

TIJUANA: PROCESSES OF A SCIENCE FICTION CITY WITHOUT A FUTURE

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*It will not be difficult to find his home
He lives in the rubbish dump.
Welcome to Tijuana
Tequila, sex, marijuana...*

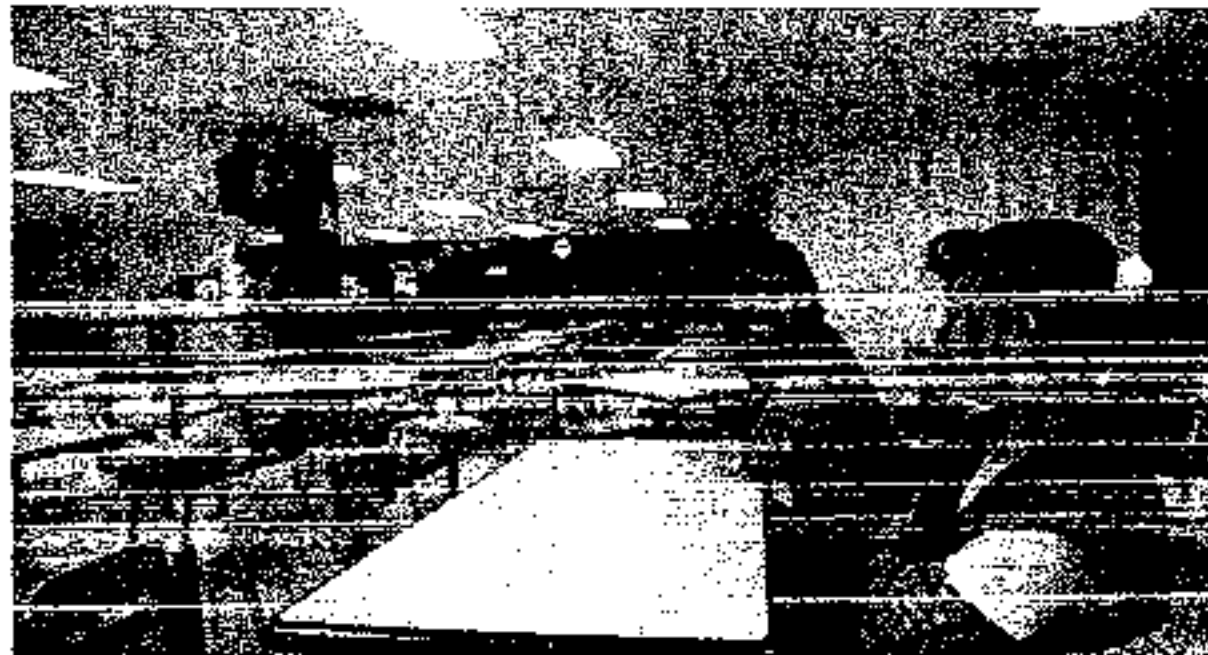
Manu Chao, *Welcome to Tijuana*

Cities such as Tijuana help us to understand Genet, Beckett, Rulfo and Kafka. They help us to understand what came next.



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"Tijuana is an industrial park on the outskirts of Minneapolis. Tijuana is a colony of Tokyo. Tijuana is a sweat shop in Taiwan. Tijuana is a stain that spreads beyond the linden trees of Hamburg... Taken together as one, Tijuana and San Diego form the most fascinating new city in the world, a city of world-class irony ... Tijuana is here. It has arrived. Silent as a Trojan horse, inevitable as a flotilla of boat people, more confounding in its innocence, in its power of proclamation than Spielberg's most pious vision of a flying saucer." (Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation. An Argument with My Mexican Father*, 1992)



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In 1809 a 54-year-old Indian converted to Christianity. During the religious ceremony, the Kumiai Indian stated the name of the ranch he belonged to. The Indian lived on what today is the north-east border with California. The native name for this place was "Llantijuan". But what the father heard or decided to note down in his book of baptisms was "Tia Juana" ("Aunt Jane").

