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Border Witness: Reimagining the US-Mexico Borderlands through Film, by Michael Dear. University of California Press, 2023, 318 pp.

Emmanuel Ramos-Barajas

Michael Dear's *Border Witness: Reimagining the US-Mexico Borderlands through Film* offers a profound engagement with a phenomenon he calls the border film genre—in this case, seventy-two films (produced in a span of more than one century) and the narratives they have broadcast globally in that time.[1] As Dear himself declares, "[t]his book is not a work of conventional film criticism or film theory" (68). Rather, it is an intriguing interdisciplinary exercise that draws from multiple subjects—film studies, ethnography, art history, cultural geography, autobiography, history, and political science—to make sense of the Mexico-US borderlands, their inhabitants, and representation. The result is a unique interpretation of the visual and narrative cultural production that has shaped large-scale perceptions about this consequential and oft-mythologised territory. Delivering, in Dear's own words, "an unabashedly idiosyncratic and opinionated report based in four decades of experience, research, writing, and activism along the southern border", he places narrative tropes articulated via film production at the centre of this construction (8). Remarkably, Dear has included both US and Mexican productions as his object of study—a perspective few scholars have tackled—to offer multi-focal analyses of border life from both sides of the line.[2]

The book is divided into three parts, "Origins", "Fusions", and "Witness", and a total of seventeen chapters. The first part traces the beginnings of border film over seven chapters. The second covers the development of border film from the second half of the twentieth century to the present in another seven chapters. In three succinct chapters, the final part gathers observations about overarching themes to define the border film genre and reflects on the future of the borderlands in film and in general. Throughout, Dear includes personal anecdotes about his childhood filmgoing education in Wales and his experiences travelling in, across, and around the Mexico-US borderlands. Also embedded are extended asides that present relevant histories of the places, peoples, and subjects at hand.

In Part One, the first four chapters serve as an introduction that outlines the book's methodologies. The central idea is that of witness: juxtaposing one's experiences of real life with events depicted on screen to detect their veracity.[3] In this turn, film becomes evidence by what it highlights or underplays—revealing more about how we imagine our place in the world by the stories we tell (or refuse to tell). Unsurprisingly, questions of space and place sit squarely at the core of the study since the borderlands exemplify the "in-between spaces where two national film cultures collide and fuse" (48). That is, they open possibilities for new languages of exchange

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between nations. Dear understands border film—defined precisely by its borderland setting and the substantial cross-border connections that arise from such localisation—as an articulation of this binational cultural communication. The last three chapters of Part One smartly deliver a distinctly binational reading of the border; not only by providing adept understandings of the issues at play, but by pairing Mexican and US films with considerable thematic overlap. For example, the coupling of *Border Incident* (Anthony Mann, 1949) with *Espaldas mojadas* (Alejandro Galindo, 1953) while discussing unauthorised migration, and *Aventurera* (Alberto Gout, 1952) with *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) in the "Border Film Noir" chapter are skilful successes of film criticism that bridge typical national approaches. In comparing the Mexican and US social values espoused by these films, Dear exposes the distinct national imperatives behind their production.

In parts Two and Three, Dear advances the theory that we are entering a golden age of border film. In his enthusiasm for this proposal, however, he leaves several considerations unexplored. These limitations prevent a more nuanced argument, ultimately draining these chapters of a shade or two of the lustre they promise. The principal issue in these untested waters is identifying the work that border film is carrying out. To explain, I turn to art historian Kirsten Pai Buick who insists on studies that foreground what an object *does* as opposed to what it *is*—that is, analyses "that rest on the infinitive 'to do' rather than 'to be'" (33). Through this approach, she cautions, we avoid doing the work of the object; we elude replicating and rearticulating the narratives that the object of study itself has normalised. In our case, Dear devotes the book to a "task of genre identification" and does not connect grander political trends to the labour of border film (217). Such an approach limits our ability to materialise the genre's discourses and rhetoric, as well as its impossibilities—what it cannot (or will not) articulate, conceive, or imagine.

While Dear maintains he is interested in these impossibilities, his textual analysis often does not go beyond the discourses found *within* the films themselves. A typical example comes in Chapter Ten "Narco Nations", which covers recent drug cartel action films. The entirety of his evaluation consists of summarising plots such as that of *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve, 2015), where only two interpretations draw from outside the narrative. The first describes the film as, "another big-spending, award-winning production, with a top-drawer cast and crew" (157). Questions of why Hollywood selected this particular vision of the border in which to invest millions of dollars are left unasked, as are questions about why its subject matter resonated so well at the box office and within critic circles. The second is a parenthetical following the scene where the main characters enter Ciudad Juárez and witness headless corpses hanging from freeway bridges, "(Many residents in the real Juárez were outraged by the portrayal of their city in this film)" (159). Again, Dear asks neither what these representations are achieving, nor how the success of these tropes incites their repetition in succeeding productions, thereby shaping audience tastes. By not challenging or contradicting the films' rhetoric, description becomes its own explanation—the films are violent because the border is violent. [4] By relying on this logic, Dear inadvertently echoes the films' discourses. In this manner, the book assumes the perspective of the films, leading to a conflation of the viewpoint of analysis—it suggests the cinematic world and the real world are witnessed to be one and the same. Indeed, Dear confirms this precise sentiment in the last chapter as an answer to a rhetorical question posed early in the book: "As it turned out the border film genre I outlined revealed a surprising degree of fidelity between real life and screen life; most of the time, the filmmakers of Hollywood and Churubusco *did* get the border right in the stories they

