

Virtual reality, cyborg migrants, and cross-border dehumanization on the US-Mexico boundary

[1] This presentation is going to focus on two films that reproduce digital spaces connected to the US–Mexico border, reflecting an existing state of exception embodied by the boundary, and tackling the problematic relationship existing between the US government and the influx of migrant laborers.

[2] *Sleep Dealer* (2008) was directed by Peruvian American Alex Rivera and it's a feature length expansion of his body of audiovisual work on the US-Mexico border and the exploitation of immigrant labor. *Culture Shock* (2019) is the tenth installment of Hulu's anthology *Into the Dark* that is dedicated to horror takes on US national holidays and it was directed by Mexican Canadian Gigi Saul Guerrero. My work focuses in particular on *Culture Shock*, since *Sleep Dealer* has been relatively extensively written about and I do feel that somehow *Culture Shock* represents a development of similar topics that it is corresponding to the actual evolution of the US public discourse and ideologies related to racial, ethnic conflict from 2008 through 2019.

[3] I will also consider the borderlands as a semiotic space: the region can be seen as the peripheral part of the semiosphere as intended by Lotman and the scholars working on cultural semiotics expanding on his work. Their take explores the heterogeneity of the cultural polyglotism that is inherent to semiotic systems. The semiosphere is characterized by a core, an idealized self-description, that corresponds to a dominant cultural hierarchy and a perceived homogeneity, which establish the differences between such dominant core of the semiosphere and the peripheral outskirts where the border is. And this border is a locus of translation between the elements coming from the cultural space external to the semiosphere and vice versa. Due to its heterogeneous nature, of course the semiospheric space is also crossed by internal boundaries, characterized by the opposition and, at the same time, the dialogue between the core and the border. Elements such as the Spanish language and Mexican heritage evidently intersect the border and despite not belonging to the dominant Anglo culture, they inevitably engage with the core. In both *Sleep Dealer* and *Culture Shock*, the borderlands can be considered as the embodiment of the semiosphere boundary, that is a porous place where exchange and necessary translation happen.

[4] So, in *Sleep Dealer*, very briefly, we have Memo who lives with his family in a rural area of Mexico, where the access to water is controlled by multinational corporations. He dreams to migrate north and work in these futuristic maquiladoras. He tinkers with technology and unwittingly triggers an attack on his house by the drones that surveil and defend the water dam. His father is killed in the attack and Memo moves to the border to find a job and maintain his brother and mother. In Rivera's dystopic borderlands, factories are located in Tijuana, where workers have nodes implanted so that they can be attached to virtual reality machines and they can carry out manual labor at distance,

through automata located in the United States. So, the migrants conduct their existence mostly in a digital world that drains their energies in real life.

[5] *Culture Shock* is basically composed of three parts. The first part of the film follows Mexican Marisol and her attempts to cross north in search of a better job. During her first try, she was raped and abandoned by her own boyfriend; so now she is pregnant, and she decides to try again on her own. She relies on a local coyote and crosses with a group of fellow Mexican and Central American migrants. As it happens in most films depicting illegal immigration, each migrant is alone in their attempt, even though temporary solidary connections are established between the components of the group. After days in the desert, the group is detained by the Border Patrol and brought to a detention center run by a nondescript militarized agency, where the migrants are attached to virtual reality machines, they are drugged, and they are projected into an idealized American suburb setting they cannot escape. The second part is Marisol's new virtual life in Cape Joy, the perfect suburb where the main social aim of the community is to prepare for the 4th of July celebrations. Here they are forced to assimilate both the dominant culture and the language. In the third part the migrants will resist and counteract.

Sleep Dealer reprises an idea that was at the basis of the short *Why Cybraceros?* (1997). [6] Rivera used footage of the original videos promoting the Bracero Program to imagine a new kind of *bracero* or agricultural worker. Both the short and the feature length play with the discursive justification of the program, that pretended to regulate immigration by exploiting the migrants' labor seasonally and "sending them back" to Mexico when their physical presence was not required anymore. It was first launched in 1943 and it was a sort of institutionalization of a long history of indenture. So, Rivera pushes these conceptual boundaries and locates his migrants south of the border, connecting them to machines that allow them to operate robots for US-based corporations. As the short goes, they are transformed into workers "who [pose] no threat of becoming citizen[s]" because they remain physically out of the US semiosphere. The fact that their existence is circumscribed to a digital space somehow parallels the experience of illegal immigrants who live and work for decades in the US. Many actually pay taxes (because they can and they do in the hopes that it will help them to obtain the citizenship, but it does not), and at the same time they do not exist for the state, they have no rights nor their work is recognized.

