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Guido Rings and Stephen Trinder (eds.)

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Encuentros estadounidenses-mexicanos en la obra cinematográfica norteamericana contemporánea
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Editorial

Articles / Artículos

Review / Reseña

EDITORIAL

US-Mexican Encounters in Contemporary Film: Preliminary Remarks

Guido Rings / Stephen Trinder

(Anglia Ruskin University / Abu Dhabi Women's College)

Throughout the 2016 US presidential campaign and Donald Trump's subsequent presidency, migration from Mexico to the United States and the growing number of Mexican-Americans have been central issues. When Trump announced his campaign, he was already very explicit about his negative view of Mexicans, on which his ongoing development of the US-Mexican border wall is based: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. […] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Washington Post Staff 2015).[1] Once elected, this ultra-nationalist binary presentation of a 'corrupt Mexico' contaminating the 'pure' United States continued, especially in the context of speeches about the Trump wall, which is supposed to keep these "bad hombres" out (Dopp 2019). These and numerous other comments signify a shift in the current US American presidency to discourses that promote essentialist and xenophobic notions of the Other as inferior and dangerous.[2] Trump's selection of Mexico as a 'scapegoat' for US domestic issues like increased drug consumption and ongoing American business interest in cheap labor is primarily questionable on moral and ethical grounds. Furthermore, given that Hispanics with Mexican cultural background form the largest minority group in the US, the potential socio-economic impact of extreme xenophobic rhetoric should also be considered. Albeit in a humoristic way, Sergio Arau's *A Day without a Mexican* (2004) has presented the potential consequences of white America left without its Hispanic population in sufficient detail well before the Trump era. In consideration of enhanced xenophobic rhetoric today, it provides a robust starting point for critical discussions from the Bush era.[3]

In contrast to populist ultra-nationalist political discourse, which Griffin discusses very convincingly as a key feature of neo-fascism,[4] many contemporary films in US and Mexican cinema and TV demonstrate a tendency to question monocultural and racist ideas, just as Arau proposed in 2004 and numerous other directors well before him. This correlates with an

[1] See also Greenwood (2018).
[2] See Valverde (2016).
[3] See Barrow (2012) for an excellent discussion of the film.
[4] See Griffin (2008: 186ff.).

enhanced integration of Mexican migrant perspectives into Hollywood productions, partially through directors, but also actors, writers, producers and technical staff with a Mexican cultural background. Their input to Hollywood increases the potential to reach North-American mainstream audiences with alternative messages, and there is evidence that films like Nava's *Bordertown* (2006), Cuarón's *Desierto* (2015) and Ulrich's *Coco* (2017) aim to show perspectives of the Mexican Other that are not in line with Trump's rhetoric. Of particular interest is here the individualization and humanization of migration but also the more nuanced portrayal of Mexico, all of which provide a basis to subvert the rigid binaries set by ultra-nationalist political discourse in the United States. It could also be argued that the fluid and transgressive character of migrant Others might be a fruitful starting point for the critical interrogation of new monocultural politics, as is certainly the case in contemporary European migrant cinema.[5] Furthermore, *Coco*'s focus on Mexican culture and traditions has contributed to the categorization of the animated Disney feature as "the Pixar film that defies Donald Trump's Anti-Mexican Rhetoric" (Rose 2018).

On the other hand, Hollywood cinema has been repeatedly discussed as a form of cultural imperialism and/or colonialism,[6] while other publications explore its impact through concepts like "Hollywoodization" (Goering et al. 2016). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that directors, scriptwriters and actors are resistant to well-established cultural binaries and hierarchies that shape contemporary forms of neo-nationalism. Finally, commercial pressures on film productions have enhanced tendencies to melodramatic excess, which might lead to the reconstruction of monocultural subtexts even within diversity-embracing films. These subtexts deserve further exploration as they might be the strongest obstacle for the development of convincing socio-political, cultural and economic alternatives to populist right-wing identity politics.

This *iMex* issue has to consider the wider spectrum of – and tension between – filmic images, ranging from transcultural solidarity constructs to enhanced monocultural portrayals. There is wider scholarly agreement that transcultural solidarity concepts blur the boundaries of individual cultures through their focus on the interconnectedness of our increasingly global environment.[7] Instead of further enhancing separatist concepts of national cultures, notions of transcultural solidarity start explorations from the "interlocking interdependence of cultures in the age of globalization" (Antor 2010: 12), which critically interrogate and destabilize

[5] See Rings (2018).
[6] See Anderson (2007) and Trinder (2020).
[7] See Antor (2006) and Rings (2018)

traditional binaries of Self and Other. This includes more recently the discussion of "transcultural memory" (Moses/Rothberg 2014) and affect.[8] On the other hand, ultra-nationalism is shaped by monocultural identity constructs, which are examined as 'island' or 'container' concepts of culture that show homogenous, separatist and essentialist features.[9]

While transcultural solidarity tendencies in Chicano cinema before the Trump era have been discussed at length, both within *iMex*[10] and elsewhere,[11] there has been no substantial in-depth research on the impact of the Trump era on images of Mexicans and Chicanos in recent US and Mexican film. This *iMex* issue aims to reduce that gap in research by exploring how far and how exactly the monocultural shift in political rhetoric in the era of "Trumpism" (Çalişkan /Preston 2017) has affected filmic portrayals of Chicano and Mexican identity. Close readings include films that focus on migration from Mexico to the US (e.g. Cuarón's *Desierto* 2015), Mexican drug trafficking and US intervention (Netflix's *Narcos* TV series, Grünberg's *Rambo: Last Blood* 2019), life in Mexico (Hardicke's *Miss Bala* 2019), Trump's wall project (Masters's *The River and The Wall* 2017) and the portrayal of Mexican cultural identity (Unkrich's *Coco* 2017).

In 'Poética contra política', CÉCILE BROCHARD and OSCAR TORRES examine the performative power of fiction in Jonás Cuarón's film *Desierto* (2015). In particular, they want to determine how far the entertainment esthetics of this film support its skepticism about the reemergence of nationalists, racists and supremacists speeches in the context of Trump's presidential campaign, speeches that were used as a political subtext during the promotion of *Desierto*. The article concludes that the esthetic choices are partially counterproductive to the original purpose of a politically engaged film aimed to fight against the reduction of the Other.

The next two articles examine images of America's "War on Drugs" on TV and in cinema. DOUGLAS E. FORSTER's '*Narcos* Television and Trump's Politics of Fear' explores how the Netflix television series reinforces negative images of Latinos as dangerous drug-lord criminals who threaten the safety and sanctity of US citizens. The author argues that this enhances Trump's politics of fear, which not only got him elected, but has broadened and strengthened his support from conservatives. His study focuses on selected scenes from episodes of three Netflix series: *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico*, and *El Chapo*, offering evidence of why such programs have become so popular for American viewers, who have been made to believe that illegal immigrants come across the border to destroy conservative white America's way of life. At the

[8] See Massumi (2002) and Breger (2014).
[9] For a more detailed conceptual discussion see Rings (2018: 8-17).
[10] See Rings (2012).
[11] See Gabriel Melendez (2013), Raab (2014) and Castro Ricalde et al. (2017).

same time, the series mocks US law and journalism, which supports Trump's political agenda further. In 'Contested Border Crossings in Shifting Political Landscapes', LARA LENGEL and VICTORIA A. NEWSOM develop Forster's argumentation through an in-depth analysis of representation of Mexicans in the recent US blockbuster *Rambo: Last Blood* (2019). Drawing upon hypermasculine, gun-wielding characteristics associated with the political right and its military industrial complex, their study critiques how far and how exactly the current political climate marked by alt-right, ethno-nationalist constructs in the era of Trump has given rise to anti-immigration discourses that reinforce racialised fears and the belief that nationalists are the rightful heirs to white privilege. Through original literary work on the five-film *Rambo* franchise, the authors trace the characterisation of John Rambo from Vietnam veteran anti-hero, via Reagan-era champion, to Trump-era anti-hero killing the Other as he invades the US southern border. In particular, this article argues that the most-recent *Rambo* film evokes the frontier mythology and a fear of the foreigner encroaching upon the homeland. The study questions anti-Mexican and anti-immigration discourses of both Trump and *Last Blood*, and Rambo's role in necessitating empowering heteronormative masculinity and the American male prominence of the savior figure. It also illustrates topoi underlying these constructs and critiques political and cultural influences and audience reception reflecting shifting political interests and fears – most notably immigration and human/sex trafficking.

ERICA BERZAGHI and FRANK O'SULLIVAN's 'Trump's Rhetoric Influence on Filmic Images of Mexico' draws on Trump's assertions about Mexican culture and migration from Latin America to explore the extent to which his hegemonic rhetoric has contributed to shaping images of Mexico in Hollywood film production. Informed by Van Dijk's concept of political discourse and Fairclough's notion of media discourse, this study proposes a qualitative film analysis to approach the research objective. In particular, it examines continuities and discontinuities in two key films made during two different republican governments, *Bordertown* (2006) – produced and disseminated under the Bush administration – and *Miss Bala* (2019) – made during the Trump administration. Based on their analysis, it is possible to argue that there is a shift towards a more negative portrayal of Mexicans, which is very much in line with the shift in political discourse from former US President George W. Bush to Trump.

In 'Politics in *The River and The Wall* (2017)', MARTINA MOELLER examines how far Ben Masters manages to combine in his documentary two goals – to document the borderlands and to explore the potential impact of a future wall on the natural environment. In this context, the study explores in detail how discourses around nature, border fences and immigration are presented in the film and to what extend they are critical of Trump's wall project. The author

comes to the conclusion that the film's suggestion to create a bi-national park along the borderlands is strongly reminiscent of John Muir's romantic legacy. However, precisely this romanticized focus on nature seems to undermine the political discussion because, in its nostalgic proposal to go back to cowboy 'roots', it marginalizes key aspects of the debate such as illegal migration and drug trafficking.

The next two studies explore the portrayal of Mexican culture in Hollywood cinema, with particular focus on Unkrich's *Coco*. JESSICA WAX-EDWARDS examines in 'Re-animating Mexicanidad' *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017), which present the Day of the Dead from very different perspectives. In particular, her article explores how these two depictions of Mexican heritage relate to the industrial structures that created them as well as the differing socio-political climates in which they were produced and released. The author argues that both animations serve contrasting ideological functions: While *The Book of Life*, which was released two years prior to the controversial presidential campaign of Donald Trump, offers a touristic gaze of Mexico as an exotic other, *Coco* could be regarded as a mildly subversive film. The latter correlates with its production during the time of Trump's election, and the director's interest to provide a more detailed and positive representation of Mexican cultural heritage in a climate of increasing political antagonism towards the country. In 'Approaching Pixar's *Coco* during the Trump Era', SANDRA L. LÓPEZ VARELA focuses more in detail on the tensions and contradictions within *Coco*'s stand against Trump's presentation of Mexicans as "rapists and drug-trafficking criminals". She argues that the film, despite its praise by audiences and critics as 'pro-Mexico' film, does ultimately not vindicate Mexico's 'good people'. Instead, it promotes an institutionalized nationalist image of Mexico's heritage and identity going back to the 19th century. The study comes to the conclusion that Lee Unkrich's good intentions to make this film 'right' help to disseminate and support the Mexican government in its reconstruction of an imagined sociocultural homogeneity, which marginalizes non-dominant ways of life in a culturally rich and diverse country.

Filmography

ARAU, Sergio (dir.) (2004): *A Day without a Mexican*. USA/Mexico/Spain: Eye on The Ball Films, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE). 100 min.

BAIZ, Andrés (dir.) (2015-2018): *Narcos, Season 1-3*. Mexico: Gaumont International Television/United States: Netflix, different episodes of around 50 minutes each.

CONTRERAS, Ernesto / José Manuel Cravioto (dirs.) (2017): *El Chapo, Season 1*. Mexico/USA: Univision Studios/Netflix, different episodes of around 50 minutes each.

CUARÓN, Jonás (dir.) (2015): *Desierto*. Mexico/France: Esperanto Kino/CG Cinema. 88 min.

GRÜNBERG, Adrian (dir.) (2019): *Rambo: Last Blood.* Screenplay co-written by Sylvester Stallone and Matthew Cirulnick. US: Lionsgate. 89 min.

GUTIÉRREZ, Jorge R. (dir.) (2014): *The Book of Life.* USA: Reel FX Creative Studios, 20th Century Fox Animation. 95 min.

MASTERS, Ben (dir.) (2019): *The River and the Wall*. Mexico/USA: Fin & Fur Films. 137 min.

HARDWICKE, Catherine (dir.) (2019): *Miss Bala*. USA/Mexico: Columbia Pictures/Canana Films at al. 104 min.

NAVA, Gregory (dir.) (2006): *Bordertown*. USA: Nava/Lopez/Fields. 108 min.

RUIZPALACIOS, Alonso (dir.) (2018): *Narcos: Mexico, Season 1*. Mexico/USA: Gaumont International Television/Netflix, different episodes of around 50 minutes each.

UNKIRCH, Lee (dir.) (2017): *Coco*. USA: Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios. 105 min.

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ARTICLES

ARTÍCULOS

Poética contra política: cuestionando el poder performativo de la ficción en *Desierto* de Jonás Cuarón

Cécile Brochard / Oscar Torres

(Université de Caen-Normandie / Université de Nantes)

1) Introducción

El thriller mexicano coescrito, coproducido y dirigido por Jonás Cuarón, *Desierto*, fue proyectado por primera vez en el Festival internacional de cine de Toronto en 2015 y estrenado en 2016 en México y en Francia. Este largometraje pone en escena a Moisés, un padre de familia mexicano resuelto a reunirse con su familia en los Estados Unidos y que ingresa en territorio americano con un grupo mexicano de inmigrantes clandestinos. Al penetrar en el desierto de Sonora, en California, estos quince inmigrantes y sus guías son abatidos por un americano desalmado, marginal y alcohólico. Como si fuese un francotirador ejecuta a todos los miembros del grupo excepto a Moisés y a dos jóvenes que se habían quedado atrás. Al darse cuenta de que aún estaban en vida, el vigilante de la frontera se propone librar una verdadera cacería humana ayudado por su perro Tracker, un pastor alemán, y dar así por terminada su misión. Solamente la pareja formada por Moisés y una joven mujer escapan, por su parte el vigilante es herido por Moisés quien decide perdonarle la vida y dejarlo a su suerte en el desierto.

Debido a su trama narrativa y a su diégesis, *Desierto* se inscribe de pleno en un contexto político muy tenso, marcado por el giro de la retórica en los Estados Unidos encarnada por Donald Trump en la escena política y mediática: las elecciones primarias del candidato republicano a la presidencia sellan el triunfo de Donald Trump en el poder, generando consigo un preocupante ascenso de los discursos populistas. En este contexto, el personaje del asesino demente de *Desierto* emblematiza la ceguera racista y supremacista que lleva a un hombre americano a convertirse en asesino en serie por una supuesta territorialidad nacional. La película de Jonás Cuarón nos muestra los peligros del discurso contra la inmigración avivados por la ideología de la supremacía blanca y que llevaron al éxito a la campaña presidencial de Trump. Un año después de su estreno, el largometraje nos invita a interrogar el poder performativo de la ficción cinematográfica.[1]

[1] Consideramos frecuentemente que el cine es un contrapoder destinado a luchar contra los peligros del discurso político. Así lo manifiesta Lee Unkrich, director de la película taquillera *Coco:* "'We started making *Coco* six years ago. It was a very different political climate than we find ourselves in now. While we were making the film, we had a change of presidency and a lot of things started to be said about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. That

En consecuencia, queremos interrogarnos si realmente la película de Cuarón, *Desierto*, controvierte el ascenso del discurso populista y extremista, que hace posible la investidura de Trump, y que legitima a su vez los estereotipos monoculturales del inmigrante ante el público americano. ¿En qué medida las representaciones de los mexicanos y del estadounidense sobrepasan los clichés esencialistas sobre el Otro e invitan a una reflexión profunda sobre la alteridad como una manera de luchar contra la retórica en la era Trump? ¿Las decisiones estéticas de la película comprometen a la ficción con una forma de performatividad que invita al espectador a deconstruir los discursos simplistas que circulan? Y ¿cuáles son los límites de la mediación crítica y artística del largometraje en términos de su recepción visto que Trump accede al poder pese a las advertencias hechas por la película?

2) Compromiso o marketing: *¿Desierto*, una película comprometida?

Para llevar acabo nuestro análisis, partiremos del compromiso externo, que corresponde al compromiso explícito del artista y de su obra en el espacio público y mediático[2]. Antes y después del estreno de *Desierto* aparecieron múltiples lecturas políticas y tomas de posición del director y de los actores contra los discursos de Trump juzgados racistas. Estas opiniones aparecieron en varias entrevistas y artículos en línea que interpretaban la película a luz del compromiso político anti-Trump. El título del artículo del *New York Times* publicado el 18 de octubre de 2016 retoma una cita de Jonás Cuarón que tiene una orientación ideológica explicita: "*Desierto* es una pesadilla que Trump puede convertir en realidad" (Cuarón en Linares 2016). Aunque Cuarón afirma haber trabajado en este proyecto mucho antes de la campaña presidencial y del repunte de Trump en las encuestas, el director, en sus intervenciones públicas, hace referencia a la temática de esta película que se había planeado desde hace más de 10 años, es decir mucho antes de la elección de Trump:

> La verdad es que no lo planifiqué, ni afectó el rodaje, pero desde que Donald Trump anunció su candidatura a la presidencia y empezó a decir cosas racistas, la verdad es que toda su campaña se llenó de un discurso violento. Es común escuchar decir que la migración es un problema, pero en realidad es un fenómeno porque la humanidad siempre ha sido migrante. *Desierto* es una pesadilla que el discurso de Trump contra los migrantes puede convertir en realidad (Cuarón en Linares 2016).

was unacceptable,' he said, clearly referencing candidate Trump's comments, including one about Mexican immigrants being drug dealers and rapists. 'We began to feel a new urgency to get the film out in the world, to get a positive message about the beauty of Mexico (and) the Mexican people and also give Mexican-American kids something to aspire to and to see a bit of themselves on the screen,' he continued" (Unkirch en Keveney 2018).

[2] Retomamos la "doble dicotomía" entre compromiso externo y compromiso interno tal y como la desarrollo Daniel Riou (2005: 177).

Esta coincidencia entre la diégesis de la película y el contexto político, que de acuerdo con el director fue secundario para su proyecto inicial, es ocultada en la mayor parte de artículos, haciendo de *Desierto* un verdadero panfleto contra el ascenso de Trump al poder. En su artículo publicado en el periódico francés *Le Figaro* el 13 de abril de 2016 y titulado '*Desierto*: Donald Trump en la mira de Jonás Cuarón' (Pagesy 2016; titulado traducido del francés por los autores), la periodista francesa Hélène Pagesy hace del candidato a la investidura republicana el blanco del director, a través de un juego de palabras que hace referencia a los fusilamientos que marcan la narración de la película. Desde esta perspectiva, el largometraje parece no ser más que un medio para pasar un mensaje ideológico, social, político y con una vocación utilitaria que subordina la ficción a lo político y que no tiene nada que ver con el compromiso tal y como es teorizado por Sartre y sobre el cual hablaremos más adelante. Además, este sometimiento de la obra a la esfera política forma parte de la estrategia de marketing centrada en el estreno de *Desierto* en México. El tráiler mexicano en línea muestra escenas de la película con un fondo sonoro montado con fragmentos del discurso pronunciado por Trump durante su investidura por el partido Republicano, fragmentos que aparecen subtitulados en español en el tráiler de la película: "When Mexico sends its people they're not sending their best, […] they're sending people that have lots of problems […]. They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists […] and it's got to stop, and it's got to stop fast". Esta última palabra coincide con los tiros del asesino que ejecuta a los inmigrantes mexicanos, justo antes de que aparezca en la pantalla la moraleja del tráiler: "Las palabras son tan peligrosas como las balas". De hecho, el 9 de abril de 2016 Jonás Cuarón invitó a los espectadores de *Desierto* a tomarse una foto junto con una pancarta en donde estuvieran escritas algunas de las frases pronunciadas por Trump en su discurso de investidura y a publicarlas en las redes sociales bajo el *hashtag* #LasPalabrasSonTanPeligrosasComoLasBalas. La estrategia de marketing de la película fue ampliamente difundida por los medios de comunicación en un contexto de plena efervescencia política. Dicha estrategia no podía ser más clara: *Desierto* busca luchar contra el discurso de Trump con las armas que ofrece la ficción cinematográfica.

Este compromiso en el espacio público mundial se realiza gracias a los medios de comunicación internacionales y se refuerza a través de un compromiso interno que se puede identificar en la misma película. En ella abundan símbolos políticos muy connotados como es el caso de la camioneta del asesino que iza la bandera de los Estados Confederados del Sur, o la bandera amarilla de Gadsden que representa una serpiente cascabel acompañada del lema "Don't tread on me", emblema de adhesión a las ideas de los militantes pro-armas en los Estados Unidos. La camioneta expresa la dimensión didáctica del largometraje que utiliza, en este caso,

el arquetipo del americano nacionalista con el fin de pasar de la mejor manera posible su mensaje. Es precisamente la elección de este personaje arquetípico la que produce la coherencia del personaje de asesino protagonizado por Jeffrey Dean Morgan:

> Está inspirado en la retórica de odio que hay en Estados Unidos y en esa sociedad vulnerable y marginada que, si sigue recibiendo mensajes violentos, tarde o temprano van a agarrar el rifle y jalarán el gatillo. Las zonas donde se promueven esos mensajes contra los migrantes son estados como Arizona. Si viajas a esos lugares puedes ver que son las regiones más pobres de Estados Unidos. Si no se cambia el discurso, esa gente comenzará a buscar chivos expiatorios y eso ya lo hemos visto en otros momentos de la historia, como en Alemania durante el ascenso de Hitler (Cuarón en Linares 2016).

La referencia al ascenso de Hitler participa en la universalización del discurso de odio propicio a la construcción de arquetipos, sin que se proponga una verdadera reflexión sobre las diferencias políticas e históricas específicas a cada uno de los discursos que se ponen en cuestión.

De hecho, este didactismo puesto al servicio de una iniciativa panfletaria ejerce una simplificación de la realidad favorable a un proceso edificante. ¿Esto significa que, para luchar contra los estereotipos simplistas del discurso racista, la película opta por simplificar al extremo la imagen de la retórica de Trump? Si las entrevistas, los discursos críticos y la estrategia de marketing de la película defienden una línea ideológica y política claramente comprometida contra el discurso de Trump, ¿se puede decir que *Desierto* es una película comprometida en todo el sentido de la palabra? Con el fin de comprender lo que significa hoy en día una obra comprometida quisiéramos retomar los trabajos teóricos sobre el compromiso literario que permitirán reflexionar sobre esta noción más allá del campo literario.

Si la expresión "literatura comprometida" aparece en el centro de los debates literarios, cuando Sartre la propone en 1945 después de la Liberación, es porque la cuestión de la literatura comprometida se plantea específicamente a partir del momento en que aparece la posibilidad para la literatura de existir fuera de los conflictos de la sociedad, y tener su propio fin, o sea tener sus propias funciones: en otras palabras, la posibilidad de una literatura sin compromiso. Es contra esta visión de literatura autosuficiente que Sartre teoriza la literatura comprometida. En su obra *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948) Sartre afirma que el escritor participa plenamente del mundo social y debe intervenir a través de su obra en los debates de su tiempo. Discutida, contestada, aplicada, repensada, la noción de compromiso tal y como Sartre la teorizó fue difundida en los círculos de crítica literaria siendo objeto de múltiples reconfiguraciones (Chaudet 2016).[3] Si observamos este fenómeno exclusivamente en el ámbito

[3] Véase Chaudet (2016).

francés, veremos que filósofos como Roland Barthes o Michel Foucault replantearon el ideal sartriano. Barthes puso de nuevo al lenguaje, la forma y la poética en el centro de la función del escritor y Foucault deslegitimó la dimensión universal del intelectual haciendo énfasis en su especialidad.[4]

Reconfigurada de esta manera, la noción de compromiso se fundamenta esencialmente en la idea de una confrontación entre arte y política a través de múltiples modalidades estéticas y que ya no tienen en común una lógica pragmática del compromiso, sino sobre todo el ejercicio de una responsabilidad vinculada con la acción, requiriendo de manera simultánea la integridad de sí mismo y la obligación de comunicar con los otros. Es en el *misi me* de Ulises de Dante, retomado por Primo Levi y analizado por Emmanuel Bouju, en donde aparece de manera simbólica la naturaleza del compromiso que es vivido como un embarque metafórico en la obra, un movimiento cuya etimología revela su propia huella: "en el verbo latino *se mittere*, retomado por la lengua italiana, encontramos la raíz de promesa *pro-missa*, en español y portugués la raíz de *compromis(s)o* o en inglés *commitment*, mientras que el alemán adopta el *engagement* del francés" (Bouju 2005: 51, traducido del francés por los autores). El compromiso es visto aquí como lo que promete el artista y lo que lo compromete: ya visto desde la perspectiva del *mise se me*, se puede definir como el "acto de intercambio que vincula al presente con la sanción del futuro y al sujeto con el juzgamiento de los otros: es al mismo tiempo una fuerza incoativa y una fuerza coercitiva" (Bouju 2005: 51, traducido del francés por los autores) puesto que incita al artista al movimiento y lo limita a su integridad. Por ende, ser responsable de una obra implica no sólo atribuirse su autoría, sino también aceptar irremediablemente un riesgo: no ser comprendido por el receptor de la obra.

Nos parece que es debido a este intercambio comprometido con el espectador que el compromiso de *Desierto* fracasa. Sin duda el contexto y la diégesis de la película tienen como trasfondo la temática de la inmigración mexicana y coincide con la investidura de Trump, además de los ecos políticos e ideológicos del contexto histórico del 2016. A pesar de ello, nos podemos preguntar legítimamente hasta qué punto *Desierto* es una película comprometida, ya que su estética obedece en gran medida a los códigos del cine de género[5]. En otras palabras, ¿la estética de la diversión es propicia a la reflexión política y ética que se espera de una obra comprometida?

[4] Véase Chaudet (2016).

[5] La expresión *cine de género* abarca un gran número de películas frecuentemente asociadas al cine de diversión, a las películas de serie B o la ficción de explotación. Este género va desde las películas de acción hasta las películas de terror (*slasher*, películas de zombies, *giallo*…), pasando por el péplum, el western, o la película policiaca.

3) La elección de una estética de diversión: ¿Un contrasentido poético y político?

Con el fin de comprender en que consiste este compromiso problemático visto desde la perspectiva del espectador, recordemos cuál era el objetivo inicial de Jonás Cuarón con su largometraje *Desierto*. Esta película posee la trama de una película de género en donde se conjugan la estética de la película de acción, el *slasher* y la cacería humana. Aunque esta trama, que da pocas oportunidades al espectador de desarrollar su empatía por los personajes, sea especialmente eficaz en el cine de género, su estética resulta problemática debido a que la película está atravesada por un subtexto político. Jonás Cuarón explica las razones que lo llevaron a realizar lo que él llama un *straight action horror movie*:

> Ya se han hecho muchas películas sobre los migrantes, así que decidí filmar algo tan distinto que involucrara a una audiencia más universal. Se me ocurrió hacer una película de acción, de manera que si la ves y no te interesa el tema migratorio igual la vas a gozar porque es un *straight action horror movie*. Sin embargo, usé muchas metáforas sutiles y hay muchísimos detalles sobre el viaje que hacen los migrantes (Cuarón en Linares 2016).

La fortaleza de la película de género reside en su eficacidad narrativa y estética, lo que no es completamente incompatible con su carga ideológica, como en el caso de *Dawn of the Dead*[6] de George A. Romero o de *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*[7] de Tobe Hooper, películas que critican violentamente a la sociedad americana. La escogencia de una película de género puede ser entendida como una estrategia que busca que el espectador de a pie no sienta el tedio que le podría provocar una película política o comprometida, frecuentemente tachadas de intelectualismo. Las películas de género y el compromiso son totalmente compatibles, incluso consustanciales en la medida en que las películas de género se inscriben en una visión violenta de la sociedad y nos invitan a observar el funcionamiento de un individuo o de un grupo humano sometido a una experiencia inédita y brutal. De hecho, las películas de género y el compromiso poseen de igual manera la propiedad de ser portadores de un mensaje universal sobre la humanidad. Es efectivamente en esta perspectiva que se posiciona el director que "[d]eseaba absolutamente que *Desierto* constituyera una experiencia visual fuerte, con muchas emociones desencadenadas por la violencia, la soledad, el miedo. El 'survival' es un género que permite abordar temas complejos, existenciales y políticos" (Cuarón en Icher 2016, traducido del francés por los autores). Aunque las películas de género se prestan sin dificultad para realizar una lectura política o existencial, su funcionamiento es estructural: su trama, sus motivos tiene sentido incluso antes de la interpretación psicológica de los personajes. Sin embargo, es

[6] Originalmente *Dawn of the Dead* y titulada *Zombi* en España, *El amanecer de los muertos* en Argentina y Venezuela y *El amanecer de los muertos vivientes* en México.
[7] Titulada *La matanza de Texas* en España y *La masacre de Texas* en Hispanoamérica.

precisamente esta característica la que hace que sea problemático el compromiso en *Desierto*: puesto que el discurso político de Trump tiene por objetivo construir arquetipos radicales (deshumanizar a los mexicanos, hacerlos radicalmente 'otros' a los ojos de los americanos para impedir su empatía), ¿el hecho de utilizar las mismas estrategias reduccionistas en el espacio de la ficción no se traduciría en un contrasentido estético? ¿En qué medida las estructuras arquetípicas de la película de género permiten deconstruir la binariedad e invitar al espectador al diálogo y sobrepasar así los estereotipos?

De hecho, el compromiso de *Desierto* se puede poner en duda debido a las características éticas propias del cine de género. El espectador de un *slasher* o de una película de horror experimenta una alegría perversa al sentir miedo, al sumergirse en el *gore*, o al esperar con placer que los personajes sean asesinados. Así, al convertir el contexto político y humano de la inmigración mexicana en la materia prima para un *slasher* o un *straight acion horror movie*, se puede mezclar el sufrimiento de las comunidades extremadamente frágiles con la angustia ficticia de arquetipos humanos en un escenario en donde, según Coleridge, el espectador interrumpe voluntariamente su incredulidad para dejarse atrapar por los códigos de la ficción.[8] El peligro reside en el hecho de que esta interrupción voluntaria de la incredulidad se acompaña, en la película de género, de la ausencia de juzgamiento moral: el espectador puede disfrutar ver, en un *slasher,* el asesinato de personajes banales y superficiales, arquetipos de una sociedad de consumo egocéntrica y codiciosa, sin que por ello el espectador sienta empatía con el personaje del asesino cuya individualización no importa.

A este respecto, una escena de la película tiene una importancia clave en la percepción que el espectador se construye del compromiso: se trata de la escena de la ejecución de los mexicanos. La estética de esta escena puede equipararse a la de los videojuegos fotorrealistas en donde el jugador/francotirador mata a cada uno de los personajes/peones que se atraviesan en su camino. Sin duda, este tipo de estética invita al espectador a ponerse en los zapatos del asesino racista americano, incapaz de hacer la diferencia entre realidad y virtualidad, pero ¿hasta qué punto esta estética lúdica puede llegar a contaminar todo el largometraje? Junto a la ausencia de individualización y de profundidad psicológica de los personajes, de los cuales el espectador no conoce ni el nombre, la estética lúdica pone entre dicho la posibilidad de una lectura comprometida. Sin mencionar que el personaje de asesino beneficia de la herencia del western americano: es un cowboy moderno que a pesar de simbolizar la imagen colonialista de la cultura americana del western también es útil para la fascinante iconografía que forjó el mito

[8] Véase Coleridge (1983: 6).

del héroe americano. A este respecto, Jonás Cuarón afirmó estar consternado por los comentarios del público americano durante la promoción del tráiler de la película:

> Cuando salió el tráiler de *Desierto* en los Estados Unidos, mucha gente comentó: 'wow, este es nuestro héroe —refiriéndose al personaje de Jeffrey Dean Morgan—. ¡mátenlos a todos!'. Eso me impresionó mucho porque yo estoy consciente de que en todos los países hay un sentimiento de xenofobia, pero ver que no sólo son los políticos sino la gente común pues fue algo bastante impresionante y aterrador (Cuarón en Recamier 2016).

Esta situación nos conduce a pensar que aún si las reacciones de los espectadores protegidos por la anonimidad de la red son impactantes y peligrosas, éstas son la prueba del populismo racista al que los medios de comunicación dan libre curso. Estas reacciones también son el resultado del intertexto cinematográfico evocado en filigrana en *Desierto* y que hace del cazador racista un avatar del cowboy moderno que defiende su territorio contra los indios. Se puede comprender entonces que la escogencia de estos símbolos cinematográficos estadounidenses pueda ser peligrosa en lo que se refiere a la recepción de la película. Guido Rings advierte este peligro:

> the ever-growing number of directors and scriptwriters who have focused on Mexican migration to and diaspora life in the US have managed to bring migrant perspectives into numerous Hollywood productions as well as TV, therefore reaching North-American mainstream population on a regular basis now. [But] […] there is also a potential downside to this success, which includes the danger of assimilating filmic messages to the taste of mainstream audiences (Rings 2012: 4s.).

La elección de una estética inspirada en el cine comercial americano y en la industria hollywoodiense permite, sin lugar a duda, emocionar a una mayor audiencia ofreciendo la posibilidad de difundir a gran escala un mensaje ideológico y seguramente haciéndolo mejor que una 'película intelectual'. Es a partir de esta lógica que el director concibió su película:

> Desde el principio a mí me interesaba hablar mucho del tema de la migración, pero no sabía cómo. Ya se había hecho mucho, y se hacía siempre para un público que ya está dispuesto a tener esa discusión, pero yo quería llegarle a un público más grande, es por eso que pensé en el cine de género de los 70 en Estados Unidos. Lograron hacer películas muy políticas y subversivas, pero disfrazadas de género. Lo importante que tiene *Desierto* es que, si no te interesa el tema, la vas a gozar igual, porque vas a estar agarrado del asiento por toda esta tensión de seguir a Gael García Bernal —quien interpreta a Moisés—. Para mí es una historia sobre huir de tus propios monstruos, aunque inevitablemente tendrás que confrontarlos al final (Cuarón en Recamier 2016).

