Borders in Post 9/11 Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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Borders in Post 9/11 Cinema

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This dissertation investigates four contemporary films that focus on borders and border security in the wake of 9/11. The films chosen were: Three Burials for Melquiades Estrada (Tommy Lee Jones 2005) Frozen River (Courtney Hunt 2008), Children of Men (Alfonso Cuarón 2005), and Sleep Dealer (Alex Rivera 2008). The textual analysis of this dissertation focuses on depictions of border spaces and the people who cross them within a particular cycle of films. This work examines how this collection of films challenges both traditional depictions of border spaces in films and the nativist conceptions of border that permeated the country in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. In doing so, this work explores how these cinematic border spaces offer new conceptions of home, identity, and citizenship.

This examination focuses on three different components of this cycle of border cinema, frontier, mobility, and the notion of home. In undertaking this analysis this dissertation employs an interdisciplinary triangle of 9/11 Studies, Genre Studies, and Border Studies.
This work is dedicated to all my friends, family, and teachers who assisted me in the research and completion of this work. I wish to thank my friend and colleague Nathanial Wallace and Christopher Hull for all their help and support while completing this project. I would also like to dedicate this work to my father Dr. Ronald Briggs for encouraging me to reach the finish line. Thank you all for your help.
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INTRODUCTION: POST 9/11 BORDER CINEMA

This dissertation examines cinematic representations of border spaces during the post-9/11 era. The genesis of this work lies with one question: how do films render other places? In answering this question the American border plays a significant role. For all the promise that globalization would herald the integration of technologies, economies, and cultures, the border remains a powerful apparatus through which both individuals and ethnic groups can be either included in or excluded from certain communities. In examining the discursive effects of borders, the focus of this dissertation is on various representations of American borders in film. The post-9/11 time period and texts which comprise the dissertation demonstrate how a certain cycle of border films can challenge essentialist attitudes towards citizenship and nationhood. In undertaking this analysis, my work seeks to reconfigure the border as more than a simple territorial marker. Rather, I argue that films examined in this work depict the border as a disciplinary apparatus whose function is to apply definition to ambiguous spaces and identities. More specifically, the border serves as a powerful, albeit problematic, apparatus for meaning-making through a systemic practice of inclusion and exclusion.

This work situates film practices as the ideal medium for both the challenging of dominant perceptions of national borders and the imagining of new possibilities for communities in the 21st century. In the words of Susan Mains, “cinema offers an alternative understanding of time and space by providing multiple contexts and venues in which a variety of images can be read, and if used as a form of resistance, may open up more spaces for effective political representation” (262). In keeping with Mains’s
comment, the medium of film, with its unique abilities to depict various landscapes, becomes a useful means of examining how the xenophobic attitudes surrounding borders are created and propagated. Film proves to be an ideal subject precisely because the medium actively participates in the articulation of the border's disciplinary function.

From film noir with its vice-ridden bordertowns, to the villainous Mexican bandits of the Hollywood western, films set in and around the American border region have historically perpetuated both the necessity of borders and stereotypical imagery about those who live just outside America’s territory. These representations have participated in forming a powerful geographic discourse in which both borderspaces and the communities that live there are seen as violent, alien, or unwanted. In undertaking this examination of cinematic borderspaces, this dissertation focuses on four films from the post-9/11 era in which either border crossing or border enforcement figures prominently in the film’s narrative. The texts are *Three Burials for Miguel Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005), *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuaron, 2007), *Frozen River* (Courtney Hunt, 2008) and *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008). In examining these films through the concept of borders, this work situates these texts as evidence of a larger cultural readjustment when ideas of cultural difference, immigration, and border security would be viewed through the lens of terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