Tijuana was built on misunderstanding. This is what the Cuban writer Lezama Lima might call an "erotica of errors", an *errática*.

Perhaps even a *neurótica*.

What Derrida would call the worst Derrida.

Llantijuan, by the way, could mean one of two things: either "place near water" or "barren land".

Tijuana was built on contradiction.

This mistranslation and blotting out of native heritage gave rise to the first character of the city, Tía Juana ("Aunt Jane"), an old, mad and quite ridiculous hostess, a hysteric who, to top it all, never even existed. Tía Juana. Many children and adults from Tijuana nevertheless believe in her, almost as much as they believe in Santa Claus or the "Chupacabras", the shapeless monster who sucks the blood from cows and dominates the news headlines every time a new political scandal erupts.

When the war between Mexico and the United States ended and Mexico was robbed of half its territory in the nineteenth century, a new border was created. At that time, the area known as Tijuana today was, in fact, a territory belonging to San Diego, the Californian city of today.

The United States Government, in its massive campaign of territorial theft, in its Yankee merrymaking, overlooked a small detail. The Government of Uncle Sam forgot to bring Aunt Jane with it. The maps were badly drawn up.

If the territory of Tijuana is still part of Mexico, it is nothing more than an accident.

Whatever the case may be, the urban development of Tijuana since the nineteenth century has been strongly dependent on the needs of the United States. During the first half of the twentieth century, the city became infested with bars, liquor stores, cantinas, motels and casinos, thanks to cheap tourism, thanks to fast tourism. (The average tourist only stays for 3 or 4 hours in Tijuana.) The key to Tijuana's boom as a city for Americans was the Volstead Law – the Dry Law – of 1919, which prohibited the production, distribution or consumption of alcohol on American territory. The same law that promoted the Al Capone-style mafia also promoted Tijuana, the city where visitors could find an interminable supply of alcohol.

Postcards from that period are quite crazy: caricatures of Americans standing around a wild landscape – in Tijuana prickly pears do not normally grow, since hardly any vegetation prospers in Tijuana, which is a wasteland –



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and behind that happy drunkard we can make out a yellow brick road of empty bottles.

However, even before the Dry Law, Tijuana had already earned a reputation as a city of vice. In 1888, an American journalist from *The Nation* wrote that Tijuana had more *cantinas* than houses.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the situation changed. Tijuana transformed itself from a city of vice into an industrial city. In the 1960s the *maquiladoras* – bonded assembly plants belonging to large multinationals or large sweatshops working for them – arrived and, like UFOs suddenly landing, they transformed the urban landscape, attracting still further emigration towards the region, making the city grow, literally, by the hour. The city became saturated with immigrants fantasizing about better wages, although, in reality, there are no worse wages than those paid by the *maquiladoras*.