Nos parece que es debido a esta indefinición y dualidad que fracasa el compromiso en *Desierto*: la escogencia de los códigos estéticos de la película de género resulta contraproducente desde un punto de vista ético en la medida en que no son asumidos de manera clara por su director. Al rechazar categorizar a *Desierto* ya sea como una película de género o como una película política y al decidir quedarse a mitad de camino entre estas dos opciones, el director pone al

espectador frente a dos elecciones interpretativas : la primera consistiría en ver *Desierto* con el filtro de los códigos de la película de género y participar así en la reducción estereotipada de los personajes (el villano, el héroe, los anónimos…), lo cual no es más que utilizar los mismos códigos del discurso que la película se supone está combatiendo. La segunda sería considerar el largometraje como una película comprometida con el discurso estereotipado pudiendo echar a perder su objetivo performativo. Por ende, hablar de compromiso parece mucho más problemático de lo que nos lo hace ver la promoción de la película.

4) ¿De la circunstancia a la universalidad? Replantear el compromiso de *Desierto*

Retomar el proyecto inicial del director, quien no buscaba hacer de *Desierto* una película de actualidad o circunstancial, nos permitirá superar este conflicto interpretativo percibido por el espectador. En sus entrevistas Jonás Cuarón se refiere en varias ocasiones al proyecto inicial que orientó la creación de *Desierto*, dejando de lado la lectura política y circunstancial de la película: "El desierto no conoce de nacionalidades, ni de países o fronteras. Allí todos somos iguales y ellos pasan por tantos peligros que no me pude sacar de la cabeza esta historia hasta que la hice" (Cuarón en Linares 2016). El considerar esta dimensión simbólica y universal no significa minimizar el compromiso de la película. Al contrario, ello nos ofrece la oportunidad de encontrar una solución a esta dificultad interpretativa producida por el choque entre un subtexto político muy emotivo con una película de género construida a partir de arquetipos capaces de provocar en el espectador sentimientos encontrados que van del horror al placer, de la persecución a la venganza.

En la génesis del proyecto Jonás Cuarón pone de relieve la experiencia animal del hombre frente a la hostilidad:

> Hace mucho tiempo que venía pensando en esta historia. *Desierto* existía antes de *Gravity*. Durante cuatro años viaje por casi todo el mundo con el fin de encontrar desiertos que me 'inspiraran': Marruecos, el sur de España, cerca de Málaga, los Estados Unidos y por supuesto México. A medida que buscaba, la idea se hacía cada vez más clara: quería hacer una película que conmoviera, confiando en una emoción visceral que, en el marco de una película de acción, desarrollará un subtexto político […] Siempre quise que el paisaje tradujera el retorno a una energía primaria, animal… (Cuarón en Icher 2016, traducido del francés por los autores)

Así, el sentido de esta película parece sobre todo residir en la experiencia filosófica, incluso metafísica que ofrece el desierto, esta interpretación es confirmada por la referencia que se hace al intertexto bíblico. En efecto, el nombre del héroe interpretado por Gael García Bernal, Moisés, le da a la película el valor de una parábola. El Moisés de Cuarón atraviesa el desierto en búsqueda de una tierra prometida como el Moisés del Libro del Éxodo, quien condujo al

pueblo hebreo al desierto fuera de Egipto. Pero la referencia bíblica parece que allí se agota: el personaje de Cuarón sigue siendo un hombre, no es un guía, mucho menos un profeta y la presencia divina está totalmente ausente de este universo desértico y hostil. Sin embargo, lo que confirma la referencia bíblica es la voluntad del director en crear arquetipos: Moisés podría también llamarse Ulises afrontando obstáculos para reunirse con su familia. De la misma manera, el personaje de asesino se reduce al arquetipo del hombre rabioso, motivado por pulsiones violentas y emociones destructivas. Es precisamente este retorno al arquetipo, en lo que tiene de universal, que el productor de *Desierto*, Alfonso Cuarón, valoriza:

> Lo que me gusta de la película, es que tiene muy pocas explicaciones. Estamos en plena acción, no se conoce la historia del personaje del 'Minuteman'[9], se puede percibir simplemente cierta vulnerabilidad en el personaje, pero no conocemos la causa. A Hollywood le gusta que todos los personajes tengan una historia íntima que explica todo. Ese no es el caso de *Desierto*. Se trata de una experiencia visceral, lo que no quiere decir que no haya una dimensión política. En este momento se nos habla a menudo de Donald Trump, de lo que dice sobre México…Fenómenos como Trump existen, de cierta manera son inevitables. Pero me parece más importante intentar comprender cómo ciertas personas pueden infligir todo este sufrimiento a otras y en nombre de qué lo hacen. En nuestra época me parece que todos los discursos que propagan miedo y odio representan el más grande peligro (Cuarón en Icher 2016, traducido del francés por los autores).

Contrariamente a lo que nos quiere hacer pensar la estrategia de marketing de la película y el discurso que la acompaña, en la mente de los creadores el contexto político nunca pasó a primer plano. Comprender el proyecto inicial es una manera de resolver en parte la insatisfacción exegética del espectador obligado a ver la película bajo el prisma de una lectura política que resulta reductora e insatisfactoria.

El sentido ético de *Desierto* reside particularmente en las múltiples elecciones estéticas que introducen en la película una reflexión filosófica sobre la igualdad, la justicia y la posibilidad de construir una moral. Despojados metódicamente de todos sus bienes (ese es justamente el sentido original del desierto, participio adjetivo de *deserere*, lo que constituye el espacio de la separación, de lo que falta),[10] los dos protagonistas terminan afrontándose en un duelo final: un plano general muestra al héroe Moisés y a su enemigo acostados uno junto al otro en una postura idéntica que simboliza la igualdad frente a la hostilidad del desierto. Es a este último a quien se le confiere el ejercicio de la justicia, puesto que Moisés deja que el desierto se encargue de la suerte del asesino que se encuentra herido. El acto de despojo extremo al que se someten los dos protagonistas y enemigos culmina en la única moraleja de la película, personificada por el

[9] Anglicismo que se puede traducir por el 'soldado de milicia'. El término *Minuteman* hace referencia a los miembros de la milicia de las trece colonias que juraron estar listos para el combate apenas los llamaran.
[10] Véase Coromines (2011: 340).

mexicano que se rehúsa a manchar sus manos con la sangre del crimen, llevando a sus espaldas a la mujer a quien consigue salvar.

Tal vez la riqueza de *Desierto* se fundamenta en la puesta en escena del absurdo. El ser humano corre, sube y baja montañas, pierde el equilibrio, se cae, esquiva los peñascos, se desliza por entre los campos de cactus, se conduce de manera caótica en una inmensidad sin caminos, y frente a todos estos movimientos humanos la inmovilidad del desierto impresiona al espectador. Por dicho motivo el inicio y el fin de la película, estéticamente muy bien trabajados y construidos a partir de planos generales y panorámicos, sugiriendo la majestuosidad del desierto, encuadran la historia circunstanciada en una dimensión metafísica que hace que los conflictos humanos parezcan irrisorios. Por ello, el valor de los planos se hace especialmente significativo puesto que los planos generales no hacen sino reforzar la pequeñez y la insignificancia del hombre frente a la grandeza del desierto. Esta visión casi cosmogónica, que se sitúa al inicio y al final de la película, abre la ficción hacia una atemporalidad indiferente a las contingencias humanas por más trágicas que estas sean. De hecho, en los últimos segundos, el objetivo de la cámara se desvía de los dos personajes para centrarse en el mundo de los hombres representado por las luces de una ciudad que se ve a lo lejos, volviéndose a fijar el objetivo en el desierto que parece inmutable. Al igual que los tres alambres de púas que se ven al inicio de la película y que figuran como un intento irrisorio por conquistar un espacio salvaje y extender la propiedad a lugares en donde esta noción está desposeída de sentido, les lucecitas del mundo humano aparecen a lo lejos como una agitación vana frente a la inmovilidad silenciosa del desierto.

5) Conclusión

A pesar de la estrategia de marketing de la película y del cubrimiento mediático que hacen de *Desierto* un contra-discurso de la era pre-Trump, un panfleto comprometido contra las reducciones simplistas y esencialistas que permitieron la ascensión del actual presidente de los Estados Unidos, *Desierto* no propone una reflexión profunda sobre el peligro del extremismo. Al contrario, el hecho de elegir una estética susceptible de emocionar a la mayor parte de la audiencia resulta contraproducente para la temática, no solamente porque vehicula las oposiciones binarias entre, de un lado, un villano americano y, del otro, el grupo anónimo de migrantes mexicanos, sino también porque ofrece al público más sensible a la retórica de Trump un imaginario y una iconografía cuyo trasfondo se basa en el gran héroe americano, el cowboy o el justiciero armado, dispuesto a todo con el fin de defender su territorio. El compromiso artístico tal y como hoy se concibe va más allá de la simple participación del artista en la esfera

mediática y pública: esto lleva a hacerse la pregunta sobre la responsabilidad del director en el intercambio que propone con los espectadores y en donde parece imposible de separar la ética y la estética. Sin embargo, lo que sí ofrece *Desierto* de manera espectacular es la experiencia primitiva del hombre puesto sólo frente a sus elecciones y a la adversidad de un mundo indiferente a sus gritos.

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Narcos Television and Trump's Politics of Fear

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1) Introduction

In the 1970s, the Nixon Administration became the first US presidency to use war as a rhetorical metaphor in the campaign to prevent drug use and addiction. However, as Stuart explains, the "'War on Drugs' really did not become the brand name until succeeding presidencies" (Stuart 2011: 8). Searching the archives of officially recorded statements from the American Presidency Project, Stuart notes, "the rhetoric intensified exponentially under President Ronald Reagan and went supernova under President George H.W. Bush" (Stuart 2011: 9). On October 14, 1982, as Cabañas cites, Reagan "explicitly redirected the War on Drugs by authorizing military and intelligence agency action in drug-producing nations and harsher criminalization of drug use at home" (Cabañas 2014: 5). Linking the act of stopping illegal suppliers in order to eliminate ultimately the demand for hard drugs, Reagan did not parse his rhetoric, using terms, as Stuart summarizes, such as "battlefield", "military intelligence", "the deployment of the armed forces", "battle", and "crusade" (Stuart 2011: 9).

America's addiction to cocaine during the Eighties was a slap in the face for Reagan's feel-good, "It's morning in America" presidency.[1] When Reagan took office in 1981, he promised to crack down on drug abuse and reinvigorate Nixon's War on Drugs initiated in the early 1970s. Reagan's anti-drug efforts included the 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which allotted $1.7 billion for the War on Drugs and included mandatory minimum prison sentences for certain drug offenses. This resulted in skyrocketing incarceration for drug-related crimes and greater media awareness of America's drug addiction, particularly cocaine use. However, as Getchell rightly points out: "Though it is difficult to determine how personally invested Reagan was in the drug war, it was certainly consistent with his own deeply held sense of American identity, traditions, and values" (Getchell 2018).

[1] Troy writes about how Reagan "invented" the 1980s, and when he ran for reelection in 1984, his campaign message was "Morning in America", which Troy describes as follows: "The most prevalent myth about the 1980s is that Ronald Reagan somehow turned back the clock to the age of Ozzie and Harriet. Reagan in fact led Americans 'Back to the Future', as the popular movies from the 1980s suggested. Reagan's brand of easy listening nationalism and feel good consumerist libertinism reassured many Americans, and conjured up warm nostalgic feelings while pushing the nation forward politically and culturally, for better and worse" (Troy 2005).

Reagan's War on drugs went far beyond his domestic policies: he used it as a weapon to fight what he viewed as "narcoterrorism" in Latin America, believing that Cuba and Nicaragua were "smuggling drugs into the United States to destabilize American society and then using the profits to finance a Marxist revolution in the Western Hemisphere" (Getchell 2018). At first, Reagan used "narcoterrorism" as a rhetorical weapon, but it soon "evolved as a way to portray communist insurgencies in Latin America as a national security threat to the United States" (Getchell 2018). During the 1985 *Movimiento de 19 Abril*[2] guerrilla attack on the Colombian Palace of Justice, destroyed documents included extradition requests for major drug traffickers such as Pablo Escobar. The "previously distinct dangers of communist insurgency and drugs became inextricably linked in the public imagination" (Getchell 2018).

While the Clinton presidency softened the war rhetoric by focusing on prevention and drug addiction treatment efforts, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US rejuvenated the War on Drugs to coincide and compete with the War on Terror. While the War on Drugs started with a "legitimate enemy, drug abuse" (Stuart 2011: 36), Stuart explains the rhetoric became a branding and marketing strategy to recruit soldiers:

> At the outset, "us-versus-them" militarized rhetoric was the pathos, but it was not the logos. By midwar, however, the federal government had used the powerful engine of our rule of law to identify children as the enemy.[3] Today, the militarized rhetoric has skipped the abstraction and individualized the enemy—each other—without a moral reason in sight for doing so (Stuart 2011: 36).

Ahead of the US presidential campaign in 2016, real estate mogul and reality television star Donald Trump entered the race, adding the War on Immigrants to the concomitant Wars on Terror and Drugs. On June 16, 2015, announcing his campaign for the 2016 presidential election, Trump declared: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best…They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists…" (Washington Post Staff 2015). Whereas the Reagan War on Drugs occasionally was more nuanced and covert in

[2] "In November 1985, Movimento de 19 Abril (M19) guerrillas infiltrated the Columbian Palace of Justice, taking hostage the entire Columbian Supreme Court and destroying documents, many of which were US extradition requests for major narcotics traffickers. A report later surfaced that Pablo Escobar, head of the notorious cocaine-trafficking Medellín cartel, had paid the guerrillas close to a million dollars for the episode. The incident drew attention to what some US and Latin American officials began to call *narco-terrorism*" (Reeves 2012: 572f.).

[3] Noting various court cases surrounding schools and the constitutionality of random drug testing, search-and-seizure protocols and freedom of expression, Stuart writes: "For Reagan, the War focused on the racial underclass whereas President George H.W. Bush's War took on a moralistic view that waged battle on those who were [quote Elkins] "more dependent, less fulfilled, lacking in 'social currency,' as well as those who do not accept the model of sober autonomy on which 'our nation's notion of liberty is rooted" [quote ends]" (Elkins 2010: 226 in Stuart 2011: 33). See also Elkins (2010).

references to racial and ethnic concerns and fears, "Trump launched his campaign on a racist political platform based on anti-Mexicanism—a long-standing American tradition embraced mostly by millions of white citizens/voters" (Huerta 2017).

And, as Tackett and Habermann suggest, no US president "has deployed fear quite like Donald J. Trump" (Tackett / Habermann 2019).[4] Three central pillars set up Trump's context for instigating xenophobia about Mexico, according to Schubert: "[…] crime caused by illegal immigration, […] problems in trade and economy, and […] deceitful actions of the Mexican government" (Schubert 2017: 50). Schubert adds that Trump cited the crime reference at the beginning of his 2015 announcement "in the form of example, which was abundantly quoted in the news media and drew tremendous attention to Trump's political agenda" (Schuber 2017: 50). His populist rhetoric legitimized and amplified the inherent textual coding of "anti-Mexicanism" that long has been reflected in how Latinos in general have been portrayed on American television for decades.[5]

2) Telecinematic Portrayal and Representation

Televised negative images of Latinos have fueled Trump's politics of fear and his desire to build a wall to keep these "bad hombres"[6] out of America. For decades, Hollywood has depicted Latinos on television as bandits, drug dealers, harlots and prostitutes on television, including in children's cartoons and films. Popular Netflix television series such as *Narcos* (2015-2017), *Narcos: Mexico* (2018-present),[7] and *El Chapo* (2017-2018)[8] seem to have reinvigorated America's fear of the 'dangerous Latino'. This plays effectively into the rhetoric of Trump's immigration policies. While Trump is certainly not the first to bring this fear of Latinos into politics,[9] he has certainly taken it to a hyper-level of urgency, all while stripping away any tactful or nuanced parsing and leaving no doubts about his intended meaning.

[4] "In an interview as a presidential candidate in 2016 with Bob Woodward and Robert Costa of The Washington Post, Mr. Trump said, 'Real power is – I don't even want to use the word – fear'" (Trump in Tackett / Haberman 2019).
[5] See Rios (2015), Cocking (2017), and Nittle (2019).
[6] On May 17, 2019 President Trump Tweeted: "Border Patrol is apprehending record numbers of people at the Southern Border. The bad 'hombres,' of which there are many, are being detained & will be sent home" (Trump in Dopp 2019).
[7] Both *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico* were created by Chris Brancato, Carlo Bernard and Doug Miro.
[8] Created by Silvana Aguirre and Carlos Contreras.
[9] According to Gustavo Arellano: "Demonizing Mexicans as rapists is a time-honored tradition of American letters and politics. The idea that *hombres* are fundamentally devious perverts hell-bent on violating the honor of white and Mexican women alike is soldered on the American psyche […] But [Trump's] stereotyping of Mexicans as sexual predators wasn't original […]" (Gustavo Arrellano 2015). "In 2007, Dana Rohrabacher […] stated from the floor of Congress, [quote Rohrabacher] "If you get raped or murdered or run over by a drunk in California in my area, it's likely it's been done by someone who should never have been there legally in the first place"[quote end] (Rohrabacher in Arellano 2015) and "The year before, Texas congressman Ted Poe told his colleagues [quote Poe]

More than three decades ago, on American television, the drug trade and the War on Drugs was glamorized in Anthony Yerkovich's hugely popular series, *Miami Vice* (1984-1990), starring two hip and cool undercover narcotics agents: Don Johnson as 'Sonny' Crockett and Phillip Michael Thomas as Ricardo Tubbs. The majority of Mexican and Latin American drug cartel cocaine shipments to the United States arrived in Miami before spreading across the nation, and as Ilana Berman puts it: "*Miami Vice* was revolutionary in the way it married the glamour of a city to the grit of the trade" (Berman 2013). However, shows like *Miami Vice* did not focus on the drug lords themselves. Even though Americans might have been aware of where cocaine and marijuana were coming from in 1985, the drug cartels and the men and women behind them, would not come into focus on television until much later.

The rising popularity of network television coincided with a growing research interest among media scholars about the effects of portrayal and representation in primetime series, particularly those dealing with crime and violence. Cultivation theory, social identity theory and the mean world syndrome would explain these, in part. Introducing a study about the depictions of Latinos on television, Mastro and Behm-Morawitz explain that "cultivation theory proposes that long-term exposure to television's stable set of selective messages ultimately shifts viewers' social perceptions towards the television version of reality, regardless of its accuracy" (Mastro / Behm-Morawitz 2005: 111). When politicians and elected officials, particularly those with the media savviness of Trump, reinforce fictional representations with artificially constructed comparisons interpreting real-world events and circumstances, the cultivation effect extends the effects of social identity theory. As Mastro and Behm-Morawitz explain:

> From this perspective, the sheer quantity of media representation becomes important (i.e., first order cultivation) as the rate of minority occurrences represents the "group's strength in the intergroup context" and reflects the social value and status of the group. Additionally, the exact nature of these portrayals (i.e., second order cultivation) indicates normative and appropriate intergroup relations (Mastro / Behm-Morawitz 2005: 112).

Therefore, even while positive character portrayals have become more frequent than in prior decades, negative representations of Latinos persist. Supplemented by the plain messaging of a leader who has made nativist rhetoric the platform for an anti-immigrant campaign predicated heavily on fear, "the potential for cultivating harmful racial perceptions, which may be used in subsequent interracial interactions, is considerable" (Mastro / Behm-Morawitz 2005: 126).

"illegals in this country contribute a vast over-percentage of violent crime and street crime, from theft to rape to murder"[quote end]" (Poe in Arellano 2015).

As television platforms have evolved through the cable era and the introduction of streaming-on-demand platforms (e.g., Netflix), scholars are just beginning to explore if the effects of cultivation theory and observations of the mean world syndrome—"TV violence should likely discourage a world view that people are generally altruistic, thoughtful, and trustworthy" (Krongard / Tsay-Vogel 2018: 7)—have greater valence in the post-network era. With the capacity for individual consumers to customize their content preferences and selections on Netflix or competing streaming platforms, "viewers may selectively expose themselves to only programs that reinforce their existing world views […] or those that help them manage or cope with their moods […] [or] individuals who already view the world as a fearful place lacking altruism choose to consume violent programming" (Krongard / Tsay-Vogel 2018: 9). Thus, it becomes worthwhile to examine if the aggregated effects of streaming on-demand availability, the popularity of storylines signifying narco culture, and the rhetoric of the current US president (Trump) have intensified the perceptions of fears, when compared to those observed in prior decades.

3) Netflix's Surprise Hit: *Narcos*

Prior to Trump's presidency and the popular Netflix series *Narco*s, Americans got a taste of the brutality of Mexican drug cartels in Vince Gilligan's hugely popular AMC series *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). The show followed the transformation of a terminally ill high school science teacher, Walter White (Bryan Cranston), into a ruthless methamphetamine drug supplier who eventually finds himself at odds with the Mexican drug cartels. The series portrayed two particularly ruthless and fearsome characters: Tuco Salamanca (Raymond Cruz), a psychopathic Mexican drug kingpin, and Hector Salamanca (Mark Margolis), a former high-ranking member of the Juarez Cartel. In keeping with the theme of violent Latino criminals, Tuco is unpredictable and prone to violent outbursts, while his uncle Hector is portrayed as a sinister and evil former cartel leader. The series is filled with violent scenes and heinous acts of terror, carried out particularly by 'the Cousins', Leonel and Marco Salamanca (Daniel and Luis Moncada) who are hitmen for the Ciudad Juárez Mexican Drug Cartel. They kill without hesitation, and their presence is made all the more fearsome by their almost robot-like demeanor, seemingly void of any human emotion.

Despite the success of *Breaking Bad* in the United States, when Netflix released *Narcos* in 2015, "The Pablo Escobar-focused first season was aimed solely at increasing Netflix subscriptions in South America and Europe. However, few expected a largely Spanish-speaking series to become the streaming giant's biggest hit" (Power 2018). Netflix's strategy

acknowledged, in part, the success of Telemundo[10], which competed with Univision, its chief rival for Spanish-speaking audiences, by investing in 'narco telenovelas' that have been distributed globally to viewers, including China and Africa, after their premieres in Spanish-speaking markets. Typically, a local telenovela went transnational only when the series succeeded in the original target market. However, one of Telemundo's greatest successes was *La Reina del Sur*[11] (2011), and 'the global nature of La Reina's production and distribution marks a departure from the norm' (Jaramillo 2014: 1600). The series premiered on Telemundo network affiliates in the US and in Spain before being expanded into the Mexican television market.

In *La Reina del Sur*, the protagonist was a young woman (Teresa) from Sinaloa who eventually becomes a dominant drug trafficker in Spain, and the narrative follows episodes of violence and life-threatening situations in California, Morocco and Colombia. "Teresa is a fully formed character; by virtue of being the protagonist, she is multidimensional and humanizes what was previously a thuggish character type on US television" (Jaramillo 2014: 1597). If there is one dimension that connects *Breaking Bad* to *La Reina del Sur*, it is the significance of the US-Mexico border in its effects upon the respective protagonists of both series, as "Mexico ends up being a character that all of our protagonists have ambivalent relationships with, but that character has accumulated considerably more personality than it has in the past" (Jaramillo 2014: 1602).

Narcos earned favorable reviews and high ratings during its three-season run.[12] By the time of his death in December 1993, Pablo Escobar, founder and head of the Medellin Cartel, was the best-known Colombian drug lord, and *Narcos* offers a thorough, personal approach to portraying how he built his empire. The first two seasons were shot on location in Medellin,

[10] As Jaramillo explains: "Telemundo's parent company, NBC Universal, is owned by Comcast, one of the five largest media conglomerates in the USA. Comcast owns two broadcast networks, multiple cable networks, and is the largest cable operator in the USA" (Jaramillo 2014: 1595).

[11] "'La Reina del Sur'" finale was the #1 broadcast program regardless of language at 10 pm last night among adults 18–34, men 18–49 and men 18–34. The telenovela's finale was #2, regardless of language, behind ABC's series premiere of 'Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition' in the 10 pm hour among adults 18–49. The finale of 'La Reina del Sur' more than doubled (+125%) the delivery of the network's previous most-watched finale, 'El Clon,' which averaged over 1.2 million adults 18–49 (1,252,000) when it aired on December 10, 2002" (Gorman in Cabañas 2014: 10).

[12] IGN gave the first season a 7.8 out of 10 score, saying: "It's a true-to-life account, sometimes to a fault, of the rise of Pablo Escobar and the hunt that brought him down laced with stellar performances and tension-filled stand-offs. It's [sic.] blend of archival footage reminds us that the horrors depicted really happened, but also manage to present an Escobar that is indefensible but frighteningly sympathetic" (Wheatley 2015); *The Philadelphia Inquirer* critic, Tirdad Derakhshani called it: "Intense, enlightening, brilliant, unnerving, and addictive, *Narcos* is high-concept drama at its finest" (Derakhshani 2015).

and the show is packed with action and violence that one would expect in a show about drug trafficking.

Perhaps the darkest moment of *Narcos* occurs in Season 1, Episode 6, 'Explosivos' (Baiz 2015), when Escobar, played brilliantly by Brazilian actor Wagner Moura, recruits Jaime 'Jaimito' Ortega Carrera (German de Griff) to unknowingly blow up Avianca Flight 203 on November 27, 1989.[13] Carrera was recruited off the streets as a cocaine courier for Escobar and later brought into his inner circle to gain his trust. The viewer finds Escobar welcoming him into the family over dinner before later visiting his home and promising him a large sum of money to take care of his wife and newborn daughter. His job was simple: to record a conversation between two politicians. Little did he know that Escobar had ordered a bomb be planted in the cassette recorder, and Carrera unwittingly blew up the plane shortly after takeoff when he pressed the play button, killing 110 people and himself. To make matters worse, Escobar orders the killing of his wife afterwards. All of this is planned with cold-blooded accuracy by Escobar who intended to kill presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo. This episode is a chilling example showing how sinister Escobar could be, not caring who got hurt as long as he got what he wanted. While not an outwardly violent act carried out by Escobar himself, it leaves American audiences wondering what evils drug lords are capable of committing in the United States if they can kill their own so easily.

In short, Pablo Escobar was willing to do anything to ensure that his cocaine would reach the United States, where it would earn him billions of dollars in profit.[14] However, despite his ruthlessness, in a portrayal that reminds of the fatherly figure of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* from the 1972 film by Francis Ford Coppola, Moura plays Escobar in *Narcos* "as a somewhat sensitive soul, who genuinely believed he was a force for good in his impoverished home town with political aspirations" (Power 2018). This is ironic, considering he leveled a city block with

[13] On November 27, 1989, Avianca Flight 203, a Colombian domestic passenger flight, took off from El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá bound for Alfonso Bonilla Aragón International Airport in Cali. Five minutes into the flight, a bomb was detonated, killing all 107 people on board as well as three people on the ground, making it the single deadliest criminal attack in decades of violence in Colombia. The attack was planned by Pablo Escobar, believing it would kill presidential candidate César Gaviria Trujillo, but Gaviria was not on the plane and went on to become the president of Colombia. Dandeny Muñoz Mosquera, the Medellin Cartel's chief assassin, was convicted of the bombing by a US District Court, and was sentenced to 10 consecutive life sentences. In *Narcos*, the bombing is portrayed as having been carried out unwittingly by a naïve new recruit of Escobar's cartel. The death of two Americans on board prompted the Bush Administration to begin Intelligence Support Activity operations to find Escobar (see Rockefeller 2016).

[14] By the mid-1980s, Escobar's Medellin Cartel was shipping as much as 11 to 15 tons of cocaine per flight in jetliners to the United States and was making over $70 million per day (about $26 billion per year). His cartel spent $4,000 per month on rubber bands to wrap the stacks of cash, much of which had to be buried due to lack of storage space, and 10 percent had to be written off as "spoilage" either from water damage or rats (see Escobar 2009).

a truck bomb in order to kill Colombian politicians, officials and journalists.[15] During his promotion of *Narcos* in 2015, Moura told Power: "He [Escobar] was a contradiction. He was a big murderer, an assassin […] At the same time, he was someone who loved his kids and his wife – was very generous to the poor. Someone who dealt in cocaine, but liked to smoke marijuana. He was very human – very, very complex" (Moura in Power 2018). Still, *Narcos* shows there is no denying the sinister side to this former king of the Colombian drug trade.

Some have even drawn parallels between Escobar and Trump. James Norton, in his 2016 article, 'Narcos and Trump: On the Appeal of Going Out Like a Gangster', describes Escobar's character in *Narcos* as an "entertainment gangster" who crushes his enemies "through wit and violence" and makes "a case for a nihilistic embrace of greed and raw power" (Norton 2016). For Norton, Trump's presidential campaign is reflected in *Narcos* in that it undermined "all norms under the guise of truth-telling, but — in practical terms — [is] an embrace of the gangster's ethos: 'Screw the rules,' it suggests, 'get what's yours, and the devil take the other guy — the immigrant, the urban poor, the gays, the blacks, and so forth". Whether or not viewers agree with this comparison, due to the unexpected success of the first three seasons, Netflix decided to move the series hundreds of miles north for *Narcos: Mexico*, where the violence and bloodshed become even more intense, cultivating the environment for Trump's politics of fear to become more entrenched.

After Escobar's death in Season 2, *Narcos* Season 3 focuses on the DEA's hunt for the leaders of the Cali Cartel for whom, with Escobar out of the picture, business is booming with new cocaine markets opening up in the United States and around the world.[16] Most of the action and bloodshed continues to take place in Colombia, including a gruesome scene in Episode 1, 'The Kingpin Strategy' (Baiz 2017a), in which Pacho Herrera (Alberto Ammann) and his bikers tear Claudio Salazar's (Carlos Humberto Camacho) limbs from his body as each rides in a different

[15] On December 6, 1989, a truck bomb attack targeting the Administrative Department of Security (DAS) headquarters in Bogotá, Colombia, killed 52 and injured about 1,000 (including innocent women and children), leveled several city blocks, and destroyed more than 300 commercial properties. It is widely believed that Escobar was responsible for the attack in his attempt to assassinate DAS director Miguel Maza Márquez, who escaped unharmed. The DAS bombing was the last in a long series of attacks targeting Colombian politicians, officials and journalists in 1989, which began with Escobar's January 18 killing of 12 judicial officials in Simacota (see Rockefeller 2016).

[16] See Shannon (1991).

direction.[17] However, one character in particular, Chepe Santacruz Londoño[18] (Pêpê Rapazote) brings the violence home to the United States as the Cali Cartel's head of operations in New York City.[19] In Episode 2, 'The Cali KGB' (Baiz 2017b), Chepe guns down a group of Dominican rivals in their hair salon headquarters with an Uzi hidden under his barber's gown, a bloodbath reminiscent of a similar scene in *The Godfather: Part II* (Coppola 1974). Prior to this scene, all of the *Narcos* violence occurred in Colombia, but seeing such bloodshed in New York City only reinforces Trump's image of the dangerous Latinos south of the border who are capable of wreaking havoc on American soil, even if they aren't from Mexico.

4) Getting Too Close for Comfort – *Narcos: Mexico*

Hot on the heels of the success of *Narcos*, Netflix decided to rebrand the show and move it north as *Narcos: Mexico*. Keeping the same gritty, violent realism as *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico* shifts the perspective and focuses on the DEA's attempts to bring down the Guadalajara Cartel in the 1980s while trying to convince Washington bureaucrats to fund their efforts. The two main characters are cartel leader Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (Diego Luna) and DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena (Michael Peña). With Escobar out of the picture, Gallardo eventually becomes the most powerful drug lord in Mexico, commonly referred to as 'El Padrino' (The Godfather). Like Pablo Escobar before him, Gallardo will stop at nothing to ensure his drug empire will succeed, and once again, creators Carlo Bernard, Chris Brancato and Doug Miro present us with graphic violence and bloodshed at the hands of ruthless Mexican banditos. This seems to be "exactly what US audiences want to see when they peek into the illicit world of drug trafficking" (Zatarain 2019). While Gallardo, like Escobar in *Narcos*, is presented as a complex and savvy businessman, *Narcos: Mexico* continues to feed Trump's politics of fear narrative of "the phantom threat of Mexicans as rapists, murderers, and monsters messily flowing into the US, bringing drugs, bringing crime" (Zatarain 2019).

[17] Former Cali Cartel head of security turned top informant "who almost single-handedly brought down the cartel", is currently under witness protection and acted as a consultant on *Narcos*, Season 3 and stated: "I saw one episode, the first or something, where they pull apart one bad guy with two motorcycles. I will say, though it's horrendous, it's not far from the [actual] happenings. They did that the same. Not with Harleys, they used two Land Cruisers. I wasn't there, but I had people who were actually in the execution of these things" (Salcedo in Shepherd 2017).

[18] José Santacruz Londoño, also known as Chepe or Don Chepe, and the Rodríquez Orejuela brothers formed the Cali Cartel in the 1970s. At one point, they were supplying 80 percent of the US and 90 percent of the European cocaine market (U.S. Government 1989).

[19] Chepe moved to New York City to keep the Cali Cartel's operation alive after Colombia banned a main ingredient needed to refine cocaine. In an interview with *Latin Times*, actor Rapazote said about his character: "He was the most successful narco ever to live in the US [who] pretended to be a real estate developer", and "his character was very violent because […] it was business. He had to kill in a ferocious business to protect his territory" (Rapazote in Gómez 2017).

