

**The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor
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Movies seduce me. The lights slowly soften, enticing me into the new and playful world that is my imagination. Mostly movies seduce me through the visual mix of plot, action or character. In *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* I found myself seduced by sound.

The movie soundscape is superb. Take the scene in which a grieving Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones) mourns his dead friend Melquiades Estrada (Julio Cedillo). The only sound in the entire scene is that of Pete drinking half a beer and then slowly emptying the remaining contents onto the grave of his dead friend. A drink has been shared. Yet now the friendship is empty.

Dialogue is redundant, for sounds have spoken louder than words. The rich soundscape chimes in perfect harmony with the sparse and space landscape that is the border country between Texas and Mexico.

Three Burials (which marks the directing debut of Tommy Lee Jones) starts as a sad mix of *Who shot Liberty Valance?* (1962) played out amongst *Desperate Housewives* (2004-) and despairing husbands. It gathers pace to become a fascinating journey in which human darkness faces poetic justice and finds redemption.

Melquiades Estrada is found shot dead, his first burial. An illegal migrant, his death is dismissed by local law enforcement. What is one dead migrant to those whose work it is to enforce an artificial border dividing rich Texas from poor Mexico? Place of birth and family unknown, Melquiades second burial occurs quickly and quietly.

Yet Malquiades has begged his cowboy friend, Pete, to never let him be buried in America, “a land of billboards.” So starts a journey of redemption, as the body of Malquiades is mourned, exhumed and returned to his Mexican birthplace.

The Three Burials continues the gritty writing and non-linear structure for which screen writer Guillermo Arriaga gained earned critical acclaim in *21 Grams* and *Amores Perros*. Yet *Three Burials* mixes moments of laugh out loud humour. We chuckle ironically at the notion of reverse swing, as Jones illegally smuggles Malquiades body from Texas back into Mexico. We appreciate the delightful irony three Spanish-only speaking Mexicans, captivated by an American-only TV soap opera.

Between the humour and amid the sparse landscape, lies a bigger question. Is poetic justice and redemption possible? Could the American murderer of an illegal migrant find redemption?

American-only TV soap opera is the soundscape for the shallow marriage of Mike (Barry Pepper) and Lou Ann Norton (January Jones). Could they climb out of the grave that marks their desperate marriage?

Finally, in a year in which illegal immigration into the USA has become a red-hot political issue, this movie probes the redemption of American justice. Can the racism lying shallow in this American “land of billboards” find a redeeming humanity? Can the shallowness that is the global export of American-only TV soaps ever become deep enough to care for human beings, irrespective of their place of birth? And death?

504 words

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