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A genre and a limit: Across the Rio Grande border

In 2005 Tommy Lee Jones' film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* offered spectators a story of pledge and revenge leading the protagonists across the Rio Grande border between the USA and Mexico. Despite contemporary circumstances in terms of date and issues – mainly illegal immigration – geographical and visual elements obviously give the film some resemblance with what André Bazin regarded considered as the essentially American genre, the western. Attempting to answer the deceptively simple question of how far *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* can be described as a western will give an opportunity to explore some features of the genre, especially the geography of the Western, as well as study a few stories set in typical landscapes, focussing on the border between the United States and Mexico. That major locus in northern as well as mid-American imagination and culture is also the setting of a number of westerns and especially of John Ford's *Rio Grande* (1950), the source of our title as well as a fascinating inter-text to Tommy Lee Jones' work.

A grandiose mountain landscape offers an ideal setting to John Ford's "cavalry" drama¹, parts of which supposedly take place on the border river. The crossing of the latter is The credits show images of riders, mostly military, crossing a river we immediately identify as the Rio Grande since we are being told so by the film's very title written over the shots. However, we may experience some difficulty at identifying who's who or rather which bank is which as the point of view switches from one side to the other – especially if we mistakenly analyse the credit shots as coming first in the chronological unravelling of the

¹ *Rio Grande* is generally included in John Ford's « cavalry trilogy » as a third and last opus concluding the series opened with *Fort Apache* in 1948 and continued with *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* in 1949. The three films mix the daily-life and heroic feats of cavalry officers and troops, John Wayne acting as a protagonist in all of them.

plot. A few scenes later, the same shots are repeated, making far more sense once integrated in a linear narrative. The repetition emphasizes the importance of the scene: the middle of the river represents some kind of neutral ground, a liquid, unstable stage where both Mexican and US representatives can display exquisite manners and generosity, in sharp contrast with the rocky banks and the sheer brutality of the rebellious Apaches who repeatedly find shelter on the Mexican bank after their bloody forays into US territory. At first sight, Captain York's predicament seems as clearly outlined as the river divide on the map: he has orders and crossing the Rio Grande is strictly forbidden to his troops. Yet the repeated credit scene shows how these orders suffer exceptions, on humanitarian grounds for example: US military doctors have obviously been allowed on Mexican territory to help repair some of Natchez' damage. Several minutes before their repetition provides us with a retrospective understanding of the equivocal credit shots, the opening scene in which unidentified riders meet at midstream while we are quite unable to know the Mexican bank from the US one reads as a reflection of how complex the crossing of this particular border may prove.

In 1950, John Ford was referring to past history. In Tommy Lee Jones' film, set in a contemporary context, two scenes give a quite different depiction of the crossing of the same Rio Grande border. The first one refers to the current reality of illegal immigration into the United States. Interestingly, the river is never shown in the scene where the confrontation between the border patrol and the wetbacks is represented as an extremely disorderly and ultimately violent chase. Again, US representatives and alien outlaws enact their cruel, century-old game of hide-and-seek, but harmless-looking Mexicans have replaced fierce Apache warriors. Again, the point of view shifts from one group to the other, never really taking sides, or maybe taking both sides. The two films share a violent and highly complex

vision of the crossing of the border between Mexico and the United States, none illustrating the official concept of a “seamless border” successive governments on both banks had tried to implement from the Second World War onward.

In many films² the crossing of the Rio Grande or Rio Bravo, depending on which bank one stands, and the passage from one country to the other is the occasion for particularly crucial scenes, and we shall now examine some of the reasons why the Mexican horizon is so present in US films. Then, as a great number of these films belong to the Western genre, we shall focus on *The Three Burials* as a Western and study the importance of the Rio Grande border in that particular film.

“Ever since the earliest silent Westerns (...) Hollywood has had a love-hate relationship with the people and the landscape “south of the border, down Mexico way”.³ The relationship on film is the reflection of constant and conflicted exchanges between the two countries, exchanges rooted in a history of struggles for power and territory. Once actual wars were over, the border has remained as a place for contact and confrontation. For decades, like the characters in Graham Greene’s short story “Across the Bridge”,⁴ people living on either side of the river have dreamt of crossing it. For “Anglos” it means escaping justice, finding a hiding place or indulging pleasures one will not or cannot enjoy at home, mildly exotic honeymoons, mariachis and margaritas, or wilder experiences with mushrooms; for Mexicans, expectations of a better life. In other words, a place laden with dreams, hopes, fear and violence, and an interface between English and Spanish-speaking cultures.

