

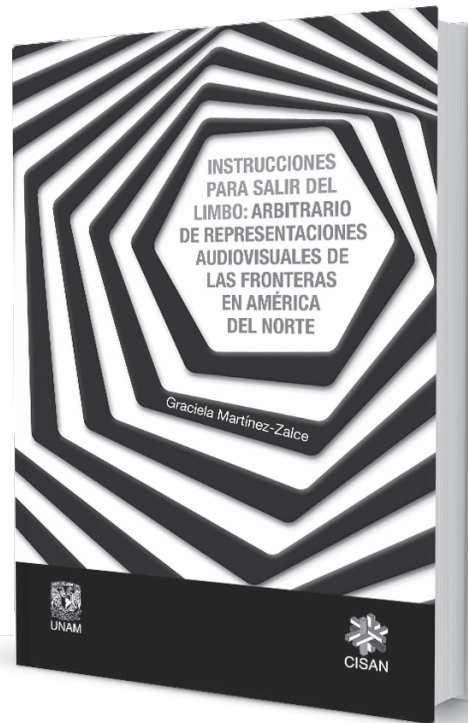
**Instrucciones para salir del limbo:
Arbitrario de representaciones audiovisuales
de las fronteras en América del Norte**

(Instructions for Getting Out of Limbo:
Anthology of Audiovisual Representations
of Borders in North America)

Graciela Martínez-Zalce

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Perhaps not since the signing of NAFTA has what is happening in Mexico's North caused so much concern. In the last decade of a tumultuous century, we observed our northern border with growing expectation and not a few misgivings about globalization, which was presented as synonymous with progress. Today it is clear that the promise of free transit between countries has only been for goods; in contrast, for individuals, geography has been broken apart and borders have become a "limbo," that is, an edge, a temporary or permanent liminal space with its own heterogeneous characteristics. Molded by the friction between cultures, the borders of North America became extremely complex spaces that have not gone unnoticed by cultural industries like the cinema and television.

In this book of essays, Graciela Martínez-Zalce studies the audiovisual representations of border spaces in North America at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. It is an anthology that aims to—and manages to—be selective rather than exhaustive. The most significant antecedent to this work is perhaps Norma Iglesias's pioneering study about the cinema of the Mexico-U.S. border, *Entre yerba, polvo y plomo* (Amidst Grass, Dust, and Lead) (1991), whose definition of the border genre is still

valid. However, it is clear that the list and quality of the films dealing with this issue have increased considerably. Given the need for new approaches, Martínez-Zalce's book takes a critical look at the cinematic and television representations of this region which, in fact, has been paradigmatic in its transformation during the globalization process.

The introduction goes into how the space is configured in audiovisual formats. Based on Luz Aurora Pimentel's narratological theory, Martínez-Zalce explains the way in which the space is inherent to the story and asks herself, in the manner of Doreen Massey (*For Space*, 2005), how the human experience is conceptualized. These reflections seek to pin down the importance of films in the creation of national identities. Tim Edensor's answer in his book *National Identity* (2002) is that they take shape around an illusory concept of nation that is commonly accepted as natural and not a construct. Thus, if the nation's image is created by repeating symbols that in the end represent its origin and uniqueness, cinema and television are industries that systematically repeat and configure those symbols. Later in her introduction, the author defines the "border genre," a concept that will be indispensable in the book's six chapters, based on Norma Iglesias's observations:

a film is about the border when it takes place on the border, when it refers to border characters or towns, or when its plot deals with problems of national identity. The definition is perfectly pertinent for the films that make up the body of this book.

In the first chapter, “Fronteras (y géneros) que se cruzan...” (Borders [and Genres] that Cross Each Other), the author analyzes seven films whose characters change on the highway: *Sin dejar huella* (Without a Trace), *Bajo California* (Underneath/Lower California), *Born in East L.A.*, *Highway 61*, *Blue State*, *Niagara Niagara*, and *Ciclo* (Cycle). The protagonists of these road movies subvert the stereotypes that usually abound in this kind of film and start trips that move them closer to or distance them from the asymmetrical boundaries of the United States: both its southern border, ringed by a river, a desert, and now a wall, and its northern border, one of the world’s longest and for a very long time one of its least guarded. And even though moving always presupposes a search, the reasons for the trips could not be more different: running from persecution, by accident, evading the past or the future, or just for love of the journey. These seven films crisscross the entire North American region at the same time that they shape it in the viewers’ imaginary.

Then, in “Fronteras que se viven” (Borders Experienced), the author studies four films directed by women. From different parts of North America, they portray the daily life of families headed by single mothers: *El jardín del Edén* (The Garden of Eden), by Mexican María Novaro; *Gas Food Lodging*, by U.S. American Allison Anders; *Bordertown Cafe*, by Canadian Norma Baily; and *Frozen River*, by U.S. American Courtney Hunt. In all these films, the border space is portrayed as a place of passage the characters are trying to get away from.

The chapter “Fronteras que se erigen” (Borders Erected) deals with two products from U.S. popular culture: the films *Canadian Bacon*, by Michael Moore, and *South Park Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, by Parker and Stone. Both take ironic looks at national values to demystify them. They make way for a reflection about the constitution of national identities based on opposition; that is, the process whereby the enemy, or the “other,” is constructed. They also make it possible to interpret the paradox in which the concept of border is situated today.

The TV series *The Border* merits an entire chapter to itself: “Fronteras que se vigilan” (Borders Watched). Here, Martínez-Zalce analyzes how stereotypes about migration exist in Canadian public television. Throughout this White Pines-produced series, we watch episodes about terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering, slavery, or the sale of human organs. Despite the seriousness of these issues, we can recognize a not-so-veiled stereotyping: Muslim terrorists, bloodthirsty Mexicans, or U.S. Americans with hidden agendas ravage multicultural, cosmopolitan, twenty-first-century Canada.

But not everything is about geographic boundaries. The chapter “Fronteras de los géneros” (Gender Frontiers) studies two movies whose protagonists are border beings because they are transsexual. *Le sexe des étoiles* (The Sex of the Stars) and *Transamerica* subvert the notions of sex and gender. In both films, one Canadian and the other U.S. American, borders are erased and an attempt is made to cross them when the characters face their identity in the male-female dichotomy and from two points of view: transsexuality and transgender identity.

Finally, “Fronteras simbólicas” (Symbolic Borders) deals with border representations created as dystopias. The animated short *Borderlines/Territoire* and two science fiction films, *Cube* and *Upside Down*, portray a border space as a fundamental textual element both thematically and visually. And, although none of these situate their protagonists in a specific time period, they do reflect on the significance of the dividing lines between genders, countries, and worlds.

The book concludes with two important contributions: a commented filmography and a large specialized bibliography. Graciela Martínez-Zalce’s book is a valuable, pertinent update on border film studies at a time when we need to rethink everything that has been said about North America’s borders—complex, fascinating spaces that they are—, which, given the encounters and clashes there, have become true contemporary limbos. ■■

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