Introduction

I grew up in Wales acquiring an inexplicable childhood attachment to Mexico. It was nurtured by watching "cowboy flicks" starring the likes of Tom Mix and the Cisco Kid but—more consequentially—it featured those majestic landscapes from the American West. It's how I became habituated to seeing Mexico through film. I arrived in the US in the early 1970s and lived along the Canada-US boundary line for more than a decade, but later became a US citizen. Always I returned to Mexico, north, south, east, and west. By the early 2000s, I felt ready to travel along both sides of the entire US-Mexico border, a voyage that took four years to complete. So in some ways this book is the culmination of a lifetime's learning about Mexico and the US through direct experience and representations in film.

My purpose in this book is to explore how the images in border-focused films of the past century reflected cross-border attitudes in each country, from the early silent films through present-day global blockbusters. Whose stories were being told in border films, and whose ignored or distorted? What kind of plots, narratives, and themes did filmmakers favor, and how did these choices alter over time? Do onscreen images accurately

portray real lives? And what does a century of border filmmaking reveal about our nations' future?

International relations between Mexico and the US have always been tinged by mistrust and prejudice. Today cross-border attitudes are worse than at any time since the era of post–World War II optimism. The US federal government in Washington, D.C., consistently regards Mexico as a junior partner in all things including trade, politics, and filmmaking (one clear exception that comes to mind is *futbol*). Conventional wisdom is that the southern border is the source of all evils, meaning undocumented immigration; threats to national security; and the trafficking of drugs, guns, and human beings. Public opinion in the US is dominated by a shrill anti-immigrant rhetoric, punitive policing and lawmaking, racism that too often bleeds into violence, and an irrational belief that building walls will solve the nation's problems.

Meanwhile in Mexico City, a highly centralized federal government rarely bothers to look northward unless and until cross-border commerce with its premier trading partner is threatened. Despite the prosperity and political clout of its northern border states, Mexico's population elsewhere continues to regard the north as a remote, inconsequential backwater, where (I've heard it said) people eat catfood, and the towns they live in are not really Mexican. Mexicans who live along the borderline confront the insult and indignities of the US-built border wall every day. By now a generation of young people have lived their entire lives in the shadow of walls.

Successive US presidents (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump) have elected to fight the nation's largest domestic wars—drugs, national security, and immigration—by using border communities as battlegrounds. At the same time, twenty-first-century Mexican presidents (Vicente Fox, Felipe Calderón, Enrique Peña Nieto, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador) have wrestled to maintain economic growth and stability in the face of threats posed by ascendant drug cartels. Borderlanders resent interference from their respective national capitals because there lurk powers to confiscate land, impose unwanted regulations, authorize military-style occupations, and curtail civil liberties. The police and military forces occupying the US are eerily reminiscent of the foot soldiers of

drug cartels occupying parts of Mexico. While both federal governments strive to assert their authority, their endemic corruption confounds the practices of democracy in both countries.

My interest lies in the "in-between" spaces where two nations converge. For me, the border zone is like a piñata: one small tap, and out pours a cascade of wonders, confections, and sometimes things. Over ten million people live in border-adjacent communities, most of them dwelling in a series of "twin towns" that straddle the borderline. (The best-known twins are Tijuana and San Diego, and Ciudad Juárez and El Paso.) Well over a billion dollars' worth of trade crosses the international boundary every day, and taken together, the ten border states reputedly would comprise the third largest economy in the world. Hundreds of thousands of border residents cross daily to the other side for purposes relating to work, family, shopping, play, schooling, and affairs of the heart. Many border families have lived in this border ecology for several generations, some even before the US-Mexico boundary was created in 1848. They are fond of reminding visitors that it was the border that moved, not they or their forebears.