[7] In *Culture Shock*, the migrant body is physically allowed to enter the US territory, but its presence is counteracted by allowing it agency exclusively in a virtual dimension. The Latinx body is emptied of its subjectivity and it is reduced to a shell attached to a virtual reality machine, in order to be brainwashed. Once they have forgotten completely about their origins and erased their own consciousness, we are left to assume that the brainwashed migrants can be introduced in the American society, posing no threat anymore to the preservation of the dominant cultural system. This forced assimilation seems to be the necessary passage to ensure the exploitation of the completely

assimilated migrant worker, who is stripped of the Latinx ethnic component to become acceptable for integration. [8] Such a narrative construction I think speaks indirectly to the contemporary debate on post-racialism and the overlapping color-blind racial ideology in the United States. Barack Obama's electoral and presidential speeches were characterized by a post-racial discourse, you know, stressing on an alleged race-neutral universalism and claiming that racial differences have been successfully overcome already. This kind of ideology clearly contributes to a sociocultural process that aims at rendering invisible the still-existing racial structural violence. So, imagining a dystopic reality in which the bodies of Latinx immigrants become a shell that is "refilled" with dominant ideological constructs, *Culture Shock* builds a universe in which the phenotype of migrants is no longer a source of discrimination per se if—and only if—they renounce their ethnic consciousness, their heritage, and their native language.

[9] In *Sleep Dealer*, the creation and maintenance of a transnational state of exception are facilitated by the digitalization of labor. On the one hand, in the cyber sweatshop Memo and his colleagues are living a life of subordination that is made possible and ensured by their cyborg condition. Cyber-technology facilitates the intensification of exploitation and the reinforcement of the state of exception. And this gives rise to what Dalton has called "robo-sacer subjects," drawing on cyborg theory and of course Agamben's articulation of the homo sacer. They become beings who are intimately connected to and influenced by foreign technologies of power.

In *Culture Shock*, the revelation of the reality of border enforcement and its infrastructure based on detention centers is abrupt [10]. At about two thirds of the film, Marisol suddenly disconnects from the virtual setting and the facility where the migrants are detained appears for the first time. She learns that the experiment is run for the Pentagon to give migrants a transition, within a sort of virtual holding cell, and people are used extrajudicially as lab rats because as the military in charge states "nobody gives a fuck about these people." The topic of the state using private detention service providers is touched upon. The experiment is supervised by a scientist who embodies this notion that one is contributing to the greater good and anyway it is just a job, a bit of a banality of evil character. In *Sleep Dealer* this is rendered showing how drone warfare allows its perpetrators to detach themselves and feel absolved, in a mechanism of deresponsibilization that characterizes Border Patrol and ICE officers in real life. If you watch for example documentary series *Immigration Nation* you can spot parallelism with the reality at the border.

In both films the futuristic digital spaces, in which the migrant characters move, are made possible by the existence of a transnational cyberspace. In both the cultural semiosphere and the cyber-semiosphere, the Latinx migrants' access and role reflect their contrast with the dominant sociocultural core and it highlights, in a way, the power asymmetry they remain subjected to. I'd say that the digital semiosphere reinforces such power disparity, and at the same time it provides them with an interstitial space of resistance.

[11] In *Sleep Dealer* Memo and a drone pilot team up to make up for the killing of Memo's father and the environmental exploitation connected to the water dam. And they do so by using their cyborg identity and the virtual reality machine that otherwise enslaves Memo and his colleagues.

In *Culture Shock*, Marisol refuses to abide by the predetermined behavioral patterns and rebels. [12] Her resistance to assimilation causes glitches and when she realizes how this works, she will take advantage and use the disruption to counteract and escape. She tries to elicit past memories in her fellow migrants by singing the Mexican national anthem, for example, which triggers firewall bots and eventually it will crash the virtual reality system. The migrants will manage to escape the facility and Marisol will also take revenge on her rapist ex-boyfriend. At the end she opts to cross south to the Mexican side with her newborn girl.

So, both films manage to interpret and reimagine in a futuristic way the reality lived by migrants, in thrall to the panopticon embodied by the American immigration and border enforcement system. And they point the finger on a nativist state power that tries to obliterate the presence of migrants despite their fundamental role in the US capitalist economy. [13] As the foreman of the node operation at the maquila says "This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they've always wanted, all the work—without the workers." In both films, the virtual dimension is presented by the semiospheric core as the only "good option" for Latinx migrants, and their bodies are acceptable only when they are technologically mediated and nullified. Taking a step further, *Culture Shock* also denounces the minimization of Latinx cultural heritage and the patronizing attitude toward Latinx culture, as well as the attempted invisibilization of its existing intersections with and within the US dominant semiosphere.