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The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada, directed by Tommy Lee Jones, screenplay by Guillermo Arriaga

Tommy Lee Jones's *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* is based on the story of Esequiel Hernandez, an 18-year-old who was wrongly shot in 1997 by a US marine patrolling for drug smugglers while the young Mexican was tending a goat herd.

Three Burials has met with a critical response as polarized as the region it depicts—the American Southwest.

Some daily newspaper critics have panned it: “[M]ainly the film is dreadfully slow without much in the way of rewards”—*San Francisco Chronicle*, Mick LaSalle. Others have greeted it as “...the kind of story that John Huston or Sam Peckinpah might have wanted to film”—*Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert.

In the screening this viewer attended, audience members either got up in the middle of the film and left or stayed to the very end of the credits.

That may be due in part to the film's role in deconstructing the hallowed mythology of the region it is set in. From that standpoint *Three Burials*, scripted by the Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga (*21 Grams*, *Amores Perros*), has a very different viewpoint than the conventional Western.

It is also interesting to note that in Tommy Lee Jones's debut as a director, he casts himself as a quite different figure, cowboy Pete Perkins, than the brash good ol' boy he often plays (*Coal Miner's Daughter*, *The Fugitive*, *Men in Black*).

The breaking of form is revealed early on in the film when the Mexican, Melquiades (or Mel), happens upon a group of iconographic American cowboys engaged in a lively roping competition (although of a lifeless model steer). The man about to befriend him (Pete Perkins—Jones's character) asks why he is there, and Mel (played by Julio Cedillo) responds humbly that he is looking for work. When asked what kind of work, he responds even more humbly in Spanish, “I am just a

cowboy.”

As “just a cowboy,” Melquiades is a man whose skill on horseback is only partially alluded to by his later gift of a magnificent horse to his friend Perkins. Likewise, the Mexican woman initially depicted as a member of a band of “wetbacks” scattering like so many mice from the frontier Valkyries, the US Border Patrol, and whose nose is broken by the “way overboard” border patrol guard (Mike Norton, played by Barry Pepper), is subsequently revealed to be a skilled herbalist and healer who saves the guard from certain death by rattlesnake bite. She later returns the earlier favor by pouring a pot of hot coffee on him and breaking his nose with the pot. These are Mexicans who are courteous, intelligent, and even courageous. What are we to make of them?

We have entered the nether world of the American Southwest, where fiction and truth frequently trade places. Oscar Wilde's dictum that nature imitates art (or artifice) reflected the distorted world of Victorian England, where the ideology of the conqueror reigned supreme from the boardroom to the bedroom. So too, the conventional incarnation of the American cowboy reflects its settler culture origins. Texas was the spearpoint of Manifest Destiny. Its pioneers were slaveholders seeking the defense and extension of the antebellum South.

In that context, the humble Mexican *vaquero* (a pastoral vocation based on steers and riding stock of Spanish origin) became the swaggering English-speaking buckaroo of the American (by implication not-Mexican) West. Even meat cooked simply over an open flame, *barbacoa*, has been elevated to the gastronomic rite-of-passage of the American male known as barbecue.

These are myths in the service of distorted, and consequently tragic-comic, social relations. The Boer and his English cousin, Baden-Powell, the Israeli sabra and the American cowboy have a lot in common.

The US-Mexico border was an important imposition of American imperialism as a product of the land grab of 1847. Its primary function has been as a vehicle of exploiting both the natural wealth of the region and the labor of its inhabitants. Today, fully one sixth of the population of Mexico lives and works in the United States, most of it under conditions of illegality, with little protection from the predation of low-wage employers. The border is less a geographic fact and more an instrument of social and class relations.

The vacuous and demoralized life led by border patrolman Mike Norton and his pretty but bored-to-tears wife, Lou Ann (played well by January Jones), makes it clear that all is not well in the land of manufactured housing with, in the words of the overweening trailer salesman, “All the topflight stuff.” Mike’s job is to defend that artifice, the US-Mexico border, and he does that with a sadistic zeal that in the words of one of his Mexican captives gives him the gaunt appearance of a skeletal ghost.

While engaging in *Hustler* magazine-inspired self-abuse, Mike is surprised by a cowboy’s gunshot and frantically returns the fire, with murderous results. That is the beginning of a saga of one friend’s devotion to another. Striking a hopeful note, the friend, Pete Perkins, does this in a way which is completely oblivious to race or national origin. Frustrated by the blind eye turned by the local town’s Sheriff Belmont (played by Dwight Yoakam), Pete is forced to take matters into his own hands. The impotent (in more ways than one) sheriff goes off to Sea World, and Pete begins the arduous journey through a beautiful but inhospitable landscape with the murdering patrolman and Mel’s corpse in tow. The macabre condition of the deteriorating corpse reflects the very real otherworld conditions that many Mexicans are compelled to endure as outcasts in their own (the US Southwest) land.

Mel had extracted from Pete a promise that should he die on the US side of the border, Pete would return his body to his native village in Coahuila, Mexico. Mel has been separated from his wife and children for five years, and the fulfillment of that promise, the third burial, is a further journey into the dreamlike oppressive existence of the Mexican immigrant. What would lead someone to live separate from his or her family for such an extended period of time, and what could possibly be the consequences? These are just two

of the many thought-provoking questions raised by *Three Burials*.

Contrary to many contemporary films that sound the themes of fear and vigilante justice promoted heavily in the post 9/11 era, *Three Burials* ends quietly, reflecting the good-natured bewilderment and lack of screaming vengeance so typical of a people just striving to make ends meet.



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