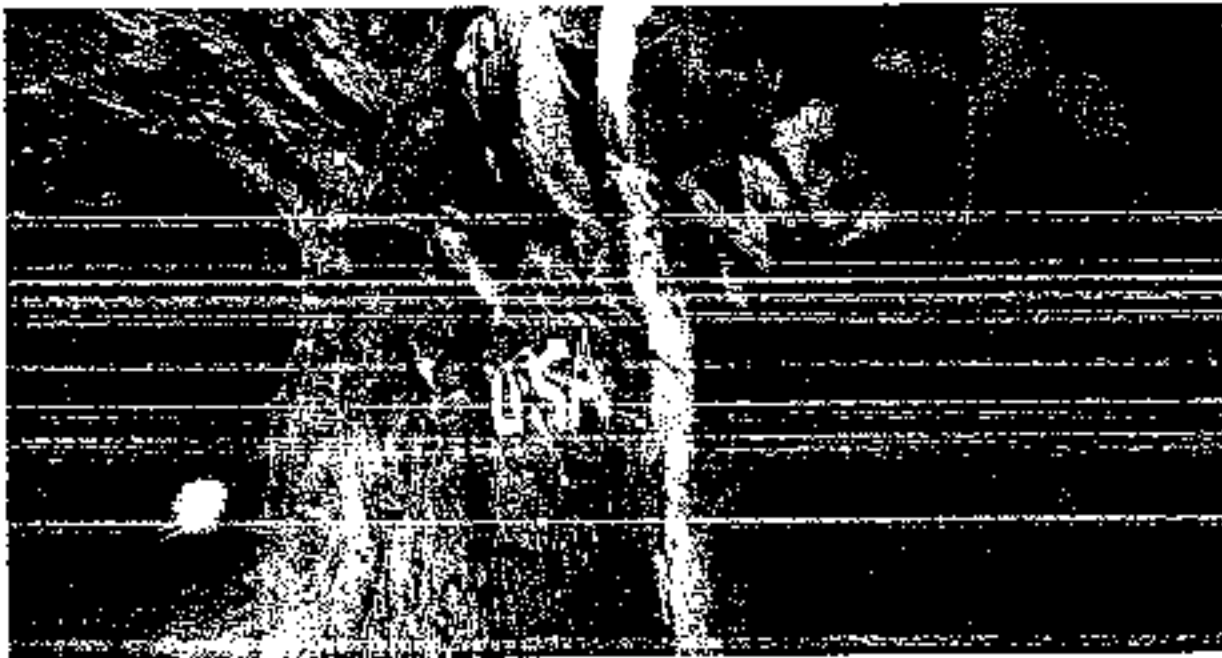
Space Invaders could easily define Tijuana. It is a city of "anarchitecture", a city of auto-deconstruction.

A large part of the city has been built by immigrants or the poor who "invaded" the hills and raised their hovels on its slopes and cliffs made of used tyres, old wood and every kind of material the human mind can imagine. Tijuana was built by recycling. Tijuana redefined the idea of recycling.

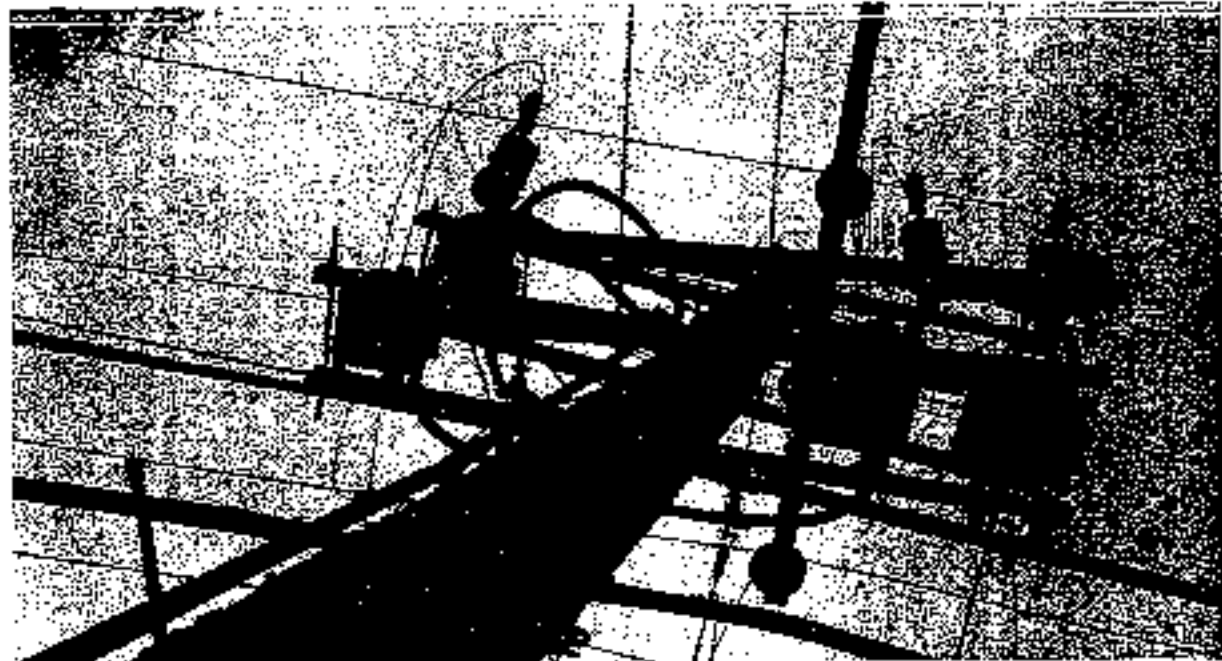
The cars driven by the inhabitants of Tijuana all had Californian owners. It is not unusual to step into a car and see the signs of an exhaustive examination still on the dashboard, since your girlfriend or your friend bought that car at an auction (organized by the Border Patrol) of decommissioned cars that had been caught carrying hidden loads of marijuana, heroine and cocaine.

