

# THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS

*Die fünf Himmelsrichtungen*  
*Los cinco puntos cardinales*

A documentary film by **FRIDOLIN SCHÖNWIESE**

Austria 2009

94 Minutes / Color / DigiBeta Pal / Dolby Digital / Widescreen 1:1,85

## PRESSKIT



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***What remains is only the Mexican dream of living at home:  
That is the Fifth Cardinal Point: A non-geographical direction –  
a permanent heading towards “home” that can be found  
everywhere and nowhere.***



A home in construction – temporarily abandoned  
Tres Valles, Veracruz, Mexico

# 1 THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS

## Synopsis

For many years already the inhabitants of the impoverished Mexican village *Tres Valles* (Three Valleys) have been following the call of the American Dream and have left their native community heading in the direction of the USA.

In *Kansas City* they have re-founded their village and christened it *Tres Vallitos* (Three little Valleys). With the dollars they earn there they want to realize their Mexican dream: a carefree life in their own country.

In an apparently never-ending spiral of hope and disappointment, these people move back and forwards between two countries and two cultures, legally or illegally. In the process they experience the inexorable disintegration of their families and engage in a continuous search for new social solidarity.

*The Five Cardinal Points* tells of the subject of migration from both the American and Mexican perspectives and it creates a differentiated picture of the complexities of neighborly relations.

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### Short description

This is the story of people from the Mexican village of *Tres Valles* in the *Veracruz* region. The inhabitants have been rooted here for generations and have always secured a living as farmers and craftsmen. Up until a few years ago growing sugar cane, pineapples and rice provided modest prosperity. As everywhere else, Mexico became part of the world economy too and saw the fall of the price of raw materials. Families could no longer feed themselves with the wages from the local sugar cane factory and poverty spread over the whole region like a long shadow. Prospects for a decent future in their own country do not appear imminent and so, for many families, there is no choice but to separate and to set off north in search of work, legal or illegal, in the USA.

In the geographical center of the USA, in *Kansas City* in the Midwest, the majority of emigrants encounter each other again. The idea of community is so strong that they cannot really envision a life outside their group. There are so many who have set off on the 2000 mile journey northwards that those who have remained behind soon begin to speak about faraway *Kansas City* as if it was a new suburb. It was given the name of *Tres Vallitos*, little *Tres Valles*. This development has remained almost unnoticed by the American population. For them Mexicans are welcome as cheap labor that is “simply there”. For a long time only a few gave serious thought to their culture, life circumstances and living conditions.

*Tres Vallitos* has become a kind of virtual city within a city, a parallel universe *Kansas City*. The divided families are always in close contact and like ant's pathway they wander between one village and the other. A cycle of setting off and returning has become an everyday event for these people. The inhabitants of *Tres Valles* give one the feeling that they are resigned to this life, they simply accept it and, in large measure, simply ignore the great number of problems that grow in them as a result of this splitting. Two of the villagers who live their lives between the two places are my main protagonists. It is through María Esther and Miguel that the film is able to generate a vision of the human drama around the quest for happiness in a faraway place and from the dream of a better life in one's own home.

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#### Background information

**The five cardinal points** is a documentary, a long-term observation aimed at getting to know about the origins, roots, thoughts and emotional worlds of emigrating people, in viewing their lives as immigrants and guest workers far from home (in the USA) in a new light.

What moves the inhabitants of this small Mexican village to give up their traditional life and emigrate? What do these people go through after they have left and find themselves as (illegal) guest workers in a foreign culture? How can the lifelong attachment of these people to their own (old) culture be explained when in their new home that culture is often regarded as resisting integration and ignorant?

Whoever immigrates to the USA has always melted into a new, American identity. Why are Mexican immigrants different? There has hardly been any immigrant group in the USA that has demanded – as the Mexicans have done – the American anthem to be translated into their language.

On the one side is the culture and society of the host country; the so-called “First World” and its oppositional reaction to the modern surge in job-seeking migrants. The positions swing between integration and exclusion, bringing families together and deporting them.

The other side is often only perceived as the shadowy “Third World”. In the general (Western) ideas of these countries they appear as faceless collecting pools of poverty and as undefined grey areas with many of their people crowding the borders of rich industrial countries.

This documentary film leads the audience into this “grey area”. They find themselves in a village of a not-at-all grey, evergreen, tropical landscape in the Mexican state of *Veracruz*. This is where people live who have been bound to their village, *Tres Valles*, for generations, modest and dignified characters who are held together by a strong family and community structure.

*Tres Valles* is an impoverished village. The chances of obtaining work here are small and farming yields less than what is needed for families to survive. Whoever wants to live here must first go to the big cities to find work.

No-one remembers when it began, but one day some people came back to their native village from a faraway place called “Kansa” and, with the money they brought back, built modest houses with gardens and they drove American pick-ups through the street of the village, much to the astonishment of the neighbors. “Kansa” quickly became a magic word for a promising future and although nobody had any idea that *Kansas City* in the American Midwest was meant, many people set off northwards on an unknown journey in order to obtain the same good fortune and prosperity.