I view *Three Burials for Miguel Estrada* as a genre film that utilizes some of the established tropes of the Western, particularly its references to the frontier, in order to challenge traditional depictions of the US/Mexico border space as a site for American colonialist fantasy. I interpret *Three Burials* as a revisionist Western that uses the border
setting to contrast the region’s mythic status with the actual treatment of Mexico and
Mexicans in the name of national security post-9/11. In regards to the US/Canadian
border, I examine Frozen River. I view Frozen River as a film that deals explicitly with
the role that race and gender plays in border enforcement. In exploring the relationship
between two women who smuggle people across the US/Canadian border into America,
River explores the concept of mobility and what movements are legitimated within a
newly militarized US/Canadian border space. In looking toward the future, I examine the
science fiction film Children of Men. I place Children of Men in the context of a new
cycle of science fiction films that deal explicitly with the issue of immigration through
the concept of the alien. I argue that Children uses both the generic traits of science
fiction and imagery from the War on Terror to address the figurative de-humanization of
immigrants and refugees in the post-9/11 world.

Lastly, this work examines how the disciplinary powers of the border operate in
the virtual world by examining the science fiction border film Sleep Dealer. By
examining the film in regard to the theme of virtual labor, I argue that rather than making
national border’s more permeable, the phenomenon of global connectivity has led to
various practices in which immigrant labor is disembodied from the workers which
produce it. Through a textual analysis of these films, my project explores how the
borderspace is represented in recent Hollywood cinema. In doing so, this work examines
cinematic borderspaces in regards to three distinct themes; frontier, home, and mobility.

The first theme is that of the frontier. While the frontier is usually defined as a
line or border separating two countries, as a rhetorical device, however, the term extends
beyond its geographical meaning. Throughout American history the frontier has appeared in various forms of nationalist rhetoric. The idea that America was a different and unique country because of the frontier was propagated by Fredrick Jackson Turner who in his now famous Frontier Thesis of 1893 recast the notion of the frontier as a determining factor in characterizing American identity. In Turner’s assessment, the foundations of America’s greatness are a direct result of its ever expanding and receding frontier. In this mythic rendition of American history, whether it was the possibility of death, the danger of starvation, or thirst in the vast American wilderness, or the threat of attack by indigenous people, Jackson’s evocation of the Wild West was framed as a symbolic training ground for national character. The notion of the border as the frontier was understandable at the time of Turner’s thesis nation building required gaining control over certain territories and marking that control with the transformation of frontiers into borders. Jackson’s nativist rhetoric laid the groundwork for what is known as the Frontier Myth, the popular romanticization of America’s westward expansion that would be told and retold in countless stories of the ‘Wild West’.

What proves telling is how the myth of the frontier has been used to characterize actual border spaces, specifically the US/Mexico border. It is against this salutary vision of the frontier that my dissertation posits that these associations between the border and frontier betrays a persistent anxiety regarding the fluidity of the border’s presence. At their essence, what these various evocations demonstrate is that the frontier has been used to characterize an uncertain future or ambiguous geographical space in which the United States has yet to conquer and must stake its claim on. In marking the boundary between
the civilized American territory and yet uncivilized region of Mexico, the border region has often been filtered through the concept of the untamed frontier. I propose that the evocations of the frontier serve as a means to project American colonialist fantasies onto a geographically and ethnically ambiguous space.

In the films I discuss frontiers take on a more geographic rather than mythic quality and are used to characterize places that fall outside the homeland. In Three Burials, the Frontier Myth is deconstructed in order to challenge how Mexico and Mexicans have been portrayed in classical Hollywood westerns. In both Children of Men and Frozen River frontiers are used to describe territories which have fallen into lawlessness due to their proximity to the border.

