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Film Review

John Carlos Frey: *The Gatekeeper* (2001)

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The subject of immigration and human crossings tends to provoke strong emotions as well as schisms on both sides of the Mexico-United States border for very different reasons. While the border and its inhabitants, or dwellers, conjure up a wide range of reactions and impressions, their recent notoriety have raised the ante of what the border means to both nations as a point of contact and as a source of porous interaction. The perceptions on both sides of the border continue to be quite divergent: on the American side it is viewed as a menacing threat, even referred to as a silent invasion, while Mexicans measure its significance more according to its degree of risk, danger and opportunity. What is undeniable is this region's unique qualities of transculturalization since the area is one of the most crossed borders in the world. Some might even claim that it is also one of the most contested borders given that it is a geographic space where two polarized nations from the First and Third-World clash and converge. Indeed, the United States and Mexico are two nations that overlap culturally, historically and economically and in this manner produce a kind of modern *Blade Runner* where borrowing and interpenetration are the rule rather than the exception. The border region, then, is vital for most modern cultures because it represents the type of cultural evolution we might encounter in the far future^ Therefore, it should surprise no one that the border has been characterized by a long list of epithets, such as a scar, wound, a militarized zone, an abyss, the end of the world, a point of convergence for two tectonic plates, a porous or permeable membrane, *mestizaje,* and many others. Its approximately 3,000 kilometers in length seem to provoke multiple conceptualizations that involve conflation, merging, blending and sometimes blurring of differences.

It is not coincidental that border culture has garnered much attention in the last decade, frequently appearing in the form of feature articles, revised maps of current cultural trends, and particularly in the covers of mainstream magazines which help formulate and shape American opinion. Two examples suffice: a map titled "MexAmerica: The Border Culture" from l995[2] presents revealing statistics about the region's new-found visibility, including cultural phenomena that pertain to both sides of the border; and the magazine cover of *The Atlantic*from May l992 portrays the border as an uncomfortable territory of mish-mash

disjunctions with the following subtitle: “In the tense, hybrid world along the U.S.-Mexican border, Mexico’s problems are becoming America’s problems.’,[3]In contrast, Carlos Fuentes in *La frontera de cristal: una novela en nueve cuentos* (l995)[4 presents a series of short stories that illuminate Mexico’s perspective on the border by underscoring the extensive interaction between the two nations (USA and Mexico) through entrepreneurship, cultural icons, food, manufactured products, people, etc. as well as an inherent interdependence and the shared commonalities present between the two. While many media sources in the United States focus on the differences and similarities between the two countries, Fuentes points to qualities and attributes of the border as indicative of a *third culture* that encompasses distinctive admixtures and symbiosis.

Cinematography has indeed indulged in the visual discourse of portraying the border. Both the American and Mexican film industry have, however, depicted this politicized social sphere more as a backdrop than a central focus. While there has been a clear acknowledgement of the border’s presence and the migratory patterns surrounding it, film in general prefers to depict individual stories instead of grappling with the larger, over-arching geo-political issues. There has been a strong tendency to emphasize those border characteristics that are sensational and dramatic rather then focus on those aspects related to its cultural significance and contributions. The exploitation of the border for its emotionally charged qualities has prevailed over an honest attempt to understand its intrinsically complex nature. Films have oftentimes inexplicably compartmentalized their narrative angle: for example, *Touch of Evil* (l958) shuffled vice and temptation in a barbaric border town, *Raices de Sangre* (l977) epitomized a bi-national attempt to reconcile differences by exploring a common struggle to find a solution to border labor issues, *Born in East L.A.* (l983) confronted stereotypes and paradoxes with a cathartic humor, *The Border* (l984) romanticized violence with pity, *El Norte* (l984) explored an expansion of the border as a result of Central American wars and diaspora, *Traffic* (2000) focused on the clandestine networks of drug trafficking, and *Lone Star* (l996) discussed the complex matrix of coexistence via a detectivesque intrigue. In general, what emerges from such a list is the exploitation of the border topic without offering much of a final solution. The region either triggers high emotions or subliminal undercurrents of racism; it encompasses conflicting mixed messages and contradictory viewpoints. According to David R. Maciel in his book *El Norte: The U.S.-Mexican Border in Contemporary Cinema* (l990),^ Mexican border cinema since the l970s has followed three distinct thematic and chronological cycles: l) the Chicano border experience; 2) Mexican immigration to the United States; and 3) crime on the border. By contrast, mainstream American cinematography concentrates more on the last category whenever it deals with the border and virtually ignores the first category. If the second category is dealt with at all, it is usually relegated to independent productions.