One of the most graphic and disturbing scenes occurs in Season 1, Episode 7, 'Jefe de Jefes' (Ruizpalacios 2018) when two American tourists are brutally killed by a paranoid Rafael 'Rafa' Caro Quintero (Tenoch Huerta) in a Mexican restaurant because he thought they were undercover DEA agents.[20] The scene starts out innocently enough, with the two Americans entering the La Loca Langosta seafood restaurant for dinner. They even announce to the staff, "We're tourists from the United States". While waiting for their meal, they are discussing ideas for a travel book about Mexico they are writing together and taking notes, which catches the attention of Rafa and his men, who tell him: "They're writing your name, Rafa. They're cops!". A coked-up Rafa shoots one of the men and brutally kicks and stabs the other before hacking the already dead first man in the chest with an ice pick. This scene represents the ideology of much of Trump's 2016 campaign: "Here are a group of bloodthirsty Mexicans savagely murdering two innocent Americans in Mexico. Don't let this happen at home!".

Equally disturbing is the scene in Episode 9, 'Lope de Vega' (Baiz 2018) in which DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena, played by Michael Peña, is repeatedly tortured, revived with adrenaline by a doctor, and tortured some more. It includes a particularly savage scene when one of Gallardo's thugs drills a hole through Kiki's left hand. Camarena is finally found dead in the final episode, and Gallardo uses tape recordings of Kiki's torture and ultimate death to buy his freedom, and he continues to run his drug empire with "an army of corrupt police at his disposal" (Strause 2018). Kiki's murder in 1985 launched the largest DEA homicide investigations ever undertaken and will probably be the focus of Season 2.[21] If Americans might have doubted the reality of the perception of Mexico as a corrupt and lawless country, as presented in *Narcos: Mexico*, Trump did not hesitate to remove any gray areas. At the

[20] Rafael 'Rafa' Caro Quintero was responsible for revolutionizing the marijuana drug trade by creating a seedless and potent marijuana plant. He is allegedly responsible for the 1985 murder of two American tourists, John Clay Walker and Alberto Radelat, but it is unclear if he actually committed the murders or ordered his "sicarios" to do so. As portrayed in *Narcos: Mexico*, Rafa was arrested in Costa Rica in 1985 for the kidnapping, torture and murder of DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena and was released from prison in 2013 after serving 28 years of his 40-year sentence. Since his release, he has remained on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list with the US offering a $20 million award for information leading to his capture. In a 2016 interview with Proceso, the 66-year-old Quintero denied responsibility for the murder of Camarena and apologized to Camarena's family, the DEA and US government, and the Mexican people (see Yemi 2018).

[21] DEA agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena was able to infiltrate deep into Gallardo's drug trafficking organization, even posing as a worker on Gallardo's giant marijuana farm, "Rancho Bufalo" in Chihuahua, Mexico, which was known to be protected by Mexican DFS intelligence agents and with the knowledge of local Mexican police, politicians, and the military. Because Camarena was starting to expose the connections between drug traffickers and Mexican law enforcement and government officials, Gallardo ordered the kidnapping of Camarena on February 7, 1985. He was brutally tortured for 30 hours before being killed on February 9 when a hole was drilled in his head with a powerful electric drill. His shrink-wrapped body was later found in a shallow hole on a ranch in Michoacán state. DEA Operation Leyenda included a special unit to coordinate the investigation in Mexico, where corrupt officials were implicated. Gallardo's arrest on April 8, 1989 exposed widespread corruption at political and law enforcement levels in Mexico. Gallardo remains jailed at age 73 in a minimum-security prison in Guadalajara.

Republican presidential debate on 16 August 2015, Trump said, "Our politicians are stupid. And the Mexican government is much smarter, much sharper, much more cunning. And they send the bad ones over because they don't want to pay for them. They don't want to take care of them" (Trump in Peters / Woolley 2015). The point was, as Schubert explains, to present Trump both as "intellectually superior" to the Democratic presidential candidates and "morally superior" to the Mexican government (Schubert 2017: 52).

5) The Most Feared Man on the Planet: *El Chapo*

With the success of *Narcos* and *Narcos: Mexico*, Netflix, in cooperation with Univision, launched yet another drug trafficking series in 2017 based on the life of notorious Sinaloa Cartel Mexican drug lord Joaquin Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, known as 'El Chapo' (Shorty) due to his mere 168-centimetre stature, a man who became the most powerful drug trafficker in the world.[22] El Chapo has "been called everything from the Usama bin Laden of the drug cartel world to the most 'ruthless, dangerous, and feared man on the planet'" (McKay 2018). Like Pablo Escobar, Guzmán came from humble roots before rising to power, and "[i]n Sinaloa today, Guzmán is as respected and admired by locals as he is reviled by law enforcement" (Bonello 2017). El Chapo is famous for funneling cocaine into the United States through underground tunnels and escaping from Mexican prison not once, but twice: first by bribing a guard in 2001 and escaping in a laundry cart to avoid extradition to the United States,[23] and again in 2015 from a maximum-security prison through a tunnel.[24] Both of these escapes are portrayed in Netflix's *El Chapo* series which, like *Narcos: Mexico*, exposes Mexican police and government corruption. After being captured in 2016 and extradited to the United States, Guzmán stood trial, and his 30-year reign of terror came to an end when a federal judge in New York City sentenced the 62-year-old to life in prison in a 'supermax' penitentiary in Florence, Colorado, a place where no prisoner has ever escaped. Despite his small stature, El Chapo was

[22] As head of the Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico, El Chapo ran one of the world's largest drug operations, shipping cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin to over five continents until his capture in 2016 (see Garcia 2017).

[23] After Mexico's Supreme Court made extradition between Mexico and the US easier, Guzmán bribed prison guards to aid in his escape. On January 19, 2001, prison guard Francisco 'El Chito' Rivera helped Guzmán escape in a laundry cart pushed by maintenance worker Javier Camberos, who then drove him out of town in the trunk of a car. Both Camberos and the prison director were jailed for aiding in his escape, and Guzmán yielded great power within the prison, including smuggling contraband into the prison and receiving preferential treatment from prison staff. In addition, Guzmán paid Jalisco police to ensure that he had at least 24 hours to escape and avoid the subsequent military manhunt.

[24] On July 11, 2015, Guzmán escaped from a maximum-security prison from an elaborate underground tunnel leading from the shower area to a house 1.5 km away in a Santa Juanita neighborhood. The tunnel included a motorcycle on which it is believed Guzmán rode to freedom. As a result of his escape, several officials and police officers were indicted, as it would have been impossible for this tunnel to be built without outside help and corruption.

a brutal cartel leader who smuggled over $12 billion dollars-worth of drugs "and plunged his country into a long-running tragedy of bloodshed and corruption" (Feuer 2019).[25]

El Chapo portrays Guzmán (Marco de la O) as a family man with a chip on his shoulder, always trying to prove that he is the greatest drug lord to ever live and willing to do anything to ensure everyone knows this. But make no mistake: despite his willingness to risk capture to see his wife and children as well as his mother, Guzmán yields his power with violence and murder on anyone who gets in his way. The very first episode in Season 1 (Contreras / Cravioto 2017a) contains a particularly disturbing scene. El Chapo makes an unbreakable promise with Pablo Escobar to move cocaine across the US border through his tunnel in only 48 hours. He employs dozens of poor Mexican farm workers to dig the tunnel, and once it's completed, we see the workers getting paid and being served sandwiches and beer. The men look happy and content, unaware that Guzmán has ordered his men to "kill all the workers who built the tunnel. Everyone, except for the engineer. No one can know where it is". As Guzmán is carrying the coffin at his father's funeral, the tunnel workers are gunned down. Right away, we learn that this so-called 'family man' is a cold-blooded killer. However, El Chapo and his family also suffer at the hands of their rival cartel leaders.

In Episode 3 of Season 1 (Contreras / Cravioto 2017b), the Avadaño brothers, rival cartel leaders, order the killing of Hector Palma Salazar's, 'El Güero' (Juan Pablo Acosta) wife and two young children by tricking his wife, Guadalupe (Abril Schreiber) into leaving her husband and escaping to Venezuela. After convincing Guadalupe to join him, her secret lover, Rafael Clavel 'El Buenmozo' (Miguel Alfonso Gutierrez) drugs her children and kills her in a Caracas hotel. Then Rafael drives onto a bridge in the middle of the night and drops the sleeping children, wrapped in a blanket, into the dark river below. If these scenes were not chilling enough, the Avadaño brothers send El Güero's wife's head to him in an icebox. Unfortunately, these gruesome events depicted in the television series are not figments of a writer's imagination, but actually occurred, with slightly different – but just as gruesome – details.[26] The message is clear: In addition to brutally killing their rivals, Mexican drug lords and their henchmen kill innocent men, women and children, all in the name of "business comes first".

[25] US Judge Brian M. Cogan "noted that the 'overwhelming evil' of the drug lord's crimes was readily apparent. Beyond the life sentence — plus an additional 30 years — he ordered him to pay a staggering $12.6 billion in forfeiture" (Feuer 2019).

[26] Venezuelan Rafael Clavel Moreno's mission was to infiltrate the closest circle of 'El Güero' Palma by first marrying Palma's sister and then becoming Palma's wife's lover, Guadalupe Leija, convincing her to take two million pesos from her accounts and escape with him to San Francisco, where they once stayed at a hotel and he proceeded to cut her throat. Fifteen days later, he took Héctor Jesús and Nataly, sons of Héctor and Guadalupe to San Cristóbal, Venezuela, where he proceeded to throw them from the bridge of La Concordia. In addition to videotaping the terrible event, he sent Guadalupe's head to Palma in a cooler.

Like Pablo Escobar, El Chapo has been compared to a modern-day Robin Hood and remains a popular figure today in his home state of Sinaloa, Mexico. His international narcotics enterprise has provided job opportunities to the locals and exposed the widespread corruption of the Mexican government and police. This has made him a hero to many of Mexico's working class. Indeed, El Chapo's story, his "rise from a poor family in rural Sinaloa to ruthless head of an all-powerful cartel, is one of legend in Mexico" (Alexander 2017). But make no mistake, across the border with his arrest and life sentence in the United States, El Chapo is viewed exactly as Trump wants him to be viewed: as a bloodthirsty bandit.

After Guzmán's second escape in 2015, Trump reportedly received threats[27] from a Twitter account with the username @ElChapOGuzman, after he blamed "corrupt Mexican officials" for Guzmán's escape. In true Trump style, he used this threat for political gain by stating: "I'm fighting for much more than myself. I'm fighting for the future of our country, which is being overrun by criminals. You can't be intimidated. This is too important" (Trump in Reuters in Washington 2015). However, it appears that Trump was intimidated enough to contact the FBI about the Twitter threat. One can never be sure about the truth of Trump's claims, given his obsession with mythopoesis. In January 2016, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an interview that actor Sean Penn conducted with El Chapo, whom Penn described as resembling in manner the character of Tony Montana from Oliver Stone's *Scarface* (De Palma 1983). Penn writes, "I mention Trump. El Chapo smiles, ironically saying, 'Ah! Mi amigo!'" (Penn 2016).

6) Conclusion

In his 2018 *New York Times* article, 'Commander of Fear', Charles M. Blow states: "Trump has found — or has always had — a winning populism perfectly suited for this moment in our history, when the anxious, scared hateful and callous desire an unapologetic voice that has the backing of actual power" (Blow 2018). In a perverse way, he flipped Reagan's feel-good "it's morning in America" (Troy 2005) persona and created "a magical mixture" that makes "being afraid feel like fun" (Blow 2018). Trump's followers view him as their greatest defense against "all things of which they should be afraid, or shouldn't trust or should hate", and thus they "roar their approval at their white knight" (Blow 2018). The entertainment industry's recent obsession

[27] The message read: "Keep screwing [with us] and I'm going to make you eat your fucking words you lousy white faggot". However, "[t]he authenticity of the Twitter accounts […] could not be verified" and "[f]our Mexican government officials said they could not say whether the account, as well as several others in the name of some of Guzmán's children that were linked to it, were genuine.'I am told they are apocryphal', said Mexican deputy interior minister Roberto Campa" (Reuters in Washington 2015).

with television series such as *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico*, and *El Chapo* keeps this fire of fear stoked and burning hot.

A perfect storm has gathered that supersedes the limits of the politics of fear as observed in previous American presidencies: the popularity of 'narco telenovelas' in the Spanish-speaking world that has spilled over into the United States. The streaming platforms such as Netflix where viewers can select on demand the opportunity to binge watch episodes of these series on their own, and a president's rhetoric that leverages and exploits the commercial success and popularity of these series. "Trump's polarising oratory has the function of verbal colour-coding, painting an utterly bleak picture of Mexico" (Schubert 2017: 54), all to serve his own political purpose.

Sadly, what is given less emphasis in these shows, and is completely missing from Trump's fear-based rhetoric, are the innocent victims in Colombia and Mexico. As Ana Karina Zatarain, a writer living in Mexico, puts it:

> There is no glamour to murder, no glory in gore. The trafficking systems are less sophisticated than one would imagine, the brains behind the operations less sharp and calculating. For every philanthropic deed by a cartel in a rural town, there are countless people abducted and murdered. Actually, they're not countless. There is an exact number of them, and every day it grows. They're the children of women weeping in the fields, the afterthought in shows like *Narcos* (Zatarain 2019).

The US War on Drugs is nearing the 50-year mark, and many believe it has failed. In fact, in many states and cities, reform-minded district attorneys and prosecutors are being elected who promise to change criminal justice practices and eliminate charges for minor drug possession or abuse, the news of which is documented extensively in *The Appeal* newsletter and website operated by Daniel Nichanian. In November 2019, the US House Judiciary Committee voted for the first time on a bill that would decriminalize marijuana at the federal level: the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act.[28]

Nevertheless, with El Chapo now serving a life sentence after his conviction in 2019, US and Mexican authorities continue to target the heads of large cartels, and the Sinaloa Cartel remains one of Mexico's top crime groups. Unfortunately, these efforts have resulted in fragmented groups that are harder to identify and target, and violence and body counts in Mexico continue to rise.[29] However, the key point here is "in Mexico". Despite Trump's dire

[28] See Gullapalli (2019).

[29] "The Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG are Mexico's strongest criminal groups today. But a series of arrests and killings of important cartel members, in addition to internal disputes, has caused these groups to splinter. New groups have emerged as a result and are forming new alliances with the rivals of the cartels in power, carrying out attacks with the hopes of seizing control over key illicit activities. This has ushered in unprecedented levels of violence.

warnings for the need to build a wall on the US/Mexico border and promise to end what he called "this American carnage" (Trump in Wilson 2017), violent crimes in the United States have been falling for the past 30 years and continue to fall.[30] Trump, nonetheless, insists he will get his wall built to keep out those "bad hombres" south of the border. In a recent interview with *TIME* magazine,[31] Trump stated: "We're building the wall right now […] It is under major construction", and claimed that the reason the number of border crossings is now at a 13-year high is because

> they're trying to come in because the economy is so good […] They're not coming up for asylum. They're coming up for money […] we have an asylum situation that is so ridiculous. We're the only country in the world with the things that we have to do, and the Democrats could easily fix it, but they want open borders ─ which means crimes, it means drugs (Time Staff 2019).

Few give credence to the wall's potential impact for stopping the flow of drugs. Diego Luna who plays cartel kingpin Gallardo in *Narcos: Mexico*, said in an interview with *Variety* that "A wall is not going to stop anything….They've put a succession of drug dealers in jail, and that hasn't stopped anything either because this is […] a corrupt system that has seeped into every level of power on both sides of the border" (Vivarelli 2018).

El Chapo's US trial revealed that in addition to his infamous tunnels, Guzmán's cartel methodically used legal points of entry to bring drugs across the border via automobiles and trucks, boats, planes, trains, and even submarines. He even "filled cans of jalapenos with cocaine, stacked them on the back of commercial tractor-trailers and drove through legal points of entry, no questions asked" (Olson 2019). Even if Trump makes good on his promise to build "a beautiful, big, strong wall", illegal drugs will continue to flow into the United States because, as Hillary Clinton once said, Mexican cartels serve Americans' "insatiable demand for illegal drugs" (Clinton in Gómez Romero 2019). John Kelly, Trump's former chief of staff, admitted

Whereas violence is bad for drug trafficking organizations, smaller groups rely on it to engage in kidnappings, extortion and other crimes. In 2017, Mexico tallied more than 30,000 homicides, more than any other year in the country's history" (Salomón / Asmann 2018).

[30] "Inimai Chettiar, director of the Brennan Center's Justice Program, said Trump's warnings are meant to bolster support for massive overhauls to the nation's immigration system and a renewed focus on the War on Drugs. 'Since day one in office, President Trump and his administration have wrongly pushed the idea of 'American Carnage' and a nationwide crime wave,' Chettiar said. 'They appear to be trying to scare Americans into supporting some of the administration's most controversial policies, from changes to drug prosecutions to aggressive immigration enforcement. But numbers clearly undercut their claims. Crime rates this year [2017] remain near historic lows'" (Chettiar in Wilson 2017).

[31] Trump's interview included *TIME* Editor-in-Chief and CEO Edward Felsenthal, Washington Bureau Chief Massimo Calabresi, Senior White House Correspondent Brian Bennett, and White House Correspondent Tessa Berenson.

that the United States is part of the problem because it is the world's biggest consumer of illegal drugs.[32]

The popularity for series such as *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico* and *El Chapo* already had been well established, but certainly the coincidence of Donald Trump's unexpected 2016 presidential win and his unapologetic turn to mythopoesis to channel his political message of fear exemplify the sort of effects that media scholars have observed and articulated with cultivation theory, social identity theory and the mean world syndrome. Both Reagan and Trump came to the presidency with successful media careers in film and reality television, respectively. Both candidates embraced a maverick image with eerily similar campaign themes: Reagan's ‘"It’s morning again in America", and Trump's "Make America Great Again". And, like the television series examined here, they respectively mocked and challenged the institutions in which we invest our trust: government, the law and journalism.

While Reagan could engage in diplomatic flourishes and stirring optimistic oratory, Trump acts otherwise. Trump, like Pablo Escobar and El Chapo, "pit the gangster ethos, with its (flexible and ultimately totally disposable) codes of honor and (threatened and actual) violence and unapologetic braggadocio and greed against […] governance" (Norton 2016). By instilling fear in US citizens of the "bad hombres" south of the border, "Donald Trump is putting a gold-plated gun on the table and inviting us to pick it up, join him in the streets hunting down our enemies", and "[t]hat gun looks awfully good if you've lost confidence in the system as a whole" (Norton 2016). Whether or not Trump's politics of fear wins him a second term remains to be seen, so the real question is: How many Americans will succumb to this fear and pick up that gun? Unfortunately, the recent mass shooting at an El Paso, Texas Walmart seems to indicate that some people are willing to kill to stop these so-called "invaders".[33] One thing is for certain, Americans still have quite an appetite for 'Narcos' entertainment, because a quick search on Netflix reveals a plethora of Narcos series and dozens of documentaries about drugs to satisfy this apparent hunger.[34]

[32] In 2017, Kelly urged Congress to "get into the business of drug-demand reduction". He said countries south of the United States are saying, "How about stop lecturing us about not doing enough to stop the drug flow; how about you stop the demand, and then the drug flow will go away" (Kelly in Jones 2017).
[33] See Peters et al. (2019).
[34] Current titles include *Pablo Escobar: El Patrón Del Mal* (Moreno / Mora Ortega 2012), *Drug Lords* (Tiley / Welsh 2018), *Alias J.J.*, (Restrepo / Sandoval / Vásquez 2017), and *El cartel de los sapos* (Restrepo / Casilimas 2008), just to name a few.

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"You Are Not a Wolf, and This Is the Land of Wolves Now": Nemesis, Narrative and the 'Norteamericano' in the *Sicario* Films

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1) Introduction

This article examines how covert US interventions are represented in the *Sicario* films by drawing on structuralist interpretations of narrative with a focus on the concept of equilibrium. In particular, the study follows Todorov, who argues that narratives are the result of changes in equilibrium.

> The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. […] The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement (Todorov 1969: 75).

During the course of writing this article, debates around US interventionist politics have become overshadowed by an observable shift from covert intervention to overt action because of the killing of the Iranian Major General Quasem Soleimani by a drone strike on January 3rd 2020. This strike took place at the open request of the US President and was then immediately framed in a number of ways by the international media. Immediate reportage suggested the strike could have been explicitly politically motivated in order to "shore up support from Republican Senate hawks in time for [President Trump's] impeachment trial" (Papenfuss 2020) even though some claim the drone strike may have been ordered as long as seven months prior.[1] Publicity surrounding this intervention was so overt that the President was later described as giving a "minute by minute" recounting of the details of the strike not to journalists at the White House press briefing room, but to "donors at Mar-a-Lago" (Liptak 2020), the "Winter White House" (Caputo 2017).

By contrast, the form of interventionism represented within the *Sicario* films is driven by the need to depict the murky realities of covert operations. Intervention is seen as a necessary requirement of maintaining a specific political and social equilibrium, and this equilibrium is what drives the narrative. When the protagonist of *Sicario*, Kate Macer (Emily Blunt), questions the legality of the US intervention, the answer she is given by Matt Graver (Josh Brolin) – the

[1] See Lee / Kube (2020).

CIA agent operating the inter-agency task force – is that they are there to impede cartel operations and to "shake the tree and create chaos" for an entrenched illegal organisation. The mission statement of the task force is explicitly stated in both *Sicario* films to be to forcibly manipulate the equilibrium of the cartels in order to destabilise them. In both films this follows an inciting event: In *Sicario* it is the discovery of a cartel charnel house on United States soil, while in *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* it is the implied involvement of the cartels in smuggling Islamist terrorists into the United States. In both cases the righteousness of Graver's operations is justified by provocation and the way in which US agencies classify specific cartel activities as hubristic, necessitating their retribution. This retributive justice is intended to provoke the cartels into going to war with one another, in both forms, the US position themselves into the role, in classical terms, of nemesis.

It is this nemesis – retributive justice in the form of corrective action – that frames my analysis of the *Sicario* films, split between analysis of both political and narrative terms. Nemesis constitutes a method by which equilibrium is manipulated and re-established. The purpose of this analysis is to conceptualise nemesis as a structuralist term which can constitute a method by which narrative equilibrium – as per Todorov (1969) – can be manipulated. In order to reach this stage this article will first discuss the origins of nemesis in the classical sense to establish the specific nature of its function before highlighting how this operates within the narrative of *Sicario*.

2) Nemesis, Hubris and Retributive Justice

The word "nemesis" is used throughout this article to refer to a specific form of retributive justice. Although the word has come to be used as a shorthand for the opposite of the hero of a narrative – something fostered, perhaps, by the usage of the word within the increasingly popular filmic superhero narratives of the previous twenty years – the original meaning derives from the Greek goddess Nemesis (Νεμεσις). In Greek mythology Nemesis was the "goddess of retribution against, and retribution for, evil deeds and undeserved good fortune" (Atsma 2017). Nemesis "directed human affairs in such a way as to maintain equilibrium", but was "regarded as an avenging or punishing divinity" in her role of providing retributive justice that restored equilibrium to the mortal world (Atsma 2017). The actor and writer Stephen Fry writes:

> Nemesis was the embodiment of Retribution, that remorseless strand of cosmic justice that punishes presumptuous or overreaching ambition – the vice the Greeks called hubris. [...] (Fry 2017: 18).

In socio-political terms "hubris" is used to represent the justification for retributive action. From a narrative perspective nemesis therefore represents the actions taken when a threshold of hubris is met and equilibrium, having been disestablished, must then be re-established through corrective measures. The *Sicario* films represent a depiction of operatives of covert US agencies as representing nemesis in the form of covert action. A report that sits between both the narrative and political dimensions of this debate already exists: In 1994, while researching for the Office of Research and Development (RAND) under the aegis of the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the researcher David Ronfeldt identified something which he conceptualises as the "Hubris-Nemesis Complex" (Ronfeldt 1994). Ronfeldt's report details both the way in which antagonistic relationships operate between the US and leaders of other countries and describes how interactions between the US and other nations may fall into a routine of conflict based on personality, hubris and retribution.

Ronfeldt's research indicates that there is a structure to this relationship that is often dictated by the actions of leaders on both sides, and that the American retributive justice is summoned as a consequence of hubris, where

> hubris is the capital sin or pride, and thus the antithesis of two ethics that the Greeks valued highly: *aidos* (humble reverence for law) and *sophrosyne* (self-restraint, a sense of proper limits) (Ronfeldt 1994: 2).

The function of nemesis is to re-establish equilibrium after the threshold of hubris is reached, where

> [h]ubris above all is what attracted Nemesis, who then retaliated to humiliate and destroy the pretender, often through terror and devastation. Thus she was an agent of destruction. The battle won, she did not turn to constructive tasks of renewal and redemption—that was for others to do. Yet her behavior was never a matter of pure angry revenge. There were high, righteous purposes behind her acts, for she intervened in human affairs primarily to restore equilibrium when it was badly disturbed (Ronfeldt 1994: 3).

This destructive intervention is characteristic of the portrayal of US interventions in Latin America within cinema, and the US-Mexico border provides justification for retribution.

3) Nemesis and Border Crossing

The function of the border in cinematic narratives is to act as a frontier in a particularly North American sense. The first major narrative focus of *Sicario* concerns the extradition of Guillermo Díaz, the brother of Manual Díaz (Bernardo Saracino), a lieutenant of the Sonora Cartel. During the course of this rendition the team of US covert operatives are stalled by traffic crossing the border and stalked by two cars of armed gang members seeking to curtail the

extradition. A firefight ensues, with all eight gang members being killed, publically, at the border crossing. The following dialogue ensues over the radio communications of the US operatives; "This is going to be on the front page of every newspaper in America", to which another replies, "No it won't. They [the gang members] won't even make the paper in El Paso".

The border/frontier acts as a license for actions of retributive justice in a manner which would not be as acceptable were it to take place on US soil. To support this, the *Sicario* films depict the necessity of the recruitment and empowerment of local operatives to undertake extrajudicial activities for mutual benefit. Alejandro Gillick (Benicio Del Toro) – the secondary protagonist of *Sicario* and the primary protagonist of *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* – is empowered by the inter-agency task force to undertake extrajudicial illegal activity up to and including kidnapping (*Sicario: Day of the Soldado*)[2] and assassination (*Sicario*)[3]. Gillick is covertly empowered to do so as part of the task force, but is also empowered in narrative terms; his wife and children were murdered by Fausto Alarcón (Julio Cesar Cedillo), and so Gillick enacts "high, righteous" destruction: Gillick kills Alarcón, but not before killing his wife and children in front of him at their dinner table.

Gillick's presence helps justify the "righteous" nature of the task force operation and empowers American operatives at the expense of Mexican agency. For the US, the structural function of the border in the construction of narrative is to permit "lift[ing] local history from the confines of antiquarianism into *mythic meaning*" (May 1991: 93). However, representing the border as empowering US intervention leads to nemesis as a "dynamic motif" (Todorov 1977: 220), and the conclusion of the story represents the new equilibrium. Nemesis demonstrates a way by which this equilibrium is forced into being. With reference to Propp, Todorov highlights in this context the importance of the genre:

> Propp (following Joseph Bediér) distinguishes constant motifs from variable motifs and calls the former 'functions', the latter 'attributes' […] But the constancy or the variability of a predicate can be established only within a genre (in Propp's case, the Russian fairy tale); it is a generic and not general distinction here, propositional) (Todorov 1997: 220).

In generic terms the *Sicario* films are political thrillers with features of action but, crucially, through their interaction with the border-frontier they also operate within the same generic space as the Western. Mexico, to the inter-agency task force portrayed in the *Sicario* films, is a land of violence and paranoia. While travelling to Juárez, Steve Forsing (Jeffery Donovan) – a member of the task force – notes:

[2] See Sollima (2018).
[3] See Villeneuve (2015).

> You know, 1900s, President Taft went to visit President Díaz. Took 4,000 men with him. And it almost was called off. Some guy, had a pistol. Was going to walk right up to Taft and just blow his brains out. But it was avoided. 4000 troops. Do you think he felt safe? [Laughs].

This generic malleability means that Mexico – or, at least, this representation of Mexico – becomes "disembodied, known by words alone" (Slotkin 1992: 311). Slotkin writes that, as a country, Mexico represents "mythic space par excellence" (Slotkin 1992: 311); as a narrative device it has been used for "political utility" (Slotkin 1992: 415) by film studios since at least 1939. Slotkin highlights Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) as a particular instance of a "Mexico Western", which brought together the "populist mythology of the outlaw story, its concern with the problem of domestic justice, and the counterinsurgency mystique of the gunfighters-in-Mexico, which reflects on American's role in world affairs" (Slotkin 1992: 594). Gillick, in turn, represents (at least in part) that which Selbo refers to as the "classic Western protagonist"; he "simply cannot live with himself if he does not follow his own deeply embedded convictions". He, like William Munny (Clint Eastwood) in *Unforgiven*, "must avenge, do what 'he must do' and enter the final violent climax of the film story" (Selbo 2015: 196f.).

For narratives of US intervention, the border therefore begins to represent a frontier, and this frontier represents license for the characters crossing it to fulfill whatever mission they are required to complete. The primary issue with this conferment of agency is that, through the way by which it is represented, it comes in itself to represent a form of hubris; to return to Ronfeldt, this is problematic in that

> [i]t led people to presume that they were above ordinary laws, if not laws unto themselves—to presume they deserved to exceed the fate and fortune ordained by the gods. Acts of hubris aroused envy among the gods on Mt. Olympus and angered them to restore justice and equilibrium (Ronfeldt 1994: 2).

The narratives of both *Sicario* and *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* are predicated on the punishment of Mexican drug cartels for acting as if they are above "ordinary laws", thus provoking the ire of the United States of America. Even if the allegory is potentially over-literal, it could be argued that the *Sicario* films present the United States as believing themselves to be Olympus. This is particularly evident within the narrative of the second film, wherein a cartel angers the US government by seemingly becoming complicit in aiding the transportation of Islamist terrorists across the US-Mexican border. This is discovered first through the attempted apprehension of an immigrant who commits suicide rather than be taken by the border patrol and compounded by the suicide-bombing by three operatives of a Kansas supermarket.

Having aggravated the US, these attacks – constituting the inciting incident for the narrative of the film – lead to a statement by the fictional US Secretary of Defence James Riley, which directly outlines how the film represents Ronfeldt's "hubris-nemesis" complex;

> Our intense focus on recovery and assisting the injured and the families of those who have been killed is matched only by our determination to prevent more attacks. A message to our attackers. Your bombs do not terrify us. They empower us. They empower us to send you something that is truly terrifying: the full weight of the United States military (Riley in Sollima 2018).

The key phrase here is "truly terrifying"; per Ronfeldt's discussion, as highlighted above, Nemesis – once hubris had justified her intervention – took on the role of being the one "who then retaliated to humiliate and destroy the pretender, often through terror and devastation" (Ronfeldt 1994: 3). To reiterate; "[t]hus she was an agent of destruction. The battle won, she did not turn to constructive tasks of renewal and redemption—that was for others to do" (Ronfeldt 1994: 3).

4) Equilibrium and Representation

The key word from Riley's speech, however, is "empower". Hollywood cinema has a tendency to use travelling to Latin American countries as empowering protagonists to manipulate, disestablish or reestablish equilibrium – both narratively and, often, politically or socially – while denying or restricting the agency of the country in question to, effectively, sort out their own problems. Narratives of this form are not locked to a particular genre, and several examples from both multiple genres and mediums can easily be highlighted.

McTiernan's *Predator* (1987) establishes the need for covert intervention predicated on Russian involvement in an unnamed Latin American country. Until the science fiction element of the titular character becomes obvious the American mercenaries are told, by their unwilling rescuee Anna, that the force killing them one by one is "the jungle", as if "it just came alive". When Americans flee to Mexico they encounter vampires (e.g. in Rodriguez's *From Dusk Till Dawn* 1996), quarantine zones filled with extra-terrestrials (in Edwards' *Monsters* 2010), or corrupt military *juntas* (in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* 1969; see also Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption* 2010). This is in line with the portrayal of Mexicans fleeing to America as illegal aliens as seen in Sonnenfeld's *Men in Black* (1997). The most outlandish example of Latin American representation would potentially be found in *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands* (Ubisoft 2017). Within the narrative of the game a drug cartel has fully taken over multiple regions of Bolivia; despite their seeming reach and grasp, a single team of four American Special Forces operatives destabilizes the entire regime and restores peace and order

to the country. Mexico, however, is a place for American drug barons to operate with impunity (*Extreme Prejudice*, Hill 1987) even as their old friends try to stop them. In this last case Powers Boothe – who plays Cash Bailey, the primary antagonist of the film, said when later interviewed:

> Thematically, men standing up for themselves and making their way in the world is a theme that's been in movies throughout the world. But it's particularly an American genre, and it has to do, in my mind, with the development of our nation: you can do anything you're strong enough to do; right is right, and wrong is wrong. And at least in the movies, right wins out (Farkis 2019: 14f.).

In this context, Mexico forms a backdrop for narratives that repeatedly ignore Mexican agency. Mexican cinema does produce its own border narratives across different genres; Aldama (2013) provides multiple examples of northward-facing narratives. Crime narratives such as *Los bastardos* (2008), *El evangelista* (2006) and *Ladrón que roba a ladrón* (2007) sit alongside what Aldama identifies as more spiritual narratives such as *40 días* (2009) and *Santitos* (1999). "Border-crossing films", for Aldama, tend to highlight "a spiritual journey" or the issue of "bleak economic prospects", or both (Aldama 2013: 62f.). In terms of a national film industry, however, Mexico has – like many other countries – a history of trouble competing with Hollywood in terms of output. Mora highlights two key historical issues with this; firstly, that of output, as from the beginnings of the industry:

> From a peak production in 1919 of fourteen films, including a newsreel series that reached seventy editions, Mexican filmmakers' output gradually declined until in 1923 only two films were made, and in 1924 apparently none. Production increased to about seven movies in 1925 but the popularity of Hollywood films was a challenge that the undercapitalized and largely unoriginal national companies were unable to overcome. The United States was producing between five hundred and seven hundred features a year by the early 1920s, a gargantuan industry that was backed by an aggressive marketing organization throughout the world. In 1923, for instance, First National Pictures opened its own distribution offices in Mexico City and not long afterwards Universal, Paramount and Fox followed suit (Mora 2005: 22).

