One of the points which emerged forcefully in Chapter 1 is that it is the interaction of different aspects of mise-en-scène which enables filmmakers to accomplish the most interesting effects. Chapter 2 explores an extended example from the 1996 film *Lone Star* in order to develop this sense of interaction at greater length.

*Lone Star* is a border film. This is a tradition of films — to call it a ‘genre’ would be to exaggerate the case, and the term ‘cycle’ suggests a temporal proximity which the films (and works in other media) do not possess — which are set on the US/Mexico border. Perhaps the most famous border film is *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958), in which another law enforcement officer works outside his jurisdiction. Typically, border films are concerned with various different kinds of borders, not simply national boundaries, and the degree of difficulty which is involved in crossing them.

The sequence I want to examine takes place just beyond the film’s halfway point. Sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper), in the course of his investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death of Sheriff Wade, takes a trip across the border into Mexico to interview Chucho Montoya (Tony Amendola). Sam asks questions of Chucho. They discuss the extent of his business empire (or rather his kingdom — Chucho is known as El Rey de las Llantas, King of the Tires). In less than specific...
terms, Chucho responds to Sam’s questions about his period of work in Texas, his subsequent return, and business career. Sam’s main enquiry provokes an emotional discussion and the scene culminates in the graphic and disturbing flashback which shows the murder of Eladio Cruz (Gilbert R. Cuellar Jr) by Sheriff Wade (Kris Kristofferson).

The sequence begins with a young man removing a tire from a wheel, at the rear of the Llanteria. Sam and Chucho appear through a doorway already talking. Chucho holds a bottle of CocaCola. He encourages his employee to take a break, and continues to walk and converse with Sam.

Chucho: Down here, we don’t throw everything away like you gringos do. They emerge from the building.
Recycling, right? We invented that. The government doesn’t have to tell people to do it.

Sam: You own this place, huh?
Chucho: This place, the one across the street, three or four others in Ciudad León. Soy el Rey de las Llantas! King of the Tires. Chucho stops and turns to face Sam.
A lot of your people rolling over that bridge on my rubber.

Sam: So you lived in the States for a while?
Chucho: Fifteen years.
SHORT CUTS

Sam: Made some money, came back here.
Chucho: Something like that.
Sam: D'you ever know a fellow named Eladio Cruz?
Chucho: You're the sheriff of Rio county, right? Un jefe muy respetado.

Chucho draws a line in the dirt between the two men with the bottle which he plants at its end. He stands up and beckons to Sam.

Step across this line.

Sam walks away from Chucho, parallel to the line rather than crossing it.
Ay, qué milagro! You're not the sheriff of nothing anymore. Just some tejano with a lot of questions I don't have to answer. ... A bird flying south, you think he sees this line? Rattlesnake, javelina? Whatever you got. You think halfway across that line they start thinking different? Why should a man?

Sam: Your government has always been pretty happy to have that line, the question's just been where to draw it.

Chucho walks parallel to the line until he is opposite Sam, then turns to face him again.

Chucho: My government can go fuck itself, and so can yours. I'm talking about people here! Men! ... Mi amigo, Eladio Cruz is giving some friends of his a lift one day in the back of his camión, but because they're on one side of this invisible line and not the other, they've got to hide in the back como criminales, and because over there he's just another Mex bracero, any man with a badge is his jefe.

As Chucho tells his story the camera pans to the left, leaving the present day characters behind, and revealing a broken-down truck stranded on a bridge on a quiet road near the border.

The central action of the sequence is the line that Chucho draws in the dirt. In drawing the line he is marking a difference between the two individuals, it is an act of separation on a personal scale. Yet it simultaneously refers to the national border, as Chucho's remarks make plain.
In asking Sam to step across the line, Chucho’s act becomes a challenge. There is something of throwing down the gauntlet in this moment. When in 1527 Francisco Pizarro, the conquistador, challenged his companions to persevere with their South American expedition, he invited them to step across a line he drew in the sand (Hemming 1983: 26). The action is also a little reminiscent of the kinds of ritualised stand-off that are familiar from Westerns or, closer to home, some of the provocations of Sheriff Wade witnessed earlier in the film, around the pouring and spilling of drinks, or in the confrontation between Wade and Buddy Deeds (Matthew McConaughey). What is certain is that one cannot imagine the late Sheriff Wade walking away from this confrontation in the way that Sam chooses to do. The line could barely be more insubstantial, as Chucho observes, and yet it already possesses a consequence that is almost tangible. It is one boundary among many, in a film in which borders are both insubstantial and yet difficult to cross.

The act of drawing the line is eloquent and effective, but some of the other decisions made by Sayles and his collaborators inflect, develop and enhance the significance of the confrontation.