told" (246). By seeking to convince us that the work of corporate fiction storytellers—whose principal obligations are to producers, investors, and the box office—has been successful in capturing a faithful reality, Dear signals to the potency of the genre he has identified; however, he reduces his argument to what border film *is*, not what it *does*.

Following this line of inquiry, an urgent unaddressed question regards the representations of violence and landscape in the border genre. While there is no denying that the borderlands have historically been prone to violent episodes, the deeper systemic causes are naturalised throughout. Dear accepts violent qualities as inherent to the space of his study with comments such as, "[border] films inevitably focused on the consequences of the mixing of races, identities, and cultures in the historically violent borderlands", and "[t]he visually compelling desert landscapes convey the threatening aridity and alienation of border life and forefront the border as a place capable of *generating* alienation, violence, and lawlessness among border dwellers" (178, 187). In these sentences, violence works as its own description—it is characteristic of the land itself, not a consequence of socio-political issues. The question is not: "How is violence made to operate as a narrative trope?" or "What does the representation of violence in the borderlands reveal about its history?" Instead, violence is expressed as an unchallenged fact. Likewise, his treatment of the historical formation of the borderlands and their representation on film leave significant questions unanswered. Conspicuously, he does not consider US imperial ambitions and the campaigns these engendered against Mexican sovereignty. Principally, he fails to mention the causes and consequences of the Mexican American War (1846–48)—including the US invasion of Mexico City or the Mexican Cession—as significant components in determining Mexico-US relations. The lack of consideration of US productions of Spanish colonial stories like that of Ramona and Zorro is particularly glaring considering their popularity spawned numerous adaptations and remakes. Relatedly, the Western—which shares a lot of thematic overlap due to a geographic insistence and despite its sheer number of productions—is not theorised in relation to border film. Why, then, are US accounts of empire excused from the conversation about historic veracity? Given US cultural production has traditionally abounded with questions about the ubiquitous frontier, its inclusion could have deepened ideas of the border as either foil or complement. This detached historical perspective on landscape and violence also colours how race, class, gender, nationality, and their processes are theorised.

Dear's exploration of how differential meanings have been attached to the human body springs from a slanted understanding of the histories of land. Dear begins his discussion of border stories by focusing specifically on bodies *on* the border, that is figures bisected by the line. From the metaphoric—Charlie Chaplin straddling the border at the end of *The Pilgrim* (Charlie Chaplin, 1923), to the literal—two murder victims, one white, one Mexican, sliced in half to make up one whole victim as inciting incident in *The Bridge* (Gerardo Naranjo, 2013), the human figure on the border allows Dear to explore stereotyping and miscegenation as two central themes of border film since its earliest days. In his analysis, he refers to two films: *Shorty's Trip to Mexico* (Jay Hunt, 1914), a silent film about an Anglo-US adventurer who crosses into Mexico to rescue a Mexican woman from a corrupt general, and *Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). Despite his successful critique of *Shorty's Trip*, his argument quickly devolves when the focus shifts to Griffith's ill-reputed narrative about US Black-White relations. Despite mentioning the more theoretically and geographically appropriate *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), Dear insists on using *Birth of a Nation* to pursue a reading of Mexican-Anglo miscegenation.[5] This resolve effectively reduces his

evaluation of race and racialisation to a US lens. His approach does not consider the complex dynamics between race and class that are so prominent in Mexican cultural production and social hierarchies. Dear adopts a categorically stable view of Mexican and Latinx characters—often reducing their identifications to a physiognomic denomination—resting on what race *is* as opposed to what it *does* in these films.

