

**Airport Terminals and Desert Planes: Re-Visiting the Border  
in *The Terminal* and *No Country for Old Men***

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**Abstract**

Eighteen years after the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington and in the present context of bitter conflict over the building of a wall across the US-Mexico border promoted by current President of the United States, Donald Trump, this article reads Steven Spielberg's *The Terminal* and the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* through the use of border theory and Cosmopolitanism. The main aim of the article is to reveal the mechanisms by which these films promote and intervene in an ongoing debate on the nature of the nation-state and the role of national borders in the creation of national identities. The two films appear to consolidate certain social imaginaries while highlighting the extent to which, though the turn of the millennium seemed to promise a world with more mobile, hybrid identities in multicultural spaces, most social and cultural realities still tend to be trapped within nation-state borders which prove the staying power of national identities.

**Keywords:** *The Terminal*, *No Country for Old Men*, border studies, Cosmopolitanism, transnational, film studies

**Terminales de aeropuerto y llanos desérticos: Reconsiderando  
la frontera en *La terminal* y *No es país para viejos***

**Resumen**

Dieciocho años después del 11-S y en el contexto actual de conflicto a raíz de la construcción de un muro entre los Estados Unidos de América y México

promovida por el actual presidente de los Estados Unidos, Donald Trump, el presente artículo analiza las películas *La terminal*, de Steven Spielberg, y *No es país para viejos*, de los hermanos Coen, a través de la teoría de la frontera y del Cosmopolitismo. El principal objetivo es revelar los mecanismos a través de los que estas películas promueven e intervienen en un debate constante sobre la naturaleza del estado-nación y el rol de las fronteras nacionales en la creación de las identidades nacionales. Las dos películas parecen consolidar ciertos imaginarios sociales a la vez que subrayan el grado en que, a pesar de que el milenio parecía prometer un mundo de identidades más móviles e híbridas que habitaban espacios multiculturales, muchas realidades sociales y culturales aún tienden a quedar atrapadas dentro de las fronteras del estado-nación, demostrando así la persistencia de las identidades nacionales.

**Palabras clave:** *La terminal*, *No es país para viejos*, estudios fronterizos, Cosmopolitismo, transnacionalismo, estudios de cine

## 1. “SAFE AND UNSAFE”: THE POLITICS OF THE BORDER

“Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” – Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlines/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

As this article is being written, the US Administration is in shut down due to a disagreement between the Government and the Senate as to who will finance the Wall that will physically divide the US-Mexico border. This “dividing line, a narrow strip,” to use Anzaldúa’s definition above (25), was one of the proposals which appeared in

Donald Trump's election programme. We consider his attempt to transform a "vague and undetermined place" (Anzaldúa 25) into something solid, concrete, and that will cost real money to US citizens, an ironic yet important context for our discussion here.

The obvious resilience of national identities, which find their symbols in concrete and expensive dividing walls, is an ironic response in the light of recent Cosmopolitan theory. Against Trump's attempts to make an argument for the need to materialise the already noticeable border between two nation-states, we read photographer and media artist Minna Rainio, who considers that "[b]orders are not self-evident and do not exist naturally" (129). Such a statement is surprising in the current state of affairs, but it comes in useful in order to understand the way in which individuals and communities define their identities in relation to spatial, ideological and social borders. There is nothing 'natural'<sup>2</sup> in the existence of borders or in the identities that result from these constructions, but both are immersed in on-going processes which materialise in "the creation and maintenance of boundaries and differentiations" (Rainio 133).