The border is also a state of mind. People on both sides insist that they have more in common with each other than with residents of either home nation. For them, the borderline unites rather than divides. They speak with uninhibited affection and pride about their "in-between" status and connections. Though bodies and minds may be divided by the line, borderlanders thrive on the fusions that proximity and adjacency permit. Cross-border lives are so pervasive that people have often said to me: "I forget which side of the line I'm on." One time I was sitting with a binational group of longtime border friends on the Avenida Revolución in Tijuana, at the restaurant where the Caesar salad reputedly was invented. All of us are super-aware of our cross-border connections and comfortable with various expressions of an "in-between" identity, referring to one another as "transborder" citizens and calling San Diego and Tijuana twin cities, *ciudades hermanas* (sister cities), or *ciudades amistosas* (friendly cities). I sometimes think of this closely connected border space and the people who live in it as a "third nation." (I don't mean this literally; the San Diego-Tijuana twins won't be sending delegates to the United Nations any time soon.) The term offers a different perspective on the US-Mexico border:

not as an edge where hostile nations grind together but as a shared space where two peoples connect.

Not everyone likes this idea. Some of my salad-sharing companions are hostile to the idea of a third nation, regarding it as an infringement on Mexican identity and sovereignty. I understand their caution, but I find the view of border spaces as a kind of quasi-independent ministate opens the door to refreshing insights into divided worlds. One of my objectives in this book is to explore this new way of seeing.

Exploring the mental maps of real people is a messy business, involving assessment of personal feelings, identities, and complicated histories. There have been a few opinion polls measuring cross-border attitudes and sentiments regarding people on the other side, but I needed something more. I began searching for an independent source that could cast light onto borderlanders' feelings about cross-border connections. My hope was to find a source that covered the entire geography of a two-thousand-mile border zone on both sides, as well as incorporating a history that reached back centuries to the 1848 treaty that caused the original borderline to exist. At first, this seemed an all but impossible ambition.

But then it came to me that this is exactly what border film was offering.

I have been going to the movies since before I can remember. Watching films in theaters has been a lifelong devotion and pleasure. The earliest films I recall are those Saturday morning Westerns involving gunfights between Mexican bandits and gringo heroes who too often interrupted the action in order to serenade a horse. They were joined by extravagantly dressed Western women who manifestly preferred horses over any man. The border landscapes favored in these films were always exotic and bewitching even if the plots were more than a tad repetitious.

Time passed, and cowboys were replaced by cops; the bad guys still had guns and wisecracks, and the women still veered between saints and sinners (the latter with hearts of gold, naturally). Western landscapes soon gave way to the thrall of dark, gritty urban locations, but border films remained blood soaked and melodramatic. Only much later did border films acquire a distinct identity and diversify into tales of revolution, social concern, romance, migration, sex, drugs, cartels, and *la migra* (Spanish slang for US immigration police). The men in these films seemed

more than ever damaged and violent, but women became more adventurous and stronger.

Most recently the attention of border-oriented filmmakers was riveted by the devastations caused by drug cartels and the corrupt establishments in politics and law enforcement. Coincidentally, this occurred just as the tectonic plates of US and Mexican film cultures collided. The consequent trauma unfolded over decades but was spectacularly capped in 2019 when Hollywood awoke to find that five out of the previous six Best Director Academy Awards had been awarded to Mexicans: Alfonso Cuarón (twice), Alejandro González Iñárritu (twice), and Guillermo del Toro.

This would not have come as a surprise to many observers beyond Hollywood. In the mid-twentieth century, Mexico was a hemispheric presence in film, and after the 1990s the country reemerged as a global force in film and television. The Hollywood studio system supporting twentieth-century filmmaking had begun showing overt signs of stress and imminent collapse. So the emergence of three Grandmaster filmmakers from Mexico, the revitalization of Mexican film and television, and the apparent fragility of Hollywood's dominance simply confirmed that a new world order of film was imminent. Amid this maelstrom, in the year 2000, a distinctive genre of border film was born. Another of my principal objectives in this book is to explain why this happened and to reveal what the border film genre consists of.