Everybody knows the 2000 miles’ border runs from coast to coast, from San Diego/Tijuana on the west coast to Brownsville/Matamoros on the Atlantic, but our focus

² For example, Steven Soderbergh’s *Traffic* (2000) or Etan and Joel Cohen’s *No Country for Old Men* (2007).

³ Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1988), p.185.

⁴ Graham Greene, *Complete Short Stories* (London: Penguin Classics , 2005).

will be on its “natural” section, the Rio Grande, “natural” not being taken for granted; in other words, the Texan border, starting at El Paso, Texas, that historical bone of contention between the US and Mexico, was to become the locus for a great number, if not a majority of Westerns. *The BFI Companion to the Western* describes it as “the origin and still the centre of the distinctive cowboy culture that came to dominate the popular idea of the West”.⁵ The geography of the Western mingles imagination and reality as *Rio Grande* shortens the distance between Monument Valley (actually in Arizona) and the border river, apparently at a few hours’ ride from Ford’s favourite location.

The south-western territory came to harbour so many Westerns because of its hybrid culture, and the interesting Mexican tropism of a number of Hollywood productions. First of all, the south-west obviously provides films with spectacular landscapes, lively music, and all the clichés of Latino culture, dark ladies and drama-laden stories. Then, Mexico itself is clearly perceived by Hollywood as “the breeding ground for an apparently endless succession of villains, bandits and rebels”,⁶ from the “greaser” silent films of the 1910s such as *Broncho Billy and the Greaser*, or *The Greaser’s Revenge* (Gilbert M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson, 1914) to *Viva Villa* (Jack Conway, 1934) and *the Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) or *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (Sam Peckinpah, 1974). Westerns throughout the history of the genre have constantly hovered between the praise of law and order and the enjoyment of sheer wildness. It accounts for their choice of territories where these contradictory forces can clash freely and dramatically and leads us to view the Rio Grande border as a sort of ideal setting where to enact some essential paradigms of the Western.

Taking place on the banks and in the shallows of the Rio Grande itself, the second “crossing” scene in *The Three Burials* can be regarded as a climax in the narrative. The

⁵ Buscombe, p. 227.

⁶ Buscombe, p.228.

situation is quite paradoxical, as Perkins, the protagonist, asks a smuggler or “*passeur*” to help him and his prisoner cross the border from the US into Mexico, contrary to the wetbacks in the first scene. Redefining some classic motifs of the Western, *The Three Burials* offers its own variation on the theme, as a reluctant evil doer, Melquiades’ accidental killer, is being roped into the water like some maverick and forced across the river and into Mexico as part of Perkins’ revenge for his friend’s death. We can see in the scene how most of the thematic and visual elements in *The Three Burials* belong to the classic Western tradition though the film is set in the current context of illegal immigration, Melquiades being an illegal Mexican farmhand and Mike, his killer, belonging to the border patrol. As in the river scenes in *Rio Grande*, several long shots show the men as puny figures struggling ineffectually in a kind of primeval landscape impervious to their vain agitation. “*Fleuve impassible*”, the Rio Grande flows on, ignoring why men ludicrously decided it would be a border between two countries. The crossing, dangerous and heroic as it may be, is presented as quite meaningless, both banks being very much alike. Moreover, the shallowness of the river makes it so easy to cross that the human interdiction seems absurd.

As we have seen in the credit shots of *Rio Grande*, the viewer hardly knows who’s who, behaviours, marching orders, decorum and politeness being very similar in both camps and the camera hovering undecidedly from one bank to the other. In *The Three Burials*, it shifts to the Mexican bank only at the end of the scene, focussing on the exhausted men stranded on a disappointingly empty stretch of sand. Captain York’s as well as Perkins’ quests are equally dwarfed by the brooding presence of the cliffs and mesas, yet as human spectators we follow them and may find some grandeur in their quixotic endeavours. *The Three Burials* shares yet another feature with many westerns, that of the mission. Interestingly, both Captain York’s and Perkins’ missions are illegal but obey a superior law. York will cross the Rio Grande in order to save abducted children’s lives whereas Perkins fulfils his promise to

Melquiades, having his corpse buried in his village. If *The Three Burials* re-evaluates the moral assumptions underlying Hollywood westerns by inverting such canonical lines as the frontier between the “good” and the “bad” banks, *Rio Grande* appears as a forerunner in the ambiguous way it depicts the crossing of the river in its credit shots.