As argued, this is no more than a perception promoted by the concept of the nation-state, the primary agent responsible for the construction of borders that contribute to define and create a fantasy of homogeneity in terms of political identity. Against this notion, at the turn of the millennium, postmodernism tried to articulate a world where both nation-states and geographical borders would become progressively blurred until they would lose their significance (Walby 2003). In this new world, virtual realities, the internet, economic liberalism, and a wider access to global mobility, would become primordial elements to favour the rise of communities and identities characterized by their transgression of traditional geographic and national borders. In other words, a world with hybrid identities in open multicultural spaces would replace traditional modern conceptions of self, identity and belonging upon which the construction of the nation-state was traditionally erected. Alejandro Lugo's work promotes a re-positioning of border theory in the realm of (Foucauldian) power as it has operated in the past two hundred years in the West, where it has been, he argues, "imbricated in the academy, in culture theory, in the global contexts of capitalism and ... in the realms of the changing

‘nation’ and ‘state’” (44). Lugo considers that what he calls “the border region” and its border theory are capable of eroding “the hegemony of the privileged center by denationalizing and deterritorializing the nation-state and culture theory” (44). The concepts of erosion, denationalisation, and deterritorialisation are interesting in our discussion here, particularly when they are read against Steven Vertovec’s argument that the nation-state is progressively becoming “a type of political organization or apparatus involving more multiple and overlapping jurisdictions” (86). The commonality of identity of a certain human group is reproduced, according to Vertovec, “through a system of narratives, public rituals and institutions, formal state bureaucracies and informal social relationships, written and unwritten regulations, sets of assumptions and expectations of civility and public behaviour” (87). What we argue here is that with its multiple jurisdictions and overlapping public narratives, the nation-state and its subsequent national identities seem to have the power to constantly reinvent themselves, hence their mesmerising resilience.

In 2008, Ulrich Beck was optimistic about the turn of the millennium when he claimed that a transition could be witnessed from a first age of modernity, based on the nation-state, to a second, cosmopolitan, age of modernity (222-230). Beck’s argument then was that at the end of the twentieth century “a new kind of capitalism, a new kind of economy, a new kind of global order, a new kind of politics and law, a new kind of society and personal life are in the making which both separately and in context are clearly distinct from earlier phases of social evolution” (223). In Beck’s view, one of the consequences of this transition from a nation-state based to a cosmopolitan society would be that the Western claim to a monopoly of modernity would no longer hold, as alternative modernities in all parts of the world were becoming increasingly visible. At the same time, as “the assumed congruence of state and society is broken down and suspended” (224) and given that the state would no longer necessarily contain all economic and/or social ways of acting, in the new cosmopolitan world of Beck’s second modernity, the West and the non-West would stand on equal ground, sharing the same time and space. This would be made possible, among other things, because non-Western societies would no longer be defined in terms of their foreignness and otherness, as was the case in the first age of

modernity. Instead, “in the second age of modernity everyone has to locate himself in the same global space and is confronted with similar challenges, and now strangeness is replaced by the amazement at the similarities” (224). Within Beck’s proposal, the cosmopolitan world effectively comes to replace the nation-state project. Ethnic identities usually relate to different nation-states (with some exceptions) and individuality is a consequence of both the conflict amongst and overlap of such different identities. For Beck this is “a creative achievement” for the individual, one where conflict becomes the driving force of integration (225). This is undoubtedly a hopeful and confident view of the dissolution of nation-states or, rather, their transformation into something different, and the consequences associated to such transformation are likewise considered in an optimistic light. Over a decade later, and in the present state of global affairs, Beck’s outlook has proved to be rather naive.

This tension created at the core of Cosmopolitanism between what could have been and what has actually happened is addressed by historian David A. Hollinger. In spite of considering that for cosmopolitan citizens of the world, “the diversity of humankind is a fact” (231), on which we obviously agree, Hollinger goes on to observe that Cosmopolitanism may have a tendency to foster what he describes as certain enclosures. Still arguing on a positive note, however, Hollinger accepts these enclosures as necessary, effective domains where people can create diversity. Cosmopolitanism, he states, “urges each individual and collective unit to absorb as much varied experience as it can, while retaining its capacity to achieve self-definition and to advance its own aims effectively” (231). The debate between the hopeful view of Cosmopolitanism as a creative option based on diversity and the resilience of a nation-state concept that refuses to evolve is the theoretical framework we will employ in reading two films which revolve around constructions of border regions: Steven Spielberg’s *The Terminal* and the Coen Brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*.

## 2. “CITIZENS OF NOWHERE”: *THE TERMINAL*

*The Terminal* was released in 2004, three years after the attack on the World Trade Center, in itself a proof of the vulnerability of nation-

state borders and, as we will argue, an event ironically connected to the current building of Trump's Wall.