I have had the extraordinarily good fortune to work with first-class film scholars during my professional life. Over many years at the University of Southern California I absorbed a belated education at one of the nation's premier film schools. There were movie stars in cafés, in markets, and on sidewalks. I participated on a number of film projects, the most fun being screen time in *City of Gold*, a documentary film on Jonathan Gold (the first Pulitzer prize-winning restaurant critic) directed by Laura Gabbert for Sundance Selects. In Los Angeles—truly a border city—I fell in with a circle of people active in film and crossed the border to meet artists, filmmakers, and critics in Baja California and Mexico City. Then in the 1990s I was approached by a group of Mexican and Chicano artists wanting to learn more about Los Angeles, the city where they worked. Thanks to them I acquired a second belated education, this time in Latinx and

Chicanx art history and practice. I began paying serious attention to Mexico. After 2009 my film education continued through UC Berkeley's Film and Media department, where I taught a class in film and was introduced to the Pacific Film Archive.

After sojourning in these different galaxies, I began scribbling notes about border film. My attention was piqued by the gap between what I knew about the borderlands and what border filmmakers chose to portray onscreen. The gap seemed large, and my essay continued to grow. There was much more to say than I expected.

My foremost challenge lay in choosing a selection of border films from a vast archive of border-related films accumulated in the century-long catalogs of two nations. (It was vitally important that I should be conversant in the films of both countries.) A few "classics" of the burgeoning genre emerged quickly, but my curiosity bent toward more quirky films that illuminated something beyond the iconic. I began by defining a *border film* simply as taking place in a borderland setting, with a thematic focus on the lives of border people and their cross-border connections. To be considered a contender, the chosen film would do more than treat the border as mere scenery or backdrop; instead it would demonstrate the border's transformative impact on person and plot. The highest echelon in the hierarchy would be reserved for films that rendered the border as the topical focus or subject of the film (in which case, the film is said to be *about* the border).

The catalogs of two nations' films are too much to consider in a single book, so I have confined my interest to fictional feature films originating from Mexican and US sources. Occasional reference is made to documentary films, television programs, and films originating beyond the US and Mexico whenever their perspectives provide special insight. Throughout, I endeavor to maintain a balanced presentation of Mexican- and US-origin films, even though long-established practices of international coproduction make it increasingly difficult (and unhelpful) to attribute a single country of origin to such films.

My wide-ranging inquiry is broken down into three parts. Part 1 describes the origins of border films in the silent film era, setting standard themes and stereotypes even in these early offerings. I explain some

ground rules for using films as "evidence," and provide short histories of film and border film in both countries. The remainder of part 1 presents the first crop of border film "classics" that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century. Thematically they dealt with revolutionary war and modernization, the first great migrations of rural Mexicans to the city and the US, and the reputation of border cities as distasteful places of crime and vice.

Part 2 tracks the growth and diversification of border films during the second half of the twentieth and the early decades of the twenty-first centuries. During this period, filmmakers began devoting more attention to a wider range of border-related topics. As the geopolitical boundary increased in political prominence toward the end of the twentieth century, the number and quality of border films increased. The principal themes of these later decades revealed a maturation of filmmakers' palette, encompassing the aftermath of the Spanish conquest; the increasing prominence and diversity in portraits of borderland women; the rise of drug cartels; the trials endured by migrants in search of their "American Dream"; the use of borderland settings to convey acute moral tales (e.g., pertaining to race and miscegenation); and some surprising and welcome diversions into comedy, fantasy, science fiction, and spirituality.

Part 3 gathers the book's accumulated evidence to define an overarching border film "genre," based on identifying the principal elements of a distinctive *cinematic imagination* expressed in the contents of my film choices. These imaginary worlds are compared with the actual world of real borderland people, leading to a provocative reconsideration of the realities confronting borderland residents as well as the future of border film.

Following the introductory materials, each chapter is generally arranged thematically by category or subgenre (e.g., drama, comedy), chronology (according to the historic period covered in the film, not the year of its release), and topic (migration, war, etc.). Throughout the book, brief historical digressions assist in understanding the events featured on-screen.

My book blends film and media studies with the geography, history, and politics of the US and Mexico. I use film not as an object of conventional criticism, theory, or philosophy but as *evidence* of the ways borders were represented over a hundred years of film releases originating in both countries. Images from the films are complemented by photographs of