Tijuana survives thanks to rubbish and second – or third – hand items thrown away or brought in from the United States. Clothing. Computers. Dreams. Sometimes Tijuana seems more of a Swap Meet than a city. An open-air market.

Tijuana was built on illegality, ranging from its comitory hills taken by force to its business districts and its gangsters. Crime is part of Tijuana's identity: violence its backbone.



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Transvestites are one of the characteristic sights of Tijuana night-life. On Revolution Avenue – yes, even the Mexican Revolution ended up as a picturesque avenue for tourists – some of the dives have to place signs up in the window that read "Real Women Here" and the laboratories in the city-centre place other signs in their windows that read "Smear test ONLY for women". It seems that in Tijuana nobody wants to be who *they really are*.

On the United States border with Mexico, everyone wants to be someone else. Americans want to have their weekend of Mexican transformation and the immigrants want to sign up to the "American Way of Life" or, at least, to the "Chicano Way of Life". And if someone has a Mexico City accent or a southern



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accent, no matter. There is no destruction of the other through sarcastic references to their language or their identity, the way that we destroy ourselves through the very language itself. Here nobody knows who is who.

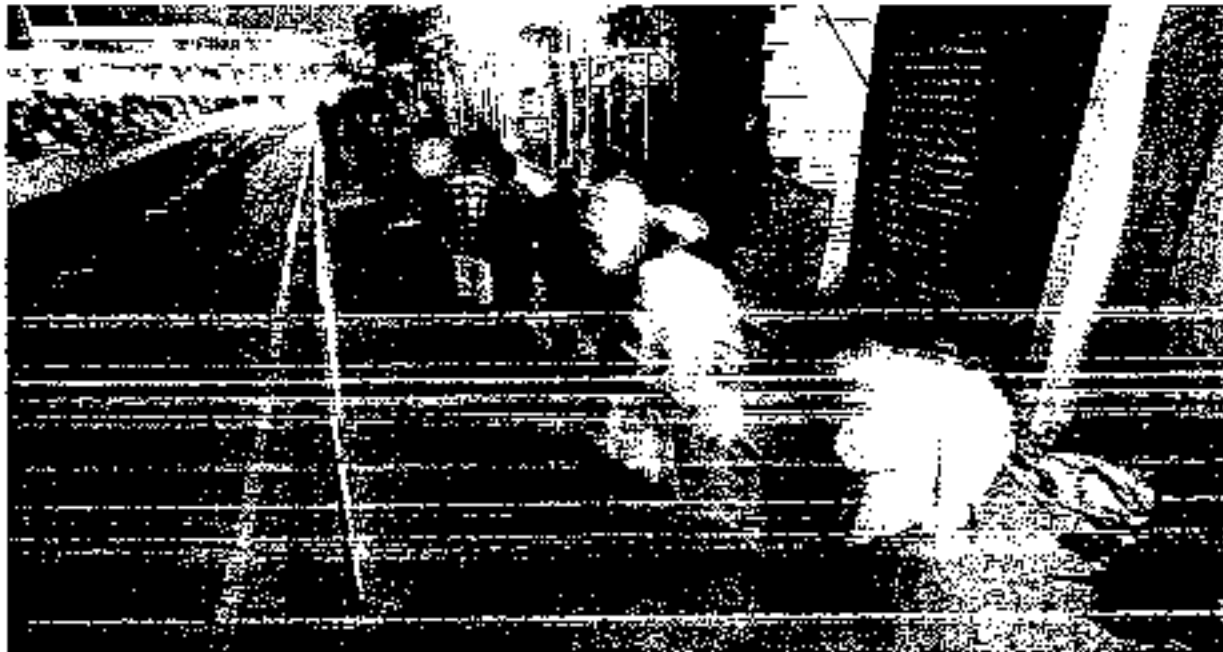
That is why there is so much chaos, fun, amusement, festivity and partying, loud music... because although we all ended up at the maquiladoras, observing their sleepless shifts and overtime hours, this did not mean that we waved goodbye to the nightlife. On the contrary, nightlife also spilled over into the next morning, the next evening, two nights in one. The sexual tourism industry received a massive boost, with its clubs for every taste and pocket. As for alcohol and illegal substances, they're all here too.