Secondly, Mora highlights the issue of the "traditional enmity" toward Mexicans "in the Southwestern United States" – a historical issue dating back to before 1848, which "generated a legacy of hatred, suspicion and bigotry" (Mora 2005: 24). Mexicans, in Westerns among other genres, were depicted as "conniving, untrustworthy persons who usually operate outside the law" (Mora 2005: 24). These films, however, were less likely to be exported to Mexico for obvious reasons, leaving audiences less familiar with the growing image of the "Mexican greaser" of Westerns. Hollywood cinema evidenced a shift identified by Aldama "from exotic and hypererotic to dirty, degenerate and drug addicted" (Aldama 2013: 75).

Thus far this article has attempted to establish three main points. After introducing the idea of narrative equilibrium through reference to Todorov (1969) it has put forward the idea that nemesis, in the sense of retributive justice, can form either a part of the mechanism or the mechanism itself for the reestablishment of narrative equilibrium. I have linked this to the sociopolitical research undertaken by Ronfeldt following his own direct involvement with research centred on the Mexican military (Ronfeldt 1994). I have subsequently tried to give more context to an assessment of North American cinematic representations of Mexico as an "inglorious, larger-than-life silver-screen canvas" casting "a shadow over Mexico" (Aldama 2013: 75). It is within this shadow that the framework of the *Sicario* films operates. In narrative terms *Sicario* attempts to demonstrate that this shadow means it is no longer clear what 'righteous', 'right' or 'winning' are. In the film, Graver explains this in the following terms:

> Medellin? Medellin refers to a time when one group controlled every aspect of the drug trade, providing a measure of order which we could control. And until someone finds a way to convince 20% of the population to stop snorting and smoking that shit, order's the best we can hope for (Graver in Villeneuve 2015).

The problem has no solution; the best that can be hoped for is attempts to manipulate the equilibrium of the situation through extrajudicial intervention. Within both *Sicario* films, a justification for retributory intervention is reached – the charnel-house and killing of American policemen in *Sicario,* and the cross-border transportation of Islamist terrorists in *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*. These constitute a threshold of hubris, after which Olympus must intervene through the actions of Nemesis. The justification for retributory intervention allows American involvement to represent the righteous, destructive nemesis of the Mexican drug cartels, an intrusion with no interest or intention of post-operative rebuilding, reconstruction or rehabilitation. Within *Sicario*, the motivation of the American-empowered nemesis, Alejandro Gillick, is simple – according to Graver: Gillick was forced to witness his wife being beheaded, and his daughter was thrown "into a vat of acid", and as such Gillick works "for anyone who will point him toward the people that made him". American empowerment is thus mutually beneficial: Gillick receives his revenge, and the inter-agency task force continue to manipulate what passes for "order".

Retributory intervention in *Sicario* is therefore relatively uncomplicated. Kate Mercer is attached to an inter-agency task force simply because FBI involvement gives said task force licence to operate within American borders. Mercer is used as a cipher to demonstrate the shadowed confusion of the operation; as an audience surrogate she is deliberately kept out of the loop and later used as bait to entrap a cartel-corrupted American police officer. If the

narrative of *Sicario* is darkly cynical, it is at least honestly so. Once Mercer's usefulness is outlived, and she has signed a document – at gunpoint – certifying that the operations were undertaken "by the book" – she is told by Gillick that "you should move to a small town where the rule of law still exists. You will not survive here. You are not a wolf, and this is a land of wolves now".

The "land of wolves" represents the new equilibrium reached through the action of nemesis, and this new equilibrium is effectively the shadow under which the narrative of *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* exists. Removed of restraint, Graver's task force now seeks to take greater, more drastic measures to destabilize cartel activity. The plot of the second *Sicario* film is driven by an operation to kidnap the daughter of a drug cartel leader and to provoke the consequences of this action. Within the narrative of the land of wolves, however, the problem becomes one of a lack of consistency. In attempting to portray a shadowy world of covert operations, *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* attempts to simultaneously justify American interventionism and to portray a world without the rule of law where all are expendable. The problem therein is a lack of consistency which is justified by changes in the 'narrative'. The inciting incident – a suicide bombing at the border followed by the subsequent suicide bombings at a Kansas City supermarket – are used as the justification for the kidnapping of a Mexican citizen. Isabel Reyes (Isabela Moner) – daughter of Carlos Reyes, who was responsible for the death of Gillick's family – is kidnapped and through rendition is taken to Texas, where Graver and Gillick stage a rescue operation to make it appear as if Isabel was taken by a rival cartel. The intention then becomes to return Isabel to Mexico.

This is where *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* becomes problematic. On entering Mexico the team are ambushed by their seemingly corrupted Mexican police escort. This leads to the following exchange between Graver and Cynthia Foards (Catherine Keener), his immediate superior;

> GRAVER: It was a Green-on-Blue, Cynthia. There was no other option. You wanted Afghanistan, now you got it.
>
> FOARDS: This isn't Afghanistan. This is our fucking neighbour! There are 54 million Americans with relatives there. And they're sitting there watching footage of dead Mexican police on Fox News.
>
> GRAVER: The police *were* the ambush. We had no choice. They attacked us.

The situation is further complicated when it emerges that the justification for the operation – the Kansas City bombings – were undertaken by domestic terrorists (from 'New Jersey') – which, for Foards, "changes the narrative". Once the justification for the operation is removed,

Foards orders a clean sweep – implying the killing of both Alejandro Gillick and Isabel Reyes – in order to minimise the risk of American involvement being exposed. Graver initially refuses to comply with the killing of Gillick, but ultimately his loyalty to Gillick represents an attempt by the narrative of *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* to humanise the face of covert operations. The agency's willingness to reply on disposable Mexican agents represents a counterpoint to this. Attempts at humanization are later further compounded by Graver's later actions – when his team rescues Isabel Reyes at the end of the narrative, he decides to take her in rather than kill her.

This leaves the second *Sicario* film, in its depiction of American interventionism, guilty of astonishing moral dissonance. It is acceptable, depending on the rules of engagement – or in the case of the ambush by corrupt police – to extrajudicially kill Mexican men involved in the drug trade but it is unacceptable, by the logic of the same operative, to kill the teenage daughter of a cartel leader simply because plausible deniability is not worth, to Graver, the cost. It is worth noting that Gillick survives an execution and later recruits his teenage would-be executioner in the final scene of the film. The implication here therein is that the misused and abandoned empowered nemesis may now be turning his attention to his former handlers – something overshadowed by Graver earlier in the narrative.

5) Conclusion

The *Sicario* films can be accused of noble motives. In a cultural climate where representations of Mexican cartels are an increasingly prevalent narrative trope, the aim of the films – accounts based on bringing American covert interventions in the war on drugs out of the shadows – are seemingly honest in their intentions. At a time where Mexican cartels are both a target for John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in *Rambo: Last Blood* (2019) and a source of retirement income for Earl Stone (Clint Eastwood) in *The Mule* (2018), the *Sicario* films constitute an attempt at representing the murkiness of the shadows, even if they do not fully commit to a relentless bleakness.

This problem – that of, effectively, not committing to bleakness – is structural in nature, as the *Sicario* films represent complex narratives that attempt to portray American intervention as problematic at best and actively harmful at worst. However problematic the potentially anti-American standpoint is, the nemesis still receives his retribution in *Sicario*, and the princess is still saved in *Sicario: Day of the Soldado.* Finally, the problem is that these films are still produced as part of what Der Derian (2001) labels the "military-industrial-media-entertainment

network".[4] Even with cynicism and melancholy, the *Sicario* films form part of the idea of a situation where "[t]he US is depicted as a well intentioned leader fighting the scourge of drugs and corruption" (Mercille 2011: 1639). They attempt to demonstrate that these good intentions have led to an engagement with the hubris-nemesis complex, but with the hubris squarely positioned on the part of the US rather than a rogue state or foreign leader. Even with noble motives, the *Sicario* films evidence problematic representations of Mexico; the shadow from Olympus is the cloak under which the American Nemesis crosses the border to seek retribution.

Filmography

EASTWOOD, Clint (dir.) (2018): *The Mule*. Canada/USA: Warner Bros. et al. 116 min.

EASTWOOD, Clint (dir.) (1992): *Unforgiven*. USA: Warner Bros. 130 min.

EDWARDS, Gareth (dir.) (2010): *Monsters*. UK/Mexico/Guatemala: Protagonist Pictures et al. 94 min.

HILL, Walter (dir.) (1987): *Extreme Prejudice.* USA: Carolco Pictures. 104 min.

ESCALANTE, Amat (dir.) (2008): *Los bastardos*. Mexico/France/USA: Mantarraya Producciones et al. 90 min.

GRÜNBERG, Adrian (dir.) (2019): *Rambo: Last Blood*. USA et al.: Lionsgate et al. 89 min.

GRÜNBERG, Adrian (dir.) (2012): *Get the Gringo*. USA/Mexico: Icon Productions et al. 96 min.

MARTÍN, Juan Carlos (dir.) (2008): *40 días*. Mexico: Catatonia Films. 101 min.

MCTIERNAN, John (dir.) (1987): *Predator*. USA/Mexico: 20th Century Fox et al. 107 min.

MENENDEZ, Joe (dir.) (2007): *Ladrón que roba a ladrón*. USA: Narrow Bridge Films / Panamax Films. 98 min.

RODRIGUEZ, Robert (dir.) (1996): *From Dusk Till Dawn*. USA/Mexico: Dimension Films et al. 108 min.

SOLLIMA, Stefano (dir.) (2018): *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*. USA/Mexico: Columbia Pictures et al. 122 min.

SONNENFELD, Barry (dir.) (1997): *Men in Black*. USA: Columbia Pictures et al. 98 min.

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Contested Border Crossings in Shifting Political Landscapes: Anti-Invasion Discourses and Human Trafficking Representations in US Film and Politics

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1) Introduction

"[T]he US–Mexico border has been invented and re-invented by the camera, which has selected certain clichés and developed its own topoi" (Dell'agnese 2005: 205). The demonisation of those on the southern side of that border by Donald Trump, the divisive symbolism of his border wall and his use of terms such as "invasion", "murderers", "rapists", and "bad hombres"[1] have incited and bolstered racism, nationalism and securitisation discourses.[2] Such discourses are reflected in media narratives which, as Susan Mains notes, have increasing capacity to "fuel sentiments such as fear and terror, particularly in relation to how and who can travel across and between social and physical borders" (Mains 2004: 253). Such contested spaces are constructed, literally and textually, to constrain the Other on the outside, whilst keeping he or she visible to perpetuate anxiety. As such, Mains argues, cinema "provides a context for producing and interrogating discourses of nationalism, nativism, and fear" (Mains 2004: 253).

Recent work by scholars including that of Kristine Vanden Berghe (2019), Claudia Hachenberger (2019), Oswaldo Zavala (2018), interrogates narcocultural discourses and traces the cultural imaginary surrounding cross-border – particularly Mexican – trafficking. For instance, in her study, 'The US–Mexico Border in American Movies: A Political Geography Perspective', Dell'agnese (2005) analyses how the US film industry has imagined the cross-border experience and the meaning of the border as an expression of geopolitical discourse. She notes that in various cinematic inventions and re-inventions, the border has been constituted as a racialised and gendered space that is fraught with masculine and feminine stereotypes and criminalisation. Building on the notion of gendered border space, we argue that contemporary nationalist and nativist political argumentation is embedded in some popular filmic texts, reifying masculine border stereotypes into a form of toxic masculinity.

[1] See Zavala (2018), in particular, the section "Deportaciones, Xenofobia y los "*Bad* Hombres"".
[2] See Graham et al. (2019), Heuman / González (2018), Inwood (2019) and Pastor (2017).

Whilst mainstream films have centered on cross-border drug trafficking since the mid-20th century,[3] only recently have they addressed human trafficking at the US–Mexico border. The most recent of these, *Rambo: Last Blood* (Grunberg 2019), is the focus of this study. While Rambo's character has historically elicited hyper-masculine and militaristic stereotypes, this most recent film in the popular franchise presents a character exemplifying behaviors and characteristics associated with a toxic masculinity rooted in rage-based violence as a product of patriarchy.[4] Rambo's character further reflects a toxic masculine rage rooted in assumptions of white male victimisation due to increases in immigration, feminisms, and multicultural concerns highlighted by the political right.[5] *Rambo: Last Blood*'s fear-based discourses of Mexican sex trafficking cartels align admirably with the anti-Mexican rhetoric of Trump and other right and alt-right politicians and pundits.

2) Contextualising Rambo as Anglo-American Saviour

To analyse the filmic representations of Mexican identity in *Rambo: Last Blood* (Grunberg 2019), we argue the most recent characterisation of the iconic American cinematic anti-hero, John James Rambo, is that of an anti-hero saviour of Anglo-American cultural values at the US-Mexico border. We are informed by Mary Christianakis' and Richard Mora's work on the discursive "construction of the U.S.-Mexico border as a boundary meant to deter and constrain undesirables[, thus,] contribut[ing] to the 'securitization discourse' that frames the border security as imperative" (Mora / Christianakis 2015: 87). Our own analyses of racialised immigration 'invasion' fears that play a central role in securitisation discourse,[6] amplified by the rhetoric of Trump, will also be employed to critique *Last Blood.* We build on our recent work on anti-hero hypermasculinity, violence and militaristic gun narratives that validate aggressive action against perceived threats of the Other.[7]

As a literary and cinematic trope, the anti-hero is often associated with the uniquely American western genre.[8] Serving as a liminal character, he[9] often assumes traditionally heroic roles and actions whilst his personality and aesthetics are primarily aligned with that of villain or, at least, vigilante. The goal of personal freedom is translated into his choices to speak and

[3] See Elena Dell'agnese's (2005: 213ff.) discussion of films ranging from *Borderline* (Seiter 1950) to Steven Soderbergh in *Traffic* (2000), and Zavela's scholarship (2008; 2014; 2018) on narcocultural discourses / *narcocultura* as the cultural imaginary surrounding the Mexican and cross-border drug trade, including his analysis of *narcocultura* which first emerged in the 1970s through *narcocorridos* (drug ballads).
[4] See Haider (2016).
[5] See Johnson (2017)
[6] See Newsom / Lengel (2019).
[7] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press).
[8] See Poulos (2012) and Soberon (2017).
[9] Given the preponderance of anti-heroes are male, we use pronouns he, his and him throughout this study.

act out regardless of societal, political and legal norms. He, thus, operates outside accepted institutional systems and constructs of law and order which, he perceives, betrayed him in the past and will not serve him at present or in the future.

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, a military anti-hero characterisation developed out of the gunslinger-cowboy archetype as a response to US American discomfort with its involvement in the Second Indochina War.[10] Phillips and Strobl describe this American anti-hero characterisation as a "hyper-masculine former military man who believed himself wronged by the system, he became a lone wolf on-the-run and used violence in the hope of clearing his name and holding his alleged 'wrong-doers' accountable" (Phillips / Strobl 2015: 121).[11] Cinematic anti/heroes, after being persecuted within the system, display a hyper-masculine personification refusing victimisation and transcending norms and restrictions that would otherwise reinforce his emasculation. Such is the case with Rambo, who, after being victimised by police brutality, takes his revenge on the police and entire town of Hope and, in the subsequent films, protects his fellow US Americans abroad. Finally, he stops the infiltration and invasion of the US and, ultimately, American women's bodies.

Rambo's evolution moves between antagonist and protagonist in the nearly four-decade filmic franchise, bridging heroic and villainous characteristics often associated with contemporary anti-heroes.[12] To trace Rambo's character from the book *First Blood* (Morrell 1972), through the iconic hyper-masculine action hero played by Sylvester Stallone, we analyse Rambo's anti-hero/hero transformation as it is aligned with shifting US politics, and obfuscationist and revisionist US military history and alliances. Morrell's book and the first film that bears its name (Kotcheff 1982) are eloquent and evocative indictments of war or, at least, one specific unpopular war, and the refusal of many in the US to attempt to understand the devastating impact of Vietnam on those who survived it. Both the book and film open with Rambo appearing as a long-haired, anti-establishment drifter. The filmic narrative reveals an optimistic young man backgrounded by an unusually sunny, mountainous US Pacific

[10] Also widely known as the Vietnam War or Vietnam Conflict and, in Vietnam, *Kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước* [Resistance War against the American Empire to Save the Nation].

[11] Philips and Strobl constructed this definition to talk about a real-life 2013 mass murderer in Los Angeles and that murderer's manifesto. Note the similarity to the introductory voiceover to *The A-Team* television series about a group of military anti-heroes: "In 1972, a crack commando unit was sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit. These men promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government they survive as soldiers of fortune" (Lupo / Cannell 1983). Similarly, early movie posters for *First Blood* highlight John Rambo's past in Vietnam, illustrating Stallone's character holding a military-style machine gun and boasting the tagline, "This time he's fighting for his life". *Rambo* and *The A-Team* were two of the most prominent post-Vietnam military anti-hero popular culture artifacts of the 1980s, and both featured anti-heroes traumatised by betrayal of the system and on the run from the law.

[12] See Kellner (1995), Warner (1992) and Washington (2019). For recent work on representation of the (anti-)hero in Spanish and Latin American cinema, see Davis (2020).

Northwest, an idyllic cabin by a glittering lake. Rambo seeks to reconnect with the last surviving soldier in his battalion, only to discover that he has died from carcinogenic effects of Agent Orange. His calm and smiling demeanour quickly and forever fading, Rambo departs, likely reflecting on how his only remaining friend was killed by his own nation's military industrial complex. Likely mistaken for a hippy draft dodger heading to Canada, Rambo is arrested by the Hope, Washington sheriff and Korean War veteran, Will Teasle (Brian Dennehy), and subsequently subjected to unwarranted police brutality that triggers Rambo's past prisoner of war trauma.

Rambo is his own particular category of anti-hero, reminiscent of those featured in mid-twentieth century film noir, what Staiger termed the "fallen-man" (Staiger 2008: 73ff.). Rambo's descent into fallen-man status begins with his highly-decorated war veteran standing, to his and other Vietnam veterans' beleaguered return home, and to Rambo's arrest in the first few minutes of *First Blood*. Given "[t]here's nothing more dangerous in this world than a humiliated man" (Buecker in Romero 2017), humiliation by both police and war protestors is the fuel that slides Rambo further into anti-hero status. He begins working outside hegemonic norms to re-create himself and focus his anger at his country for turning on Vietnam veterans after they returned home and the multiple socio-economic and political structures that repressed him.

At the time of its release, *First Blood's* representation of the military anti-hero reflected a nascent form of aggressive masculinity in US society. The topoi underlying this gender construct, media patterns, and cultural influences that construct the contemporary anti-hero have been increasingly salient since.[13] He is also associated with contemporary mass shootings and militaristic behaviors.

The post-Vietnam military anti-hero developed as both a critique of the war itself and of the military-industrial complex responsible for that anti-hero's creation. This characterisation would dramatically evolve through a Reagan-era Cold-War military archetype and eventually into a post-9/11 military anti-hero,[14] reflective less of a critique of the military and political forces that constructed him, and instead focusing on a need to defend those same systems and

[13] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press) for our historical analysis of the anti-hero archetype, rising above social norms and restrictions and taking necessary action to promote the rights and welfare of individuals about whom he cares, whilst reclaiming a mythic American past. This archetype evokes, conflates and reconstructs notable historical figures such as James Butler 'Wild Bill' Hickok and Jesse James into American folk legends.

[14] Post-9/11 anti-heroes are standard as are those of the post-Vietnam variety. The in-between film anti-heroes are almost comic-book characters rather than realistic ones and fight much more existential threats (e.g., the rise of Batman film success, *Wolverine* and the *X-Men*, wherein villains become mega-wealthy, as in *Wall Street* or *American Psycho* characterisations, or Terminator-style aliens/monsters/robots.

ideals against the threat of a rising Islamist and non-American, terrorist machine. Commenting on the reception of the various films in the Rambo franchise, David Morrell, author of the original novel *First Blood* (1972), notes that Rambo has "always been a litmus test for people's personal politics. People see what they want to see" (Morell in Sacks 2019).

Shifting geopolitical contexts over four decades, and the US role in it, can be traced through Rambo's overall story arc. Whereas *First Blood* highlighted the trauma of being a prisoner of war and post-trauma of Vietnam War veterans returning to their homeland, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos 1985) appears to celebrate war or, at least, serve as a consolation for the Vietnam War; "processing of that trauma through the presentation of an exuberant return to an active, potent, successfully interventionist America" (Hutchings 2013: 56). Thus, it is no surprise that, given *First Blood Part II*'s release at the height of the Reagan era, the USA celebrated Rambo.

The premise of *Part II* appears to align well with Reagan-era individualistic egoism: Rambo's former direct report, Colonel Samuel Trautman (Richard Crenna), offers him the chance to be released from prison (where he ended up at the conclusion of the first film) if he returns to Vietnam to search for US prisoners of war (POWs) at the camp from which Rambo escaped in 1971. Trautman promises Rambo a US Presidential pardon if the mission succeeds. Rambo asks, "Do we get to win this time?" Trautman responds, "It's up to you this time". The answer is no, however, not due to Rambo's lack of hyper-masculine warrior expertise. Rather, it is the fault of a government bureaucrat, Marshall Murdock (Charles Napier), who thwarts the mission to protect the US government from the public relations nightmare that will ultimately occur if the public learns of POWs still captive in Vietnam more than a decade after the US exited the failed war effort. Any *Part II's* political nuance is lost on much of the US audience,[15] including Reagan, who saw the film, concluded Rambo was Republican and this all-American warrior would be welcome to assist in the next global conflict.

In 'The Reagan Hero: Rambo', Jeffords takes an embodied rhetorical approach to Rambo's body as metaphor for American militaristic protectionism, able to "defend its country/its town/its values against outsiders" (Jeffords 2004: 142). The identity of these outsiders, too, is a litmus test, with enemy Others shifting over the four decades of the franchise. The types and numbers of those outsiders have reflected not only militaristic geopolitical shifts, but also

[15] Very little attention in the film's reviews was paid to Rambo's anger and grief for the POWs still in Vietnam. For instance, when Colonel Trautman tries to persuade Rambo to rejoin the US Special Forces, luring him in with the promise of another Medal of Honor for his actions, Rambo, fighting back tears and rage, responds saying the soldiers he rescued deserve that Medal far more. Further, Rambo said he only wants the same thing as the rescued soldiers – for their country to love them as much as its soldiers love their country.

increasing fear mongering of the right, which created and responded to a perceived need for an increasingly active and potent America. This could be reflected in the rising body counts of the Rambo franchise from Part II onward, but also expanding excesses of Hollywood action spectacles: The *First Blood* body count was one, unintentional death. In the second film in the series, *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* Rambo killed 74 people and, at the time of its release, *Rambo III* (MacDonald 1988) was the most violent film ever made with 132 deaths overall, 78 kills by Rambo.[16] Each subsequent film after *First Blood* increased its visual focus on Rambo's body, extreme close ups of his arms, back and torso, all illustrative of a "physically potent incarnation of US exceptionalism" (Hutchings 2013: 59).

The potent exceptionalist joins forces with the Afghanistan Mujadhadin in *Rambo III,* an alliance that exemplifies the most interesting geopolitical shift in the franchise and illustrates that US exceptionalism can encompass both military might and the erasure of awkward previous alliances. Unsurprisingly, the original dedication at the close of *Rambo III* – "…to the brave Mujahideen fighters of Afghanistan" – was changed after September 2001 "…to the gallant people of Afghanistan" to help erase the US memory of its own training and funding of the Mujahideen, which was presumed to be linked with Al Qaeda. Other changes also diminished political nuances. For instance, in the fourth film, *John Rambo* (Stallone 2008), as he is being talked into saving captured missionaries bringing medical aid to the oppressed Karen ethnic minority in Burma, Rambo makes a surprisingly astute assessment of geopolitical conflict: "Old men start wars. Young men fight them. Everyone in the middle gets killed. And nobody tells the truth". Stallone left that philosophy of war on the cutting room floor. What remained were more typical Hollywood lines like "When you're pushed, killin's as easy as breathing".

3) Contextualising the Trafficker/Abductor Other

Being pushed to kill is particularly salient for the US American anti-hero as he protects "his own". This is a common narrative of mainstream US action films that highlight human trafficking, when enacted by the (foreign) man of color taking the white woman. Historically, representations of abduction have been present in film for more than a century, from *The Train Wreckers* (Porter 1905) to *King Kong* (Cooper / Schoedsack 1933) to *Dr. No* (Young 1962) to the 'new wave' of princess films, feature racialized masculinity and the seizure of the white damsel in distress. The fear of abduction, coupled with the rise in awareness of human

[16] Along with its body count excesses, with production costs totaling $63 million USD, *Rambo III* was, at the time, the most expensive movie ever made.

trafficking, has given rise to a several commercially successful action films,[17] notably Pierre Morel's *Taken* (2008).[18]

In their critique of heteronormative masculinity in *Taken* (2008), Szörényi and Penelope Eate argue, "In spite of their ostensible concern about the exploitation of women", films that represent human and, specifically, sex trafficking do so

> as an occasion for the redemption and rehabilitation of the beleaguered white American male, appropriating the problem of trafficking in the service of a US-led neo-imperialism bolstered by masculinism and xenophobia, and implicitly problematising women's independence and justifying the control of their movements and sexuality (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 608).[19]

Further, such trafficking-centered films, particularly those situated in the corporate Hollywood model, are created and produced to both "entertain and absolve" (Vance 2012: 200).[20] For example, in *Taken*, ex-CIA agent Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson), uses his "very special set of skills" to save his daughter Kim (Maggie Grace) from sex traffickers in Paris. *Taken* and *Last Blood* play upon the same fears; whilst the invader is a different enemy Other, in *Taken*, an Albanian trafficking cartel, illustrative of post-9/11 Islamophobic invasion fears, both *Taken* and *Last Blood* are centered around what Szörényi and Eate note is a "standard plot: American hero faces evil villains and in a series of chases, gun battles and showdowns, triumphs and proves the superiority of his masculinity" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 611). Further, *Taken* and *First Blood* are deeply and troublingly gendered family narratives. Gender norms both enable and justify xenophobic approaches to the 'war on trafficking', and the ways that human and, particularly, sex trafficking narratives represent, in contradictory and unstable ways, the racially structured neo-imperialism that results. These tales of white US American men in crisis need to be understood as "assemblages" (Puar 2007: 32) where multiple and heterogeneous dimensions of gender and racialisation not only intersect, but also work together and proliferate across different contexts to produce a consistent and yet mobile politics of exclusion. Stories of family men in crisis, it emerges, have much to do with frames of war, and trafficking appears as a convenient site for the exposition of both. Thus, both Bryan Mills and John Rambo reclaim their position through superior US masculinity vis-à-vis racialised Others, whether it be Albanian or Mexican traffickers, in defense of US American women and children.[21]

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[17] An analysis of the numerous documentaries on human/sex trafficking is beyond the scope of this study.
[18] Coincidentally, another major release during the same year as *Taken* (2008) is the fourth of the Rambo franchise in which Rambo tries to save a white, Christian woman from Southeast Asian abductors.
[19] See, also, Baker (2014).
[20] See Andrijasevic (2007).
[21] See Szörényi / Eate (2014: 612) and *Trade* (Kreuzpaintner 2007), a German-American film centering on trafficking in Mexico which illustrates far more ambivalent representation of American men. Critics note it was a

4) Rambo as Political Litmus Test for an Increasingly Polarised, Barricaded USA

The present litmus test of Rambo's story arc in *Last Blood* (Grunberg 2019), the fifth film in the franchise, reflects current ethno-nationalist and anti-invasion discourses. Most notably, given Trump has focused his attention on "an invasion of our country with drugs, with human traffickers, with all types of criminals and gangs" (Trump in White House 2019), it is not surprising that, as Marquez notes, "Trump's border talking points sound like [a Hollywood film]" (Marquez 2019). Further, given the right's anti-immigration rhetorics and discursive focus on fear of invasion, it is certainly not surprising that reception of *Last Blood* is aligned along political factions, so much so that the alt-right press has actively commented on the 'overwrought' politically left readings and receptions of the film.

Rambo's fiercely independence and rugged strength is required for his, and his nation's survival, whether it be in a prisoner of war camp or at the borderlands. *Last Blood's* characterisation of Rambo reflects that of an ethno-nationalist anti-hero, focused on fighting back against the perceived oppression of white men the Trump era. He evokes fierce and aggressive independence associated with frontier mythology, preserving US America and its southern border. The setting of *Last Blood*, on a rural Bowie, Arizona horse ranch relatively close to the Mexican border, aligns with the American Western anti-hero trope and its frontier mythology. Whilst *Last Blood* reflects standards within the western film genre and how multiple historical narratives are interpreted and reinterpreted within the genre, it is driven by current socio-political and cultural narratives. Significantly the film highlights a new kind of manifest destiny that aligns with Trump's ideological and dread-mongering rhetorics: Rather than expand the USA, the goal is to protect and contain the existing space/borders.[22] Driving Trump's anti-immigration and MAGA discourses is fear – fear of loss of power, status, centrality and necessity. Kimmel, one of the earliest social critics of masculinity, argues American "manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us" (Kimmel 1996: 6). This is particularly the case for non-elite white men who have experienced an "aggrieved entitlement" (Kimmel 2017) particularly since the global financial crisis and its resultant rising income inequality, union bashing and housing insecurity,

US box office flop, perhaps because it "presents a compromised, non-violent, non-triumphalist image of North American masculinity". It is also noteworthy that the character, Veronica, a blonde-haired Eastern-European woman, is repeatedly raped by her Mexican captors. Despite the narrative centering on a young Mexican woman, Adriana, it is Veronica's face gracing the cover of the film's US DVD release. Perhaps most intriguing is that the trafficking cartel leader frequently prays to the Virgin Mary, for redemption of his involvement in the sex trade (see Baker 2014).

[22] See Crockford (2018).

all of which exacerbate "social and cultural anxieties confronting middle-class, white males in western societies" (Pierson 2019: 337).[23]

Since the close of the fourth film, simply titled *Rambo* (2008), Rambo has lived a quiet life on his late father's ranch he co-manages with Maria Beltran (Adriana Barraza) and her granddaughter, Gabriela (Yvette Monreal). Against Rambo's and Maria's advice, Gabriela travels to Mexico to find her estranged father and is subsequently drugged and abducted by a group of human traffickers. Rambo crosses the border to save Gabriela, is severely beaten and is nursed to recovery by Carmen Delgado (Paz Vega), who is investigating the trafficking cartel, led by brothers Victor (Óscar Jaenada) and Hugo Martínez (Sergio Peris-Mencheta) who murdered her sister.

Last Blood's central narrative on saving an abducted young woman and exerting revenge against the foreign Other who abducts her into a human/sex trafficking ring is aligned with the rise in white, ethno-supremacist hypermasculinity and narratives surrounding border security and anti-immigration and invasion discourses, post-9/11 Islamophobia, anti-feminism, and anti-LGBTQ.[24] Analysing popular cultural representations of human trafficking and, specifically, "the service of a US-led neo-imperialism bolstered by masculinism and xenophobia", Anna Szörényi and Penelope Eate argue human trafficking and, in particular sex trafficking, suggest an aspect of "the 'crisis' of white middle-class masculinity, one that clearly relates this to post 9–11 anxieties"(Szörényi / Eate 2014: 609). Szörényi and Eate note "trafficking narratives are also sites where contemporary anxieties about the role of the USA in global politics are worked at and reconfigured" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 608f.).[25]

The trafficking narrative highlighted in *Last Blood* echoes the perceived slipping away of US American power and its links with masculinised entitlement, dominance and control.[26] The representations of the traffickers in the film is consistent with the nativist arguments and "bad hombres" labels espoused by Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign (Robertson 2018).[27] Trump's insistence that "tremendous crime" comes across the Mexican border, paired with the combination of US-based violent forms of toxic masculinity directly contrasted with *machismo* and its association with Mexican cartel culture[28] reinforces the belief on the political right in the existence of attacks on white US culture and masculinity. The resulting conflict of violent,

[23] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press) for our discussion of the lack of understanding of socio-economic class, hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy by Trump's working-class white supporters.
[24] See Maruska (2009).
[25] See also Bickford (2018).
[26] For work on American exceptionalism in the age of Trump, see Johansen (2017).
[27] See Robertson (2018).
[28] See Ponce-Cordero (2017).

hyper-masculine characteristics serve as "an uncritical distraction from the underlying conditions of the emergence of trafficking-related violence in Mexico" (Baginski 2019: R36f.).[29]

In *Los Cárteles No Existen: Narcotráfico y Cultura en México* (2018), Oswaldo Zavala critiques the representations of violence at the US-Mexico border and the "state of narco-narratives as commercially successful myths" (Verduzco 2017: 80). In his work on Mexican narco-narratives Zavala asserts, "the lives of infamous men and their legends […] replace our scarce knowledge of real traffickers" (Zavala 2014: 345) critical approaches to narco-narratives – perhaps currently the most popular form of representation of death in cultural productions – share "the absence of a critical assessment of the narrations' relationship to their real referents" (Zavala 2014: 341). Kristine Vanden Berghe, too, argues for critical assessment. In *Narcos y Sicarios en la Ciudad Letrada* she notes the lack of critique of the dominant representations of heteronormative patriarchy of narco-narratives.[30] Whilst Zavala and Vanden Berghe focus on the literary mythos of drug trafficking, Lydia Cacho critiques the inadequate cinematic representations of human/sex trafficking in Mexico. Connecting these types of trafficking is relevant in that there are numerous studies indicating human trafficking is often controlled by those involved in drug trafficking.[31] In her analysis of the film *Las elegidas* (Pablos 2015) Cacho argues:

> La historia está llena de clichés, es tramposa, plagada de lugares comunes de quienes no se atreven a adentrarse en historias complejas […] Estos creadores no se atreven a explorar su propia mirada frente al sexismo para complejizar su obra y tal vez por eso terminan flotando en la superficie, allí mismo dejan a sus audiencias y lectores, llenos de rabia y sin entender o conocer nada nuevo. El peligro del cine de denuncia fallido es que cae en la apología de aquello que pretende denunciar. Una lástima (Cacho 2016).[32]

Robust interrogations of what Cacho has named "la psicología profunda del machismo" (Cacho 2016) in human trafficking, and in both Mexican and US cinema, are crucial. US-based toxic masculinity, which is constructed both with similar characteristics to the *machismo* associated with Mexican trafficking, is framed in direct conflict with *machismo*. US toxic masculinity or "strongman masculinity" emerges as alt-right political pushback against multicultural, feminist and immigration reform movements and espoused by nationalistic and nativist regimes to invoke an "imaginary of an authentic nation under threat" (Gökarıksel / Neubert / Smith 2019: abstract). This form of toxic masculinity, also labeled "fragile masculinity", is associated with

[29] See also Astorga (1995; 2007) and Barrueto (2014).
[30] See Vanden Berghe (2019).
[31] See Merläinen / Vos (2015) and Shelley (2012).
[32] For a critical analysis of *machismo* in film, see Simon-Lopez (2012).

mass shooters in the US who position themselves as victims of contemporary multiculturalism and feminism.[33] Thus, whilst the US hyper-masculine cinematic character might cross the border to free victimised women and girls, he does so by reinforcing their victim-status and dependency on rescue by a mythic strongman type of heroism.