In the film, Viktor Navorski, played by Tom Hanks, is travelling to New York to search for a jazz singer and ask for his autograph. Though the reason for his trip may seem trivial, Viktor is on a mission on behalf of his father. Throughout the film, audiences see him carrying a tin box which contains an old photograph of a group of famous jazz players and bits of paper with their autographs, a collection which his father has been unable to complete before his death. Initially, Viktor has the status of tourist in the US, flying from Krakozhia, an imaginary Eastern-European country where a military coup has taken place during his flight. As he lands at New York Kennedy airport, he goes through passport control to find out that he is not allowed to enter the US as his passport is no longer valid. He has become "an immigrant from an imaginary country," (Peña-Acuña 112). Viktor is promptly taken to see Frank Dixon, the Director of Customs and Border Protection and new Acting Field Commissioner, responsible for immigration at JFK. Dixon informs Viktor that:

Currently you are a citizen of nowhere [...] You do not qualify for asylum, refugee status, temporary protective status, humanitarian parole or non-immigration work travel. You don't qualify for any of these things. [...] You don't really have a home. Technically [your country] doesn't exist. It's like a twilight zone. [...] You have fallen through a small crack in the system. (*TT*, 06:50 - 08:18)

And so, Viktor becomes a "threatening visitation" (Benito 205). He is confined to the International Transit Lounge, he is deprived of his passport and he has no money. He is given back his suitcase, some food tickets, a phone card and a pager and is finally dismissed with an "America is closed," to which he reacts with "What I do?" to which Judge Thurman replies: "There is only one thing you can do here, Mr Navorski ... shop." (*TT*, 10:13 - 10:16)

As Viktor's case ironically proves, without a country to belong to, the whole world is closed for the individual. Therefore, the loss of

country brings along a loss of individual identity. The film, in this way, points to the nation-state as absolutely indispensable in the shaping of individual identity. Viktor is trapped inside the border, a space that is a non-place (Augé 122), and which only acquires meaning as transit from one country to another but which, nonetheless, “help[s] define the nation” (Benito 208). With its “rituals of hospitality and the welcome” later “qualified by the political constrictions,” Viktor’s “status as a temporary visitor” is confirmed (Benito 208-210).

Therefore, Viktor is forced to survive in the terminal with no money, no friends, nothing. He does not despair and manages to make sense of this non-place to which he is sentenced. And so he survives in the International Transit Lounge by “manag[ing] to reorganize space and to wrest personal places from the heart of the non-place” (Benito 212). He manages to get food, wash, build himself a sort of home at gate 67, find a job and even fall in love. The passing of his days is marked by his daily encounter with Dolores Torres at her desk and her repetition of the daily mantra: “You cannot enter New York without a visa. You cannot get a visa without a passport. You cannot get a passport without a country. You are simply ... unacceptable,” as she puts the red stamp on his form (*TT*, 21:53 - 22: 13).

Viktor makes several friends during his stay at the terminal: Joe Mulroy, an African-American who works in the luggage department and runs an after-hour poker game with his friends, Enrique Cruz, a Latin-American man who works delivering food to the aircrafts and is in love with Dolores Torres, and Gupta Rajan, an Asian-American janitor who comes from Madras. All of them are “undesirables” in Dixon’s words, yet they are all American and therefore ironically represent a multicultural America. For Dixon, however, they all exist on the margins of the nation-state, conforming to the fantasy of the US as a homogeneous community in terms of identity. At the turn of the millennium, furthermore, these “undesirables” promote the rise of new communities and identities that may replace traditional conceptions of self, identity and belonging. In the non-place of the International Transit Lounge, these three characters shape an alternative modernity, one more aligned with Beck’s proposal. Viktor can integrate in this model and construct himself as an individual and

acquire a selfhood that the nation-state model denies him. His fall through the crack in the nation-state model paves his way to a new modernity, so that although his transnational experience may initially be read as devastating, it may in fact be the seed for a new social model, the cosmopolitan one that Beck refers to above. Viktor's experience with Mulroy, Enrique and Gupta points to Beck's notion of global space, one where strangeness is replaced by similarity. As was said before, individuality has become a consequence of both the conflict and the overlap of different identities.