In the meantime there is almost no family that does not have at least one member in the faraway north. Fathers, sons, daughters or mothers, legal and illegal; everyone has relatives “on the other side”. People talk of “Kansa” as if it was a suburb; though always with painful undertones because whoever is in “Kansa” doesn’t return for a long time.

Kansas City is a quiet, small city that lies partly in Kansas, partly in Missouri. It has industries and pleasant developments of terraced houses connected by an extensive network of city freeways. These join the historic centre and the former communities round it into a large tapestry. There was almost no native resident who had ever heard of *Tres Vallitos* even though they had been living well with many unknown neighbors, cheaply and reliably, since they are already here ...

*Tres Vallitos* is a place within place, a parallel universe in which numerous Mexican guest workers from the far south live. In *Kansas City* the social lives of Americans and Mexicans seldom come into contact. And mutual contact is seldom sought because those from *Tres Valles* come here only to earn a few dollars and dream of the day when they can return to their own country with their modest wealth.

Here very few people learn English because in order to carry out their unskilled jobs the few words they have to exchange with their employers are enough. Otherwise one stays amongst one's own people, isolated from everyday American life. Mexican traditions are consciously upheld and lived out in an almost exaggerated fashion in order to bridge the time that remains until their return.

A year passes, perhaps two. The family in *Tres Valles* waits in vain for the return of its members from "Kansa". People's wishes, needs and dreams get bigger all the time so that one accepts another year of separation, then another one, and often another.

Those who return nevertheless often find that they cannot get used to their old life again. Families have become strangers or have grown apart. Very quickly village life becomes too narrow for the returnees and continuing unemployment drives them to depart for the northwards once again. Now it is often entire families that leave their home country. Children who grow up in the USA quickly adapt to the American environment, rapidly becoming estranged from parental ideals. A great rift appears between first and second generation migrants.

If one drives through *Tres Valles* one sees unfinished houses everywhere in the landscape. The owners, however, live faraway in the north, in *Tres Vallitos*. For them these houses are the anchor points for the soul and they provide a shimmer of hope that one day they will be able to live there again.

The challenge in realizing this project lied in filmically bringing together two completely different life concepts and visually fusing the separate and virtual family life of my protagonists. Two world views can be zoomed in on and clarified in an impartial way. The breaks in the different ways of living, language, culture and tradition that become visible allow the viewer to understand the loss and search for identity in an almost fictional way. Both protagonists of this film represent the totality of the processes of emigration, return, failures and becoming stateless and homeless. They represent the local community of *Tres Valles*. There are countless other places in the world with other names.

**The Five Cardinal Points** is not in pursuit of some moralistic goal and it ascribes no perpetrator and victim roles to rich and poor countries. This work enables the audience to redefine the familiar "here" and the foreign "there" and to mentally relocate it.

The project is a small regional story against the background of a global issue. The topic can be observed in southern Spain, in Senegal, in Turkey, in the suburbs of many European capitals, in Israel, Palestine, Mexico or in the USA.

Cultural, social and religious contradictions rub up against each other in these places. Often only the part that is spectacular and attractive to the media becomes visible – refugees on overloaded ships, refugee smugglers, the drug trade or border fences.

The film takes a position far from these headlines.

It attempts to grasp the essence of two countries and to establish ways of seeing the self from two cultures. It tells of two worlds that encounter each other and from the profound mis- and non-understandings that result.

## 4 THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS

### Protagonist María Esther / scene description

When the sober morning traffic flows along the urban freeways of Kansas City on a normal working day, Maria Esther is in one of the cars. From the outside it looks as if the driver behind the wheel has just left her own nice house in order to get to work. That's true of Maria Esther, but nobody would suspect that neither her home nor her workplace could be described in terms of a typical US small town existence.

Maria Esther has lived in *Kansas City* for 16 years. She is driven, always on the move, she has never arrived. When you get into the auto with her, the American urban landscape outside suddenly becomes a stage set. Ear-splitting Mexican music covers up the street noise. The auto rushing about is a message, a diplomatic representation. A few cubic yards of Mexican airspace in a completely different environment. Her *Kansas City* is *Tres Vallitos* – a parallel world to the American city.

The 91-year-old retired village priest, Padre Gabriel, is sitting in his neon lit house in the centre of *Tres Valles*. This house has been something like a local Vatican for the village for decades. Father Gabriel is a moral institution. He has taken care of generations of people, married and buried them, celebrated their first communion and given consolation in church on countless Sundays. Now he is retired and seems exhausted and confused.

Maria Esther was brought up by Padre Gabriel. She has not seen her padre and foster father for 16 years now. She celebrates the daily telephone call with him like an absolution. The suppressed knowledge that she will only ever meet her padre and foster father over the telephone fills her with grief. But for Maria Esther a return is not possible. The eternal weighing up, stay or go back, troubles Maria Esther every day.





