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Border Bandits: Hollywood on the Southern Frontier (Book Review)

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Fojas, Camilla. *Border Bandits. Hollywood on the Southern Frontier*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2008.

Fojas begins the preface to her book with a reference to May 1, 2006, a date on which American workers recognized International Labor Day by boycotting their jobs and marching to reject a law that repressed undocumented workers at the same time that it proposed the construction of a wall along the whole 700-mile Mexican border. The author claims that this protest marked “a new era in the predicament of workers at the bottom of the labor market” (vii). For Fojas, this moment marks a new visibility for Latinos and immigrant communities.

It is against this historical and political horizon that Camilla Fojas undertakes her study of how Hollywood cinema has framed and continues to frame our image (national and international) of the Mexico-U.S. frontier. In the process, she traces the history of U.S. military interventions in Mexico and the political pressures imposed on the country South of the border by its more powerful neighbor.

Throughout her book Fojas discusses a series of icons and “stock characters” that emerge from Hollywood’s treatment of the border, noting that these have entered national and international imaginaries, distorting historical events and often concealing the true nature of the conflicts, and imposing a uniquely nationalistic voice and mythology. As she analyzes and reviews the construction of these stereotypes within Hollywood cinematic production, she incorporates critical contributions not only from the field of film studies, but also those of history and cultural criticism.

The book’s first chapter, “Welcome to the Alamo,” provides a careful summary of the ways in which the U.S.-Mexico border is portrayed in Hollywood films on the subject throughout the twentieth and in the beginning of the twenty-first century. After noting that a great deal of the almost 200 films she studied for this project are Westerns, she proposes the thesis that the border western constitutes a cinematic form through which great historical events are mythologized as a way of proposing a more advantageous outcome for the U.S. Two of the films discussed in greater detail in this chapter are *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *Rio Grande* (1950). It is in these earlier twentieth-century films that Fojas encounters the foundational tropes of racial segregation and rejection of the indigenous population as part of the American imperial nation. These tropes, she notes repeatedly, are reaffirmed continuously throughout the century.

Chapter 2, “The Imaginary Illegal Alien” analyzes the figure of the border patrol as an embodiment of certain national myths in films on immigration and border drug trafficking in the 1980s. Some of the films analyzed in this chapter are *Borderline* (1980), *The Border* (1982), and *Flashpoint* (1984). Fojas characterizes these films as examples of “*bordersploitation*” because of their crude use of stereotypes. In

chapter 3, Fojas centers her analysis on the treatment of drug trafficking in recent films and television shows. Fojas' thesis here is that Hollywood media production supports and extends the 'U.S. war on drugs', by placing the spectator directly in the moral world of those who prosecute this war and enforce drug laws, thus identifying with what she terms "the narc sensibility." Chapter 4 centers on films that make Los Angeles their focal point. In them, the western metropolis is a geography onto which are drawn literal literary and metaphorical borders of various types (racial, class, legal, political, gendered).

In her conclusion, Fojas examines recent changes in the Western genre through an analysis of two revisionist Westerns: *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). In them, mythic Western images are recycled and resemantized. In the process, claims the author, Hollywood proposes new ways of constituting nationalist hegemony despite their liberal and revisionist traits.

Backed by a very substantial body of filmic evidence, Fojas's argument that this cinematic body of works helps to create an imaginary American "national" ideal is persuasive. So too is her argument that Hollywood has succeeded in producing a fictional space through which U.S. audiences have been able to manage traumatic and undesirable histories and ultimately reaffirm core 'American' values" (2). Fojas is equally forceful in arguing that Hollywood has had a large hand in helping to establish a cultural agenda regarding the U.S.-Mexican border, and that this agenda has influenced cultural and political views for much of a century.

Fojas' book has particular relevance today, when new waves of intentionally regressive legislation are seeking to erode immigrant rights and to dehumanize illegal aliens. Her characterization of North American culture as one "that has defined itself at every turn against Mexico and Mexicans, against labor and immigration, and against the Mexican culture of the Southwestern" describes an inexhaustible tension, past and present, exceeding the margins of Hollywood. By analyzing naturalized fictional images, all of them deeply ideologically charged, Fojas' book contributes to make visible the urgency of serious political discussion on these topics, both within and outside of Departments of Film and Cultural Studies.

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