The film presents the characters of Viktor and Frank Dixon as counterparts to explore the complex ramifications of the debate about identity. On the one hand Viktor is living proof of the strength of the nation-state in shaping individual identity, while Dixon ironically represents the fragility of dominant powers and discourses. Viktor is trapped at the border yet, ironically, Dixon is trapped there with him too: "Everything he does comes back to me," he confesses to Thurman (*TT*, 22: 57). The unacceptable Viktor will shake the establishment, impersonated in the character of Dixon. The metaphor of the vulnerability and artificiality of the nation-state through the relation between these two characters is successfully conveyed by film director Steven Spielberg. Viktor's manipulation of the translation to help Milogradovich travel with the drugs he is taking to his father in spite of American regulations is an example of how the establishment, embodied by Dixon, may be challenged and undermined from the outside. Dixon, the representative of US mainstream discourses and power, is repeatedly ridiculed in the film, as in the first interrogation, during which he smashes a packet of crisps with an apple to explain the military coup in Krakozhia.

In spite of the film's focus on this temporary challenging of established power in the juxtaposition between Viktor and Dixon, it is made clear that the situation cannot go on for long. After nine months inhabiting this alternative second modernity at the airport, Viktor receives the news that the war in Krakozhia has ended and he finally agrees to return home. His final words when he gets in a taxi (*TT*, "I am going home," 112 : 11) confirm the notion that the all powerful nation-state has its ways to reaffirm its authority and resilience, and that such vindications of alternative identities as those we have

witnessed throughout the film are temporary challenges which promote a transitory glimpse of a more cosmopolitan, diverse future.

### 3. DISTURBING ALIENS: *NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN*

Another instance of a cultural non-place as disturbing as the JFK International Airport may be found in the desert planes of Joel and Ethan Coen's film *No Country for Old Men* (2007), their personal rendering of Cormac McCarthy's homonymous novel. The setting here is the West Texas plains, a county the Coens had already visited in 1984 for the shooting of their first feature film, the dark comedy *Blood Simple*.

One of the issues critics welcomed at the time the *No Country for Old Men* was released was the way in which the directors had successfully subverted the traditional tenets of genre. In fact, no critic seems to be able to come up with an accurate label for a film which is in turn described as a thriller, a suspense film, a Western, a border movie, and a Western noir, among others. When the DVD version was released, Rob Mackie in his review for *The Guardian* finally suggested, in our view, the most accurate description: a "crime Western noir horror comedy" (Mackie 2008). The subversion of genre which critics found so titillating at the time is achieved through the use of pastiche and the medley of a several original ingredients, as Mackie's labelling above suggests. The genre of the Western and its conventions seems to tie in well with the challenging landscape and the weird characters inhabiting it. The minimal use of dialogue contributes to building up tension, quite a feat if we consider that the Coens refuse to use a musical score for the film. Likewise, the rhythm is slow, a deliberate cadence which partakes in a general, apocalyptic tone of complexity, depth, and gravity. *No Country for Old Men* is a story of extreme violence which starts after a hunter decides to keep the money from a drug deal gone wrong. From this very enticing opening, the paths of three men overlap in 1980s West Texas, depicted as a wide open and desolate country.

The men are Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, played by Tommy Lee Jones, probably the character for whom the title was chosen if we are to consider his initial lament for the increasing violence in the area.

The hunter who escapes with the money is Llewelyn Moss (James Brolin). The third man in the savage equation is Anton Chigurh, ironically pronounced ‘sugar,’ and played by Javier Bardem, a disturbing killer hired to recover the money at whatever cost. His chase of Moss is relentless and cruel, and it affects all those who accidentally cross his path.

In this section of the present article, we will focus on a reading of *No Country for Old Men* which contends that part of the film’s tension is based on the difficult, ambiguous relationship established between tradition and (post)modernity, between national discourse and global threat or, even, between what might be described as ‘local color’ and the outlandish menace which comes from dislocated subjects. In order to do so, we will focus on the Coens’ use of border landscape and the ways in which it affects the three main characters.