Many other scenes in *The Three Burials* echo classic Westerns, and the one in which Melquiades is introduced into the film provides us with the best illustration of how far Tommy Lee Jones goes in his loyalty to the tropes and values of the genre. It starts on an idle group of men, some of them elderly, whiling the time away inside a barn. The scene makes use of the paraphernalia and motifs of classic westerns to illustrate the extenuation of the myth: here are older men on foot, practising their lassoing indoors, in the dark, on unmoving artificial targets. Then a small Mexican appears at the door of the barn, against the outdoor light, looking for work. More Sancho Pansa than Quixote, he rides a mule but still reclaims some of the attributes of the cowboy, as he introduces himself with a sweet smile: ‘*Sono vaquero mas*’, just a cowboy. Letting him speak his own language, with the soft sing-song of Mexican Spanish, the film gives nobility to the figure of the Mexican, atoning for the “Greaser” figures of many earlier films. Moreover, the frame he is given to appear in reminds the viewer of some famous shots such as the opening and closing ones in Ford’s *Searchers*, enshrining him as an apparition. At that stage, we already know he is to die, the “*vaquero*” figure is showed as part of the living only in retrospect, and we tend to pity the character. We may smile in that scene, but with the title character, never at him; obviously, *The Three Burials* cannot read as a debunking of the western. In spite of his straw hat Melquiades is no parody or caricature of the cowboy. In a way, the film crosses the river to rehabilitate all those villainous Mexican figures who had haunted “border” western for decades.

In a further scene one can see how Melquiades the illegal farmhand offers Perkins the best horse he had ever seen, which gives the “*vaquero*” a fable-like aura. The film shows how Melquiades’ sweet temper and loyalty has turned him into a sort of knight able to offer regal prizes. The values he shares with Perkins, friendship, loyalty, are shown as vanishing, and the heroes as belonging to the past, still riding horses when the border patrol uses four-wheel drives. Yet Perkins defeats the sheriff and the patrol, as he is perfectly adapted to his environment, the wrinkles on his face reflecting mountain crevices, and eventually fulfils his quest when he obtains Mike’s plea for forgiveness.

However, the film crosses other borders in so far as it challenges the limits of the genre, and especially the classic convention of a linear narrative. The first half of the film is built upon an extremely complex structure based on a series of flashbacks and requesting some reconstructing effort on the spectator’s part. It also takes into account the history of the genre, paying tribute to the classics by favouring long and medium shots yet offering some close-ups, especially of Perkins’ face, reminding the viewer of spaghetti Westerns.

The end is faithful to the conventions of the genre, with a fulfilled mission and a dutiful transmission to the younger generation, yet the protagonist doesn’t ride away against the setting sun, and we may doubt Mike’s capacity at running the gauntlet. Interestingly, the film seems to leave us at midstream, indecisive as to how we should leave it or how it leaves us. What has been accomplished may appear futile, the village where they have buried Melquiades is a ghostly place, his house a ruin, the woman on the photograph denies she is his wife, and Mike asks forgiveness from the same doubtful photograph.

Crossing the river led them nowhere but to the land of the dead, and the mission was nothing but the burial of a man who had already been buried twice... which leads us to

ponder whether *The Three Burials* should be watched as a kind of paradoxically optimistic Mexican feast of the dead and a burial of the Western. Perkins tries and preserves Melquiades' body through a series of funny macabre operations, the poor corpse being more pickled than embalmed. Hence, the carrying around of Melquiades' body could be seen as the metaphor of a dead genre, and the film as an attempt at preserving it. The values the genre embodies, such as friendship, fidelity and generosity would then be represented as a kind of cherished but cumbersome burden and the film as an attempt to give the Western a decent grave.

The fact that the body is carried to Mexico, a place where figures of death mingle with the living on November 2nd also emphasizes the notion of a genre haunted by ghosts. Many contend the genre is dead, but were films ever more than illusions, shadows, ghosts?

As a post mortem western, Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* makes us cross the river and travel to the realm of the dead to proclaim the only eternity film can offer, hardly consistent shadows appearing and disappearing on our screens and memories.

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