The second theme is that of home and homeland. My work draws a distinction between home and homeland. While home is traditionally defined as the place where one lives permanently, specifically as a member of a family or household, as a rhetorical device, however, homeland evokes powerful emotions and can become a means of galvanization for the enterprise of protecting the country. The notion of homeland carries with it meanings that convey a sense of native origins, of birthplace, and birthright. In the words of Amy Kaplan, “Homeland appeals to common bloodlines, shared ancestry, and notions of racial and ethnic homogeneity, all of which are tied to a certain territory” (85). Geographic borders become a necessity as they delineate the boundaries between the foreign and the domestic, which in turn make the creation of a home possible. In this respect, the establishing of a secure homeland becomes a necessity in order for home to exist. In addition, the idea of homeland is connected to the discourse of diaspora,
migration, and exile, to a sense of loss and nostalgia: “A place you came from—no matter how long ago—and long for, but cannot ever return to” (Kaplan 89). While home, like the border, is traditionally defined in geographical terms, this work situates the home and homeland as a powerful rhetorical device in relation to the security of the border. My work examines how following the attacks of 9/11 as the subsequent passage of the Patriot Act the rhetoric of the nation as ‘home’ was institutionalized via the Department of Homeland Security. This work links this larger institutionalization of the homeland through the establishment of ‘homeland security’ to nativist practices which have permeated discussions about American borders. The films which I examine depict the creation of new homes in spite of racial and ethnic differences. *Three Burials, Frozen River,* and *Children of Men* entail the search for a new for homes that is not tied to the specific location or ethnic identity. The films that comprise this project challenge the home/land association through the creation of new homes and refuges that are not bound to a specific territory or ethnic group.

The last theme which unites this work is that of mobility. Because the border operates as a means of policing a variety of different movements, the politics and power of being mobile are a significant factor in understanding the various effects of the border. In situating American borders as more than just territorial markers, any conception of the border that ignores the idea of movement would be untenable. Border studies has continually argued that the constitutive function of a border lies not in the building of walls but in the crossing of bodies. Furthermore, this deliberate policing of mobility must be understood within practices of global capital. Given how much the global economies
dependent on the unimpeded circulation of goods, the power to control movement through various national borders becomes, in the words of Louise Amoore, “one of isolating the legitimate ‘inside’ transborder activities of the global economy, and securing them from illegitimate ‘outside’ of those who would exploit the possibilities of an open border” (339). It would appear that the policies regarding the border are characterized by a significant paradox. On the one hand, the border must be secured and policed for the purposes of protecting the homeland from another terrorist attack. Yet at the same time, the border must be kept porous in order to ensure the flow of global goods. It is this contradictory desire to both consume and limit the products of transnational activity which has lead certain movements to be legitimated by the state and others to be deemed illegitimate. In the aftermath of 9/11, the controlling of certain mobility becomes a matter of risk management. The movement of thousands of people across American borders had to be viewed through the lens of terrorism. This relationship between transnational mobility and national security was best articulated by Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge who viewed the threats posed by terrorism as another consequence of an increasing globalized world. In explaining the function of this security organization, Ridge stated, “As the world community has become more and more connected through globalization and technology, transportation, commerce and communication. The same benefits of globalization are available to peace loving, freedom loving people are available to terrorists as well” (Department of Homeland Security 1). The task of trying to designate certain movements as safe or dangerous is just as much about the anxiety over globalization as it is about the fears of terrorism.
With unfettered mobility comes the potential for cultures to become more interconnected with one another. In this respect, the governing of mobility post-9/11 is not just a means of protecting the nation against terrorism, but of controlling the cultural ambiguity that movement across borders facilitates.

The films which this work examines highlight the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate mobility. By examining cinematic depictions of crossings my work makes clear the border’s power to both legitimate and criminalize a variety of movements. Each of my films are characterized by a relationship between two characters who have different degrees of mobility through the border. In highlighting the various contrasting forms of mobility in these films this project seeks to understand how the power of the border is not limited to a specific geographic space. In focusing my examination of these themes, my work requires a synthesis of film history and a history of America’s ever-changing policies toward its borders. Therefore my project brings together the fields of 9/11 Studies, Border Studies, and Genre Studies. In creating this interdisciplinary triangle my work is able to trace the discursive effects of borders beyond their geographical location.

What is Post 9/11?