A recent allegorical film, titled *The Gatekeeper*^ (200l), directed and written by John Carlos Frey, makes a concerted effort to create a different kind of discourse on both the border and immigration, using its title as a derivative of the Operation Gatekeeper Program from the early l990s instituted by the United States government to control and discourage massive Mexican/Latino immigration. The work avoids much of the gratuitous violence and sexual titillations of border films on both sides of the border, although a picture of lawlessness

still persists. By zeroing in on a small segment of border life, the script writer manages to give a face to both the undocumented victims as well as the anti-body of these people, namely an immigration service agent named Adam Fields who is in cahoots with an anti-immigration group. The story, then, is two pronged: it unveils the larger economic interests of a drug industry as well as the internal conflict by the agent who reconsiders his place in containing illegal crossings. The film gives a face to a group of anonymous people and a heart to an individual in self-denial who assumes the role of "the gatekeeper".Ultimately, we discover the latter's contradictions and his conversion toward becoming a defender of vulnerable people.

The internal conflict of the agent occupies central stage in order to illustrate the discrepancy between real experience and governmental policies. Adam's search for institutional justice through the immigration system unexpectedly succumbs to a larger question: how to defend the undocumented whose American dream is derailed by the drug cartel? In that way, *The Gatekeeper* breaks down walls of internalized hate and racism which manifest themselves in the agent himself. Without overdoing the psychological dilemma he suffers, including his Malinchista inclination of being anti-Mexican—meaning partly against himself, the film slowly removes the veneer of destructive feelings in order to focus on a human story rarely told. Hate is turned into empathy and disgust is turned into pathos, but only after he becomes a victim at the hands of the drug cartel. He witnesses first-hand and in graphic terms how the border is manipulated, distorted and exploited for material gain by a few while using poor, innocent Mexicans and consequently change their dream into a nightmare. As a border film, it presents a fairly typical border, except that the unique perspective focuses on a personal revelation about good and evil.

While the story is initially framed by the voiceover of Jack Green, a right-wing radio talk host from Southern California, the rest of the film disproves to a degree the virulent attitude expressed through the radio.Without mincing words, the host offers an emblematic warning of the sort that is often thought but unstated in American media: "By the year 20l0 Mexicans will outnumber any other ethnic group in California. They are invading your schools, your hospitals, your welfare system, not to mention your jails... They have a plan, my friend, to regain their lost territory and they are savagely getting what they want, your AMERICA." The direct warning possesses an edge to it, but its message loses some of its credibility by the mere fact that Adam Fields, the agent, and Jack Green, the radio host, had orchestrated their dialogue in their efforts to promote border vigilantism. One concern emerges: Is it possible to hold such extreme views in a country defined by immigration? Their exchange ends with Jack's ominous words: "You are becoming the conquered civilization. You are being invaded by a foreign power. You will be forced to eat beans and rice for the rest of your life." While the film appears at first as a forum to debate hard questions about cultural differences, overlapping histories, social and economic interdependence, border patrol tactics, and many other thorny topics, these social issues come to rest on Adam's shoulders while he grapples with who he is. The film, then, points to a story rarely told: how a segment of drug trafficking, namely the methamphetamine industry in isolated rural areas, turns undocumented border crossers into modern day slaves. Another redeeming quality emerges: Adam slowly begins to recover a part of himself he had suppressed all of his life, partly due to shame and an inferiority complex.