"Tijuana is not Mexico", wrote Raymond Chandler in *The Long Goodbye* in 1953. Tijuana defines itself, in contrast to Mexico City. Two cities that scorn each other. Two different mental states. Two metaphors interpreted literally.

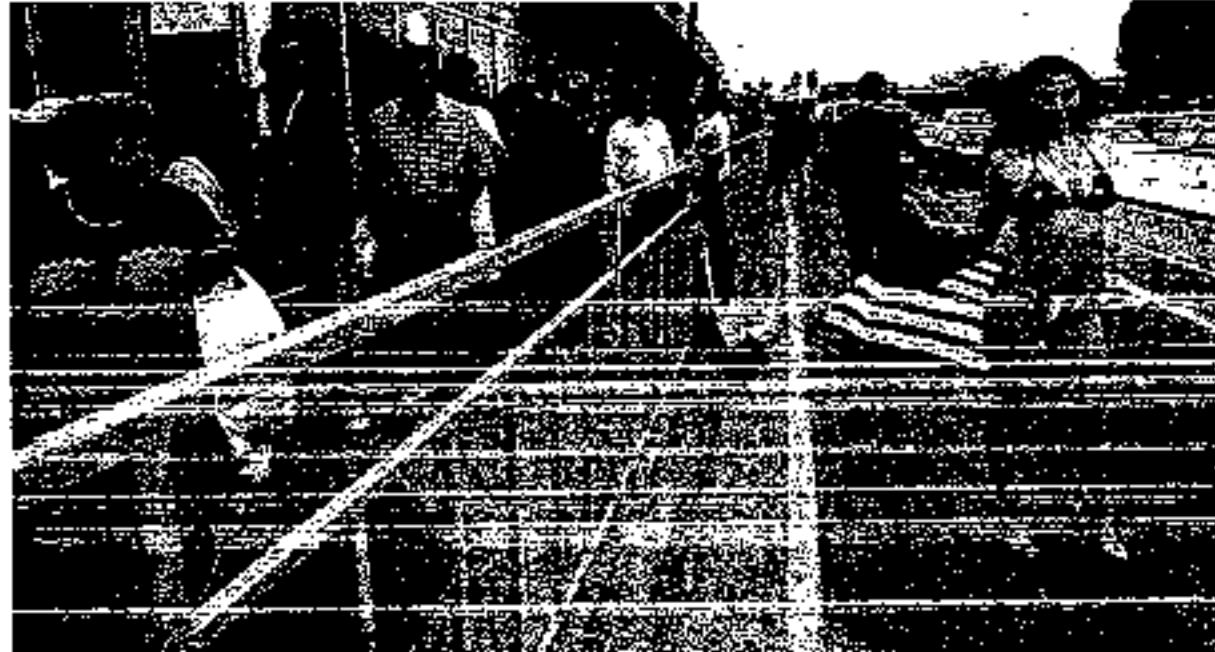
Tijuana resents the Federal Government. Many inhabitants of Tijuana feel they have been forgotten by the central powers. But Tijuana also mistrusts the Yankees. And it doesn't like to be associated with Mexican-Americans either, whom it calls "pochos", which means "uprooted", "rootless".