An important aspect of this interdisciplinary triangle is a clarification of the term post-9/11. The term 9/11 has come to describe the period following the coordinated terrorist attacks on the United States in which a series of hijacked planes were flown into the World Trade Center of New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 2,996 people along with countless more injuries, and billions
more in damage which had been exacted upon the country. Realizing that the terrorist attacks had been the result of a massive failure in intelligence and security, 9/11 lead to a dramatic reassessment of the security and safety of the nation in regards to the threats posed by terrorism. This reassessment was characterized by the overhaul of the country’s immigration policy, a substantial expansion of the national security state, and the inauguration of a War on Terror in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is in this climate that the term post-9/11 emerges in popular discourse as an attempt to demarcate these various political, administrative, military, and cultural responses to the deadliest terrorist attack in American history.

It should be noted that various efforts to understand the ongoing impact of 9/11 have been undertaken by a wide range of disciplines. For scholars of post-colonialism, the continual practice of self-identification and its mutual dependency on the construction of an ‘other’ could be employed in understanding various cultural reactions to 9/11. Within the area of media studies, however, critical examinations of 9/11 tend to focus on how the attacks changed established modes of perception and representation regarding violent spectacles and city spaces. In addition, many contemporary historians have argued that the climate of post-9/11 America was the perfect storm of patriotism, fear, and nativist rhetoric which neo- conservative leaders saw as the perfect opportunity to dramatically reshape the Middle East using military force. While none of these fields of study dispute the substantive impact of the event, as a concept, 9/11 continues to be many things to many people. The dilemma of the term post 9/11 is perhaps best articulated by Kevin J. Wetmire Jr. who in his book Post 9/11 Horror states “post 9/11 relates to a
specific event and a specific moment in time. But the concept has also come to refer to a specific mindset… the words refer to a specific terrorist attack on September 11th 2001, but also what has come afterwards, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the creation of the department of Homeland Security and the passage of the Patriot Act. The phrase thus refers to a day an event, a period, a mindset and a cultural shift” (4). It is in examining post- 9/11 America in relation to borders and immigration that the nation’s cultural response to the terrorist attacks is significant to this work.

It was just ten days after the terrorist attacks, when then President Bush first described the retaliatory strike against the Middle East as a ‘War on Terror’. Far from moderate in its tone, the Bush administration would characterize the inevitable conflict in the Middle East in black and white terms. In describing the nation’s militarized response as ‘civilization vs. barbarism, good vs. evil, or ‘you are either with us or against us, the President helped foster a domestic and cultural climate where dissent and criticism of any aspect of the response was nearly impossible to make.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks various discourses successfully re-framed the attacks on the twin towers as an attack on American values. In regards to the idea of borders, I argue that given the horrific scale of the attacks, coupled with the response of the nation’s political leaders to them, the events of 9/11 provided the perfect conditions for the rise of a distinct form of cultural nationalism. This particular type of post- 9/11 nationalism was articulated through excessively patriotic symbols (flags, songs, rallies, etc.) and narratives that would both revive and reinscribe familiar imagery from the nation’s past. In short, the distinguishing feature of this post-9/11 nationalism
would be a desire to return to a once better past. Thus a desire to return to the past is evidenced in the very descriptions of the attacks. Immediately following the attacks on the Twin Towers, witnesses and commentators characterized the event as a Pearl Harbor style assault on the nation. Commentators, former officials and even news anchors such as Tom Brokaw steeped in the mythologies of the ‘Greatest Generation’ were eager to liken the terrorist attacks to Pearl Harbor, and event which shares little in common with 9/11. Such evocations of the “good war” are understandable. To evoke World War II is to also evoke the times when it occurred. In framing the event within the existing mass cultural trend of World War II nostalgia, 9/11 is removed from its specific historical context and becomes a new ‘day of infamy’ one that would, as Susan Faludi argues, “reinvigorate our World War II ethic of national unity and sacrifice, a long awaited crucible in which self-absorbed Americans would, at long last be forged in twenty first century stoic army of the latest ‘Greatest Generation’ (4). Furthermore, if the 9/11 attack was a new Pearl Harbor then any retaliation done in response becomes justifiable through the association to the American fight against Nazism. In this context, it appears the post-9/11 era was characterized in part by wanting to avoid the uncertainties of the future by escaping to the past. These post- 9/11 nationalist attitudes did not just valorize the “good war” that was once fought and won, they would valorize traditional forms of manhood and the quintessential embodiment of America. We can see this evidenced in celebration of New York firefighters and policeman in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11.
Figure 1: Bush and NYFD officials at stamp unveiling commemorating 9/11
In the days that followed the 9/11 attacks, the New York firefighter was quickly turned into a new type of American hero. While the actions of many firefighters and first responders at Ground Zero that day were unquestionably heroic, commentators eager for new national heroes quickly transformed NYFD as exemplary of a return to a traditional sense manhood. In the words of Stephen Ducat, “The attacks facilitated a revivification of heroic manhood by turning altruistic New York firemen, policemen and assorted males
into iconic rescue-worker hunks” (Ducat 227). What proves telling is how in this discourse, commentators assert that traditional masculinity was once gone and has now returned. Perhaps the best articulation of this post 9/11 nostalgia for lost manhood was undertaken by Peggy Noonan who in her essay “Welcome Back Duke”, writes that “A certain type of manliness is once again being honored and celebrated in our country since 9/11. You might say it suddenly emerged from the rubble of the past quarter century. I am speaking of masculine men, men who push things and pull things and haul things and build things” (2). Many of the NYFD men were heralded as something akin to knights and warriors, a neo-conservative rendition of Muscular Christianity. In this respect, the perceived resurrection of a long lost manhood becomes the forerunner of a collective cultural nostalgia that sought to return to a simpler and potentially stronger time in the wake of tragedy.

