

The good, bad and ugly of Tex-Mex cinema

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The U.S.-Mexico border. What does that image conjure up?

Good things (like Tex-Mex music and tacos). Bad things (migrant smugglers and drug cartels). Ugly things (the 400 unsolved mysteries of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez since 1993).

Whatever the vision, one truth emerges: this is a part of the world shot through with a streak of radical independence.

It's true on both sides of the border, and on Monday it's Mexicans' turn to celebrate their freedom – 197 years of it.

Their ancestors' war of independence against Spain began on Sept. 16, 1810, and every year the republic's 109 million people – along with 27 million Mexican-Americans in the U.S. – mark the occasion with parades and speeches and special events, especially in the borderlands of the American southwest, in Texas, Arizona, California and, of course, New Mexico.

Here are five films on DVD that take place along those boundary lines, where Mexicans and Americans have had such a long and complicated relationship as friends, neighbours and enemies.

Aventurera (Mexico, 1950) A masterpiece of that uniquely Mexican film genre, the *carbaretera*. This musical-drama-cum-morality-play is about a society girl (Cuban dancing sensation Ninón Sevilla) who descends into a life of sex and sin in the nightclubs of Juárez, the feverish border town across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. Lots of rhumbas and mambos make the campy melodrama swing. A Facets/Cinemateca DVD.



Touch of Evil (U.S., 1958) The 3½-minute opening tracking shot heralds a feat of pure cinema signed Orson Welles, who directed and starred (with Charlton Heston, Marlene Dietrich and Janet Leigh) in this film noir about a cross-border murder investigation. Universal re-edited the film in 1998 based on a famous 58-page memo Welles wrote to protest against the studio's original cut (the memo is included on the DVD).

Lone Star (U.S., 1996) A dirty secret is unearthed when a small-town Texas sheriff investigates the disappearance years before of a predecessor in the job, a corrupt, Mexican-baiting sheriff by the name of Charlie Wade. A great John Sayles film with a vibrant R&B and *conjunto* soundtrack. Chris Cooper, Kris Kristofferson, Matthew McConaughey and Elizabeth Peña star. No extras on the otherwise fine Warner disc.



Traffic (Germany/U.S., 2000) The phony "war on drugs" is the subject of this multiple-Oscar-winning film from director Steven Soderbergh. Filmed partly in El Paso and Tijuana, every performance in it is good, and even Michael Douglas turns makes a nuanced effort. In one of three interweaving plots, the Fatal Attraction star plays a U.S. drug czar who finds out his daughter is an addict. The two-disc Criterion edition screens like a lesson in filmmaking.

The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada (U.S./ France, 2005) Watching a West Texas rancher heft a corpse across the border for burial may not be everyone's idea of a good time at the theatre, but when the rancher is Tommy Lee Jones and the film is written by Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perras*, *21 Grams*), it's worth doing. The only extra on Sony Pictures' U.S. DVD is a lacklustre commentary; distributors in Europe and Australia offer much more.

And here are 10 more U.S.-Mexico movies to hop the border by: Bordertown (1935; not yet on video), Border Incident (1949), Vera Cruz (1954), The Wild Bunch (1969), El jardín del Edén (1994), All the Pretty Horses (2000), The Mexican (2001), De l'autre côté (2002; documentary; not yet on video), Babel (2005), Fast Food Nation (2006).

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