Tijuana is a border city with a strong sense of its own identity, although many both inside and outside the city ironically believe that Tijuana has no identity at all.

Tijuana was built on fantasy.



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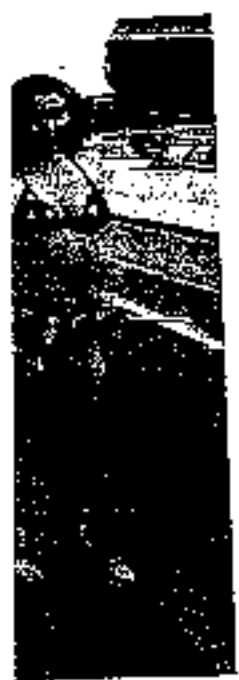
Tijuana is "Television Town". Tijuana boasts of having assembled 75% of the television sets on Earth. Thousands of people work in San Diego, California, and live in Tijuana. Cultural influences are moving in both directions. People in Tijuana have revolving-door minds.

Tijuana is a cold beach, one that is nevertheless familiar, literally just a few metres away from the American Patrol and helicopters flying over the three walls that were set up in certain sections of the dividing line. The First World meets the Third World.

This is asymmetry. Tijuana is pure asymmetry. Get it? Comprendes, Méndez?

That is how it is. That is Tijuana.

Inequality, a clash of forces, sketched out the map of Tijuana.



Tijuana has one million inhabitants or maybe three.

Carlos Santana learned how to play the guitar in Tijuana and the local musician who taught him doesn't let a day go by, of course, without cursing his successful pupil. Tijuana is a city obsessed with itself, like New York or Buenos Aires.

Tijuana is a freaky city, a metropolis with no recognizable centre. Tijuana is centrifugal.

The centre of Tijuana stinks of urine. The municipal clock looks like one of the McDonalds arches and its official architecture is pure simulacrum, pure kitsch. Tijuana existed long before Baudrillard.

Tijuana was built for American interests.

Tijuana was built on poverty. The economy explains this city.

Tijuana is appropriationism. Tijuana unravels like a Kathy Acker novel in which a city takes a story already written – let us say, the Californian dream or the Mexican disaster – and rewrites it, giving it that typical Tijuana twist.

Tijuana is Bart Sánchez art.

Tijuana is ultra-satirical. It detests the tourists it welcomes. Bukowski knew it: "I asked the barman what day it was and the barman said 'Thursday', so I had a couple of days. Aieseo had to wait for the Yankee crowds to reach the border to have his two days of madness after five days of hell. Tijuana took care of them. Tijuana took care of their money, but the Americans never knew that the Mexicans hated them so much

[...] they went around TJ as if they owned it, and every woman was a bed and every police officer a character from a comic strip, but the Americans had forgotten that they had won a couple of wars against Mexico, as Americans or Texans or whatever. To the Americans, this was only something out of history books; to the Mexicans it was something alive, real, and it did not feel good to be an American in a Mexican bar on a Thursday evening; the Americans even ruined the bulls; the Americans ruin everything". (Charles Bukowski, *The Stupid Christs*, 1967)

Tijuana is a Mexican seller who approaches two Asian-American tourists looking at clothes in a shop on Revolution Avenue and Tijuana says to them, "Chicken try it. And if you want, I can *hara-kiri* price". That is how Tijuana deconstructs.