This valorization of the blue collar firefighter not only places the 9/11 attacks into a highly problematic gendered paradigm, it is also indicative of what Kyle Kusz termed ‘White Cultural Nationalism’ which proliferated in the aftermath of 9/11. In Kusz’s assessment, the white masculine everyman figure is cast as the normative center and the embodiment of an ideal American citizen for post-9/11 America. What makes this particular brand of nationalism so powerful is how it appears to be racially neutral, even as it privileges whiteness as the normative center of American culture. Thus the love of country and the protection the American people becomes an opportunity to secure traditional American values, as Kusz notes “this apparent nostalgia for America is really just code for creating and maintain the optimal conditions for White patriarchal global
capitalism and the undermining of the minimal gains made by historically marginalized groups since the 1960’s” (79). This nationalism would have tragic consequences for various ethnic groups who were looked upon with suspicion for being complicit in terrorist attacks. A 2010 report by the Justice Department revealed a sharp incline in hate crimes directed towards people who were suspected of being Muslim immediately following the attacks on the Twin Towers.

This nostalgia reveals why the concept of the homeland seems so potent in the wake of 9/11. In writing about the various meanings of homeland Kaplan argues that “Homeland evokes a sense not of stability and security, but of uprootedness, deracination, and desire” (89). In many ways America in the aftermath of 9/11 was aspiring to the return to a lost homeland, as if the terrorist attack had not only fractured the culture’s sense of security, but forced us to reflect on a past that seemed simpler and safer. This conflux of masculinism, nationalism, and xenophobia would become institutionalized in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

The creation of the Department of Homeland Security brought the term Homeland into the lexicon of American political rhetoric. Created as a direct response to the September 11th attacks, the department brought together more than twenty government agencies and employed more than 40,000 people with the purpose of insuring that another 9/11 does not happen on American soil. Homeland Security was instituted in order to address the policy and security papers that lead to the 9/11 attacks as well as remodel the now antiquated national security framework to meet the new threats of the new millennium. In addition, the organization possesses wide ranging powers over
American domestic life. In carrying out its mission to secure the homeland and protect its borders the framework established for protecting the future security of the homeland echoed the same cultural scripts political leaders were already familiar with, specifically centralized control.