It would not be far-fetched to state that, as the film progresses, spectators become increasingly aware of the importance of landscape and its impact upon all the characters inhabiting it. Although the film was shot in different parts of the Mexican border, it is made clear from the first scene that the setting is West Texas, near the Río Grande, a forlorn area which becomes an integral part of the story, as it is in McCarthy’s novel. In the film, the beautiful photography by Roger Deakins greatly increases the general effect initiated by the novel which the Coen brothers wanted to convey visually. The desolate and bleak beauty of the desert opens the movie, functioning as a remarkable setting for Sheriff Ed Bell’s initial monologue.

As Joel Coen emphasized in an interview for *The Guardian*, landscape is of the utmost importance in his films (2011). Surely, it is one of the interests of the Coens to underline the relationship of characters and story to the landscape and, particularly, the way humans deal with their confrontation with this harsh environment. Landscape, with its powerful and mythical presence, leaks into the characters to the point that it can help explain their reactions, behaviours, personalities and, more specifically, their accents.

The unequivocal and abstruse Texas accent which most of the characters display greatly contributes to the general atmosphere of

remoteness and isolation. Ironically, the character who participates more actively in the creation of this alienating atmosphere through his general demeanour and performance, Anton Chigurh, is the only one not to have a Texan accent: the implications of this are particularly significant, and will be discussed at length subsequently.

Another way in which landscape affects the characters is through the physical and psychological impact of the frontier. In the traditional tenets of the Western genre, the border between the United States and Mexico reverberates with the strife for the defence of North-American 'civilization' against the savage Other represented by those subjects living beyond the borderline. Most of the characters in *No Country for Old Men* seem to move in and out of the border which separates civilization from savagery in more or less fluid fashion. Scott Foundas in *The Village Voice* reminds audiences that

like McCarthy, the Coens are markedly less interested in who (if anyone) gets away with the loot than in the primal forces that urge the characters forward ... In the end, everyone in *No Country for Old Men* is both hunter and hunted, members of some endangered species trying to forestall their extinction. (2007)

The strife here is taken to its most basic level: to hunt or be hunted, to kill or be killed. Following this line of argument, Judie Newman argues that the climactic moments in *No Country for Old Men* are those in which the porous border between prey and predator becomes mobile and thus "destiny and evolutionary progress apparently reverse" (142). A striking case in point is the very beginning of the film which sets the story's ruthless logic: Llewellyn Moss is hunting antelope and due to a fatal error of judgment becomes the prey of Anton Chigurh. Chigurh's "weapon of choice," Newman reminds us, is "a stun gun," thus implying "that men are cattle, animals bound for slaughter" (142). The boundary between victim and victimiser is as porous as that other border, the one between the United States and Mexico, which Llewellyn Moss crosses at a climactic point in the film.

In "The Ghosted Other: Ethno-Racial Violence in *No Country for Old Men*" Alison Reed aptly states that "it seems no coincidence that

the Coen brothers' filmic reproduction of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* erupts in a xenophobic political era obsessed with national boundaries" (2007). After a particularly violent encounter between Moss and Chigurh, the Coens decide to take their plotline exactly to the point between the United States and the Mexico border stations: the Río Grande. The river becomes a crossover point which successfully disrupts the fixed line between two stereotypes: the Spanish-speaking dark-skinned Other and the Western cowboy (Reed).

Wounded and drowsy from the injuries Chigurh has inflicted upon him, Llewelyn Moss reaches the Río Grande bridge and walks unsteadily along it. He takes a moment to look back towards the US side, while he continues to walk in the direction of the Mexican checkpoint. Suddenly, he is approached by a group of three young men who return to the US after partying in Mexico. The men, who are drinking Mexican beer, are clearly codified as North American in clothes and behaviour. They look shocked when they see Moss, and although one of them asks him three times whether he was in a car accident, the only thing he can do is produce some blood-stained dollars to pay for one of the guys' coat and the beer.