**The cola bottle**

Economics, and their relationship to the Texas/Mexico border, are important concerns of the film. The transport of illegal immigrants and the associated privation and exploitation are everywhere to be seen. Earlier in the film characters remark on the sweatshops of Ciudad León and Sam suggests that the American town of Frontera’s main tourist attraction is the opportunity for low-budget sex tourism that its proximity to Mexico provides. In this scene, the economic differences that the border helps to sustain are also inescapable — from the discussion about recycling tires to the circumstances in which Eladio was murdered. In this context, the decision to have Chucho use a CocaCola bottle to draw his boundary is not a flattering product placement, in fact quite the contrary. Given that the economic and exploitative nature of the relationship between America and its neighbours is very much the
subject of attention, to use the clearest symbol of American global economic dominance as a marker is eloquent. It is the governments, Chucho argues, which have drawn these lines in the desert. It is the imperatives of multinational companies, the film suggests, that guide the hand of government policy. And it is the people, like Eladio Cruz, who are the victims of these boundaries and their exploitation.

The uniform

Sam has removed his badge prior to crossing the border, and made the journey in his own car (in contrast, for example, to his first appearance in the film), but he is still wearing the rest of his sheriff’s uniform, a uniform which brings with it a weight of association. These associations are felt by both characters and audience. We may again be put in mind of the Western. The film goes out of its way to point up similarities between the dress, and role, of the latter-day sheriff and the traditional figure of Western lore, most prominently in Hollis’ (Clifton James) retelling of the night when Buddy Deeds ran Sheriff Charlie Wade out of town.

It is these two previous wearers of the uniform whom Chucho and Sam are most likely to be put in mind of. Sam is continually conscious of the difficulty of filling his father’s footsteps, a man in whose shadow and by whose laws he has always had to live — as many of his investigative conversations make clear (‘Sheriff Deeds is dead honey, you just Sheriff Junior’).

But in this particular encounter our sense, and Chucho’s sense, of the relationship between Sam and Charlie Wade is much more active. For Chucho, the uniform of a Rio County Sheriff must powerfully bring him back to his terrible first encounter with North American authority, an authority which Sam inevitably embodies. This connection is dynamically strengthened by the shot that ends the ensuing flashback, when the camera cranes up from Chucho’s youthful self hiding for his life under the bridge and, rather than Sheriff Wade’s widespread arms upon the parapet, we encounter Sam surveying the scene from the bridge in the present day.

In addition to the expressive skills which a performer brings to a film, the casting of a role has consequences for our understanding. It is to take nothing away from Cooper’s sensitive performance to suggest that his pasty physiognomy is not of the kind we associate with hero or male lead. (On the contrary, it is one of the pleasures of the film that Sam is not played by someone with the appearance or obvious charisma of a star.) It is one of the film’s intelligent decisions, and one that only takes on its full weight in relation to the casting of Sheriffs Wade and Buddy Deeds. In contrast to Cooper, Kristofferson is an iconic figure, and an iconic figure of the past. He brings not only the weight of a star to the role, but also the aura of Peckinpah’s Billy the Kid, a whiff of the decay of both the old west and, perhaps, the western genre. And, though not a star at this point of his career, who could appear more clean-shaven or firm-jawed than Matthew McConaughey in the role of Buddy Deeds? Sam’s predicament — the impossible task of living up to the past and the legend that was his father — is underlined by the casting.

Claims for the complexity and significance of this scene are not solely dependent on the action and the associations of clothing and bottle, but
also the way in which the action has been organised for, and with, the camera. Mise-en-scène does not just describe the contents of the frame, but simultaneously the organisation of those elements. In order to do this we need to have a rather more detailed account of the sequence, one which describes the action in relation to the different shots by which the scene is realised.

It begins with a shot which, at forty-five seconds, is by a considerable margin the longest take of the sequence. The camera tracks left past Chucho’s employee at work and meets the two men as they emerge into the open air. The camera accompanies them to the right as they walk together, facing, by and large, the same direction, Chucho leading the way. When, however, Chucho says, ‘A lot of your people [are] rolling over that bridge on my rubber,’ he turns to face Sam, making for a more confrontational relationship. Despite referring to the extent to which citizens of the United States use Mexican remolds, the tenor of the sentence discriminates rather than insists on things in common — ‘your’ and ‘my’ actually work to accentuate the difference rather than illustrate the point of contact.

As Sam asks his next question (‘So you lived in the States for a while?’) the long take ends and the scene continues in shorter shots, cut in a reverse field pattern. Both men remain in the frame from the waist up, but we view one from over the other’s shoulder. This arrangement continues for several shots until the point at which Chucho bends to draw the line in the dirt, when he disappears from the bottom of the frame, leaving Sam alone for a moment.