Such a departure from the "typical" border films does not detract from its overall effectiveness. But the fundamental change in focus brings into question a new category, namely an identity border film where the protagonist inadvertently finds himself in such a

quest. First, however, he must devise a sophisticated plot of wiring himself to record the undocumented people's crossing with the intent of later using the film footage in a publicity stunt to denounce such migrations. Adam resorts to impersonating an illegal crosser by calling himself Juan Carlos Mendoza and by darkening his moustache and wearing worker's clothes. He is dropped off in Tijuana to fend for himself and his first task is to locate a *coyote* or smuggler of illegals (undocumented workers) to take him across the border for $35,000 Mexican pesos (approximately $3,500 dollars). What both Jack and Adam did not anticipate was that the latter would gain a sense of solidarity with the helpless and vulnerable people who had nothing else to lose. The action becomes even more psychological when Adam, a self-righteous individual filled with hate toward his Mexican background, soon encounters the poorest of the poor willing to risk their lives to simply improve their family's lot. He gains new insight and respect for their sacrifice, endurance, and sense of camaraderie exhibited under duress and danger. Locked in the methamphetamine ranch, what began as Adam's vicarious game or plot to capture illegals becomes his own real-life entrapment. Here he meets an array of people who populate the ranch: Eva and her young son Carlos; José, the lab technician who turns Adam into his apprentice; Leonora, the ranch cook and general intermediary between the newcomers and the bosses; and a group of anonymous workers.

Realizing his adventure has gone beyond his original expectations and taken a turn for the worst, Adam attempts to escape from the ranch, only to be detected by the sophisticated wiring system of sensors and other high-tech gadgetry used to watch the occupants' every step. He is caught and returned to the campground and shot on the leg by one of the boss's henchmen, thus serving as an example to discourage others from considering that option. The climax occurs at the critical moment when Adam experiences the genuinely humane response by his fellow victims. They come to his rescue, even defend him, and consequently do anything they can to ease his pain vis-à-vis the brute and vicious treatment by the drug bosses. His previous contempt and condescending feelings toward the undocumented people wavers as he is a first-hand witness and beneficiary of their kind attention. He suddenly but silently confronts his own demons of self-denial, realizing his ideological contradictions. Such transformation is indeed rare in border cinema. From this point forward, Adam becomes a quiet convert and advocate for these modern day slaves, consequently contacting one of his superiors thanks to a fax that Eva sends for him. Such an act of bravery by Eva becomes the cause of her death and Adam decides to blow up the lab in his final escape. The border patrol agent comes full circle: whereas he was at first the overseer of illegal crossings, literally the gatekeeper, he now becomes a protector and a kind of gate opener. In the last scene of the film, he stands next to the boy Carlos as they touch hands, almost suggesting he is beginning to recover the Mexicaness of his youth that he had lost at the same time that he symbolically becomes Carlos' guardian.

The film, perhaps incomplete in some aspects in terms of resolution, lends itself to a variety of interpretations beyond the regaining of a lost identity, which in itself seems important for Adam. While avoiding the conventional border film of excessive violence, it is not devoid of a layered sense of violence (i.e. social class and gender). Its greatest contribution, however, might be in the area of archetypal construction, although this too remains somewhat diffused. The film's psychological content hints at a personal encounter with his cultural background for Adam, but enough indicators suggest an allegory or fable about an anti-garden of Eden. If this is the case, then concrete evidence must be present. Where and what might constitute that Garden of Eden? Is it Adam's Mexican background or

the border? The fact that Adam (the originator of man) and Eva (the originator of woman) coexist in the story—but are not romantically paired up as a couple here—alludes to this metaphorical and archetypal structure. Both of these characters are 'purged' from their original state (Adam from being a confused Latino immigration officer and Eva from her state of poverty in Mexico) and consequently their trajectory leads both of them to discover a sense of their *borderness* and precipitates them into an inevitable tragedy, given that they both share a sense of exploitation in the methamphetamine ranch. The logical conclusion might be the following: both characters go from a form of nothingness (Adam's self-denial and Eva's poverty) to self-discovery, which is in itself a new kind of Garden of Eden. That garden is not a place at all, but rather a state of mind. In the end Adam and Eva become intertwined in their quest to assist the other toward a new form of togetherness and liberation at the expense of Eva's death. Carlos, the young boy, becomes a surrogate product of the two symbolic parents (one biological and the other only figurative) because he especially will learn from the lessons of his mother's sacrifice and Adam's renewed sense of identity. Symbolically, Carlos might become the future gatekeeper against injustice, exploitation and violence.