## 5 THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS

### Protagonist Miguel / scene description

At six thirty in the morning Miguel stomps through snow that has piled up in front the apartment house during the night and open his rusty *Pickup*. But before that coffee is filled into a giant thermos cup. He copied drinking coffee from over-large containers from Americans with whom he shares the time waiting at the traffic lights every morning. One doesn't want to lag behind. Work at the scrap yard is monotonous but he is nevertheless surprised almost every day by the mainly Afro-American customers who bring scrap metal from every part of the city in order to make a few dollars. His work is taking over the objects. Along with scrap and aluminum cans, sometimes factory-new bicycles, scaffolding and stepladders pass over his scales. Obviously stolen by the clients during the night, it all lands in the compactor from where, in a quiet moment, Miguel rescues them to sell at a profit amongst his Mexican friends. Naturally he pays the company the scrap metal value. After all, one has to earn one's money honestly.

In the evening in his auto he broods for a few minutes as to whether he should call his mother in *Tres Valles*. The on-coming autos glitter like yellow balls through the snow crystals on the windshield. In his mind's eye his family is rocking in wooden rocking chairs in the sultry evening air in *Veracruz* and with a heave against the auto door he decides he won't make that call today.



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### Director's statement

How does it come about that an Austrian director has an intimate relationship with the situation of the Mexican subculture of Kansas City?

I went to Mexico in my professional capacity in the year 2000 and I now live and work mainly in Mexico City. Over the last few years I have got to know the village TRES VALLES (Three Valleys). The people here, in one of the poorest rural areas in Mexico, gave me a warm welcome to their community. Almost half of the inhabitants of TRES VALLES have set off looking for jobs in the USA and have unanimously settled in Kansas City. The key to this documentary film lied in the fact that I was SENT to *Kansas City* by the inhabitants of the Mexican village. I found myself in restaurant kitchens, workers' housing in the suburbs, somber Mexican shops and dance cafés as if I was one of them – in the middle of a hidden Mexican parallel universe in the Mid-Western town of *Kansas City*.

With this project I faced two great personal challenges:



The thought of being able to think deeply about the subject of migration by looking at it from the other side fascinated me. The worries, poverty, wishes and dreams of a Mexican village community become visible like a 'missing link' and fit together with the feelings and opinions on the subject of immigration I already know from Europe and the USA.

"The Five Cardinal Points" is intended to be a film that manages to give an in-depth view of the deeper motivations of Mexican emigration in order to enrich the sensitive subject of Mexican immigration as represented in the USA with a new perspective.

I completely refrain from using classical divisions such as 'first' or 'third' world, rich or poor, good or bad.



I had the unique preconditions for the innovative narrative form of this documentary film: closeness and an unreserved relationship of trust between me and my protagonists. This made it possible to use the camera in a very intimate manner. It was no longer a foreign body that people had to get used to. I was able to work without the classical narrative form of "talking heads", because the people exchanged views amongst themselves and told of their own lives. The camera was almost invisible in the process. This lends this documentary film a feature film touch without turning people into actors since the boundaries of the documentary were never overstepped. The possibility of being able to narrate a documentary in this innovative way was the greatest source of my personal motivation and dedication for this project.

## 7 THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS Fridolin Schönwiese / curriculum

Born 4th of August **1967** in Vienna / Austria  
Grown up in Austria and Germany  
1986-1993 University of Vienna / Studies of journalism and dramatics  
1986-1995

Member of the Austrian Performance Art group GANG ART  
Trainee at several documentary and feature film projects  
Since 1989

Directing own documentary films. Creation of trailers, radio projects, participation at exhibitions,  
amongst others

Since 2005 living and working in Mexico City



### Films:

**1990**

#### **LUFT-RÄUME** (Air Spaces)

A film about air raid shelters, the city and the war  
(A 1990, 16mm, color and b/w, 27 min.)  
Several Festival Placements and Awards

**1992 - 1995**

#### **COSMODROM** (Cosmodrome)

A film about the Universal Pictures trademark  
(A 1995, 16mm, Color, 25.min.)  
Several Festival Placements and Awards

**1998**

#### **IT WORKS**

A film about four handicapped children working  
(A 1998, 35mm, b/w, 20 Min.)  
Several Festival Placements and Awards

**2002- 2005**

#### **VOLVER LA VISTA** (The Gaze back)

A film about the relationship between Mexico and Austria  
(A/MEX, 35mm, 90 min., color, Dolby Digital)  
Several Festival Placements and Awards

**2006 - 2009**

#### **Die fünf Himmelsrichtungen** (The five Cardinal Points)

A film about US Mexican migration  
(A 2009, DigiBeta Pal, 94 min., color, Dolby digital)  
Several Festival Placements and Awards

## 8 THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS CAST and CREW

Austria 2009 / 94min. / color / DigiBeta Pal / Dolby Digital

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with	María Esther Solis Miguel de la O Ochoa et al.
written and directed by	Fridolin Schönwiese
cinematography	Fridolin Schönwiese Rafael Ortega
sound	Rogelio Villanueva
editing	Karina Ressler
sound design	Michael Palm
production manager	Peter Janecek
producers	Ralph Wieser Georg Misch
Co-Producer	Fridolin Schönwiese
supported by	Ministry of Education, Art and Culture / Innovative Film City of Vienna/Cultural Department

A **mischief**<sup>films</sup> Production

## 9 THE FIVE CARDINAL POINTS CONTACT

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