Unable to explain his present state or even what he is doing there, the young men codify Moss as the Mexican Other. Reed contends that this incident changes something in Moss, and his progress from then on will be marked by this frontier encounter which turns him into the figure of the codified Other. It is also important to highlight that the scene takes place at the border between Mexico and the US, which mimics that between self and Other and, more clearly, between life and death (Reed, n.p.). The scene reverberates with a multiplicity of meanings not only because of the impact that Moss's predicament produces on the spectator, but also because it happens precisely in this particular no-man's-land, the in-between space which is neither the US nor Mexico. We agree with Reed's interpretation that something profound must strike Llewelyn Moss when he decides to get rid of the money he had risked his life over. He plainly decides to toss it over the fence to make sure it disappears into the wilderness. The scene resumes with Moss walking to the Mexican side after getting rid of all the external Texan markers which identify him as a Western cowboy: hat, white shirt, and denim.

As noted earlier, Anton Chigurh is the only character who does not speak with a Texan accent, using instead a more diluted sort of inflection which remains unidentifiable. Had Spanish actor Javier Bardem adopted his standard accent when speaking English, the vicious killer Chigurh would have been identified as a Spanish-speaking Other, which would not have tied in well with the novel and the film's interest in making him of no identifiable racial origin. One of the most fascinating facets of the character, and partly what makes him so frightening, is that his identity stands outside any definitions, including those which derive from the racial division between Anglos and Mexicans. The Coens, therefore, decided to make Bardem use a non-specific accent in order to make it impossible for the audience to locate the origin of such an ambiguous and disturbing character. As Joel Coen states in an interview, Chigurh is "the thing that doesn't grow out of the landscape," as 'unnatural' and 'alien' as if he had just landed from outer space. In fact, the Coens sought an actor "who could have come from Mars" (*The Guardian*).

The first time we see Chigurh the image is significantly blurred. This is how Jim Emerson describes the character's first appearance on screen:

as he moves forward into focus, to make his first kill, we still don't get a good look at him because his head rises above the top of the frame. His victim, the deputy, never sees what's coming, and Chigurh, chillingly, doesn't even bother to look at his face when he garrottes him. (2008)

The use of the word "chillingly" in Emerson's description should not go unnoticed. The film opens with a fade in on the mountains at nighttime and the voiceover of an old man who identifies himself as the county Sheriff. As he speaks his monologue on the ways in which crime has become crueller and harder to understand, we are offered several dissolves<sup>3</sup> through a number of landscapes, none of which show any signs of human activity. The last landscape is surveyed through a long slow shot which brings into frame the flashing lights of a police car stopped on the road. As the monologue continues, we are given a close-up of a pair of hands handcuffed behind someone's

back, and all we see of the prisoner is his dark hair. The opening monologue is over, but it still echoes in our minds as we witness the prisoner scurrying his manacled hands out under his legs while sitting in silence and strangling the deputy from behind while the latter is on the phone. This is Anton Chigurh and these are his brutal ways.

Chigurh's physical appearance is, at the best of times, unsettling. The first scene described above focuses on his hair precisely because it is a marker of his identity and the audience will later associate him to this fleeting first image. He sports a weird haircut, apparently derived from a 1979 book that featured photos of brothel patrons and clients on the Texas-Mexico border, but which could also be inspired in a medieval crusader or a 1960s pop star. The haircut, described by Mark Kermode as "anachronistic pudding-bowl," suggests to this critic "a timeless madness unbounded by contemporary culture" (2008, n.p.). It successfully inspires ridicule and fear at the same time.