The film cuts to show Chucho drawing the line in the dirt between the positions where he and Sam stand, but when Chucho straightens and steps back the camera follows, excluding Sam from the frame. We are then presented with a view of Sam which registers his response to Chucho’s actions. For a fleeting moment both men are in shot together, but then Sam starts off parallel to the line and Chucho is left behind. From this point onwards we never see the two in the same frame again. The pair continue to converse in reverse angle, but each character is removed completely from shots of the other.
In discussing the famous long takes of *Touch of Evil*, that earlier border film, Robin Wood has written that ‘camera movement connects, editing separates’. This is a useful rule of thumb, which is worth bringing to mind on any occasion when confronted by long takes or camera movement; although it is essential to bear in mind Wood’s qualification that this, ‘like most textbook rules, has some foundation in elementary practice but needs drastic qualification when confronted by the work of a major creative artist’ (1976: 143). This sense of connection which the ‘textbook rule’ illustrates, is partly dependent on a property which one can...

attribute to any two elements that appear in the same shot, long take or otherwise: a sense of their sharing continuous space and real time. *Lone Star* is a film that plays with this property with intelligence, not least in the film's most characteristic stylistic strategy: the single takes which travel impossibly, by means of camera movement, between the past and the present. These shots cheat our expectation of continuous space and time whilst drawing on the residual sense of connection, by placing events and characters separated by thirty or forty years in the same take. In this way the film suggests, with great economy, the contiguity of past and present, a sense of present happenings being played out in the very same spaces as the events of the past. In *Lone Star* even this border is not easily maintained, and the sense of history acting on present day events is vividly evoked.

The seamlessness of these connections form part of the background of any statement we would wish to make about the découpage of the scene with the bottle. (Découpage is another French term employed in film criticism, which refers to the way in which a scene is broken down into patterns of different shots.) The sense that 'camera movement connects, editing separates' is active in the discriminations between the longer take that begins the sequence and the shorter shots that follow. The related decisions about when the characters are framed together and when they are framed apart also draw upon that sense of connection which belonging to the same frame bestows on different elements.

There is a significant correlation between the degree of conflict which is taking place between the two men and the way in which they are framed. In the first shot, both are framed together; after Chucho has turned to face Sam, and made the remark about Sam's people and his tires, the film cuts between a series of much shorter shots, but both remain on screen in every shot. Once the line has been drawn in the dust, a further act of separation takes place, and the two are framed on their own.

The framing and cutting might be said to be taking its cue from the action — certainly, there is a pertinent relationship between the decisions about how the action on screen has been captured and the
nature, flow, and shape of the drama. Perhaps we can even pursue this relationship further by drawing an analogy between the border on the ground and the border of the frame — the separation of the men in terms of on- and off-screen space follows directly from the drawing of the boundary.

At the climax of the scene, after Chucho has walked parallel to the line until he again faces Sam, and while he makes his impassioned plea — ‘I'm talking about people here!’ — the camera zooms, almost imperceptibly, toward both Sam and Chucho. It is a small movement, and it helps to underline the urgency of what has been said, but it also has the effect of bringing them closer to each other. It is a movement against the drift of the rest of the scene: the parallel edging closer working to emphasise, for the first time in some time, the similarities rather than the differences.

**Conclusion**

The line is a mere scratch. It is unlikely that the bird flying south would even perceive the line, let alone pay it heed. It is arbitrary, indistinct and yet it holds enormous power. That the line is both a distinction between individuals and a representation of a national border is crucial. On either side are two men caught, like so many of the film’s other characters, in an awkward negotiation between personal relationships and public roles and social structures. Two ‘people’, yet simultaneously the King of the Tires or Sheriff of Rio County. In this, the line is a manifestation of the film’s major motif — the border. In *Lone Star* we are shown, and made to feel, borders of race and class and gender and nationality. Borders which are, like this one, simultaneously arbitrary and potent. Or other boundaries, like the one between past and present, which break down only too easily.

There is a whole wealth of material which this account has not touched on at all. So far, we have only examined the action itself in the broadest terms. We have not considered the *way* in which Chucho draws his line, the deliberation with which he puts down the bottle at its end, the
texture of the gravel or the effort which is required to make the mark. The details of performance have almost entirely escaped this account: the way, for example, in which Chucho lifts his Coke bottle and looks Sam in the eye, when he says, ‘Something like that’. Moreover, it is important to note that this brief account of framing and découpage only describes the general pattern employed in the sequence. We have not examined the decisions that have been made about when to show us Sam’s face, and when Chucho’s. When are we watching the speaker, and when are we shown the response of the listener? Nor have we contemplated the fact that the camera is already surveying the scene when the characters emerge into view, and questioned whether this affects our relationship to the action in any way. Even regarding the elements of mise-en-scène that we have considered, there are a whole range of artistic choices which are yet to be discussed, and which are of great significance.

Nevertheless, this brief examination has touched on international economics, father-son relationships, race relations, and people reaching out across a political divide. The range of implications, influences, consequences and ideas that an intelligent mise-en-scène can organise, and bring into stimulating relationship, is striking.