The Gatekeeper marks a significant contribution in border filmmaking by opening up new spaces of discourse and action related to the U.S.-Mexico border. In many ways, the border is the main character here because it is the conflictive point of juncture where forces pull and repel, producing one of the most dynamic—although dangerous— spots in the world. Even though the movie is associated with the Hollywood community, the film's independent label allows it to concentrate more on substance than on commercial attraction. It defines a film that searches for a new angle on a border story without falling prey to much of the contrived actions of violence, romantic intrigue, and Sodom and Gomorra constructs where sin and corruption co-opt souls. Sensationalism is avoided in order to tell a story of conflict, both internal and external. The viewers, consequently, get to see another face of the many conflicts layered upon what the U.S.-Mexico border represents.

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[m] Most border regions contain a series of factors that explain the degree of tension or rift between the two sides, but the U.S.-Mexican border seems to have more than its share of terminology that defies the norm. The abundance of terms suggests a highly dynamic place of interaction, even vitality. For example, beyond the term “border” there are other numerous terms that contribute to the region’s varying perceptions and its many forms of self-identification. The terms “frontier” and “frontera” are commonly used, yet their meaning is quite disparate: the former in English suggests vast wilderness or a place to be conquered, while the latter is the closest way of saying “border” in Spanish. Then there is “borderlands” which connotes more a larger region of neighboring regions or states that come together to form a larger cultural entity. “Línea” in Spanish simply means the line itself where the border is divided or where separation takes place. In addition, legal status is often contested:the reigning term of “illegal alien” has now evolved more into a more subtle form of respect by using “undocumented” or “indocumentado”. It is worth noting that the term “alien” in English offers myriad connotations, including the association with someone originating from another planet to underscore their “foreign” background. No equivalent term exists in Spanish. Also, there is “wetback”, a derogatory term that refers to Mexicans crossing the Río Grande illegally by swimming across, yet “mojado” in Spanish—meaning only “wet”-- hints at the same without dehumanizing the person completely. Another common term used is Tortilla Curtain to indicate that Mexico to the south possesses a cultural divide that distinguishes it from anything American, thus using the “tortilla” which alludes to a key object of Mexico’s cuisine as the central metaphor. Finally, the river separating Texas and Mexico curiously is referred to by two names in Spanish: Río Grande or “Big River” on the American side and Río Bravo or “Rough River” on the Mexican side—it is neither very big nor very rough, but the respective point of view conveys how it is perceived between its relative size and its degree of treacherousness. These are but a few examples of the way language captures and reflects commonalities accommodation and cross-fertilization as well as real differences. For further discussion on some of these topics see Francisco A. Lomelí’s article “Borders and Boundaries: Geographical, Cultural and Textual” in *I Simposium Internacional sobre “Etnicidad y Pobreza”; Memorias*, edited by Roberto Cañedo Villarreal and María del Carmen Barragán Mendoza (Acapulco: Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, 200l) 136-43.

[121] See *Newsweek Magazine*, February 27, l995, 27.

[131] Both the title and the headline are attributed to William Langewiesche, along with the accompanying article, “The Border,” which appears in *The Atlantic*, Vol. 269, No. 5 (l992): 53-92. Extensive discussion on the subject appears in Leo R. Chávez’s excellent study, *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 200l) 240-2.

[141] Fuentes’ work first appeared in Mexico City, published by Alfaguara in l995.

[151] The work was published by the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University, San Diego, California, 7.

[161] The low budget film was produced along the U.S.-Mexico border in Tijuana, on the border itself and in the area south of San Diego, California. John Carlos Frey is director, scriptwriter and protagonist of what is his first feature film. The executive producer is Jack Lorenz, a veteran in Hollywood filmmaking. Thus far the film has garnered the following awards: Phoenix Prize at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival, Best Film at the International Hispanic Film Festival, Best Film at the Winslow Film Festival, Best Film Audience Choice at the Temecula Valley International Film Festival, Best Film Audience Choice at the International Hispanic Film Festival, Best of Fest at the San Diego Latino Film Festival, Best Film Latino Collection at the Festival of Festivals, and Distinguished Performance at the International Hispanic Film Festival. A translation copy with subtitles into Spanish by Francisco A. Lomelí will soon be available.