Secondly, his intriguing weapon which the above scene also focuses on, and which serves him as a door-opening device on occasion, is another ingredient which is connected to the Sheriff's initial lament for old times. The carbon dioxide powered captive bolt pistol is eccentric as a weapon, parodying, in Postmodern fashion, the archetypal "manly" weapons of Western cowboys in classic films, the Colt.45 and the Winchester.<sup>73</sup>

One of the more chilling and menacing attributes of Chigurh's character might be his complete absence of empathy. Very early on, we start to understand that the line between life and death is blurry when Chigurh is around and, most of the times, it depends on a mere toss of coin. This becomes literal. Twice in the film, Chigurh is pleaded with through the line "You don't have to do this." (1: 21) The first to beg for his life is Carson Wells, in a scene which will later be mimicked in the final encounter between Chigurh and Carla Jean Moss. Edna McCaffrey reads these two scenes as examples of Chigurh's "ethical wasteland":

In both exchanges, Chigurh does not respond to the moral reproaches implied by the riposte; to do so would be a tacit acknowledgment of the secular morality he

opposes ... In requesting Carson and Carla to choose life or death on the toss of a coin, Chigurh is not just deferring choice to the realms of gratuity but he is also handing responsibility over to 'fate' in an act of bad faith that prevents him from taking responsibility for his own ethical choices. (128)

From the very beginning of the film, Chigurh's criminality follows a pattern that has to do with the more fearsome aspects of the contemporary, globalized world. This is the subject of Sheriff Ed Bell's lament in the opening monologue. Some might dismiss Chigurh as "just a goddamn homicidal lunatic," (*NCOM*, 88: 21) as Sheriff Giddens describes him, but Sheriff Bell knows better: "I'm not sure he's a lunatic," (*NCOM*, 98: 25) he replies. The character stands outside what is humanly comprehensible, including the boundary between sanity and insanity.

Chigurh's accent, as noted above, is obviously impossible to locate. His surname is somewhat strange and does not seem to provide any further clues as to his potential origins. His physical appearance is deeply perturbing, the weapon with which he kills is bizarre and his behaviour is unaccountable. With all these ingredients, Chigurh becomes the 'thing' to be feared in the film, a menacing presence which means much more than one might understand at face value: "resourceful, relentless, psychopathic, a primeval figure seemingly sent by the devil to challenge the human decency of Sheriff Bell" (French 2008). Indeed, he is possibly the reason why this has become "no country for old men." But he is also something else. In his ambiguous provenance and his postmodern way of killing, he becomes a dislocated subject of global proportions which successfully menaces the once solid discourse upon which national identity was based and for which Sheriff Ed Bell displays some nostalgia.

The film opens with a voiceover by Sheriff Ed Bell that is set against several dissolves through a number of barren Texan landscapes. The monologue opens with a meditation on an episode in his career: a teenager whom he sent to the chair after finding him guilty of murder. Increasingly, Sheriff Bell widens his focus of attention and transforms the monologue into a lamentation for a past

which is long gone. In his performance, Tommy Lee Jones charges his words with extraordinary emotion, and his delivery is unique and beautiful in its cadence and rhythm. This is enhanced by the images which accompany the roll of Jones's voice, "controlled with a musician's flair," as defined by Peter Bradshaw (2008). The screen is black when Jones's voice is heard for the first time, thus functioning as a sort of prologue, and a pre-dawn landscape with some hills in the distance is seen right after he speaks the first sentence. Eleven shots follow, each tracing the growing light of dawn across empty land with Jones's voice evoking a kind of life which reaches as far back as the Old West. Contents and form go hand in hand, Sheriff Bell's evocation finding its visual translation in the landscape being shown. The fact that this is a landscape devoid of human activity is significant, as it points to an idealized past which nobody seems to inhabit anymore.

When the monologue focuses on crime – "The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure" (*NCOM*, 02:05) – the camera accompanies this movement to show the parked police car and the young deputy pushing the mysterious manacled man. Through this subtle synchronization of movement and voice, we are allowed to understand that this man in handcuffs will prove an example of the kind of crime that Bell describes as "hard to even take its measure."

With Sheriff Bell's voice dominating the film's opening, the Coens successfully suggest the main topic behind the plotline, namely Chigurh and his ways. Thus the kind of values and (national) identity which Bell champions and of which he is a fine example clashes with the global threat Chigurh will come to represent. The decadence of this nationalism which is related to the Old West comes to its full effectiveness in the scene in which Sheriff Bell goes to see his uncle Ellis.