This static understanding of racialisation carries over to the understanding of ethnicities and nationalities. While discussing *Bajo California: El límite del tiempo* (Carlos Bolado Muñoz, 1998), Dear offers a counter to the American Dream in the form of the Mexican Dream. However, rather than delivering material and physical abundance (in tune to globalisation's capitalist excess), the novel iteration offers salvation through ethereal mysticism. This dream (or fantasy) of a return to indigenous perspectives comes via French writer J. M. G. Le Clézio whose vision of Mexico, Dear claims, "as a land of dreams made from a different truth, an alternate reality […] 'gave new value to the contemporary indigenous world'" (214). There is no acknowledgement that this alternate reality is the very same one subject to the Spanish conquest Dear has spent a great deal of time denouncing. How does Le Clézio's view of Mexico as "a new land where […] everything is at the same time very ancient and very new" erase historical injustices via a rabid romanticisation? (214). And what is at stake by claiming a new value for the contemporary indigenous world? The answer to this second question lies in a turn to absolution—that is, a reappraisal of traditional indigenous knowledge to atone for the violence of the past. For Dear, that is certainly the stated value of works like *Bajo California*, as evident when Damián (the main character) voices his guilt associated with a car accident that may have killed a woman before he decides "to atone and revive himself at the secret domain of the cave paintings in central Baja" (211). Indigenous knowledge, art, traditions, and people are understood merely as vehicles for larger issues, usually involving the self-actualisation of modern (read upper-class Mexican or white) individuals: othered to the point of staffage. It is important to reiterate that the US, again, is spared from such treatment. US territories are never conceptualised as mythical or otherworldly—like the American Dream, the US remains as secular as ever. Anglo-US characters are often given much more complex characteristics and moral journeys. This is likely a result of the film industry's tactics and conventions, but undertheorised and normalised by Dear. Citizens of Central American nations are also subjected to a similar inattention. While Dear mentions several films that deal with Guatemalan and Honduran migrants, he never explicitly states the complex—and often hostile—relationship between Mexico and these countries. Given the global attention Mexican immigrants in the Mexico-US border receive, contextualisation of Mexico and its southern neighbours is necessary, especially since Mexican officials have adopted deterrent measures as draconian as those of the US Border Patrol. Despite being leading characters in several films, migrants serve only as conduits of empathy—again, an issue for which the whole film industry is at fault, rather than a single author. However, Dear does not take issue with these representations and unfortunately re-articulates them himself.

Dear is at his most eloquent in Chapter Sixteen "Ways of Seeing the Border (Beyond Film)." His expertise as scholar, geographer, and activist is evident in his clear and powerful contextualisation of the borderlands as an integral part of the "border industrial complex" (242). At the core of this entanglement, he argues, is "[a] divergence between national and local interests […] because the US federal government has designated border communities as the locus where the wars on terrorism, drugs, and undocumented immigration will take place" (241). With this

appraisal, Dear is successful in elucidating how the borderlands are made to operate and the scale of these consequences. His persuasive theorisations of the borderlands as a space of radical, cross-border relationships highlights a regional approach that dispels a nationalist understanding for one of absorption, diffusion, and passage—eroding the typical binary of centre-periphery. Had these threads been woven with cinema in deeper levels, and, most importantly, had he rejected the rhetoric of many of the films discussed, we would have a convincing argument of "the ease with which [border film] crosses boundaries separating fact and fiction, confounds stereotypes, and merges Anglo and Mexican mythologies and meanings" (84).

In *Border Witness*, Dear offers several strategies for conceptualising the stories we tell about borders, their landscapes, and inhabitants to define the border film genre. Given that the subject is a region as politicised and visible as the Mexico-US Borderlands, this is no easy feat. Although these approaches sometimes fall short, the fact remains—as Dear correctly observes—that we are living through an era of unprecedented interest in a historically peripheralised landscape. However, we must not confuse a large number of productions with a period of excellence in radical storytelling. In his attempt to prove that we have entered a golden age of border film, Dear has overlooked serious considerations regarding the work that these films carry out—particularly for dominant hegemonic narratives. If we celebrate a golden age of border film without contextualising its production and reception in terms of politics, culture, and economy—from the Zimmermann Telegram to the Good Neighbor Policy to the dissolution of NAFTA—we are not determining what this period is *doing*, only tracing new boundaries.

Notes

[1] A broader list of 130 border films for further reference and viewing is listed in Appendix 2.

[2] Dear cites his bibliographic lineage, beginning with the work of Mexican film scholar Norma Iglesias Prieto, to whom *Border Witness* is dedicated, who wrote about border cinema in 1991 and David R. Maciel who did the same in English in 1990.

[3] This concept is drawn from James Baldwin's 1979 *The Devil Finds Work*—a half film criticism, half memoir book-length essay—where he wrote about US popular film culture and the ways in which whiteness was defined via representation of Black US citizens.

[4] Art historian Michael Baxandall provides the most extended theorisation on the role of explanation as a mediator of meaning, particularly through images, in *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*.

[5] *Duel in the Sun* is a historic epic set in the Texas borderlands featuring the extremely racialised and sexualised "mestiza Pearl Chavez" (Jennifer Jones) as main character. Her half Indian/half white descendancy is the subject of a lot of attention in the film. The film was produced in 1946 by David O. Selznick to replicate his prior success with *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939).

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Sicario. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, Lionsgate, 2015.

Touch of Evil. Directed by Orson Welles, Universal International Pictures, 1958.

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