It is how Tijuana tends to become untranslatable. Even to itself.

"—Who is it? —they asked one another.

—'Tijuana in' —replied those most in the know.

—Strange name!

—But so beautiful the owner! — claimed the enthusiastic speaker — a magnet woman, a radioactive woman who, seen only once, captivates you for ever. She is among those to whom, without lying, you can say: 'my life for a kiss'." (Hernán de la Roca, *Tijuana in*, 1932)

Tijuana is unlike Tijuana.

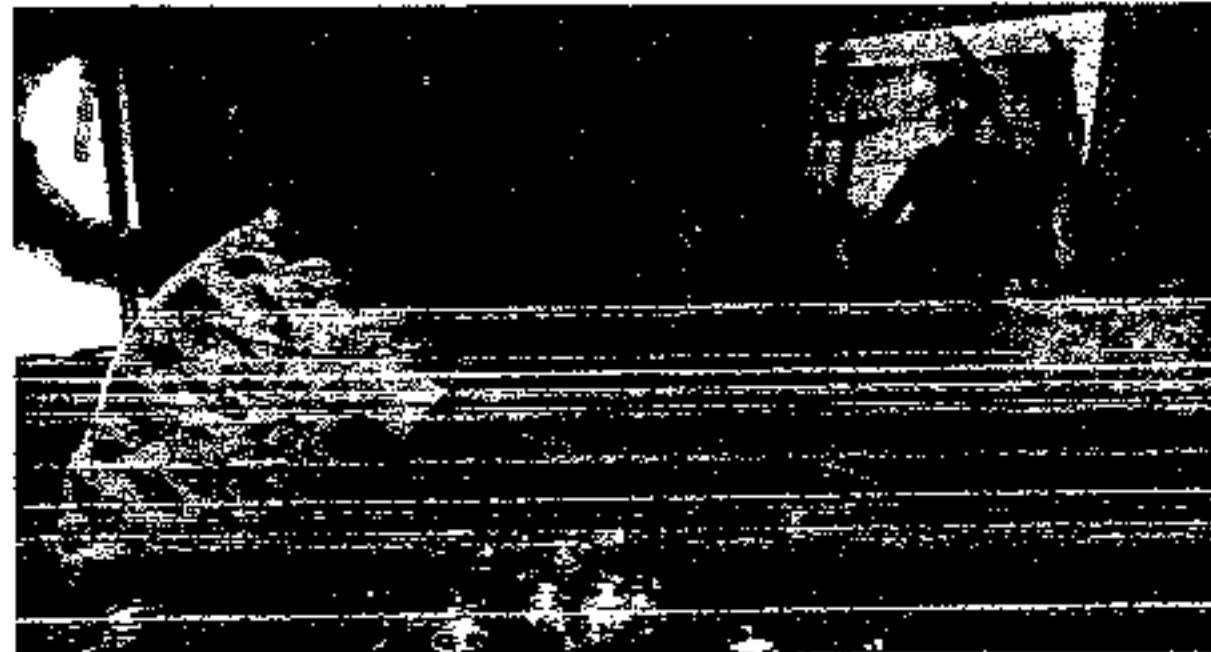
Tijuana is a lesbian wearing a hand-crafted belt, thigh-length boots and large hat holding a tequila in one hand while she embraces a transsexual dressed as Paulina Rubio, crossed with Mónica Naranjo and Madonna. Tijuana is also that transsexual who works at the post office disguised as a normal bureaucrat.

Tijuana shuffles its stereotypes. The mascot of Tijuana is a donkey painted with black and white stripes, a simulated zebra. Its name is "Zonkey".

Tijuana reinvented Mexico and also reinvents the United States at the same time.

And sometimes the United States deconstructs the United States through Tijuana principles.