The cinematic, social and political construction of US hypermasculinity can be extended to broader securitisation discourses. Trump's frequent fear mongering, to justify the need for militarisation and his border wall, illustrates fear of encroachment of the Other, into the homeland and into US American women and girls' bodies. Because of the encroaching Other, fear and anger from an imagined weak, invadable nation is illuminated in shifting politico-economic landscapes. Similarly, Szörényi and Eate argue it is not surprising that films concerning trafficking "centre on images of beleaguered heterosexual white men, non-coincidentally identified as having careers in policing, whose identity, initially in crisis, is redeemed through the rescue of the respective child–women of the films" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 611). The authors note these films' narratives, "like the US sanctioned narrative of trafficking, justify the violence and imperialism of these representatives of the US state. They also show how this violence and imperialism are inextricably linked with heteronormative models of the nuclear family, and with anxieties over US privilege and imperialist aggression" (Szörényi / Eate 2014: 611).

5) Cross-Border Reception of Last Blood

Reception of *Last Blood* by Latinx critics are critical of the anti-invasion sentiment of the narrative. Aguilar, for example, writes, "At the end of this atrociously mediocre production, you can almost hear a concerned racist saying, 'And that's why I would never let me daughter go to Mexico' or 'That's why we need the wall!' Let's hope they let this last blood bleed out till the last drop so that we don't get another nonsensical transfusion" (Aguilar in Remezcla Estaff 2019). Similarly, Betancourt (2019) critiques the "glaringly obvious racist optics (those Mexicans across the border are all bad)" (Betancourt in Remezcla Estaff 2019). Aguilar writes,

> One of Hollywood's favorite practices is to demonize Mexico (and Latin America in general) as a grotesquely lawless setting where hope has no place. This, in turn, dehumanizes anyone who lives there or comes from there. In Adrian Grunberg's *Rambo: Last Blood*, a new and unrequested installment in the mercenary saga, that depraved tradition tailored for the MAGA crowd is upheld (Aguilar in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

[33] See Myketiak (2016).

One key element highlighted by Latinx critics is the narrative that "hordes" are crossing the US-Mexico border, which is a key point in Trump's argument for a border wall. This is particularly noted in how the film highlights "the implication that Latinos in the United States should be terrified of Mexicans south of the border" (Birnam in Remezcla Estaff 2019). Within the narrative of the film, and within the narratives of Trumpian border wall calls, the border must be a place where invaders can cross easily and at-will. This is not the case for most Latinx border-crossers. Aguilar explains:

> Rambo ridiculously returns to the United States accompanied by a corpse in the passenger seat without going through customs or being chased by border patrol, yet my aunts have to wrap mole, queso, and rompope in clothing to sneak them in their luggage when they come visit. Later, heightening the absurdity, or perhaps to infer that Mexicans are actually invading, a horde of criminals riding in black SUVs arrives at Rambo's ranch. Again, whoever told these writers it was so simple to cross the border lied to them (Aguilar in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

Aguilar's critique is echoed by multiple Latinx voices, many of whom also argue that the film showcases over-the-top, racist Mexican sex trader depictions. Puig notes the film is "[r]acist in addition to being offensive in its sadism" and connects the racism to the El Paso mass murders:[34]

> This absurd gore-fest is exactly the movie we don't need in these times of racist hatred and excessive gun violence – especially in the wake of last month's mass shooting in El Paso targeting Mexicans, and the inhumane treatment of immigrants held at the U.S. border (Puig in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

Birnam further examines how the racism carries over into the film's cinematographic techniques, "Mexico is portrayed as a barren wasteland of traffickers and rapists, with the 'it is hell over there' message appearing even through the cinematographer's hues – dark and scary in Sonora, bright and sunny in Arizona" (Birnam in Remezcla Estaff 2019).

Critics in the USA focus more on the hyperpolitical imagery provided by the film and how that is marketed to a political right audience while masked as an action film. Some critics focus on the deconstruction of Rambo's character throughout the film franchise, with particular emphasis on how the film "betrays the character" by "morphing into a flag-waving, gun-toting symbol for angry Americans desperate to see the 'bad guys' from other countries suffer" (Barfield 2019). Still others see it for what it is – Hollywood violence for entertainment purposes:

[34] This refers to the 3rd August 2019 shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. The shooter, espousing racist and anti-immigration beliefs in his manifesto, murdered 22 and injured 24 shoppers, nearly all of whom are Latino/Latina. See Arango / Bogel-Burroughs / Benner (2019), Esquivel et al. (2019) and Hasan (2019).

> 'Rambo: Last Blood' Is A Rollicking Good Time Of Hyper-Violent Xenophobic Revenge Fantasies[title] […] It's all a setup for *Last Blood* to live out every assault rifle owner's worst fears and most insane fantasies about Mexico. The only way it could be more transparent is if Stallone had growled "I. Am. The Wall!" in his best *Judge Dredd* voice. (Mancini 2019).

Another, more extreme analysis argues *Last Blood* twists historical facts and contemporary data about immigration concerns and manifests destiny into a twister ideology and resultant aggressive behavior that echoes alt-right ideologies regarding the anticipation of extinction and need to bolster their own population.[35] Savlov explains, "the alt-right will surely have a rollicking good time watching this iteration of the cunning, ruthless vet make mincemeat out of 40 or so Mexican sex-and-drug traffickers" (Savlov 2019). Barfield echoes this concern, stating the film "ditches any semblance of story and unabashedly pushes an intolerant xenophobic political agenda, that'll allow justification for bigoted, hateful feelings because Sylvester Stallone says it's ok" (Barfield 2019). A focused reading of the film with regard to alt-right ideology implies that Mexican "invaders" are part of a global conspiracy toward 'white genocide' of 'white replacement'.[36] Disturbingly, this interpretation illustrates a link between how the anti-hero characterisation of John Rambo in the most recent film can be read as heroic behavior by those in the alt-right, particularly as it directly echoes the language in the manifestos of the New Zealand and El Paso shooters.[37]

This interpretation situates the role of the military anti-hero as one taking 'necessary' action in alt-right narratives. Whilst not exclusively[38] focusing on the perceived threat of the Other encroaching upon the pure homeland, alt-right individuals and groups have avowed the anti-hero identity through actions and discourses that illuminate ethno-nationalist reclaiming of notions of 'progress' and 'equality', rejecting current progressive multicultural, immigration, and wealth-distribution arguments as counter-productive to actual progress. The right and the alt-right produces its own heroic figures, most of whom fit well within this anti-hero framework. The resulting metaphor of the disenfranchised anti-hero suggests that systemic empowerment is confined to specific masculine performances. Further, alt-right narratives promote a perceived displacement of the white, cisgender breadwinner man paralleled with an increase in feminist, LGBTQ, multicultural, and immigration-based visibility. The perceived disempowerment of men has been highlighted in both alt-right and mainstream media. Alt-right

[35] See Barfield (2019), Le (2017); and Schager (2019).
[36] See Schager (2019).
[37] See Frazin (2019), Newsom / Lengel (2019) and Schwartzburg (2019).
[38] We have also critiqued the 'incel' movement's anti-heroes, most notably the mass murderer in Santa Barbara, California. See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press).

discourses, echoing the perceived displacement of men with Trumpian proclamations such as "[i]t is 'a very scary time for young men in America' […] [but] women are doing great" (Trump in Diamond 2018), highlight how these misogynist constructs are becoming mainstream ideals.[39]

Trump's "very scary time" for young (and not so young, white) men in America, due to their perceived displacement, is exacerbated by the mediated, filmic and widely reported successes of men and women whose identity is situated in multicultural and multi-gendered categories. This "scary time" evokes US American male fears of perceived cultural erasure and impotence of white masculinity and, thus, calls for an (anti)hero ready to defend American rights and freedoms. Here, the imagery of the western remains dominant in the reclaiming of manifest destiny and individual freedom. Further, as Schager argues, *Last Blood* is fitting "for a soldier who can't stop reliving past American failures in order to come out on top the second time around, Rambo gets his very own Alamo to win in *Last Blood* – against, notably, the very types of Mexican 'monsters' that our present commander-in-chief warns are intent on overrunning (and overtaking) our nation" (Schager 2019).[40]

Given the perception of the white man 'under siege' has restricted masculinity to a fixed position, we see more nuanced understandings of how Rambo has situated over time as the political landscape in the USA has shifted along the left-right spectrum. Rambo as trope highlights destabilising restrictions within the systemic architectures of power while simultaneously promoting the hegemonic aspects of the trope within intersecting dominant cultural, economic and political systems.

Rambo's alignment with the right, perceived or actual, has continued been used to bolster American militaristic protectionism and critique its failures. For example, in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001, Gawish Abdel Karim, a chauffeur for an Asian embassy in Cairo, told an Agence France Presse reporter Americans now "find themselves in a science fiction scenario – this time Rambo's not there to save the White House" (in Berenger 2007: 227). In this context, the Rambo trope espouses survivalist rhetoric evolving from historical and radicalised narratives championed by nationalists and white supremacists. This rhetoric employs hyper-masculinities, violence and militaristic gun narratives to validate aggressive

[39] Trump's own misogynist voice, coupled with his actions defending himself and other (mostly white) men from sexual harassment and assault charges is supported, at least in part, by many conservative voters and audiences that allow his fame and position to justify a "boys will be boys" attitude, thus normalizing this behavior. The values espoused serve as justification among the far-right for a masculine authority figure to, as stated by French in the extreme-right news site, *National Review*, "set things right" because we "no longer raise boys to be men" (French 2015).

[40] See also Behnken (2015) and Domínguez Ruvalcaba (2007).

action against perceived threats. These are the narratives that ground anti-terrorist militarism, and reinforce racialised fears and beliefs that nationalists are the rightful heirs to their power. This is evidenced by President Bush's reception of a 2002 *Der Spiegel* satirical cover for a feature article lamenting the pop superhero models that apparently inspired Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld's "war on terror". [41]

> Apparently indifferent to or wholly ignorant about the articles' excoriating content, Bush was amused by his muscular Rambo rendition, and ordered thirty poster-sized enlargements for his White House staff […]. Did Bush grin in recollecting that *Rambo: First Blood Part II* was marketed with the slogan 'No man, no war, no law can stop him'? (Lawrence / Jewett 2017: 25).[42]

Given the favourable reception from Bush to the *Der Spiegel* cover, and the successive supporters of the right since then, it is unsurprising that, in 2019, in the pro-Trump[43] online media source, *The Federalist*, Saltis criticised the "overwhelming proportion" of negativity and "hyperventilating from professional reviewers" as "decidedly political" (Saltis 2019):

> Going by these headlines, the casual reader could be forgiven for expecting the newest Rambo to be chock-full of xenophobic rants against Mexican immigration into the United States. Unfortunately for overwrought critics, this turns out to be about as far from the truth as the Charlottesville lie.[44] One could argue that the film actually creates sympathy for Mexicans who wish to flee what are often hellish conditions in the more dangerous regions of their home country (Saltis 2019).

Saltis continued:

> Well, there it is. Just like everything else since 2016, it all has to come back to Trump. We're apparently so deep into our hyper-politicized era that a film showcasing an American

[41] Whilst he previously, quietly supported Republican politicians, and, according to Boulton, "frequently professed his support for Reagan's efforts at resurrecting America's exceptionalism" (Boulton 2009: 72), Sylvester Stallone turned from that party after Bush et al. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan under false pretenses. Previously, he seemed amused by Reagan's infatuation of him at the time of the second film, which still viewed Vietnam through, albeit slightly, a critical lens for the US government's betrayal of its armed forced in Vietnam. Finally, whilst Stallone appears to continue to be situated on the political right (although he argues otherwise) and not the most astute actor, we have been surprised to learn he has read all of Shakespeare and encouraged his children to do as well. Further, he took on a very challenging subject area in Burma, the brutally violent pushback of the pro-democracy movement by the ruling Than Shwe and the Tatmadaw. Shooting on location, Stallone and other members of the cast and crew received death threats for critiquing the oppressive rulers.

[42] Lawrence and Jewett note that the in the same *Der Spiegel* cartoon, Powell appeared as Batman, Rumsfeld as Conan the Barbarian, Cheney as the Terminator and Condoleezza Rice as Catwoman (See Lawrence / Jewett 2017: 25).

[43] See Linker who identifies *The Federalist* as "a leading disseminator of pro-Trump conspiracies". He writes, "[s]ome day, when the Trump administration is over and the true extent of its corruption has become part of the public record, the right-wing website *The Federalist* […] at the vanguard of a thoroughly Trumpified Republican Party […] will receive proper recognition for the significant and distinctive contribution they made to polluting the waters of American public life" (Linker 2018). See also Sheffield, who notes *The Federalist* "caters to a Christian right audience and was founded by Ben Domenech, a former Washington Post blogger who was fired by the paper for serial plagiarism" (Sheffield 2017).

[44] The source also exploited the opportunity to link the "overwrought" critics to their disbelief in the "Charlottesville lie". See Green (2017) for an analysis of the Unite the Right white nationalist rally at Charlottesville, North Carolina.

> action hero beating the tar out of a vicious Mexican cartel is now subject to libelous accusations of racism and xenophobia – ignoring that this action hero is also fighting on behalf of other Mexican characters. Shouldn't fighting sex trafficking be on our to-do lists regardless of our party affiliation? (Saltis 2019).

Whilst human trafficking should certainly be on the "to-do lists" of both the left and right, there is an abundance of scholarly work attesting that the political right is far more focussed on the moral considerations of the sexualised aspect of human trafficking than on the economic inequality conditions that lead millions of trafficked persons into enslavement.[45] For example, most recent legislation, FOSTA and SESTA, have been critiqued as creating more harm for sex workers than benefit for mitigating sex trafficking.[46]

Trump's border discourse and one of the take-aways from *Last Blood* is fear of the Other encroaching the boundaries of America and an increased isolationism – to keep the Other out of America, and to protect the pure white girl from crossing the US-Mexico border.[47] It underscores his oft-cited Trumpian announcement that Mexicans are all "rapists, murders, and bad hombres".

As we wrote this study, a curious meme appeared in the form of Trump's head photo-shopped onto the body of Rocky Balboa. Given the intersecting nature of Stallone's iconic characters – Rocky and Rambo – the meme is illustrative of the hyper-masculine American hero. Also, given the Rocky/Rambo identity construction, we see Trump's self-identification with the Stallone character(s) as an avowal of Trump's, albeit false, "anti-establishment" status. Miyamoto (2018) notes a particular element of the anti-hero that Trump and his followers have continually impressed upon the nation and the world: Media audiences admire anti-heroes "because they often have the courage to say what we all would like to say and do what we all would like to do in any given situation. They are void of the rules and regulations that society has created over the years, whether it's based on law and order or sociological expectations" (Miyamoto 2018).

Trump's essentialising rhetoric fuels the characterisation of Rambo in *Last Blood* as an anti-hero that reflects the hyper-masculine narrative constructs associated with progressive pushback and the frontier mythos associated with the gun-slinging cowboy of the Hollywood tradition. This characterisation further promotes the ideal of manifest destiny as interpreted within alt-right rhetoric and action. These behaviours and characterisations echo and are echoed by real-life aggressive killers, such as the El Paso murderer, against a perceived 'Hispanic

[45] See Lengel (2018).
[46] See Stern (2019).
[47] Due to Trump's wall, the abducted woman would likely have a far more difficult re-entry into the USA.

invasion' into the US from its border with Mexico. That killer's goals, like those of other alt-right killers,[48] illustrate a growing tendency for gun-wielding disenfranchised white men to destroy lives on the precept of an invasion[49] and reflect the aggressive ethno-nationalist rhetorics of Trump and other politically right leaders and media figures. The ethno-nationalist anti-hero is highlighted by the de-masculinisation of progressive politics and a resulting re-construction of hyper-masculinity on the political right, an increase in the relationship between white masculinity and gun-based survivalist narratives. These elements exist in literary, filmic and mediated characters, within narrative constructs of the alt-right, particularly those assuming the role of ethno-nationalist savior who helps "make America great again". These elements are salient in the final scene of *Last Blood*, where Rambo mounts his horse and rides into the sunset – a mythic frontier space that echoes the Western anti-heroes (and heroes) of eras past. Furthermore, it reflects ideological narratives of 'manifest destiny' in the era of westward expansion of the USA, both eras reflective of when America was "great" within a Trumpian mythos.

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[48] See Newsom / Lengel / Yeung (in press).
[49] See Taylor (2019).

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Trump's Rhetoric Influence on Filmic Images of Mexico: The Case of *Miss Bala* (2019)

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1) Introduction

When considering modern fights for equality, democracy, freedom of speech and movement, Trump's hegemonic rhetoric against migrants from Latin America sounds like an abhorrence. It could, however, also be regarded as a rather common strategy of finding a scapegoat in an ethnic minority during a time of national crisis. For example, one of the first laws in the USA, which restricted entrance to a specific ethnic group, was the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882. Following an increased inflow of people from China, it prohibited the entry in the USA to Chinese labourers and restricted the movement of those already in the country on the basis that they "were stealing jobs and depressing wages" (Misra 2015). Since 1965 Hispanic migration from Mexico has represented one of the major ethnic influxes in the United States, and that makes it an easy target for the current wave of discrimination. However, if this is a common mechanism in political discourse, to be identified according to Van Dijk largely by its key actors or authors, i.e. "presidents […] and other members of government" (Van Dijk 1997: 12), why do people still respond to it positively?

Schaefer attributes the success of Trump's rhetoric to its links to emotions of shame, rage and disgust.[1] In fact, the current American president suggests: "The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems" (Trump in Washington Post Staff 2015) thus attributing the misfortunes of America to external factors. Not by coincidence his slogan is "Make America Great Again", which implies the nation has been wounded, belittled and Trump appears to insinuate that one source of national humiliation correlates with ilegal migration from Latin America. Therefore, it appears to be his mission to reduce migration from countries south of the United States and he justifies this by employing negative hyperbolic terminology. Seeing the other as something 'less' than our in-group is often encouraged by political discourse but it is imperative to resist the 'naturalisation' of such concepts and the stereotyping of the other that often follows.[2] Such mechanisms are pervasive: From the political level they seep through

[1] See Schaefer (2019).
[2] See Chilton (2008: 60).

society and enter everyday ways of thinking. According to Foucault, in any given society whoever is in power can claim to be the depository of true knowledge, hence, power also creates the distinction between truth and falsehood.[3] Needless to say, Trump does so in very explicit terms: "I give people exactly what they need and deserve to hear […] and that is The Truth" (Trump 2015: 8). Therefore, the language used by politicians can have a significant effect on the way people see and interpret reality because of its assigned authority. Consequently, it is possible to assert that political discourse creates narratives that permeate and shape societies.

Much of the research done into Trump's speeches have exposed from different angles their structure, motives and context without considering the repercussions this kind of rhetoric has had on cultural production. For example, Goldstein and Hall studied his speeches in relation to racism and his use of denigrating humour arguing that Trump is relating racism to nostalgia (Make America Great Again) and how he brought his entertainer brand into politics.[4] On the other hand, Rademacher has compared the presidental figure to hardboiled detectives in film noir in an attempt to examine themes of citizen estrangement and personal power. His findings suggest that, like in noir protagonists, Trump uses a "blame the victim" strategy, within which key aspects of racism, gender discrimination and xenophobia are combined to project accountability for a lost sense of power.[5] There are also very interesting linguistic approaches, which include Savoy's statistical analysis of lemmas used in the 2016 presidential primary elections. It highlights Trump's frequent recourse to the personal pronoun "I" in TV debates as well as the frequent use of basic-level sentences, which appear to have the most effect because they tend to be remembered.[6]

However, so far very little research has been done into the effect of Trump on popular culture, including cinema, although there is ample proof for shifts in Hollywood images of Mexico that seem to correlate with continuities and discontinuities in political discourse. On the one hand, Noble highlights very convincingly how far "Hollywood's images of Mexican greasers, bandits and sultry *señoritas* replicate an ingrained tradition of (visual) representation that is bound up with Mexico's colonial legacy", i.e. Hollywood cinema "simply took up where earlier visual regimes left off" (Noble 2005: 29). Also, there is evidence that Hollywood tends to come periodically back to this, e.g. in the aftermath of the economic crisis in the 1940s when Mexicans were more often represented as bandits, rather than Latin lovers, a different image favoured in preceding decades. On the other hand, Wool argues that there was a significant shift

[3] See Foucault (1980).
[4] See Goldstein / Hall (2017).
[5] See Rademacher (2016).
[6] See Savoy (2008).

towards a celebration of Latin American culture in the 1950s when the good neighbour policy established in 1933 finally managed to dominate political discourse, correlating with pressures of an enhanced Cold War.[7] In all cases, Hollywood narratives can be understood as "a practice not just representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough 1992a: 64). Furthermore, they can be regarded as "sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity" (Fairclough 1992b: 209) as well as political reactions to it.

In this context, this paper will take some of the most controversial comments made by Trump about Mexican migrants and will use them to compare how two films produced in Hollywood, before and during Trump's ascent to power, present Mexico. *Bordertown* (Nava 2006) was chosen because it was shot and released during George W. Bush's term in office, the republican president preceding Trump, while *Miss Bala* (Hardwicke 2019) falls into the Trump presidency. Also, both films share common ground: Just like *Bordertown*, *Miss Bala* is a mid-budget film ($21 million for *Bordertown* and $15 million for *Miss Bala*) that draws on historical events, and in both cases the protagonists are Chicano women who fight against Mexican criminals. Analyzing differences and similarities in these films will help to explore the effect Trump's rhetoric might have had on representations of Chicanos and Mexicans in recent US cinema. While there are significant differences in the way Bush and Trump have voiced controversial opinions, there are also political continuities that might have shaped filmic images of Mexico. For example, by 2006, Bush had already increased funding for border security by 66% and vowed that by 2008 he would have 6000 more border patrol officers instated, meaning he had doubled the amount of border security staff during his term.[8] Another aspect of Bush's discourse shared by Trump is his belief that the only way for an immigrant to become successful in the US is for them to speak English and assimilate: "When immigrants assimilate and advance in our society, they realize their dreams, they renew our spirit and they add to the unity of America" (Bush 2006.).

Another interesting similarity between the two films is the biography of their respective directors. Gregory Nava (*Bordertown*) has Mexican heritage while Hardwicke (*Miss Bala*) grew up in McAllen by Rio Grande, i.e. close to the Mexican border, which enhanced her awareness of socio-political and cultural relations.[9] This helped to shape their films, and reflects in the narratives. In particular, Nava is the son of migrants and worked his way up to

[7] See Wool (1981).
[8] See Bush (2006).
[9] See Burt (2019).

Hollywood. From this point of view, one could see how he might have used his understanding of Chicano identity in the workplace while directing *Bordertown*, where the main character is a career woman with a Mexican background who shows initially no intention to get reconnected to her roots: "If, in opposition to Toni, Lauren shows at first a strong rejection of her Mexican heritage, then this is mainly a result of external pressures of discrimination, racism and social injustice that she seems to have experienced as Mexican in the US" (Rings 2018: 134) . On the other hand, Hardwicke saw Mexico as the land of parties, underage drinking, but also the place where violence would come from. Even though these directors come from different cultural backgrounds, they both have direct knowledge and experience of some of the issues portrayed in their films. Furthermore, despite being created for an American audience, *Miss Bala* is a remake that includes many crew members who worked on the Mexican homonymous film from 2011 (Naranjo 2011). This offers the opportunity to include in the analysis the original version so as to provide a Mexican perspective on the issues addressed in this paper.

In *Bordertown*, Lauren (Jennifer Lopez), a passionate American journalist with Mexican heritage, is sent to investigate the murders of women workers at US-American-owned factories in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. With the help of an old friend, Lauren tries to utilize a surviving victim (Maya Zapata) to catch her perpetrators and expose the tragedies that transpire just across the border. Unbeknownst to Lauren, this proves difficult as corrupt politics prevail not only in Mexico but also in the USA, where her story is threatened to be dropped. However, Eva, a survivor of the notorious Juárez attacks, and Lauren work together against other people's discouragement. Despite various difficulties, they manage to kill one of the men responsible for the rapes of the maquiladora workers in self-defense and publish the story.

Miss Bala tells the story of Gloria (Gina Rodriguez), a Latin-American makeup artist from Los Angeles, who during a visit to a childhood friend in Tijuana, is kidnapped by a Mexican gang, Los Estrellas. While trying to escape, she is arrested by the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) under suspicion of collaborating with Los Estrellas: in order to clear her charges, she has to work for the DEA. However, after the DEA agent leaves her unprotected during a shoot-out against the Mexican cartel, Gloria takes matters into her own hands in order to escape. She trades finding her friend Suzu in exchange for helping Lino, a Mexican who grew up partly in the US and the Los Estrellas' boss, to kill Suacedo (Damián Alcázar), the Mexican Chief of Police. Once reunited with her friend, Gloria discovers that she has been deceived by Lino and kills him, gaining the attention and a job from the CIA. Both films deal with criminal activities in Mexico related to historical events and are directed by people with Mexican cultural background. However, this paper will argue that the protagonists' relation to American values,

despite being both Chicanas, are represented differently and so is their relation to the criminals they are fighting against.

2) Immigrants' status and assimilation

The following chapters will use transcripts of Bush and Trump's speeches to capture common ideas regarding immigration. Relevant speeches include Bush's 'Address to the Nation on Immigration Reform' (Bush 2006), his speech against Trumpism (Bush in Vargas 2017) and his appeal to dial down rhetoric on immigration (Bush in Montoya-Galvez 2019), as well as Trump's announcement of the presidential candidacy (Trump in Time Staff 2015), his speech on immigration (Trump 2016) and an address to the nation regarding the erection of the border wall (Trump in White House 2019). It will be of key interest for the film analysis that Bush tends to differentiate sharply between illegal migrants and legal migrants when he argues to stop the former but welcome the latter, while Trump shows overall a less differentiated approach with most imagery verging around themes of: a) skills and status connected to levels of assimilation, b) victimhood and criminality, and c) criminals seen as animal-like and savages. These three themes will be used to assess in what ways and to what extent the films selected comply with such ideology. A comparison could be indicative of how much concepts such as assimilation, Mexican agency and criminality have changed over time and as a possible consequence of the shift in political rhetoric.

In this context, Trump talks about Mexicans often in terms of their status: sometimes specifying the illegal divide "most illegal immigrants are lower-skilled workers with less education who compete directly against vulnerable American workers" (Trump 2016). Other times, he generalizes: "when Mexico sends its people, they are not sending their best" (Time Staff 2015). In contrast, *Bordertown* presents with Lauren a first generation Mexican migrant-protagonist who does excellent investigative journalism for a well-established US pager, the Chicago Sentinel, which helps to deliver social justice. All this leads viewers to question Trump's opinion that Mexico does not send its best people. It is, however, in line with Bush's ideas that "the borders should be open to trade and lawful immigration" (Bush 2006), because Lauren was adopted by US Americans and that makes her a legal migrant. Importantly, though, Lauren's career is shaped by assimilation, which includes an almost complete suppression of her Mexican background.

On the other hand, Gloria shows in *Miss Bala* far less of a career and personal independence, which correlates with less assimilation. This can be seen very clearly if we compare Gloria and Lauren's interaction with their bosses. At the beginning of *Miss Bala,* we see multiple medium

shots of Gloria, who is a make-up artist in the fashion industry, trying to pitch an idea to her supervisor. She is in a central position in these medium shots, showing her in a position of vulnerability, and she is shown behind her supervisor while he is facing away from her as if she is inferior to him. The only time he turns around is to reject her and even then we are shown another medium shot in which they are facing each other but he is towering over her. Even if Gloria is usually represented as a strong-willed, competent and passionate professional like Lauren, she remains silent when told by her manager that she is not paid to think. When Lauren, however, is told she cannot print her story due to government censorship, we see close-up shots of her passionately fighting her case. She is also shot in the same way as George Morgan (Martin Sheen), which highlights them as equals. George then sits down and they are both shown in a medium shot with Lauren towering over him which is the complete opposite of what happens with Gloria.

Also, while Lauren is seen doing research as soon as she gets to Juarez (Nava 2006: 00:11'), which correlates with Bush's ideas of all migrants (even illegals) as people "who work hard […] and lead responsible lives" (Bush 2006), Gloria is presented as a petty criminal: Even if stealing two bags of makeup on her way out of work (Hardwicke 2019: 00:02') has to be interpreted as revenge from having been belittled, it fits in with Trump's imagery of Mexicans as thieves.[10]

Finally, there are differences in the importance given to assimilation. While Bush highlights that even illegal migrants "are part of American life" (Bush 2006) and proposes "openness to the new" as US-American key value (Bush in Montoya Galvez 2019: 02':27"), Trump focuses on assimilation: "We also have to be honest about the fact that not everyone who seeks to join our country will be able to successfully assimilate" (Trump 2016). If assimilation implies that migrants should absorb and emulate the host culture, then *Bordertown* presents in its first part an outstanding example for this: Lauren admits at that stage that she does not know anything about Mexico and that she is not able to speak Spanish very well. However, once Lauren becomes acquainted with Eva, she starts rediscovering and embracing her Mexican identity until by the end, she decides to work in Ciudad Juárez as the editor of the paper her friend used to curate. Therefore, by the end of the film, Lauren demonstrates that it is possible to create a constructive hybrid identity that can be used for the betterment of society: Her experience can help people gain a voice from within the society where they are repressed. All this is partially in line with Bush's comments on the importance to show 'kindness' defined as a result of empathy: "look at someone less fortunate and see yourself" (Bush in Montoya-Galvez 2019:

[10] See Lind (2019).

02':52"-02':55"). However, for Bush, this is another key US-American value, while *Bordertown* presents originally Lauren's work for the Chicago Sentinel as mostly driven by egocentrism, i.e. her interest in further enhancing her career, and 'kindness' then develops in the course of hybridization, which could be read as a strong stance against assimilation.

On the other hand, as daughter of an American citizen who owned a maquilladora in Tijuana, Gloria grew up in both countries, and her initial attitude is presented as taking advantage of the opportunities offered in the USA while her emotional investment is actually in Mexico. However, since being taken hostage, she clings on to her American citizenship by reminding others, including the audience, of where she belongs. From a macro-narrative perspective, this attitude can be seen as opportunistic as she embraces her American identity only when in need. However, after the DEA agent fails to protect her, Gloria can be seen as acting above any national affiliation but by doing so, she embodies American values of individualism and masculinity,[11] which include looking after themselves and to do so with great determination and ambition. Therefore, it could be argued that in the second part of the film, Gloria's assimilation of American values pushes her from being an American citizen to representing America itself by fighting alone against crime. In her case, her hybrid identity is used, by the end of the film, to contribute to the work of the CIA, hence aiding the fight against drug cartels from the perspective of the American 'saviour', rather than from within society. In this instance, the incomplete assimilation of American culture is being exploited to infiltrate the 'enemy'.

Historically, this is a common practice that *Miss Bala* (2011) refers to with the character of Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena, an undercover American agent who got kidnapped and killed by Lino and his gang during operations with the DEA in 1985. Therefore, in this respect, Gloria fits in with American mainstream expectations of Mexican-Americans. However, in the 2019 version of *Miss Bala*, Lino also has a dual identity as he tells Gloria ("I am American, like you. I grew up in both places, like you") and his path is shown to have led him to a life of crime. As Monica Castillo mentions in her review of *Miss Bala* in regards to Latino talent getting parts in big Hollywood film, "I'm still very conflicted that the only way we could get this spotlight is by playing the worst versions of our communities" (Castillo 2019). In this sense, it could be argued that in 2019 *Miss Bala* focuses on the idea that migrants who do not assimilate US-American culture cannot have a positive impact in any society, which ultimately implies that Mexican culture cannot save itself, but it needs US-American intervention. In this case, such help is embodied by people like Gloria who, having assimilated American values, operate through

[11] See Hofstede Insights (2020).

individualistic values and from outside society thus echoing the positioning of Trump as superior to others.[12]

3) Victims, perpetrators and saviours

Despite his stance against illegal migration, Bush argues already before *Bordertown* that "the vast majority of illegal migrants are decent people" (Bush 2006) and, more recently, distances himself from the white supremacy rhetoric under Trumpism.[13] Trump himself continues to prefer a clear cut division between good US-Americans and bad migrants, saviours and perpetrators. Not by coincidence, Schaefer summarises that his "rhetorical signature remains strongly marked by a programmatic division of the world into in-groups and out-groups" (Schaefer 2019: 9). In line with Bush and in distance to Trump-style rhetoric, *Bordertown* calls for shared culpability for what happened in Juarez, where we can see that rape, violence and criminality are connected with issues around Western exploitation and corporations turning a blind eye to injustice and corruption. For example, Lauren is offered a lot of money to drop the story back in Chicago and in another scene she tells off an American manager of the maquilladora for not taking responsibility for his worker's welfare. The 2011 version of *Miss Bala* has a similar interpretation of such relation as *Bordertown* offers: the USA promotes crime in Mexico by trading arms for drugs or laundered money.