The scene is constructed upon all the ingredients which conjure up the Old West. It starts with the camera framing the barren landscape outside the window of an isolated cabin, a pickup truck approaching. Inside the cabin, Bell finds Ellis, an old man in a wheelchair wearing cowboy overalls and checked shirt. In their exchange, Ellis confirms to an "overmatched" Bell that "what you got ain't nothin' new. This country is hard on people. Hard and crazy. Got the devil in it yet folks never seem to hold it to account" (*NCOM* 127: 01). Bell leaves

unconvinced, still believing things have changed in the crime department, hence his feeling overmatched by the situation. Ellis clearly belongs to another age, probably like Bell himself, and neither of the two men seem to be moving on with the times. Plot progress proves Bell right when he is left powerless in the present situation in spite of his impressive instinct for detective work. He is finally identified as the old man for whom this is no place anymore.

Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* is an extraordinarily bizarre and hypnotic film which successfully redeploys classic Western material to explore the difficult relationship between tradition and (post)modernity. Through the use of a villain of unknowable origin whose physical appearance makes him even more outlandish, the Coens illustrate the tension between a somewhat dated national discourse and the global threat posed by such dislocated subjects. The clash between old and new, national and global, has tragic consequences according to the Coens and to McCarthy in so far as it leaves countries unrecognizable for those who had been living there, turning them into barren landscapes where, as Sheriff Bell reminds us, a man has to put his soul at hazard.

#### 4. THE INTERSTICE: DIFFERENCE NEGOTIATED

Homi K. Bhabha argues that in-between spaces “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of singular or communal selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (333). It is precisely in “the emergence of the interstices ... that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 333) As Celestino Deleyto argues, Bhabha theorises a space where differences are negotiated, creating a tension which is “peculiar to borderline existences” and which “produces hybridity in a transnational world” (Deleyto 194). What is theoretically innovative, for both Bhabha and Deleyto, is precisely the study of the processes which are constructed in the articulation of cultural differences, beyond narratives of origin and initial subjectivities. In this sense, and as Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden contend, transnational cinema, in its interest in moving

beyond the local and the global, proves its value as a fruitful means to the exploration of the in-between spaces of culture since “many films that problematize national or cultural identity take place in the “non-places” of the postindustrial landscape” (4, 8).

Such “non-places” are the airport terminals and desert planes which are used as locations for the two films we have read in the present article. Both films intervene in the debate of the nation-state, although from very different perspectives. In *The Terminal*, Spielberg successfully allows audiences to envision what Ulrich Beck would describe as a second modernity: the globalised, cosmopolitan world, “a creative achievement” for the individual where the dissolution of the nation-state and the supremacy of the West has been achieved. The film explores the tensions created by such discourse from a light-hearted and optimistic stance, even if the final consequence of the proposal is, inevitably, a return to what its protagonist calls “home,” however this is conceptualized. *No Country for Old Men*, on the other hand, follows a different tone and approach as it observes how the potential erosion of the “privileged center,” its denationalisation and deterritorialisation on the part of the unknown global threat, may bring with it challenges which the national does not know how to negotiate.

Eighteen years after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington and in the present context of conflict over the financing of Trump’s border wall, Spielberg’s *The Terminal* and the Coens’ *No Country for Old Men* successfully promote and intervene in a debate on the nature of the nation-state, the role of national borders, and the performance of both individual and national identity. Both *The Terminal* and *No Country for Old Men* become narratives “capable of strengthening certain social imaginaries” (Hjort 20), while they highlight the extent to which, although the turn of the millennium seemed to promise a world with more mobile, hybrid identities and open multicultural spaces, our lives still tend to be trapped within nation-state borders.

## NOTES

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Cinema” (Ministerio de Industria, Economía y Competitividad) which founded the research for the present article.

<sup>2</sup> The use of inverted commas around the term “natural” is meant to highlight the ambiguity of the notion of nature itself. Despite its manifold meanings, we would like to clarify that we are using “natural” in the same way that Rainio does above. Borders are constructions that have everything to do with architecture, culture, and society and even when such natural incidents as rivers and/or mountains are used as borders, these still fall under the category of “cultural constructs.”

<sup>3</sup> A dissolve is a gradual transition from one image to another, as used in film editing.

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