It is no coincidence that the perverted grandparents of



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Playboy were known, in the early twentieth century, as *Tijuana Bibles*, eight-page volumes where Betty Boop fucked Popeye. Images in which all the symbols seemed jumbled up, as in the streets and markets of Tijuana.

Tijuana is semiology converted into perverted tourism.

Tijuana was built on the contradictory versions of Tijuana.

In 1997 the city name was registered by the municipal authorities in order to make it its own property, to make it a copyright and prevent the media, businessmen or any other person from using "Tijuana" as part of a title or piece of merchandise without asking for permission.

This legislation did not, of course, work.

Tijuana is anything anyone might wish to say about her.

Dozens of writers have written about Tijuana.

Eve
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convin

Tiju
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the Un

The
cartels

It is
soldier
girl.

Afte
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Every time Tijuana is inebriated, it recites those quotes for everyone who happens to be in the *cantina*. Tijuana is convinced that all its quotes are nothing but lies.

Tijuana is almost an imaginary city, a series of cities that only have a few things in common: assembly plants, drug traffickers and 2,000 migrants a day waiting to cross over into the United States illegally.

The Tijuana Cartel is the most powerful of all the Colombian cartels.

It is no accident that the unofficial saint of Tijuana is a soldier who was incarcerated in 1938 for raping an 8-year-old girl.

After being shot by the authorities in order to stop the rioting crowd that wanted to lynch him, another section of the population became convinced that Juan Soldado was innocent, a scapegoat. Various miracles began to be attributed to him. Now his tomb is a devotional centre to which thousands of believers flock in order to ask the saint to intervene on their behalf, perhaps to recover their health or to earn the forgiveness of a deceived wife or – the favourite miracle of the devotees of Juan Soldado – to help them obtain the green card or a passport, to achieve a successful illegal crossing or be given American citizenship.

Tijuana hates to admit it but Tijuana was built on crime.

It is no coincidence that one of its municipal chairmen in the early twenty-first century was the owner of the Hippodrome of Agua Caliente; the same individual who is supposed to be the mind behind the execution of Felix the Cat, the same man who has been in prison on smuggling charges.

Half of the voters elected him, and the day he won they flooded the streets to celebrate the victory of his mega-gang.

Tijuana is always shirty.

When the Mexican President, Lázaro Cárdenas, banned betting and gambling in the 1930s, many owners of casinos

in Tijuana took their money and put it to work, and guess where ...?

Tijuana was almost Las Vegas.

But instead, Tijuana turned into Tijuana.

Tijuana is known in many circles as a hybrid city.

Post-Modernism did not only ruin the façades of buildings. It also ruined the true interpretation of Tijuana. Tijuana is much more than just a hybrid creation. Tijuana has everything to do with tension. Take two magnets and instead of allowing them to attract the other through their opposite poles, rub the two identical sides against each other, like someone's face you smash against a mirror and, as a climax to the torture, you then force them to look into the eyes of their own undesirable reflection; take, then, the two magnets and when you feel the force of the repulsion between the two identical poles and you feel their struggle to distance themselves from each other, like a rocket trying to escape the Earth and, yet, you nevertheless feel that they are both subjected to a superior force that is determined to join them together, only then will you realize the intense force that is Tijuana.

This force gives shape to the entire border. It is a magnetic field, and it not only a field of attraction, but also a field of repulsion.

This is the deconstructive repulsion of Tijuana.

A city of farewell to Hegel. A city beyond synthesis.

There are many Tijuanas. Each one of them, half legend, half temporarily out of order. Tijuana is a nightmare of enjoyment, a weekend addicted to work.

It is a city of serial housing and ceaseless production, rumours on the Internet and collective taxis, weekly executions and success stories, merciless drug traffickers and thousands of prostitutes, homeless immigrants and Japanese executives, Mexican millionaires and self-taught sociopaths.

A science fiction city without a future.