On the other hand, the most recent version of *Miss Bala* can be argued to portray the corrupted Mexican system as the only villain while the United States, even if through dubious means, investigates and fights Mexican cartels. That highlights Mexican affairs from a dramatized and polarised perspective that follows Trump's portrayals of Mexico and its citizens as troublesome and focuses on the dichotomy of US-American saviors vis-à-vis helpless victims of Mexico's own untrustworthy system. All this is reminiscent of Hollywood films of the 1960s, starting with *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges 1960), the US-American remake of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), in which rural Mexicans turn to US-American outlaws for help against Mexican bandits, while in the Japanese original the samurai-saviors are – just like perpetrators and victims – from Japan. Although the Mexican villagers do not say explicitly why they are searching for US-American help, repeated plundering without intervention by the Mexican army suggests that no one in Mexico seems to be able or willing to provide effective help against a brutal and corrupt system. By looking at *Bordertown* and both versions of *Miss Bala* the shift in blame towards a unique culprit is clear and very much in line with both

[12] See Çalışkan / Preston (2017) and Rademacher (2016).
[13] See Bush in Vargas (2017).

traditional Hollywood images and Trump's demands: "Stop the criminal gangs, drugs smugglers, and human traffickers" from Mexico (Trump in White House 2019).

By claiming that most Mexican immigrants are bringing trouble, Trump could also imply that they are to blame for their own misfortune, hence positioning them as victims of their own destiny. By analysing Eva in *Bordertown* and Suzu in *Miss Bala* (2011/2019), it is possible to examine Mexican agency more closely. The more passive Suzu could be interpreted as a burden to the United States that has to deploy resources to save the Mexican, while the rather active Eva appears self-reliant and brave in her defiance of a culture that allows crimes to be left unresolved and criminals to go unpunished.

Eva is relatively active because she has the courage to find her rapists and have them persecuted; her will to bring justice against crime that seems impenetrable sets her out from the attitude of other people around her who discourage both Lauren and Eva in their pursuit. Also, in one of the final scenes of the film we bare witness to Lauren being strangled by one of Eva's attackers. The scene is set in what could be seen as a shanty town, it is night time and everything is on fire. Lauren is being strangled by a rapist and murderer in a dark room which is only lit up by the fire that is engulfing it, the literal pits of hell. In this situation, Eva picks up a wooden plank that is on fire and begins to viciously attack the perpetrator with no remorse. The plank at one end could be seen as symbolic of a torch, a catalyst in guiding their way to freedom through the darkness that the attacker physically and mentally burdens them with. Eventually, Eva beats her attacker into the fire, we see him immersed in the flames and watch him burn to death. This seems like a fitting death, because the attacker seems to perish in the flames of hell, which he helped to create. It is possible to argue, that Eva manages all this only thanks to Lauren's help,[14] but this study contends that their relationship is symbiotic: While Lauren provides Eva with encouragement, information and protection, Eva gives Lauren a chance to get in touch with her past and helps her identity to develop. Also, ultimately, it is Eva who saves Lauren from the hands of one of the rapists. It is true that the film shows Americans in Mexico helping bring justice, as in *The Magnificent Seven*. However, it also exposes the corruption and lack of responsibility of some American people and corporations. Furthermore, Eva defies the stereotypical representation of the victim by showing determination and bravery in the face of the status quo. Such a role, in fact, contrasts with typical orientalist and colonialist view of the other as a passive, problematic figure.[15] By looking at the role of Eva, one could argue that

[14] See Rings (2018: 145).
[15] See Said (1978: 46).

Bordertown, in contrast to Trump's representations, sends a message for collective responsibility and for collaboration across borders.

On the other hand, Suzu, in both versions of *Miss Bala*, is presented as the fun-loving friend who enjoys taking advantage of a corrupt system to pursue her goals but who becomes very quickly a marginal character. In *Miss Bala* (2019), Suzu is seen as wanting to play the game of 'rubbing elbows' with the people that might make her win the pageant and at the club trying her best to seduce the General who is also involved with the contest. However, during the shoot out, she gets kidnapped and used as a prostitute by Los Estrellas. Her passive position is highlighted during the post-pageant party when she is portrayed either as hanging around with men or being dragged by the arm by Gloria. Suzu comes down the stairs of the smoke-filled house in between two men, this represents her power position. She is entrapped in this lifestyle of being used and controlled by men, that is until Gloria saves her. In this scene, Gloria attains masculinity through the gun she wields, "as otherwise helpless victims, they are able to 'achieve masculinity' with firearms" (Stroud 2012: 220). Therefore, Suzu is controlled, essentially, by masculine individuals. She does not take any action to resolve or understand her situation and in the end she is returned home thanks to Gloria's deal with Jimmy (Anthony Mackie), a CIA agent. She is a helpless subject rather than an actor in the perpetration of Mexican crime. So, in this respect, Suzu in *Miss Bala* represents exactly what Trump seems to convey about Mexicans: people with no escape and no hope they must be ultimately saved by their American friends.

4) Drugs, rape and violence: criminals as savages

Trump often implies (or says directly, that being his style) that Mexicans are "bringing drugs" to the US. Logically, for drug trafficking to be lucrative, it has to find a market. In other words, it is known that Mexico and other Latin American countries produce drugs, but it is their demand in the US that fuels their commerce. For example, other recent productions such as *Birds of Passage* (Gallego / Guerra 2018) explore in a candid way the greed for drugs and money from the USA and Colombia respectively creates a symbiotic relationship that spirals into criminality and murder. Therefore, it is interesting to see how this relationship is explored in the films under consideration. In *Bordertown*, the cause of criminal actions is not related to either drugs or weapons, but to something much nearer to people's everyday life: cheap goods – in particular computer screens. Even if marginally, the exploitative relationship between Mexico and the USA is narrated explicitly by Nava both through the words at the start of the film and in the scene where Lauren goes back to her US office and throws monitors around or

when she shouts: "It isn't free trade! It's slave trade. It's a goddamn scam, and everybody is making too much money to give a shit about these women!". Similarly, *Miss Bala* (2011) depicts the exchange of drug money for guns as a straightforward and marginal affair to the film narrative: America sells guns fueling criminality by accepting laundered money and drugs. However, in *Miss Bala* (2019) the dealer in the USA turns out to be an undercover CIA agent, pointing at the never-failing righteousness of the American system, i.e. they fuel criminal thirst for guns for investigative purposes, hence for the greater good only. Interestingly, such connection is presented as a subplot to which only a few scenes are dedicated and not fully explored. Consequently, it is possible to argue that *Miss Bala* 2019 tends to obscure the responsibility of the USA in the fueling of the drug smuggling.

According to Trump, migrants from Mexico do not tend to conform to American culture, hence keeping their habits from Mexico which, according to the president's speeches, include rape and violence: "They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they are bringing those problems with them. They are bringing drugs. They are bringing crime. They're rapists" (Time Staff 2015). Trump gives his audience very graphic descriptions of what illegal aliens do in their countries. He often associates them to animals, considering them "vicious coyotes" (Trump in White House 2019) and even explicitly summarises them as "animals" (Lind 2019), which correlates with the use of adverbs like "brutally" and "savagely". This could be regarded as a colonial perspective within which the subaltern is dehumanized, partially through the presentation of brutal details: "They stomp on their victims. They beat them with clubs. They slash them with machetes, and they stab them with knives" (Trump in Lind 2019). If Trump's imagery has an impact on filmic representations, it would be possible to note an exaggeration in the description of criminal activities and personalities in *Miss Bala*.

Interestingly, Lauren can create safety nets for her protection, Diaz and police collaboration, but is also allowed to move in and out of Mexico with some degree of freedom. Gloria, on the other hand, has her passport taken, therefore she is properly absorbed into the criminal system and held as a hostage. One possible reading is to create a greater impact on the American audience, in line with Trump assertions such as "Americans are hurt by uncontrolled, illegal migration" (Trump in White House 2019). In the scene where Gloria is in the bedroom with Lino, she is represented as his sex slave. For example, he orders her to take off his shoes and then to undress in front of him. The close-up shots show both of the character's faces while this interaction occurs: Lino's face lacks emotion and he appears to be falling asleep, this could be due to the fact that he has been in this position numerous times and it is essentially just another day in the office for him. On the other hand, Gloria is shown in medium and close-up shots,

they pan up and down her body as she removes her clothes, objectifying her naked body. As well as this, the close-up shots of her face show obvious distress, something we do not tend to see on other sexualised Mexican women, such as the prostitute who comes out of the club toilet with the police officer (she smiles). Overall, the "threat of sexual assault hangs over *Miss Bala,* but Hardwicke walks a thin – precariously thin – line" (Edelstein 2020). In this sense, rape is never explicitly shown on-screen, potentially because of the PG-13 rating Sony wanted to achieve. However, sexual harassment is often implied or shown lightly (e.g. groping of Gloria in the club) and, above all, it is inflicted on an American citizen. This is particularly interesting because the historical events did not involve any American citizen. One could argue that this creates a higher empathy with Gloria and therefore more disdain towards the actions of the Mexican gang.

In *Bordertown*, scenes of rape, machismo and violence are shown only when central to the narrative, and the crimes are perpetrated by gangs, e.g. when a bus driver takes women to a remote place so that they can get raped and killed. One of Eva's rapists is seen at a party but his character remains undeveloped, which could be interpreted as generalized portrayal of criminals operating through a web of connections that dilutes individual responsibilities in a system shaped by corruption and protectionism. At a first sight, this bodes well with Trump's rhetoric of Mexicans being rapists, killers, and brutal savages. However, *Bordertown* also shows how this web goes beyond borders and is nothing else but a branch of a system where corporate greed from external/richer countries, in this case, the USA, foments such criminal acts. In this sense, *Bordertown* depicts a country imbued with corruption and intimidation but also exposes the other side of the coin, where even independent media abroad are asked to silence the voices of those people who want to expose such injustices. All this breaks with Trump's binary view of the United States on the one hand and Mexico on the other.

In *Miss Bala* there are numerous scenes that seem to serve the sole purpose of highlighting Mexico as a place where sexual favors, machismo and forced sex are common occurrences. Already in the club scene, in which Gloria and Suzu go to enchant the pageant jury, the audience is presented with people snorting coke, most probably having sex in a toilet cubicle and the dancing is very sexual too. Even when such activity is not central to the action, prostitution and gang members fiddling with weapons are part of the mise-en-scène: For example, when Gloria enters in Casa Rosita we see girls by a pool being charmed by elderly men, while another girl with only lingerie on and a bottle of wine in her hands enters a room where a man waits for her. Overt rape is never shown, but there are several instances where it is implied, and the spectacle is exaggerated to the point of stereotyping: Mexicans are portrayed as being mainly driven by

either sexual or violent impulses and guided neither by reason nor control, therefore more similar to animals than humans.

An interesting case is the portrayal of Lino (Ismael Cordoba) as a more nuanced character: Despite being shown as a respected and ruthless leader (he mercilessly kills a woman suspected of being a spy), he constantly worries about Gloria's reactions to their depravities. For example, when noticing Gloria's shock about the bombing of a DEA safe house, he commands silence and tries to justify his actions. Furthermore, he shares his dreams with her, e.g. when he takes her to an idyllic and peaceful place where he explains the reasons behind his actions and his desire to settle in the countryside. However, he cannot be trusted: Not only does he deceive Gloria about the whereabouts of her friend, but in the end he tries to kill her to save his own life. His double-crossing could come as somewhat of a surprise and, possibly because of this, the message that Mexicans can not be trusted hits home more poignantly.

Trump warns us by making a generalized remark about one criminal: "We cannot continue to allow thousands upon thousands of people to pour into our country, many of whom have the same thought process as this savage killer" (Trump in Lind 2019). By allowing the audience to know Lino and discover, even if just for a short part of the film, a caring and sensitive side to him, the director has let the audience empathize with him. Creating this momentary emotional connection can be seen as a way to let the character "pour into our" hearts, implicitly emulating thus the feelings and consequences of letting savage killers "pour into our country". Trump admits that "they want [us] to suffer", and if we identified with the story, we do feel betrayed by Lino as much as Gloria is. In contrast, both the rapists in *Bordertown* and Lino in the 2011 version of *Miss Bala* remain undeveloped. Even if Lino in the 2011 version plays a central role in the film, he doesn't disclose any information about himself so the audience has no background to his motives, therefore, no hooks to feel any empathy towards him. In this way, the audience is kept at a safe distance.

5) Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the comparison between *Bordertown* (2006) and *Miss Bala* (2019) enabled us to identify to what extent and how political discourse influenced the portrayal of Mexico in these films. In particular, *Bordertown* exposes the shared culpability between nations for the lawlessness of the border region in Mexico. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that the crime is not resolved by the US-American protagonist alone, but by Lauren's collaboration with Mexican Eva, who has the courage to fight back. All this is at least partially in line with Bush's perspective, who argues that the vast majority of migrants to the United States are "decent"

people (Bush 2006), and it is an original finding of this study. So far Lauren has predominantly been examined as the "savior from the North" (Rings 2018: 145), which does not consider that rising up to injustice is in *Bordertown* actually a collaborative effort. It can also be argued that the film follows Lauren's journey as a return-immigrant: While getting more disillusioned with the opportunistic attitude of her colleagues, hence with American values, she gets closer to her suppressed Mexican identity. Through this interpretation, Lauren, by the end of the film, can be seen as representing Chicano identity rather than assimilated US identity. In this sense, the saviour is ultimately not a direct embodiment of American values but someone who took a journey of self-discovery and integrated successfully values from both countries. For example, in Lauren's character Mexican concern for members of the community finds renewed strength when combined with American belief in "liberty and justice for all" (Hofstede Insights 2020).

On the other hand, more in line with Trump's perspective, *Miss Bala* shifts the blame onto Mexico alone and presents the country as incapable of resolving their issues, instead relying on American intervention as embodied by Gloria. In particular, the audience is often presented with references to prostitution and criminality even when not strictly necessary for the narrative. Also, the portrayal of Lino as a sympathetic character, only to betray Gloria and the audience in the end, amplifies the message that one should mistrust Mexicans. If we consider Trumpism as an epistemological violence, this analysis may be indicative of a shift alluded to by Saramo, who argues that violence is often at first received with shock, but when repeated it becomes part of people's everyday life who then stop questioning it and rebelling against it.[16] One of the greatest risks for violence is to enter the common vernacular and become invisible to the public. Therefore, the films chosen serve as a reference point for subsequent research in an attempt to further analyse and increase awareness of this phenomenon.

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[16] See Saramo (2017).

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Politics in *The River and The Wall* (2017)

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1) Introduction

Donald Trump's electoral promises included an upgrading of the Mexico-United States border to prevent illegal immigration from Central America. The issue of building the wall and extending the existing border has been discussed since then as a controversial topic. Many commentators doubt that the wall can be an effective means to reduce illegal work migration, terrorism and drug smuggling and outline the positive effects of work migration on the US economy.[1] It has also been argued that expanding the wall is first and foremost a politically motivated project in order to boost Trump's chances of being re-elected.[2]

Initially constructed under US President George H. W. Bush in the mid-1990s, the existing fences cover roughly 2,000 miles of border between the United States and Mexico. The already existing barriers cut across a variety of terrains, ranging from urban areas to deserts. Kevin Dahl of the National Parks Conservation Association outlines the negative effects of the planned border wall on nature: "This unneeded, expensive blight will use precious water for its construction, cut off wildlife species from their habitat; and its all-night lights will destroy the clear night skies" (Dahl in Gilbert 2019).

Ben Masters' documentary *The River and the Wall* (2017) takes up this line of argument and explores the borderlands to investigate the potential impacts of a future wall on the natural environment. Masters' travel team consists only of nature specialists and experienced travel guides such as the ornithologist Heather Mackey, conservationist Jay Kleberg, the river guide Austin Alvarado and the filmmaker Filipe DeAndrade. This choice seems to underline the goal of a critical investigation. Together they travel 1,200 miles of the US-Mexican border on horseback, mountain bike and by canoe, which takes them two-and-a-half-months, to explore the different areas along the fences and where the wall is still to be constructed.

[1] A Health and Human Services (HHS) report found, "the net economic impact of resettling refugees in the United States over a decade was overwhelmingly positive. […] In other words, the argument that Miller had been repeatedly making about the soaring costs of resettling refugees in the United States was invalid" (Hirschfeld Davis / Shear 2019: 140).

[2] See Hirschfeld Davis / Shear (2019).

As a nature documentary *The River and the Wall* corresponds to the generic key characteristics of blue chip programming, which are known for avoiding political issues as Bousé summarises very explicitly:

> Blue chip programmes depict charismatic mega-fauna, such as big cats, primates and elephants; they contain spectacular imagery of animals in a "primeval wilderness"; they incorporate dramatic and suspenseful storylines; they generally avoid science, politics and controversial issues, such as wildlife conservation; they are timeless, carefully framing out any historical reference points which might date the programme or effect future rerun sales; and they avoid people, including presenters and all artefacts of human habitation (in Richards 2013: 174; see also Bousé 2000: 14f.).

In this sense, Masters' documentary highlights dramatic sceneries and provides suspenseful or funny storylines about life in nature. However, at the same time, its focus on the border fences and future wall constructions gives the film also a political agenda. I will investigate how interwoven these two agendas are both in the film's narrative structure and visual style, and how Trump's wall project is presented.

For example, as opposed to the blue chip generics, the film addresses political issues directly by interviewing people about their opinion on border constructions, while most film reviews praise in particular the documentary's visual style and the impressive images of nature. A good example is provided by Martinez:

> Where *The River and the Wall* truly excels is in the photography of the picture. We're not sure which of the five credited cinematographers captured most of the doc's nature footage, but every scene shot under the sky is breathtaking (Martinez 2019).

Blakemore even muses that the film is at its best when it is only showing nature pictures:

> The soaring visuals of the Rio Grande have a grace and gravitas that transcends politics. And though "The River and the Wall" has something to say, it's most powerful when it doesn't say anything at all (Blakemore 2019).

These reviews highlight that blue chip generics of depicting overwhelming nature sceneries might have such a strong impact on the film's visual style that at least for most reviewers the typical filmic conventions of nature documentaries appear to marginalise the political agenda. Nevertheless, the film also introduces political discourse very explicitly: At the beginning, we see a montage of short sequences of political statements by Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Donald Trump on fences as a solution to the "immigration problem" of the United States. Upbeat music underlines the visual impact of these sequences and finally joins the rhythm of a Trump rally, where participants shout the slogan "Build the wall". A panoramic shot of the tranquil river and its natural environment is juxtaposed with these emotionally high-pitched images. The opening sequence thus evokes a heavy contrast between the somewhat artificial

political debates and the peaceful nature, seemingly untouched by these debates. As we will see later in more detail, these first sequences introduce a narrative structure that is organised around an opposition between nature and civilisation, within which especially Trump's wall project and his propaganda against illegal immigrants from Central America shape a negative image of US American civilization.

In the following sequence, we see Masters driving in a car to meet his buddies for the trip along the border and the river. This sequence introduces him as director of the documentary and its main narrator. He states as the goal of the journey that he wants to find out how a wall might affect the people, wildlife and plants along the Rio Grande. He also mentions that he conceived the idea of the documentary while working for a team of wildlife biologists in West Texas, who shared their concerns regarding the impacts of a border wall on wildlife species along the Rio Grande.[3] This statement underlines once again the film's political agenda of examining Trump's wall plans by exploring the impact of the constructions on nature. However, the film's narrative structure is not always in line with this statement as Martinez highlights: "A lot of good information is shared in *The River and the Wall*, although Masters' mission seems a bit broad from the start and continues to spread itself thin throughout the film" (Martinez 2019).

This introduction sets the tone of Masters' agenda, which appears to match the point of view of many scientists describing the wall as an essential danger to nature.[4] In opposition to most articles and television documentaries on Trump's proposed wall and the already existing fences, Masters' documentary does not primarily emphasize border security issues and ethical arguments concerning illegal immigration. Instead, the documentary focuses on nature and the political debates that target this nature as main characters. Thanks to this focus on nature and politics, the film's narrative structure seems to present an alternative approach towards the discussion about the border constructions. Yet, its overloaded narration and the overwhelming blue chip visual style appear to weaken the effect of environmental and political discussion concerning Trump's project.

To address this working hypothesis, I will first analyse how the film's narrative approaches the subjects of nature, border walls and illegal immigration. Concerning the latter, I will take a closer look on how the film presents two members of Masters' team, who are examples of illegal migration to the US. I will then investigate how the film approaches political and environmental

[3] See Masters (2019: 04':05"-04':47").
[4] To give an example, a 2018 paper signed by more than 2,500 researchers lays out some of the threats, which range from wasting conservation investments to causing floods, endangering animal migrations and destroying all kinds of habitats (see Defenders of Wildlife 2018).

discourse. This includes a discussion of the narrative function of 'experts' that appear as talking heads in the film, such as the two US representatives – congressmen Beto O'Rourke, who is a Democrat (Texas), and Will Hurd, a Republican (Texas) – as well as wildlife biologists, Border Patrol agents and others. In the last part, I will explore how a consensus is created on the narrative level that marginalises problems along the border area.

2) Into the Wild: Towards 'a new American outdoor identity'

Ben Masters is a filmmaker, writer, and photographer currently living in Austin, Texas, where he studied wildlife biology at Texas A&M University until 2010. Like all the other members of his team, Masters is closely associated through his work to the border area (especially the Big Bend area of the Rio Grande). In 2015, he produced and acted in *Unbranded*, a documentary film directed by Phillip Baribeau. *Unbranded* depicts – just like *The River and the Wall* – a long journey (3,000 miles) through the wilderness of the American West. With three fellow graduates, Masters embarks here for more than five months on an expedition with sixteen mustangs from the Mexican to the Canadian border.[5] The film's overall goal was to promote the adoption of wild horses, but much like *The River and the Wall*, it received more praise for 'gorgeously photographed' sceneries than narrative impact.

Already in *Unbranded*, the travelling party includes several of the director's male university buddies. They appear in an adventurous narrative setting surrounded by breath-taking scenery and wildlife. All these narrative elements are in my opinion highly reminiscent of the romanticized image of Wild West nature and cowboys. In *The River and The Wall*, this narrative setting is taken up again, although the ornithologist Heather Mackey joins the team of buddies as a female character. I would argue that in both films, Ben Masters – a white American – presents himself as a modern cowboy: His outdoor clothes, his body movements, the heavily meaningful way and dark voice he speaks in, and also the ponies he raises are aspects that reconstruct an American identity, which builds upon 'male cowboy experiences' in the wilderness of the American Southwest.

The second main character of the buddy-team is the conservationist Jay Kleberg whose appearance (beard, family father with outdoor-clothing) matches Masters' cowboy style. In the film, Kleberg explains that

> [a]n ancestor of mine who was Parks and Wildlife commissioner back in the 30s and 40s, visited this country, when they were looking at designating Big Bend National Park. And

[5] The crossing took place almost entirely on public land, including such national parks as Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and Glacier National Park. "The wilderness gave birth to the American identity and reinforced its validity throughout the Nineteenth century, but its cache of natural resources also made the country rich" (Johns 2007).

> he was a relatively famous rancher. So that's in his blood and he sees how am I gonna produce off of that land. And his comment (is) that the highest and best use for that land is for public recreation. […] It is important to me to complete that circle and try and protect an area that he saw promising. That is threatened right now by the law (Kleberg in Masters 2019: 28':10"-28':55").

Through this statement, the film creates a continuity from ranchers nearly hundred years ago to contemporary conservationists, who want to preserve the wilderness of Texas. Kleberg's statement is furthermore highly reminiscent of John Muir (1839-1914), the 'father' of the national parks and the environmental movement in the US, who opposed the industrialisation of America's wilderness by arguing that nature is not a resource to be harvested but a treasure to be preserved. Nature was for Muir a place for recreation and of higher spirituality, and this nature approach builds upon an opposition between civilization and nature. In this sense, nature has to be saved from so-called civilisation, because capitalist exploitation as guiding principle of US civilization is likely to destroy it. It could be argued that Muir fundamentally changed the way Americans see nature, and Kleberg's ancestor might have even been a follower of Muir's movement. In this context, Kleberg's statement promotes a return to an authentic American lifestyle and values in harmony with nature, such as represented by his ancestor and Muir.

In the film, Kleberg's comments are visually supported by aerial panorama shots of the landscape of the Big Bend. Masters and his friends ride on horses against this natural backdrop. The images are bathed in a soft evening light in combination with highly romantic extradiegetic music. This visual and acoustic orchestration of the landscape and Kleberg's argument represents the American Southwest as a collective symbol for all Americans and recalls the myth of the Wild West – such as depicted in Hollywood cowboy films. I want to argue that this collective imagery is the reason why Kleberg wants to preserve the wilderness.

The English researcher Eric Hobsbawm conceives of the American West as a collective imaginary of the American idea of freedom and independence, which is the essence of American identity. In an article on the myth of cowboys, Hobsbawm points out that the image of the Wild West in Hollywood films is based on "the confrontation of nature and civilisation, and of freedom with social constraint" (Hobsbawm 2013). Furthermore, Hobsbawm argues

> Civilisation is what threatens nature; and their move from bondage or constraint into independence, which constitutes the essence of America as a radical European ideal in the 18th and early 19th centuries, is actually what brings civilisation into the wild west and so destroys it (Hobsbawm 2013).

Kleberg – a modern 'conservationist' (thus, a modern version of Muir) continues – in line with John Muir and his ancestor – the tradition of preserving the land in its authentic condition

because of its symbolic value as a collective identity symbol for all Americans. In this respect, the aestheticized representation of nature highlights the wilderness as a pillar of the myth of an authentic American identity, to which civilisation – now represented by Trump's politics – is a threat.

The film's narrative structure of traveling along the borderlands in combination with Kleberg's and Masters' deep connection with nature presents these two characters as 'new American outdoor identity model'. In the film, they already appear as model for the two other male characters, Austin Alvarado and Filipe DeAndrade, who have family histories marked by illegal immigration to the US. The personal stories of Alvarado and DeAndrade are narratively interwoven with the trip along the border. Like every other character, they have several short sequences during the trip, in which they speak about themselves, their ideas about the wilderness and the wall.

Alvarado is a Guatemalan-American, born in Austin, Texas. During his childhood, he went back and forth between Austin and Guatemala. Having earned a Bachelor of Science in Recreation, Parks and Tourism Science, he worked as a river guide on the Rio Grande and in the Big Bend National Park. Having explored natural environments all over the world, he considers the Rio Grande valley his home. Like the other male characters, Alvarado's identity construction as an American is intimately linked to the nature and landscape around the Rio Grande.

In the film, Alvarado describes working in nature very explicitly as a shelter from social attributions and class status (55:54).[6] The wilderness of the American West allows him to forget about economic and sociocultural distinctions through ethnicity and class status. This is why he feels connected to the Big Bend and the river. For Alvarado, the Rio Grande is "such an equalizer" (Masters 2019: 57':01"). Considering that Alvarado is a migrant from Latin America, his perspective mythifies nature as a space of equality and as a sanctuary for those who suffer discrimination in US society for ethical reasons. He enriches the image of the above-outlined 'new American outdoor identity' by highlighting its inclusive character.

Filipe DeAndrade's story resembles Alvarado's. He was born in Brazil, immigrated to the United States at age six, and grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. DeAndrade is a director for the Comfort Theory production company and a host for NatGeo Wild's UnTamed web series. The American wilderness and wildlife of Texas are his main passion and the subject of his work as a filmmaker. In the film, he claims: "the natural world saved me" (e.g. playing as a child in

[6] See Masters (2019: 55':54").

nature; Masters 2019: 01:10':34"). He also refers to nature as a sanctuary to which as a child he could escape and where he could forget the difficulties of being an immigrant. DeAndrade describes his present-day work as a means to give something back to the country of which he is now proud to be a citizen.[7] In this respect, he also represents a model of successful immigration, in much the same way as Alvarado.

Furthermore, DeAndrade represents the funny character in the film. He is the one who makes everybody laugh. His character underlines the film's feel good attitude, which goes along the whole buddy adventure story. Even if they encounter difficulties along their trip, DeAndrade's jokes lighten up the situation and reintroduce a positive atmosphere. This narrative structure repeatedly provides a turn for the better, and problems related to the borderlands are sidestepped by this happy go lightly attitude.

Thus, we may conclude that the film's narrative evolves around these four main typecast characters and their buddy experiences on the journey along the border. Masters and Kleberg set the benchmark of a new American outdoor identity, shaped through the imaginary of the wilderness and adventurous experiences in nature. They appear as an identity model for 'new arrivals' like Alvarado and DeAndrade. The latters' successful immigration is confirmed because they have already adapted to these established identity patterns. DeAndrade's joking attitude creates a feel good movie atmosphere and thus helps to sidestep difficult realties. Mackey, the only female character, can be read as an apologetic female presence. Introduced as an ornithologist, she explains the consequences of the wall for birds and other animals. Yet apart from that, her character does not contribute very much to the development of the film's narrative. However, ultimately, all five characters are nature and wildlife lovers who can be resumed under the new American outdoor identity. As typecast characters, they propose a narrative of consensus concerning Trump's wall, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

3) Political discourses and the creation of consensus in Masters' documentary

Masters and his friends present the river and its surroundings as a unique part of the landscape of the American West. This uniqueness, the film argues, justifies the creation of a big (bi)national park. In line with the above-mentioned significance of nature, the new outdoor identity patterns and the formation of a (bi)national park, the film promotes a strong consensual discourse that marginalises wall rhetoric.

[7] See Masters (2019: 01:12':23")

However, Masters' proposal to create a (bi)national park does not consider illegal immigration or drug trafficking at the borderlands, which Trump stylises as a major problem for the US that can only be overcome by the construction of a wall. The focus on the (bi)national park idea does therefore ultimately de-politicise the documentary. To explore this hypothesis, I will examine more closely the interviews with two US representatives in the film – congressmen Beto O'Rourke (Democrat, Texas), and Will Hurd (Republican, Texas).

William Hurd has been the Republican US representative for Texas' 23rd congressional district since 2015; he is also a former CIA officer. Hurd's district stretches about 550 miles (890 km) from San Antonio to El Paso along the US-Mexican border. Furthermore, he is, in 2019, the sole remaining Republican representative from a district along the US-Mexican border.[8] Hurd is the first (and only) Black Republican in the House of Representatives and he is considered one of the most moderate Republicans in the House.[9] A short glance at his political agenda confirms his relatively moderate profile and he has received praise for his bipartisan strides as a lawmaker.[10] In August 2019, the *Dallas Morning News* praised his achievements as a politician by underlining that Hurd's "refreshing, common-sense legislating separated him from reflexive party-line orthodoxy" (Dallas Morning News Editorial 2019).

Hurd's points of view on immigration and the wall are not aligned with Trump's politics. He spoke out against Trump's 2017 executive order to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico, saying it was a "third-century solution to a 21st-century problem" and the "most expensive and least effective way to secure the border" (Hurd in Kens 5 Staff 2017). Hurd instead advocates for a "flexible, sector-by-sector approach that empowers Border Patrol agents on the ground with the resources they need" (Hurd in Kens 5 Staff 2017). He proposes using "a mix of technology" and argues that "[i]t's going to be significantly cheaper than building a wall. Let's focus on drug traffickers […] kingpin human smugglers" (Brodesky 2017). Hurd's political convictions regarding border control highlight his moderate profile within the Republican Party. Concerning the border issues, he agrees almost in very point with his Democratic homologue, Congressman Beto O'Rourke, who is also interviewed in the documentary.

As with Hurd, O'Rourke's political convictions concerning the border are marked by his personal experience of living in the border region. This experience gave O'Rourke "a strong

[8] He is one of seven Black representatives in the House of Representatives. In Hurd's opinion, the principal role of the government in the lives of African-Americans should be to empower them to develop their own situation (see Hohmann 2019).
[9] See Hohmann (2019).
[10] See Lambrecht (2018).

understanding of immigration's impact on our community" (O'Rourke 2014: 302), as he outlines in Masters' film. Furthermore, he opposes Trump's policy of separating families at the borders and denies that the wall could serve as a useful tool to prevent illegal immigration and drug trafficking. After the August 2019 El Paso shooting (investigated by the FBI as an act of domestic terrorism), O'Rourke publicly criticized Trump's bleak and demagogic rhetoric on immigration. He pointed out that the fear and anxiety stirred up by Trump concerning immigrants was in no way helpful for resolving the problems on the border.

Although coming from different political parties, O'Rourke and Hurd share the same perspective on the wall. They both reject the wall as a suitable means to prevent illegal immigration. Their very similar lines of argument create the impression that local Democratic and Republic politicians agree in a consensual way. O'Rourke and Hurd represent the traditional model of American bipartisan politics that, according to Greene, focuses more on compromise than on outlining controversial aspects of an issue.[11] This discursive arrangement in the film suggests that problems are solved – since Democrats and Republicans are in agreement. Therefore, the whole issue on Trump's wall, the immigration problems and drug trafficking are in the film sidestepped by an apparent solution: Masters' and Kleberg's proposal for the creation of a (bi)national park. All this shifts the whole discussion of Trump's border wall in a direction that depoliticises the subject. The creation of a (bi)national park is ultimately an idea that avoids a deeper discussion of the political controversies related to Trump's border wall project.

