "a sort of father atonement, making amends for the sins and failures of his world, of his fatherland, reconciling Texas and Mexico" (2008: 221). However, it would have been highly unrealistic for the film to have ended on such an optimistic

note, since it would have meant correcting the asymmetries and solving the conflicts that have troubled the region for almost two centuries now. Lorey (1999) and Martínez (2006) conclude their explorations of the borderlands by saying that, although some advances have taken place –mainly thanks to the efforts made by the inhabitants of the region–, there are still serious obstacles (isolation, political and economic interests, etc.) that complicate “the resolution of problems stemming from domestic trends and bilateral relations” (Lorey 1999: 178). Jones’ film attempts to recapitulate a number of those obstacles and reflects on the changes that would need to take place in people’s mentality in order to be able to overcome, at least, some of them.



Figure 11. Becoming an undocumented, forced migrant in Mexico.

4. CLOSING REMARKS: THE AMBIVALENCE OF CROSSING THE BORDER

David Jacobson claims that phenomena such as “the economic disparities driving transnational migration [and] the competitive struggle of ethnic, business, and other groups to shape immigration policy in these equivocal circumstances” are having a profound impact on the notion of citizenship and its role as the anchor of identity (1997: 69). In this author’s opinion, the legitimacy of the nation-state to set the rules in contexts where such forces are at work is being eroded because questions such as what defines a citizen or to what extent institutional decisions are applicable in these peripheral

milieus are becoming increasingly problematical. Jacobson uses several examples –the passage of Proposition 187 in California, for instance– to show that certain norms that try to solve social and political problems related to immigration have challenged not just the American Constitution but also international Human Rights Law (1997: 100-2). Needless to say, the collisions between the different legal systems can only produce a great deal of tension and dialectics, since, although states still loom large in the picture concerning issues of citizenship and sovereignty, these very concepts need to take new forms in the light of processes taking place in border territories. Whether we see the borderlands as an open wound (Anzaldúa 1987: 3) or as a zipper, whether we read it as a fault line separating different worlds or as a hinge connecting them, crossing the line seems inevitably to arouse mixed feelings. Drawing from Foucault's ideas, Manzanas notes that *convenientia* “suppresses the fine schizomorphic line that presumably separates distinct identities in order to establish a broader contact zone, [...] a porous border that both separates and communicates” (2007: 12). Jones' film provides excellent instances of how that porous border invariably fosters interactions that are going to generate bonds and resemblances between the parties. These are easily noticeable in terms of the languages spoken, the programs seen on TV or the food and drinks the characters consume. As Manickam explains, the contact and intermingling of traits becomes most apparent in the protagonist's friendship with Melquiades, which “acaba humanizando tanto al inmigrante mexicano como [...] al vaquero Americano” (2009: 130). Yet, we have also seen that security forces are one of the main presences in the movie and, in most instances, they seem to work on the premise of an impenetrable line that divides and categorizes. According to İçduygu and Sert, the increase in “funding and manpower for the Border Patrol” since the early 1990s has been part of an effort made by U.S. authorities to back up the “Prevention through Deterrence” policy (2010: 15). Although policymakers tend to justify these measures as steps taken against drug traffickers and human smugglers, the fact is that, as the film shows, those suffering the terrible consequences are usually irregular migrants whose only crime is to be in search of better opportunities. All things considered, *The Three Burials* can be said to present a sympathetic picture of those who, for legitimate reasons, decide to cross the political and cultural threshold that the border marks. Jones refrains from encoding any obvious political message in the film, but he seems to grant much more importance to human motivation than to any policy models aimed at regulating them (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. A sympathetic picture of irregular migrants.

A few commentators have contended that, despite the scriptwriter's and the director's attempt to create a more transnational and bicultural product, still the movie's final purpose is somehow threatened by its indebtedness to the Western tradition, in which there is usually little mixture and ambiguity. Zimmermann concludes on this issue that Melquiades' unstable existence is eventually destroyed by the static myth of his death: "The Mexican exists as a reflection of the Texan –the rancher's, the Border Patrol agent's, the audience's– needs. The views, values, and beliefs of the North have literally been transplanted into the South" (2008: 222-23). While we have seen that there are certainly themes and motifs –especially in the second half of the film– that are clearly reminiscent of the Hollywood genre, it would be more difficult to maintain that the ultimate effects of the movie replicate those sought by the classics in the genre. To start with, it is evident that Jones' portrayal of loyalty and justice is hued by nuances of meaning that one would never expect to find in frontier stories, and which make it less comfortable and more multilayered. David Río has noted that contemporary visions of Western borders "debunk traditional mythology, rejecting at the same time extreme reductionism to simplistic binary oppositions" (2011: xv). Indeed, *The Three Burials* brings to the foreground the difficulty of telling victors apart from victims, law-abiding citizens from transgressors, local mores from global trends. It is little wonder that some reviewers were disappointed by the film's ending in which the character we had taken to be the "hero" goes unhinged when he realizes that his dead friend's dream was just that, an impossible dream. Lane remarks that "the film's plea for old-fashioned pride and racial tolerance is muffled by a plain, unanticipated fact. Pete Perkins is out of his mind" (2006: 95). While it is a fact that those of us raised on the easy logics and tailor-made solutions of old Westerns may find the denouement of Jones' film rather troubling, it is also unquestionable that the prickly issues

covered in the work deserve this more intricate and ambivalent treatment. In a way, the director's final aim is to make us question both the myths of old and contemporary realities by presenting the border as a plural, interrelated, and unfinished space, "consisting of multiple meanings and often intercultural experiences and identities" (Río 2011: xv).

In *Border Matters*, Saldívar concludes his analysis of songs, political discourses, texts, and visual productions dealing with border experiences by stating that trying "to build a smoothed-over canon of ethno-racial wholeness" regarding these works is of little use "because they operate at other levels than those constructed by national border" (1997: 197). As this cultural critic argues, we should delve into the specific visions of the U.S.-Mexican border-crossing situations by bearing in mind the historical and socio-political conditions under which those migratory journeys have occurred. There are, of course, various ways in which artists have explored the ambivalences and fears that frequently accompany any attempts to cross that "national scar" all too plagued with myths of racial superiority and military domination. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* offers the audience an invaluable opportunity to dig deep into the motivations and consequences of people's decision to cross an international border that is still perceived by many as a "form of necessary intervention and collective security" (Jacobson 1997: 136). Jones' movie seems to tell us that while strong and beautiful human ties –across ethnic, class, national boundaries– may often emerge, all kinds of ideological and institutional resistance from other actors will also need to be overcome. Bowden rightly notes –recalling Robert Frost's famous poem– that "we think of walls as statements of foreign policy, and we forget the intricate lives of the people we wall in and out" (2007: 137). *The Three Burials* should be seen, in fact, as an effort on the part of the filmmaker to remind us of the immense barriers and tribulations faced by those that decide to view the border as an opportunity for collaboration and syncretism, rather than as a site of division and disjunction (see Figure 13).



Figure 13. Strong human ties, despite difference and boundaries.

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