4) Discourses on immigration in Masters' *The River and The Wall*

Towards the end of the film, the subject of illegal immigration is accorded a more prominent place. It is reintroduced when Masters and his friends encounter Stevie Sauer, the Executive Vice President of the National Border Patrol Council 2366,[12] who says that a wall is not of any use for preventing immigration and drug smuggling without having personnel being able to act on the ground. Nevertheless, he outlines that the numbers of illegal immigrants crossing the wall have dropped. In the 1980s and in 2005, the crossings at the US southwest border reached various peaks with around 1,500,000 crossings, but already in 2017, only 304,000 crossings were measured in the lower Rio Grande valley.[13]

The next interview partner is Victoria DeFrancesco Soto of the LBJ School of Public Affairs (University of Austin, Texas) who talks about the Bracero Program of 1965 that established

[11] See Greene (2010).
[12] See Masters (2019: 01:13':27").
[13] See Masters (2019: 01:15':13").

work migration between the US and Mexico. This program brought Mexican workers to the US The program was eventually cancelled, but the established patterns of work migration between the US and Mexico continued. Although illegal, the Mexican workers were tolerated until the late 1980s, when immigration reached a peak. This information on illegal immigration is juxtaposed with some insight to the problems of drug smuggling and dealing by Hurd and O'Rourke.[14] They both explain that the US itself is creating problems related to the drug smuggling and illegal arms traffic. However, these facts on the drug situation do not lead to any conclusions within the film's discourse. The subject is shortly introduced but not reconnected to the main narrative and argument. Furthermore, there is no discussion of how a (bi)national park could be a solution for dealing with the problems related to drug trafficking and illegal immigration.

All this background information on immigration and drug trafficking finally leads to an accidental nocturnal encounter with an invisible group of immigrants or drug smugglers. While paddling along the river by night, Masters gets separated from the rest of the group. His friends hear noises from the supposed immigrants or drug smugglers. This potentially dangerous encounter leads to the discussion of a moral dilemma: should or should they not call border police? During this discussion, the film highlights the reactions of the two Hispanic members of the group: DeAndrade points out that he would not want to call the police unless these people are really drug smugglers; Alvarado appears to be emotionally touched and reminded of his own family story. Finally, they call the border police and the film's narration focuses on Alvarado's family history.

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala suffered a civil war, which is why his family decided to illegally immigrate to the US; they only achieved this on their fourth attempt. Alvarado's story has an important impact on the story. It gives illegal immigrants a face and a voice and therefore their destinies become more concrete and tangible. The emotional impact of these sequences and the level of compassion they raise are a climactic point in the film. However, concerning the underlying political question – whether or not to build a wall – this storyline does not provide much useful insight or arguments. Although the highly emotional impact of Alvarado's family story deconstructs in a certain way Donald Trump's pejorative rhetoric on illegal immigrants, this presentation of the subject fails because of the already apparent solution of creating a (bi)national park. On the contrary, the emotional undertone provides drama and stirs compassion instead of opening a deeper discussion on how to deal with the illegal immigration

[14] See Masters (2019: 01:17':34").

problems. Thanks to the happy conclusion of having eventually received American citizenship, Alvarado's family story appears more as a stroke of destiny than as the result of historical and political measures taken by different US governments. In this respect, Alvarado's personal story avoids a more in-depth discussion of illegal immigration. These problems are depoliticized because they are not narratively related to the current problems along the border and of the happy ending for Alvarado's family.

5) Conclusion: *The River and The Wall* – a nature documentary without political weight?

We have seen that Masters' *The River and The Wall* provides a narrative that is presented, especially at the film's beginning, as politically charged but finally does later shift away from the politically motivated argument toward proposing the creation of a (bi)national park. The formation of a (bi)national park presents a consensus all the different voices in the film can agree on. However, it does not clarify how the park might prevent problems of illegal immigration and drug trafficking along the borderlands. Thus, this solution does not really propose valid arguments for preventing Trump's border wall. It shifts the audience attention away from problematic aspects and suggests a superfluous solution. Thanks to the creation of this consensual discourse the real problems linked to the border seem rather forgotten at the end. This ending, together with the film's overall buddy-movie angle, depoliticizes the whole subject through its celebration of the different characters and their glorious time together. Furthermore, the impact of breath-taking images of nature in combination with highly romanticizing emotional music also creates consensus on the uniqueness of the landscape that should be saved because of its symbolic value for American national identity – such as once proposed by John Muir and Kleberg's ancestor.

Although one major argument against Trump's wall is repeated several times in the film, no coherent political argument is built around this issue: representatives Hurd and O'Rourke both dismantle Trump's rhetoric on the wall as a bulwark against illegal immigration by outlining that the wall is no effective tool to make the border region safer. Hurd argues that modern technologies are safer and less expensive for achieving this goal.[15] This suggestion could have been used to build a main line of argument and to dismantle Trump's rhetoric. Yet, the constant creation of consensual discourse avoids a focus on difficult aspects and provides a narrative that everybody (the characters as well as the audience) can agree upon. Thus through too much consensus, the film ultimately achieves a de-politicization of its ostensible subject, the border

[15] See Masters (2019: 01:36':00").

wall. Instead, nature is presented as a romanticized and sublime space for recreation and identity building, in which one can escape from more serious political problems and find an imagined 'authentic American outdoor identity'.

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Re-animating Mexicanidad: Mexican Cultural Representations in *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017)

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1) Introduction

Animation is a cinematic art form; Hollywood is synonymous with filmmaking and in keeping with this reputation, it is home to world-class animation. Animations, particularly those aimed at children, tend to depict fantastic and ultimately joyful stories with narratives located in both real and imagined geographical locations. Reel FX Creative Studios' *The Book of Life* (2014) and Disney Pixar's *Coco* (2017) are no exception to this trend. These two recent examples of Hollywood 3D computer-animated fantasies focus on Mexico's *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebration, bringing to life depictions of small Mexican towns alongside elaborate imagined worlds that seek to represent the Land of the Dead. Both films revert to the musical, adventure and comedy genres and though similar in a superficial sense, their approaches to cultural representation are markedly different when viewed within the socio-political contexts of early twentieth century and modern-day US-Mexico relations.

This article seeks to interrogate two recent examples of Hollywood animation that take Mexico, its people and the notion of Mexican identity – Mexicanness, or *mexicanidad* – as its central premise. Drawing on key interpretations of the evolving concept of *mexicanidad* throughout the twentieth-century reflective of shifting political ideologies, I examine the historic relationship between Mexico's cultural representation and its relationship with the US, notably the tourism industry. The filmic case studies selected are significant given not only their thematic proximity but also, crucially, the timing of their production and dissemination.

While *The Book of Life* was released two years prior to the 45th presidential election in 2016, won by populist Republican candidate Donald Trump, *Coco* was produced during this time and released in the US eleven months after Trump's inauguration. The Trump campaign, launched 16th June 2015, was characterized by hate-speech including the now President's classification of many Mexican immigrants as "criminals, drug dealers, rapists" (Trump in Ye Hee Lee 2015) as well as his persistent narrative around the campaign promise to build a wall on the Mexico–United States border paid for by the Mexican State. Likewise, since his inauguration, Trump's government has demonstrated intensifying antagonism toward Mexico. Seen in the context of

this socio-political climate, this article examines how these Hollywood animations approach the representation of Mexican cultural heritage and to what degree their interpretations engage with the notion of *mexicanidad* originally forwarded by Mexico's own government administrations for national and international consumption in the early twentieth century.

The Book of Life, directed by Mexican animator/filmmaker Jorge R. Gutiérrez is produced, among others, by renowned Mexican auteur Guillermo del Toro. The story transpires across three keys locations and multiple time periods: a museum in the US, attended by an unruly group of children; an ostensibly fictitious town in Mexico known as San Ángel; and the otherworldly Lands of the Remembered and Forgotten. In the present, a mysterious museum guide (Christina Applegate/ Kate del Castillo) reads to the US children from the eponymous Book of Life; she recounts the tale of Manolo Sánchez (Diego Luna), Joaquín Mondragón (Channing Tatum) and María Posada (Zoe Saldana), a group of childhood friends in San Ángel, turned rivals in adulthood by their burgeoning love triangle. Their romantic rivalry is the subject of a wager by two mystical figures La Muerte (voiced by Kate del Castillo) and Xibalba (Ron Perlman) who govern the Land of the Remembered and the Land of the Forgotten respectively. The film was commercially successful in the US and beyond, grossing just over $50 million domestically and just under $50 million abroad across 3,113 theaters.[1]

Co-directed by American animator/filmmakers Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, *Coco* tells the story of Miguel Rivera (Anthony Gonzalez), a 12-year-old aspiring musician who rebels against his family's seemingly inexplicable ban on music. After Miguel finds himself lost in the Land of the Dead he has 24 hours to seek a family member's blessing or become one of the dead. Similar to *The Book of Life*, *Coco*'s narrative unfolds in both the Land of the Living (here a fictitious present-day Mexican town known as Santa Cecilia) and the Land of the Dead. The film features an all-Latinx cast including famed Mexican actor Gael García Bernal. Produced by a much larger, more established studio Disney Pixar's *Coco* grossed almost $210 million domestically and nearly $600 million abroad across 3,987 theaters.[2]

2) *Mexicanidad*

Mexicanidad, also known as *lo mexicano,* constitutes the affirmation of Mexican culture. The term carries a rich and complex history that comprises various evolutions of meaning forwarded by different ruling powers over time. My analyses of this term will begin in nineteenth century Mexico with the advent and growing popularity of still and moving image technology. While

[1] See Box Office Mojo (2015).
[2] See Box Office Mojo (2018).

my examination of *mexicanidad* is largely limited to its use with regard to visual culture and tourism the term has also been defined and interrogated extensively in Mexican cultural criticism and literature.[3]

The arrival of the photographic and cinematic apparatuses to Mexico in the nineteenth century enabled new forms of cultural expression and augmented the capacity of the image to be dispersed more broadly. For example in 1902 ahead of Mexico's centenary of independence and in what John Mraz describes as "the culminating act of Porfirian propaganda" (Mraz 2009: 40), dictator Porfirio Díaz commissioned a visual record of State-owned church buildings. The project was indicative of a new understanding of Mexican identity, one that would celebrate the nation's Europeanization instead of rejecting its colonial past, as per the independence movement. The reframing of these churches, once symbols of colonial occupation now historical monuments, represents an ideological reframing of the conquest as shared Mexican heritage.[4]

Scholarly work tracks a further evolution of Mexican identity via image-making to the photographs of Mexican and foreign photographers (primarily European and US) at the start of the twentieth century. German photographer Hugo Brehme for example turned to the people and landscape of the country as subjects. According to Mraz "[m]odern scholars of Mexican photography argue that Brehme constructed 'a graphic system of *lo mexicano*,' creating a 'visual vocabulary' of *mexicanidad*, that constitutes 'the base of today's national identity'" (in Mraz 2009: 79). Indeed Brehme's depiction of Mexico at this point in time is one that persists in contemporary understanding and will be explored in relation to *The Book of Life*. In his work regional specificity is reduced to picturesque images featuring sombrero-clad *churros*, women in *china poblana* dresses alongside images of local tradespeople, goods and exotic fauna. This imagery formed the essence of a new *mexicanidad*.[5]

In the post-revolutionary period government policy once again sought to unite a disparate nation through the concerted construction of a shared national identity.[6] One of the earliest outputs linked to this initiative is the Mexican muralist movement (1920s). The re-definition of *lo mexicano* was driven largely by Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos. By

[3] The work of Octavio Paz, particularly *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) famously provided a definition of Mexican identity (*mexicanidad)*. His literary coevals José Revueltas and Carlos Fuentes, however, disputed the essentialist nature of these myths. Elsa Cecilia Frost interrogated the notion of *lo mexicano* further in her book *Las categorías de la cultura mexicana* (1973) Likewise authors have continued to challenge the limits of this cultural identity and its representation into the present. See also Luz Arredondo (2005).
[4] See Mraz (2009: 40).
[5] See Mraz (2009: 79).
[6] See Pick (2010: 178f.).

coupling educational reforms with these cultural projects, Vasconcelos sought to bring together complex visual narratives of nationhood on a grand scale in public spaces. These narratives captured historical periods such as Mexico's indigenous origins, the colonial period, and the Revolution and attempted to bridge these starkly contrasting époques into one cohesive unifying thread. In this context, the evolving notion of *mexicanidad* comprised an explicitly racialized dimension based on eugenics termed by Vasconcelos as "la raza cósmica". This so-called cosmic race represented an amalgamation of Mexico's previous races into one powerful cosmic being.[7]

Similarly, Mexico's hugely successful cinema industry, particularly during the period known as the Golden Age (1935-1960) provided a new platform for defining *mexicanidad*. This was composed chiefly of a carefully established star system that mirrored the Hollywood framework and provided recognizable archetypes of Mexican identity. Celebrities such as María Félix and Dolores del Río, Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, and Cantinflas (Mario Moreno) all embodied different aspects of this proposed identity and nuanced acceptable gender roles and stereotypes of the time. The national cinema industry provided codified representations of morality for intersectional audiences seeking to understand their societal place and role in the age of modernization.[8]

Crucially, however, the purpose and impact of a constructed *mexicanidad* is not limited to its national audience; a shared notion of *lo mexicano* also plays a part in foreign perception of Mexico, particularly that of US tourists. From this perspective, the creation of *mexicanidad* comprised part of a State campaign to re-brand Mexico's image to foment tourism and, by extension, encourage foreign investment in the country. This approach originally emerged during *porfiriato,* the period between 1884 and 1910 when General Porfirio Díaz controlled Mexico through continuous non-consecutive reelection punctuated by puppet presidents. The Porfirian regime sought to "correct the 'errors' of world opinion concerning Mexican climate, politics, and society" (in Mraz 2009: 31) by photographing and propagating a more desirable image of Mexico. This was mainly achieved, at the time, through a celebration of Mexico's colonial past as exemplified in Díaz's photo-project concerning colonial churches across the

[7] See Baker (2015: 13). As scholars have noted certain races are erased from this narrative, namely African, Asian and other ethnic groups not in keeping with the government's framing of Mexican history, see González (2010). Likewise, despite the incorporation of Mexico's indigenous past to this narrative, the underlying message and ideological aim is a whitening of the nation that points to a racist mentality (in which darker skin tones are considered reflective of barbarity and lack of cultivation and lighter tones are associated with civilization), see Franco (1985). While this article does not explore the racial dimensions of the two animated films to this extent, the pervasiveness of this racialized representation persists at the time of writing and can be observed in the form of lighter-skinned animated protagonists in both films.

[8] See Monsiváis /Bonfil (1994).

country, a move that favored European culture over Mexican but simultaneously also emphasized the country's architectural and thus historical richness compared to the less established US.[9]

It is from the 1930s until the 1950s where *mexicanidad* became a crucial tourism tool. As Alex Saragoza writes, this involved "the gradual, selective appropriation of cultural forms to 'image' the country through the articulation of notions of national identity and its attendant heritage" (Saragoza 2001: 91). Co-sponsored by the State and the private sector, tourism (an industry that relied particularly on the US economy) transformed into a fundamental expression of a carefully commodified national cultural identity. This blanket identity was forged from a patchwork of distinct regional art forms that would come to symbolize an image of Mexico produced mainly for US consumption. Thus cultural forms that are specific to certain groups and areas, such as the performance of the *jarabe tapatío* to mariachi music or the *poblana china* dress, come to represent identity on a national scale. Néstor García Canclini labels this phenomenon "the dissolution of the ethnic into the national" (García Canclini 1993: 65). While positive to a degree, Canclini argues that this method of homogenizing difference under the banner of national unity simply serves to depoliticize and distort a more complex and conflict-laden reality.[10] As such touristic representation is largely removed from the political while historically, as discussed, Mexico's construction of Mexicanness for national consumption is distinctly more politically engaged. It is in this political context that Mexico's multifarious indigenous roots were largely reduced to Mayan and Aztec histories and artefacts, with the pyramid as an iconic emblem of this.[11]

Alongside this selective distilling of regional specificity into a bland national typicality, touristic narratives descended into hyper-dramatic spectacle and pageantry.[12] *El día de los muertos* is a prime example of this and notably forms the backdrop to both the animations discussed in this article. Other examples include bullfighting, the *voladores* (flyers) of Papantla, the *toritos* with fireworks, and charro-style mariachis, a selection of which also appear in both filmic narratives.

The touristic promotion of Mexico in the 1930s and 40s (chiefly to US Americans) was primarily found in this ostensibly essentialist cultural depiction. The touristic gaze of this period focused on difference and the exotic and was thus forged around the notion of an 'us' and 'them'

[9] See Mraz (2009: 40).
[10] See García Canclini (2010: 65).
[11] See Saragoza (2001: 100).
[12] See Saragoza (2001: 98f.)

narrative. That is to say, *mexicanidad* both nationally and abroad was concentrated into this dichotomy of difference. As is argued in Saragoza:

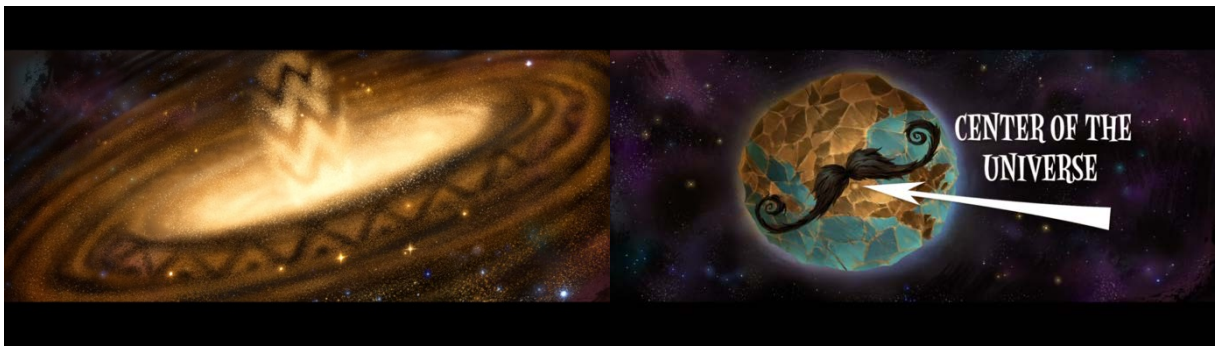
> In this sense, tourism constructed the nation as "an assertion of its opposition to other communities and identities" where "to assert 'identity' in the relational form [was] to display 'difference' forcibly in the public sphere (Carter / Donald 1993 in Saragoza 2001: 109).

It is this emphasis on difference, particularly in the context of growing divisive populist discourse during the Trump era that will be observed in relation to the filmic texts in the remaining sections of this article. Thus, *mexicanidad* can be viewed all at once as a touristic tool that packaged Mexican cultural stereotypes for US consumption and a positively received though ideologically-driven example of cultural assertion in Mexico itself. These foundations for the representation of cultural heritage both nationally and abroad serve to explore the depiction of *mexicanidad* in *The Book of Life* and *Coco*. While this article does not seek to explore the presence of *lo mexicano* exhaustively in both films, it is worth highlighting their engagement with *mexicanidad* and how this is navigated via recent Hollywood representation before and during the Trump administration.

3) *The Book of Life* (2014)

Released the year prior to the start of the Trump campaign, Reel FX Creative Studios' *The Book of Life* (2014) provides an interesting starting point for the exploration of Hollywood depiction of Mexican cultural heritage in animation proposed in this article. *The Book of Life* is clearly intended as a positive and celebratory depiction of Mexican culture, the affectionate way that the film introduces its Mexican focus testifies to this. In the opening scenes of the film a group of unruly children arrive to a city museum where a friendly female tour guide leads them to a secret wing of the museum for an alternative tour. It is in this space that we encounter the titular book. As the mysterious museum guide begins her introduction to the origins of the Book of Life and the veracity of the stories it holds, she states "[t]here is one thing we know for certain, Mexico is the center of the universe".[13] Her words are accompanied by parodic images which present Mexico first in the form of a sombrero-shaped galaxy (Figure 1a) and then, as the digital imagery imitates a superzoom effect, as the planet earth where a mustachioed North American continent with an arrow pointing to the would-be facial fulcrum is captioned "CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE" (Figure 1b).

[13] Interestingly one explanation of the toponymy Mexico is said to be an agglutinate of the Nahuatl words 'Mextli' (moon), 'Xitle' (center) and the suffix 'Co' (in the), therefore meaning "in the center of the moon" (see Arredondo 2005: 11).



Figures 1a; 1b: Mexico is the center of the universe (in Gutiérrez 2014: 02':42"-03':00").

The images draw on the typical visual signifiers of an early twentieth century Mexican *campesino* (peasant) captured in the work of foreign photographers including Paul Strand, Edward Weston and of course Hugo Brehme. These cursory symbols, which playfully introduce the setting of the story, are offered as emblematic of Mexico as a whole, as opposed to a specific social class within a particular cultural context. Adjacent to Canclini's assertion that in such contexts the ethnic is filtered into the national, here the representation intersects class and nation with the rural working class representing all of Mexico.

Indeed, the film supplies a perfect example of a touristic gaze and in doing so engages closely with the characteristic visuals of a typical depiction of *mexicanidad* for an US audience. The film's very narrative cements the viewer's role as outside observer; we discover the world of Manolo, Joaquín and María via the museum-tour experience of a group of American children. The tour guide leads the children to a special, secret wing of the museum where upon entering she announces "[b]ehold children, the glorious beauty of Mexico". Here they encounter an ancient chamber lacquered with pseudo Mexican curios such as enormous and vibrantly colored skull heads that are vaguely reminiscent of the Olmec colossal heads, and all peppered by a *papel picado* bunting (see Figure 2). It is in this exotic setting – that of the mystical and mysterious museum wing, where the children and audience experience the story of Manolo, Joaquín and María.

Throughout the unfolding of the plot, the 'us and them' binary is reasserted, punctuating the structure of the sub-narrative at regular intervals in the story. In one example, when María and later Manolo appear to have died, the animation cuts back to the children in the museum. Their story is disrupted, relegated even, by the reactions of the children hearing it and who are shown to take precedence. While it can be observed by the children's concerned reactions that they empathize with the characters, these interruptions to the interdiegetic world constantly remind the viewer of their distance from the world depicted. There is a continual reinforcement of a specific reality (that of the children in the museum) against the fiction of San Ángel. These

jarring cuts are not 'limited' to shocking twists in the story but also occur when the children make commentary on the plot itself, a metanarrative technique that also questions the validity of the depiction.

Figure 2: "Behold children, the glorious beauty of Mexico" (in Gutiérrez 2014: 02':03"-02':05").

In this way, the viewer is reminded that they are watching a story within a story, creating yet further distance between the Mexican protagonists and the cinematic audience. Under these circumstances the viewer's experience parallels that of the US children and not the protagonists of the love story, aligning the viewer thus more with those outside of Mexico than within it. The audience then, much like the children, is simply a short-term visitor to this Mexican town and deeper engagement with the lives of its citizens is limited.

Perhaps most indicative of this fact is that the townspeople of San Ángel, including the three chief protagonists, are all digitally rendered as toy wooden figures, presented to the children in miniature form prior to the telling of the sub-narrative (see Figure 3). Though there are other fully animated Hollywood features where toys protagonize the narrative and co-exist with humans,[14] in the case of *The Book of Life* the artistic decision to represent the subplot characters as toys results in a further separation of the two parties: the children are real like the viewer

[14] Prime examples of animated features that comprise toy protagonists are seen, for example, in Disney's successful *Toy Story* (1995-2019) franchise, the classic tale of *Pinocchio* (1940) also produced by Disney as a two dimensional animation and, to some degree, Dreamworks' *Shrek* (2001). It is important to note, however, the following concessions: in *Toy Story* the adult humans are largely absent from the narrative; Pinocchio is the only animate toy in his universe and his personal ark culminates in his becoming a 'real' boy. Finally, in *Shrek* the characters are all drawn from fantasy and coexist in a fairytale land, and thus no distinction is made between toys, humans and animals for example.

while the purportedly esteemed Mexicans are toy-people. Thus, though the manner in which the figurines are presented highlights their importance (they are protected by a wooden chest), despite their carefully assembled display they are still reduced to lifeless objects resembling souvenirs. These figurines, as well as the museum chamber in which they are found, thus represent a commodified Mexico, curated for a US audience.

In keeping with this essentialist depiction of Mexicanness, the film also includes countless cultural clichés. For example in terms of music, the soundtrack mixes contemporary songs, at times performed in mariachi style, with classics of *mexicanidad* such as the *jarabe tapatío*. The male protagonists are archetypes of machismo spectacle: Manolo the sensitive guitar-playing torero and Joaquín the lauded military hero. Largely, the fictional town of San Ángel is constructed on a touristic understanding of *lo mexicano*. The town, which is itself shaped like an acoustic guitar, is a further reminder of this fact.

Beyond the film's reliance on clichéd cultural tropes and its constant pendulum cuts between the US child audience and the Mexican love triangle, a temporal divide further buttresses the assertion of difference between Mexico and the US. The sub-narrative takes place during an indeterminate past that visually recalls porfiriato but can be located somewhere after the revolution (1910-1920) due to explicit references thereof within the plot. This once again separates the US children from the Mexicans, while their story takes place in our shared present, that of the Mexicans is consigned to an unspecified past. In the same vein, the town of San Ángel is also far removed from any larger civilization is therefore even further distanced from an attempt to align this depiction of Mexican society with a more faithful and realistic present-day equivalent.

The one attempt the filmmakers make to bridge the gap that it so forcefully constructed during the narrative takes place in the final moments of the film. In keeping with the genre of fantasy to which it pertains, the real and imagined fictitious worlds of the sub-narrative converge when the museum guide reveals herself as La Muerte. From their own culturally iconic yellow school bus, the US children wave goodbye to the guide who transforms into her true form and reunites with her own love interest, Xibalba.

Figure 3: "All of these wooden figures represent real people in our story" (in Gutiérrez 2014: 04':25"-04':29").

Despite this largely superficial engagement with Mexican culture, *The Book of Life* received predominantly positive reviews in the US though critics focused their praise mainly on the high quality of the animation.[15] Nonetheless, as explored here and in accordance with Simon Abrams' review, *The Book of Life* "preaches tolerance while lamely reinforcing the status quo" (Abrams 2014). In the context of Mexican cultural identity, the status quo relates to the film's heavy reliance on a polarizing narrative that separates the viewer from the Mexican protagonists of the film and relies on dated *mexicanidad* clichés.

4) *Coco* (2018)

Unlike the toy Mexicans that populate the imaginary town of San Ángel in *The Book of Life*, Disney's *Coco* is protagonized by a twelve-year old boy named Miguel and his family (both living and dead). The film is significant not least because it was produced and released during a period of pervasive and pernicious populist discourse attributed to then-presidential candidate (and now US president) Donald Trump.

Populist discourse is forged around reductive binaries; it seeks to create two antagonistic identities, placing itself on the side of 'the people' and in doing so opposes itself to so-called 'elites'.[16] This dichotomy lends itself to the creation of further moralistic antagonisms such as

[15] See Scheck (2014), Snetiker (2014) and Stewart (2014).
[16] See Mudde (2004: 544).

'good' and 'bad' or 'pure' and 'corrupt'. However, as part of this simplification of political identity, groups that do not constitute part of the 'elites' but in some aspects do not sit comfortably within a shared understanding of 'the people', are also targeted for their difference. Within populist discourse, minorities are often depicted as a protected group that, although it does not hold power itself, benefits directly from the rule of the elites. Such is the case for Mexican immigrants during the Trump campaign. Trump's public labelling of many Mexican immigrants as "criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc." highlights their exclusion from the classification of 'the people'. Once again, Mexicans and their culture are relegated to a position of 'otherness'. In this context an 'us' and 'them' binary based on cultural difference, as is the case in *The Book of Life*, becomes problematic. It is perhaps for this reason that *Coco* results a more complimentary, rich and even challenging depiction of Mexican cultural heritage than its coeval animated feature. Instead of leaning into the notion of mexicanidad that characterized twentieth century tourism as with *The Book of Life*, *Coco* evolves its engagement by narrativizing the relationship between contemporary life and Mexico's cultural past.

Though *Coco* relies on many of the same narrative tropes and clichés as *The Book of Life*, as one example both films center around Mexico's day of the dead celebrations, it asserts a more detailed examination of cultural products and celebrations. Its timely release places the film at the center of high tensions and debates regarding the current and future relationship between Mexico and the US during this presidency (2017-2021). These tensions have been stoked not only by the President's slandering of Mexican immigrants but also his campaign promise to "build a wall" on the Southern border. In addition, his administration's termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and its zero-tolerance policy on families entering the US at the border that resulted also in the forced separation of children from their families.[17] These policies and the rhetoric that accompanies them intends to create societal divisions in which 'the people' are established as law-abiding citizens, while immigrants are placed in direct opposition to this, with their behavior and humanity construed as resultantly 'illegal' or 'criminal'. Thus *Coco* has been identified by some reviewers as 'subversive' for its positive approach to Mexican identity and cultural heritage in such a volatile political climate.[18]

What is being labeled subversive here is the well-researched and detailed celebration of Mexican cultural identity that draws heavily on the tradition of popular visual culture. Indeed the film is fraught with visual references to figures like political lithographer José Guadalupe Posada whose famed *calavera* cartoons would posthumously come to be associated with *Día*

[17] See Hirschfeld Davis / Shear (2018).
[18] See del Barco (2017).

de los Muertos and iconic feminist artist Frida Kahlo. The potency of these references is strengthened by their specificity. Arguably, the most powerful example of this is the film's dialogue with Mexico's cinematic Golden Age and the characters and celebrities that populated this time. Ernesto de la Cruz, one of the primary characters of the film and ultimately its villain, is a guitar-playing actor/singer idolized by the young Miguel. De la Cruz is based on real-life Golden Age film stars such as Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, heartthrobs of the period known for playing the singing *charro* in countless films. In addition to the film's inspirational derivation, stars from the Golden Age also make appearances in the film itself with de la Cruz surrounded by his would-be contemporaries including Negrete and Infante as well as María Félix, Cantinflas, Dolores del Río and wrestling film icon El Santo (Figure 4). While plot and mise-en-scene in *The Book of Life* mingles playfully with broad cultural themes and touchstones such as bullfighting, mariachis, sombreros and moustaches, it is through this acute attention to detail that *Coco* attempts to produce a more thoughtful image of *lo mexicano*. Thus *Coco*, despite being a Hollywood production, does not pander to US expectations of Mexican cultural identity but alternatively produces an image of Mexico that is recognizable and beloved to a Mexican audience. It is arguably for this reason that the film was so well-received in Mexico, where it is now the highest-grossing film in the country's box-office history.[19]

Figure 4: All-star sing along in *Coco* (in Unkrich 2018: 59':42").

[19] See McNary (2017).

Another characteristic that simultaneously sets the film apart from *The Book of Life* is the intermingling of past and present. While, as previously discussed, *The Book of Life* re-imagines Mexico in a non-specific historical period as a toy-populated fantasy-land, *Coco* is assertively set in the present. Although Miguel harbors nostalgia for the past, seen in his obsession with the life and work of de la Cruz, he is dressed in more modern attire – namely jeans, trainers and a hoodie. The intermixing of past and present onscreen takes place when Miguel travels inadvertently to the Land of the Dead. Here, he encounters his own ancestry in a world that is conscientiously constructed as a visual layering of cultural meaning through design. The animated city of the Land of the Dead incorporates key architectural periods from Mexico's Mesoamerican and colonial past, layering these vertically to create a visual architectural timeline that articulates Mexico's complex history (Figure 5). These details, combined with countless other considerations, work to produce a warm and welcoming environment that is intended to honor the culture.[20]

Figure 5: The foundations of a society (in Unkrich 2018: 24':20").

In this sense the film's subversive quality is largely seen in its positive affirmation of Mexican cultural heritage, a chief hope of the film's director Lee Unkrich for the project given the current political climate (Huerta Ortiz 2017).[21] In terms of explicit political content however, the film offers relatively little. The singular notable example is the border-crossing scene 25 minutes

[20] See Robertson (2017: 6).
[21] See Huerta Ortiz (2017).

into the film. When Miguel's deceased relatives walk him over the marigold bridge to the Land of the Dead they arrive at the border control. While waiting in the re-entry line, an over-the-shoulder shot captures Miguel glancing over to the 'departures' gate. The shot pans right to show a long shot of a border patrol agent. A cut brings the viewer closer to the action with a medium shot that captures the agent using her equipment to scan faces of travelers to identify their right to travel, in *Coco* this right is determined by whether there are corresponding pictures of the deceased at their families' *ofrendas*. The first couple's pictures appear on the agent's monitor with a green light above indicating a positive match. After another positive traveler is allowed through, in this case literally given the green light, Hector enters the frame from the right impersonating Frida Kahlo. The camera cuts to a visibly awestruck Miguel who continues to observe the departures desk. In this instance, given that Hector does not have a picture on an *ofrenda* his travel is denied. The agent's screen is filled by a red cross and the previously green light on the monitor now shines red. In an attempt to negotiate with the agent, Hector pulls off his Frida costume but she replies "no photo on an *ofrenda*, no crossing the bridge". The situation is clear, there are rules relating to crossing the border and he does not have the right to do so.

Given the failures of his first and second attempts to cross legally, Hector runs towards the bridge and is visually captured through a series of cuts and leftward pans that see him leapfrog a security guard as he hurries towards the crossing, all interspersed with a reaction shot of Miguel who is still watching. Nonetheless, as he reaches the bridge a tracking full shot follows behind him and as he sinks through the petals the shot shortens and travels round to capture Hector head-on in a close up that reveals his exasperated expression as he is lifted away by security. As Hector is dragged back to the gates, the film cuts to a long shot that now pans right to follow the movement. When he reaches the center of the frame the depth of field shifts to focus on Miguel in the foreground with his Tía Rosita both watching the scene.

The purpose of the sequence is to introduce the character of Hector to the audience, a character whose storyline is centered entirely on redemption. He is presented in this first sequence as a likeable criminal but, as we will later discover, he is in fact wrongfully believed by his family to have abandoned them and is the victim of both murder and theft. Thus, a parallel is drawn between Hector and other immigrants (including those that may have entered the US legally): by learning his backstory the audience is enabled to understand his motivations. He is humanized and the viewer can thus empathize with him and his desire to cross the border. While the analogy is fairly basic, the presence of such a sequence as a part of this kind of narrative arc is rendered more powerful due to the timing of the release of the film. The film as a whole provides an antidote to the increasing intensity of the domestic tensions between the US

government under Trump and its approach to immigration. On the 25th of January 2017, just five days after his inauguration, Trump signed two Executive Orders (EOs) directed at immigration: 'EO 13767: Border Security and Immigration Enforcement Improvements', which sought to "secure the southern border of the United States through the immediate construction of a physical wall on the southern border". The second: 'EO 13768: Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States', radically expanded the boundaries of who is considered a priority for deportation as well as the definition of what constitutes criminal behavior for immigrants.[22] These recent EOs rapidly intensified a pre-existing trend in immigrant criminalization and have resultantly produced increases in apprehensions, detentions and deportations.[23]

Both measures supply further evidence of the ongoing targeting of chiefly Latinx immigrants[24] and highlight the malignant focus of Trump's rhetoric regarding the US/Mexican border. Thus though *Coco* is only subtly subversive, the film's engagement with these issues marks a compelling attempt to challenge false narratives and portray Mexican people and culture with greater complexity. Mexican actor García Bernal, who voices Hector, acknowledged this point outright at the film's Hollywood premiere:

> I want to dedicate this film to all the children who have ancestors from Mexico and Latin America. In this moment, these kids are growing up with a lot of fear because the established narrative says that they come from families that come from rapists, murderers, and drug traffickers. We are such a complex and profound culture, and these kids need to be empowered to stand up and say that what is being said about them is a complete lie (García Bernal in Fernandez 2017).

Unlike the sub-narrative interruptions of the children in the museum during *The Book of Life*, the constant cuts to Miguel during the border crossing sequence remind the viewer that the next generation is watching. This testifies to the timeliness of the Disney Pixar release.

5) Conclusion

The 2016 US presidential elections bore witness to a political period characterized by a divided electorate. These divisions were rendered yet larger by the hostile populist rhetoric of the Trump campaign which sought to villainize immigrants crossing the US/Mexican border. Both films discussed in this article provide positive and engaging depictions of Mexican cultural heritage and are notably informed by notions of *mexicanidad* that date back to the twentieth century.

[22] See Federal Register (2017).
[23] See Alvord et al. (2018).
[24] See Provine / Doty (2011).

While both films are effectively 'selling' Mexico to national (in this case the US) and international audiences their respective approaches to this exchange are ultimately impacted by the socio-political climates in which they were produced and released. Despite blatant similarities (*Día de los muertos*), and a difference of less than three years in terms of release date, the films' differing levels of critical engagement with Mexican culture and its presentation onscreen are highly revealing.

Though positive in its depiction of Mexicanness, *The Book of Life* exhibits a touristic gaze, an engagement with Mexico as 'other'. Mexico is appealing and wondrous but innately different from the US. It depicts a Mexico congruent to the blanket identity forged from images of mariachis and sombreros, essentialized and produced mainly for US consumption often by foreign photographers. Engagement with Mexico takes place from an outside perspective, and although it is positive, it does not interrogate its stand or question the othering and exoticization of Mexicanness in the US.

Coco on the other hand, produced in a climate of intense anti-immigrant rhetoric, engages more deeply with Mexico and its culture. Instead of presenting an essentializing image of Mexico, *Coco's* well-researched story allows viewers to experience the country through the eyes of a young Mexican boy. The characters are voiced by Latinx celebrities and the story features an abundance of carefully curated references to Mexican history and pop-culture.

In contrast to *The Book of Life, Coco* feels much more like a Mexican story than a story about Mexico. In the context of the US political and social climate of the time, it is this small but crucial difference that makes *Coco* a mildly subversive film. Mexico then becomes not an exotic other but a place recognizable and beloved to a Mexican, and a Mexican-US audience. Through subtle engagement with political issues such as the border-crossing scene, and the celebration of a diverse selection of Mexican culture and history, *Coco's* portrayal of Mexican people and culture stands in contrast to the rhetoric prevalent during the Trump campaign.

Filmography

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Approaching Pixar's *Coco* during the Trump Era[1]

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1) Archaeology of Media

The importance of mass media to everyday lives compelled the discipline of anthropology to analyze the significance of information produced through newspapers, magazines, television and film-production studios, including its means of distribution.[2] Anthropology has been one step ahead of archaeology when it comes to reinventing itself to approach cinema studies.[3] Not even the release of the blockbuster film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981) incited a prompt analytical response from archaeologists, even if after its release, their departments experienced significant growth in student enrollment. No wonder, Thomas Elsaesser suggests that the emergence of the archaeology of media is more a symptom than a desire to create a discipline to analyze the power structures and micro-histories of the dominant narratives dispersed by them, something also noticed by Rodney Harrison.[4] Symptom or not, literature on Media Archaeology has grown over the last decade to a point in which we are in a position to approach the tensions and contradictions embedded in the narratives and accounts of 'the other' in the world of animated cinema.[5] The following pages discuss the film *Coco*, produced by Pixar-Disney, as an example.

The archaeology of media has been particularly concerned with the mass production of fictional stories and imaginary worlds as the new process of history making,[6] of which *Coco* is no exception. Such a concern requires film analysis to discuss the powerful reach of cinema to distribute information and images to different types of audiences, along with the interests of those who own and control them.[7] Given the induced social transformations by mass media worldwide, Appadurai (ibid. 35f.) made a call for anthropology to explore these phenomena

[1] The meaning and portrayal of archaeology in contemporary popular culture derives from the larger research focus of 'Alternative Mexico', a project by the author and supported by UNAM-PAPIIT. Research presented here was conducted while holding a research award invitation from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung at the Iberoamerikanisches Institut and the Rathgen Labor of the Preussischer Kultur Besitz in Berlin in 2019.
[2] See Appadurai (1996).
[3] See David / Wogan (2009).
[4] See Elsaesser (2016: 181) and Harrison (2010).
[5] See Hiscock (2012), Holtorf (2016), Huhtamo / Parikka (2011) and Parikka (2012).
[6] See Harrison (2010: 2).
[7] See Appadurai (1996: 35).

through its distinctive theoretical concerns and methodologies. Appadurai introduced the term "mediascape" to analyze the political setting in which a large repertoires of images, narratives and group identities reach a massive number of viewers (Appadurai 1996: 35f.). The term "mediascape" is used here to demonstrate *Coco*'s narrative is based on loose accounts of those living in Mexico, offering endless possibilities to construct imaginary worlds inhabited by characters and objects telling new stories about 'the other'.

2) *Coco* – where the north meets the south

Coco, directed by Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, and co-produced with Darla K. Anderson, tells the story of Miguel Rivera, a dark skinned boy, who wants to become a musician against his family's wishes. The music and colorful pecked paper with skull images shown in the opening of the film creates the perfect setting for the audience to know the story will unfold on *Día de muertos*. Praised by the film industry and critics for its 'respect' of Mexican culture, this 175 million USD film casts Mexican actors Alfonso Araú, Gael García Bernal and Ana Ofelia Murguía. Receiving two Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature and Best Original Song, and Best Animated film at the BAFTA Awards and the Golden Globes, *Coco* has above all been highlighted as a 'pro-Mexico' film.[8] For critics and audiences, the film takes a stand against Donald Trump's portrayal of Mexicans as rapists and criminals, as highlighted in a rambling speech he gave during his presidential campaign in 2015.

Such an anti-Mexican sentiment is not new to the US, but Trump broke here with norms of political correctness that had dominated world politics for decades. Furthermore, his offensive speeches granted permission to publicly express suppressed feelings of discrimination and hate towards Mexicans. In this context, Trump has resorted to an ancient and effective *divide et impera* strategy, which forced individuals to take sides on every issue at stake during the campaign, including essentialist and xenophobic notions about Mexicans in an already fractured social environment. Contrary to Trump's remarks, however, it could be argued that "Mexico has helped make Hollywood great again" (Rose 2018) by sending their best actors, directors and cinematographers. The industry was already in need of a different approach to provide entertainment movies, and that was introduced by Mexican filmmakers Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro, and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, who dominated the Oscars in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

[8] See Rose (2018).

The release of *Coco* on October 20, 2017, during the Morelia International Film Festival in Mexico, took place within the political backdrop of Trump's campaign. As the film opens, Unkrich's good intentions to vindicate Mexico's good people begin with a mariachi version of the iconic song 'When you wish upon a star', used at the beginning of most Walt Disney Company films. The film takes place in Santa Cecilia, hometown to Ernesto de la Cruz, a beloved singer and artist who achieved fame thanks to his song 'Remember Me'. Miguel Rivera tells the story of Mamá Imelda, who was abandoned by her husband so that he could pursue his career as a guitar player. Despite Mamá Imelda prohibiting the family to play music, Miguel spends his free time learning how to play the guitar in the hope of becoming a famous musician,

Determined to participate in a talent show at the town plaza, taking place on *Día de muertos*, Miguel grabs his guitar to make his dream come true, accompanied by a street dog, a Xoloitzcuintle, conveniently named Dante. Miguel hides Dante and his guitar under the altar, which displays photographs of the deceased members of his family, along with flowers, food offerings, and candles. Dante accidently knocks down a picture of Mamá Imelda, which had been folded to cover the torn photograph of Mamá Coco's father, who is revealed to be holding the same guitar used by Ernesto de la Cruz. After insisting de la Cruz is Mamá Coco's father, his "abuelita" destroys the guitar. Defying the family, he runs away and takes de la Cruz's guitar placed at his mausoleum. As he begins to play the first strokes, Miguel is taken to a world inhabited by skeletons, among them are his deceased family members, who have crossed over from the Land of the Dead through a border with a Maya style façade and pink neon sign, which could be interpreted to be the US-Mexican border.

Anybody who has crossed the US-Mexican border can relate to what the skeletons go through when customs agents ask for their visa and passport. In *Coco*, the dead are only able to cross if their photograph was placed at their family altar and they too have to declare their belongings to custom agents. Evidently, the deceased live in a better world than the living, a modern land with tall fancy buildings in a European style and urban transportation. This is the US side, contrasting strongly with the underdeveloped town of Santa Cecilia. These scenes allude to those who have crossed illegally into the US and who are unable to go back to Mexico for fear of being deported. The film portrays a skeleton named Héctor, attempting to cross the border with a fake identity, only to find himself faltering in the 'desert' (represented by a Mexican marigold field) before he is detained by border police. In these scenes, the producers make very explicit references to Trump's immigration policies, which include, among other measures, reinforcing border security by completing the building of a wall, and deporting immigrants who arrived in the US as children.

Miguel is seen in the film crossing without the right papers to see Mamá Imelda, who lives 'on the other side' / *al otro lado* and is stranded in the Land of the Living, as her photo does not appear to have been placed at the altar. Making her case to customs agents, she finds out that Trump's "bad hombre" not only transgressed the world of the dead, he took her photograph from the altar and stole Ernesto de la Cruz's guitar. Facing 'deportation', Mamá Imelda demands Miguel to place her photograph on the altar and give up music. In line with Trump's rhetoric, Mamá Imelda, says, "You go home my way or no way". Miguel refuses, runs away and meets Héctor, whose photograph has never been placed at an altar, and is most likely the image of the *coyote*, a smuggler of illegal migrant. Subsequently, he 'charges' Miguel with a 'fee' for disguising him and helps him find de la Cruz in the Land of the Dead. In this new journey, Miguel finds himself in Diego Rivera's atelier, one of Mexico's most iconic painters, and meeting famous painter, Frida Kahlo. Finally meeting de la Cruz, Miguel is introduced to Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, icons of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema who most likely inspired Ernesto de la Cruz's character. They are shown in classic black and white clips in the film, and the beautiful women look and dance like actress Dolores del Río. For such links to the Mexican Golden Age period, Unkrich could draw on earlier Disney films, including *The Three Caballeros* (Ferguson et al. 1944), produced by Walt Disney himself after his visit to Mexico as Goodwill Ambassador under the orders of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. At the end of the story, Héctor finds out that de la Cruz murdered him for his songs. After publicly unmasking de la Cruz, Mamá Imelda gives Miguel her unconditional blessing to play 'Remember me' for Mamá Coco upon his return, and she shows him the missing piece of the family photo, which ensures that Héctor does not meet his final death. In a traditional Disney happy-ending structure, the villain receives justice and Miguel pursues his vocation as a musician.

3) Defying Donald Trump's anti-Mexican rhetoric with *Coco*?

In 2018, the producers of *Coco* received the Oscar and BAFTA award for best-animated feature film. For both awards, Unkrich thanked the people of Mexico for their beautiful culture and tradition, saying, "[w]ith *Coco* we tried to take a step forward towards a world where non-white children can grow up seeing characters in movies that look and talk and live like they do. Representation matters. Marginalized people deserve to feel like they belong" (Unkrich in BAFTA 2018: 00':46"-01':01").

Shortly afterwards, *Coco* 'became the talk of the town'. In blogs, newspapers and periodicals like *Vogue* and *VanityFair*, writers highlighted that *Coco*'s narrative defies Trump, making it

the most important film of 2018.[9] Since the story is also about the importance of family, the film resonated with every culture around the world and became a blockbuster, ranking within the top 20 highest grossing animated films ever. Undoubtedly, behind *Coco* are the producers' good intentions to send a positive message about Mexico.[10] However, I remain concerned about the rhetoric behind the narrative of this 'love letter to Mexico'. In my opinion, the film disseminates a nationalist image of Mexico's heritage and identity, which has obscured alternative accounts and non-dominant narratives of a far more diverse Mexican culture. In particular, the film reproduces a stereotypical image of Mexico and its citizens, which resonates well with tourists.

Discussed in more detail elsewhere,[11] Mexico's current definition of heritage results from nation-building needs and interests after its subjection to the Spanish Crown came to an end. Drawing on the spirit of the French Revolution, a national historical consciousness was developed that includes the heritage of indigenous populations as emblematic of its national ethnicity. Not by coincidence, *Coco* displays images of Mexico's infatuation with French culture and spirit, enhanced during Porfirio Díaz' presidential terms, by creating a world populated with French style buildings. The film also had to include examples of Mexico's archaeological richness, declared by Porfirio Díaz as national properties in 1902,[12] and even artistic monuments, a concept institutionalized by President Victoriano Huerta in 1914.[13]

It is, however, President Lázaro Cárdenas's merit to bring these elements together as Mexico's cultural patrimony in 1939, by founding the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) for the protection and promotion of Mexico's economic and social welfare programs. Tied to its foundation, Cárdenas implemented a business model to reduce Mexico's poverty levels, which creates economic value from Mexico's patrimony by fostering its tourism. For indigenous populations to contribute to Mexico's economic growth, this business model included the selling of crafts or *artesanías* as 'survivals' of Mexico's past.[14] Key to this model was the support by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) and now Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indigenas (INPI), the Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías (FONART) and the Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Populares (MNAIP). Although tourism and craft selling proved to be unsuccessful strategies for poverty reduction, the strategy remains in place and is consequently also key for *Coco*. In particular, the Secretariat of Tourism created "Pueblos

[9] See Ruiz (2018).
[10] See Keveney (2019).
[11] See López Varela (2018; 2015).
[12] See Schroeder Cordero (1984: 672).
[13] See Rodríguez Morales (2011).
[14] See Dietz (1995).

Mágicos" in 2001, to promote a magical experience through the natural beauty these towns have to offer to its visitors, along with their cultural richness, traditions, folklore, historical relevance, cuisine, art crafts and great hospitality. *Coco* draws on this tradition and, as such, it stands for Mexico's 'policy of assimilation', centered on the state's long-time interest in forging a culturally homogenized and modern nation.[15] This includes the alienation of languages, traditions and technologies of those living in poverty, because they are considered obstructions to Mexico's economic growth.[16]

4) *Coco* as mediascape

Coco disseminates a series of images and narratives that align with Mexican state sponsored ideology, which has created tensions in its definition of heritage, as it sets strict temporal limits for the preservation of archaeological, artistic and historic monuments, leaving Mexico's modern heritage resources unprotected. Beyond the twentieth century, stewards preserve only properties exhibiting relevant aesthetic values. By binding heritage to strict temporal limits, the state has excluded alternative forms of heritage that are relevant for Mexican society, such as the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema. Mexico belongs to one of very few countries in the world, which remain unable to recognize outstanding citizens as part of its heritage, such as actors Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete.[17] The film industry is not completely at fault for not showing 'alternative' values of Mexico's heritage. For more than two centuries, the Mexican government has tried to 'hide' the physical, intellectual, moral, and economic underdevelopment, which restrains Mexico from becoming a country like Germany, France or Japan.[18]

Coco promotes a tourist image of Mexico, accentuated by the neon-lit atmosphere of colonial Spanish-style charming streets and buildings inhabiting the Land of the Living. Inspired by the producers' and crew's visit to Michoacan, Oaxaca[19] and Guanajuato[20], a city not far away from San Miguel de Allende with a population of ten thousand retired US and Canadian citizens and veterans, the film highlights a particular vision of Mexico's national heritage properties with focus on archaeological, artistic and historic monuments. Undeniably, these 'towns' are part of Mexico, but so are other regions of Mexico, populated with history and legends, telling a different 'story' about Mexico's people, especially those living in 'rural' areas, who are forced to migrate to the US to compensate for the economic and social failures of the Mexican state.

[15] See Caso (1958) and Gamio (1916).
[16] See López Varela (2015).
[17] See López Varela (2019).
[18] See Gamio (1916: 10).
[19] See Imaginario (2018).
[20] See Rose (2018).

When *Coco*'s teaser came out, it sparked a debate surrounding its originality. Who got it right, *The Book of Life* or *Coco*? I would argue that both films are good examples of past and present governments' efforts to make its citizens and viewers around the world accept and internalize one homogenous national identity model. *The Book of Life,* produced by Guillermo del Toro and directed by Jorge Gutiérrez for Century Fox in 2014, is another story about Día de Muertos, based on cultural dynamic experiences of urban life, which are closer to Mexico's modern national identity than to its revered archaeological past. The film takes place in San Ángel, one of Mexico City's wealthiest neighborhoods, characterized by colonial churches, manors, highly visited crafts markets, cobblestone streets, expensive restaurants, luxurious boutiques and homes, including Diego Rivera's atelier. San Ángel's 'beauty and magical charm' is hardly the norm where Mexican children grow up. Still, San Ángel is a living reality for a highly privileged sector in Mexico. Maybe from the point of view of those who have absorbed the state narrative as part of their identity, *Coco* exalts Mexico's national historic consciousness and for them it takes a stand against Trump, but this does not work from an archaeological point of view.[21]

For example, *Coco*'s mise-en-scène drowns in a world of crafts found at various markets. At Mexico City's well-known *Bazar del sábado*, one can buy carton skeletons wearing European aristocratic attires with French-style makeup, along with colorful pecked paper, as shown in the film. Portraying the dead as 'catrines' and *catrinas*, the producers dignify wealthy Mexicans of the Porfiriato, but not Mexico's masses back then – and even less Mexican masses today. These skeletons created by illustrator and lithographer José Guadalupe Posada are satirical images of wealthy Mexicans during this period, wearing make-up to make their skin look whiter, and to erase their 'shameful' non-European origins. The fantastic animals shown in *Coco* co-existing with the dead were created by Pedro Linares López in the 1930s, captivating Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who made them popular. In the 1970s, British filmmaker Judith Bronowski, fascinated with *alebrijes*, took them to local artisans in Oaxaca, who adopted their making through her craft workshops. The *alebrije* in *Coco* is not a substitute for the belief among many populations in Mexico that every individual, since birth, keeps a spiritual coexistence with an animal that will determine its personality and destiny.

At Cuentepec, in the State of Morelos, people celebrate *Día de muertos* very differently. Celebrations for *mehkailwitl,* Day of the Dead, begin on October 28, when those who perish in an accident or violently will arrive at noon. On October 29, those who drowned will join them.

[21] See Parikka (2012: 2).

Those who no longer are remembered because they no longer have living family members come on October 30. The unborn and those who were never baptized arrive on the 31st, while children come on November 1 and adults on the 2nd. To welcome them, people place an offering on the ground, over a palm rug or *petate*, which is spatially divided in two, by placing a censer with white candles in the middle to honor the deceased matrilineal (right) and patrilineal (left) sides of the family (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: At Cuentepec, in the State of Morelos, the offering on Día de muertos is placed on a mat. The offerings are divided in two by a censer, and to honor the deceased matrilineal (right) and patrilineal (left) members of the family with tamales, oranges, mole, sweet bread, flowers, coffee, and soda (López Varela 2000: Cuentepec-CONACyT Project).

Overall, *mehkailwitl* is a celebration for renewal, not only are people bought new clothes that day, everything at their 'altar' is freshly made. For the offering, women have usually spent days gathering ingredients to cook green mole and white tamales (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Preparing tamales on *Día de muertos* by two women at Cuentepec (López Varela 2000: Cuentepec-CONACyT Project).

Since this is a town where most live in extreme poverty, they add pieces of chicken to these main plate offerings if they can afford. Clay jugs with water, cups filled with salt and bags of sugar are also placed on the offering, along with bottles of coke and tins filled with flowers. If one were to visit other nearby towns on *Día de muertos*, one could appreciate the enormous diversity of this celebration, which does not tend to include 'catrines' and *catrinas*. In this sense, *Coco* gives not only an oversimplified but very misleading tourist view of the Day of the Dead.

The problem is not about who got it right, Del Toro or Unkrich, because both films were ultimately created for mass entertainment. If, however, these films are the center of this discussion it has to do with the power of Disney and Century Fox studios to disseminate a fictional story to be consumed as the D-Day of the Dead in Mexico. It has the potential to obscure the lifeways of 'others', who evidently were not 'attractive' enough to be included in these films and would not contribute to the $807 million USD in gross earnings of the film, as they do not provide the visitor with a 'picturesque image' of their poverty.

Regrettably, the Trump era has created a 'post-truth' age, where the world is consuming fake news and even the oxymoron, "alternative facts", introduced by Kellyanne Conway, US Counselor to the President during an interview in 2017. Today, people are having a hard time separating facts from fiction, and it is possible that Unkrich (2018) really believes there is only one Mexico – the brown toned skinned one – to which children can relate to through *Coco*'s characters, as they look alike, and they talk like they do. However, Mexico comes in different skin colors and backgrounds, although the obsession with ethnicity made its way into a constitutional change in the 1990s, when Mexicans were divided into indigenous and non-indigenous populations.[22] Already Kracauer wrote that "[f]ilms are the mirror of the prevailing society", and financed by powerful corporations, they have to adapt to the tastes of the audience in order to make a profit (Kracauer 1995: 291). He furthermore argues, the more incorrectly these films present "the surface of things", the more correct they become and the more clearly they mirror the secret mechanism of society (Kracauer 1995: 292). *Coco*'s script is one example for this as it is based on loose data, and it is at risk of substituting anthropological research with a narrative that constructs a homogeneous society and therefore helps the Mexican state reproduce its "imaginary community" (Anderson 2006). The potential of mass media to produce nations and shape national imaginaries,[23] is the reason why Arjun Aappadurai is central to this analysis. *Coco* fulfills all the characteristics of a mediascape with the potential to suppress existing alternative accounts and non-dominant narratives of 'others'.[24]

[22] See López Varela (2015).
[23] See Ginsburg et al. (2002: 11).
[24] See Harrison (2010: 329).

5) Bitter ending

Since the 19th century, 'white' camera lenses have shown substantial interest in 'indigenous populations' and their exotic lives, not without criticism of their films for being politically charged and creating a romanticized record of these people.[25] The film industry turned their exoticism into popular entertainment and at first large numbers of Plains Indians signed on to play 'Indians' in movies,[26] as this matched the taste of early 20th century audiences. Since then, the taste has changed and now the portrayal of 'Latinos' is one of the US advertising industry's most coveted market segments (Dávila 2002: 264).[27] However, profits do not tend to reach the people protrayed. This is particularly obvious in the case of *Coco*, which raised $807 million USD in gross earnings but did not pay back any significant amount to those communities that the film took inspiration from.

For example, family and friends of María Salud Ramírez Caballero, an artisan living in Santa Fé de la Laguna, in the state of Michoacan, claim their 105-year-old 'Nana Salud' has significantly inspired Mamá Coco.[28] Granddaughter Patricia Pérez Hernández has stated the unfairness behind the producers not giving her official recognition in their modeling of Mamá Coco's character after her appearance. This is not the first time the private industry has appropriated Mexico's 'indigenous' cultures. From Carolina Herrera, Nestlé to Hermés and even Pineda Covalín, these companies have taken from Mexico's culture, without hardly recognizing it or paying what Mexico's producers deserve for their selling of products for thousands of US dollars. Unfortunately, the issuing of a new law,[29] protecting indigenous populations in Mexico through the National Institute for Indigenous Populations, not only came in late, it mandates the institution to create measures to protect intellectual property without any mention of sanctions or compensation to indigenous populations. If those living in Santa Fé are right about their town was used in *Coco* as part of its scenery, Disney-Pixar have taken from this community. On the other hand, the only 'benefit' their appropriation brought to the community is their being visited by tourists who want to meet Nana Salud and take their picture with her, which could mean further income for the town's selling of crafts. While municipal authorities recognized Nana Salud as ambassador of the region's artisans for her contributions to her hometown,[30] *Coco*'s producers have kept quiet.

[25] See Prins (2002: 61).
[26] See Prins (2002: 61).
[27] See Dávila (2002: 64).
[28] See Arrieta (2018).
[29] See DOF (2018).
[30] See Arrieta (2018).

If there is a genuine interest in writing against global inequalities and in representing people in distant villages as part of the same cultural worlds we inhabit,[31] then surely archaeologists require new skills and sensitivities for communicating effectively with the wider audience. Unfortunately, there are hardly any programs offering correlated degrees in film studies, despite archaeology and its fieldwork adventures appealing to a large number of people. Overall, the discipline of archaeology has created huge profits for the film and television industries by taking advantage of state discourses and disregarding films, documentaries and TV series as valid forms of entertainment to communicate research.[32] It is worth stressing that the *Indiana Jones* films, for example, have played a significant role in stimulating the public's interest in archaeological exploration. In recognition, actor Harrison Ford became an elected member of the Board of Directors of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) in 2008. All this highlights that archaeology is a brand, which has to be developed further.[33]

In Mexico, archaeologists and anthropologists have in particular failed to understand the dominant representation of research and the development of human culture in mainstream cinema.[34] Mexico's stewards have created a YouTube channel promoting their activities with only 118k subscribers in a country with a population of 130 million inhabitants.[35] Nonetheless, there are exceptions of good practices of creating entertainment programs to communicate scientific information. German Public Television (ZDF), for example, collaborates with institutions and experts to produce programs in which artificial intelligence is used to 'discover' and 'illustrate' people's past. *Terra X*, a TV program, shows scientific 'discoveries' through documented expeditions. The President of the Preussischer Kultur Besitz, Hermann Parzinger, is casted regularly as part of the TV show 'Rätsel alter Weltkulturen' and has been interviewed many times by the Deutsche Welle, giving a more complete picture of the role of an archaeologist in today's world. Parzinger is an expert in making archaeology 'public knowledge' and, as such, one of the few archaeologists taking advantage of the novel opportunities mass media creates to communicate the contributions archaeological research makes to the contemporary world.

Therefore, it is time to abandon the conservative approach to archaeology in Mexico, which was well suited for the educated classes of the twentieth century but is far from suiting contemporary audiences with diverse social backgrounds. The value of national monuments as

[31] See Ginsburg et al. (2002).
[32] See Holtorf (2016).
[33] See Holtorf (2016).
[34] See Hiscock (2012).
[35] See López Varela (2019).

people's heritage has changed. Society has transformed its value systems. If we do not change the nationalistic approach to archeology, how can we complain about the film industry perpetuating stereotypes of Mexico as a paradise dream for every villain wishing to escape justice or that of a country in which men are lazy drunks, while women's aspirations rely on serving a wealthy home and marrying the family's handsome rich son?

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REVIEW

RESEÑA

René Ceballos

Kristine Vanden Berghe (2013): Homo ludens *en la Revolución. Una lectura de Nellie Campobello*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 208 páginas.

Nellie Campobello, escritora y coreógrafa mexicana nacida en 1900, fue "una mujer de un carácter muy fuerte y de una voluntad extraordinaria que no se dejaba amedrentar por las normas sociales de su época ni por los dictados de la supuesta decencia" (72), después de haber sido secuestrada, murió "intoxicada y abandonada en la más absoluta soledad" (9) en 1986.

El interesante e innovador acercamiento de Kristine Vanden Berghe a la obra de Campobello se apoya en la teoría del juego de Johan Huizinga (*Homo ludens*) para quien el juego "es una categoría primaria de la cultura humana y de la guerra arcaica" (65). No obstante, también utiliza las aproximaciones teóricas complementarias al respecto de otros autores – por ejemplo de R. Caillois (quien agrega los conceptos *ludus* y *paidia*) –y se concentra en la relación entre la Historia real, la ficción y la violencia.

Al inicio, Vanden Berghe nos ofrece un sucinto panorama sobre la teoría del juego de Huizinga y las acotaciones que a ésta hace Caillois. Concluye que – aún teniendo recelos frente al *Homo ludens* – el lector sigue usándola como referencia obligatoria y constata que las diferentes teorías del juego existentes muestran ante todo que "lo que se califica como juego es una construcción de quien lo analiza" (29). La principal razón por la cual se utiliza la teoría de Huizinga en el análisis de la obra de Campobello radica en la similitud del trato que tanto ella como Huizinga le dan a la belleza, al juego y a la concepción de lo lúdico en la guerra primitiva que el historiador holandés ha trabajado.

En su obra *Cartucho* (publicada en 1931), Campobello, como Huizinga, "construye la guerra discursivamente como un juego" (43) en la que "los hombres juegan a la guerra" (48). Su narradora es una niña (después una mujer joven) que relata los acontecimientos bélicos de la Revolución Mexicana como si todo se tratara de un juego.

La parte lúdica en la composición de la obra de Campobello la localiza Kristine Vanden Berghe en el juego que la autora mexicana establece partiendo de datos biográficos e históricos y que combina a través de un proceso de ficcionalización de tal forma que el lector ya no puede diferenciar claramente entre la realidad de la ficción y la literaturalización de la historia. Las obras *Cartucho* y *Las manos de mamá* son ejemplares en este aspecto ya que la ambigüedad existente en la representación tanto de los hechos históricos como del estado ontológico de la narradora obligan al lector a no poder decidirse por una interpretación referencial unívoca o por

una simbólica-alegórica. Precisamente este es un aspecto que Vanden Berghe logra delimitar claramente. A diferencia de otras voces críticas que tratan de identificar a la autora mexicana con la narradora de sus obras, Vanden Berghe no titubea al distinguir entre la identidad nominal de la instancia narrativa y la autorial, es decir, siempre respeta el principio de distinción existente entre narradora ficcional y escritora real, a pesar de que lleven el mismo nombre.

Junto a las teorías de Huizinga y Caillois, Vanden Berghe también utiliza el concepto de lo abyecto y lo grotesco acuñados respectivamente por J. Kristeva y M. Bachtin para analizar las descripciones de (pedazos de) cuerpos (y cadáveres) en algunas escenas violentas de *Cartucho*. Sin embargo, según la crítica, éstas no representan una visión voyerista de la violencia bélica, al contrario, ella afirma que "Campobello asocia estrechamente el acto violento con la búsqueda de la dignidad del sujeto, con su profunda humanidad […]" (65).

En el capítulo tres la autora se aparta un poco de su punto de análisis y propone una lectura de *Cartucho* que la lleva a clasificar a la escritora como una precursora de Juan Rulfo. El punto referencial común lo encuentra Vanden Berghe en el *primitivismo* de ambos autores mexicanos con el que se supera el problema de la incompatibilidad ideológica de los personajes primitivos (arcaicos) y el narrador ilustrado. En el caso de Campobello, la diferencia se supera cuando se incorpora una narradora infantil "afin a la ideología primitiva […] irracional ingenua y falible" (80). Asimismo encuentra semejanzas en la creación de un lenguaje que ya no distingue entre el lenguaje culto del narrador y el arcaico de los personajes. Ese aspecto del análisis merece ser subrayado ya que la crítica general de Campobello no alude directamente a un relación casi genealógica entre *Cartucho* y *Pedro Páramo*, los comentarios al respecto son sutiles y poco profundos, al contrario del convincente paralelismo que Vanden Berghe establece entre ambos: "la cultura mexicana moderna brota de la Revolución vista como contienda arcaica y lúdica" (96).

Si la guerra primitiva en *Cartucho* correspondía a la forma de la *paidia*, la forma del juego que Kristine Vanden Berghe descubre en *Apuntes sobre la vida militar de Francisco Villa* (de 1940) es la del *ludus*, cuya función es más estratégica y apunta hacia "un juego más institucionalizado y puro" (108). Por la ausencia de revolucionarios, el cambio que se presenta en la segunda novela *Las manos de mamá* (de 1937) es aún más significativo; además, la madre protagonista utiliza un lenguaje rebuscado transmitiendo cierta tristeza de la narradora que ayuda a crear una atmósfera de historicidad. No obstante, esta novela mantiene una relación con la anterior en tanto que *intercala* escenas de la Revolución y repite algunos aspectos del *primitivismo*. El juego y lo intrépido, la risa y la belleza se concentran ahora en la figura de la madre protagonista. Según Vanden Berghe, lo lúdico en esta obra "es inversamente paralelo al

deseo de prestigio" (130), lo degenerado (posrevolucionario) se contextualizará ahora en la opulencia y la productividad.

En el sexto capítulo la orientación del análisis se centra en el tema de la construcción de una identidad mexicana posrevolucionaria como se refleja en la obra *Ritmos indígenas de México* (de 1940) – cuyo propósito es revalorizar, "recordar el pasado y restituir la verdad sobre él" (140) – e intenta relacionar las formas indígenas en ella representadas con su "sensibilidad hacia lo lúdico" (134). Lamentablemente no consigue establecer una relación directa con la teoría del juego y las culturas prehispánicas de México porque los especialistas en este campo carecen de "una definición operacional del juego en esas culturas" (154), lo que le dificulta a Vanden Berghe la comparación de la idea de juego en el mundo prehispánico con el contemporáneo.

Con el séptimo y el último capítulo, la crítica demuestra que no pierde el hilo conductor de su análisis basado en el *Homo ludens* de Huizinga, al hilvanar temáticamente las obras analizadas de Campobello: de *Cartucho* al poemario *Francisca yo!*.