Even while 9/11 was undertaken by a fundamentalist group of non-state actors the Bush administration chose to single out the countries of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an ‘Axis of Evil’ (Bush), a collection of nation states that would be the targets of America’s policy of preemptive warfare. In spite of the fact that none of the so-called ‘Axis nations’ had any involvement in either 9/11 or involvement with one another the Bush administration vigorously reinstated the subsiding Cold War ideology of the previous century for the wars of the current century. The ideology of the Cold War is best understood as a policy of containment. In an effort to contain the spread of both communism and the Soviet Union, the national security policies of previous administrations had been characterized by rapid military expansion throughout the world. As Marylyn Young notes “the official rhetoric and strategies that have emerged in the wake of the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil are reminiscent of the Cold War at its peak” (10). Young argues that actions taken by the Bush Administration following 9/11 “reflect a pattern of behavior set by 50 years of previous administrations” (ibid). These echoes of the Cold War mentality reveal how Homeland Security was not simply a means of protecting the nation, but of reestablishing a lost sense of strength. In his analysis of the beginning of the Department of Homeland Security Nicholas De Genova notes “the war of terror was kind of a Cold War redux. It takes little historical imagination to see the
permanent war on terrorism as a continuation of what was initially imagined as the war on communism” (De Genova 2). Here, the policy of containment of the external threat of the Soviet Union which characterized national security of the Cold War had been revised and reinterpreted to the perceived the of the Axis of Evil. Both in its name and in conception, the Department of Homeland Security merges to deep seeded desires rooted in the trauma of 9/11. First is the return to a lost homeland and the second is the desire for that homeland to be perpetually secure.

In preparing the nation for war in the Middle East this post-9/11 nostalgia would reach back even further than World War II. Much of the language used in the run up to the War in Afghanistan was steeped in the mythology of the Wild West frontier. When asked about how he would deal with Osama Bin Laden, the then Commander and Chief famously responded “There’s a saying out there in the old west. Wanted Dead or Alive” (Bush). These references to the Wild West extended outside the presidency. Political candidates proved their worthiness for post-9/11 office by brandishing guns on the campaign trail. “Our journalist cast firefighters as tall-in-the-saddle cowboys patrolling a Wild West stage set, and our pundits proclaimed our nation’s ability to vanquish barbarians in a faraway land they dubbed Indian Country” (Faludi 5). Furthermore, these references to post-9/11 America as a frontier were used to characterize Americans as heroic cowboys or settlers while the people of Iraq and Afghanistan are cast as violent uncivilized others. In regards to the ongoing War in Iraq, Wall Street Journal reporter Max Boot equated the event with the small-scale “savage wars” waged in the countries early days and which columnist Robert Kaplan hailed as a “back to the days of fighting
the Indians”, and that [the war] was really about taming the frontier.” The various references to a nation’s idealized past reveal how much of the cultural response to 9/11 was steeped in a desire to return to the past. Perhaps the articulation of post-9/11 nostalgia came from Susan Faludi who states “we reacted to our trauma not by interrogating it, but by cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom’s childhood. In the male version of that reverie, some nameless reflex had returned to that 1950s badlands where conquest and triumph played and replayed on infinite loop” (4). If the post-9/11 era was characterized by uncertainty and instability, the return to an idealized war, manhood, or frontier not only revives traditional American values, but becomes a way for the nation to anchor itself in a more familiar time after it has become unmoored by terrorism.

While the multidiscursive nature of 9/11 resists any definitive ‘meaning’ any particular discourse can give to the event, contemporary border studies situates aftermath of 9/11 as the moment when a larger conflation between immigration and terrorism began to take hold. For instance, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks the United States government formed the Department of Homeland Security. In addition to being tasked with protecting the ‘homeland’ from future terrorist attacks, the organization also institutionalized the link between domestic security and foreign travelers. Given the underlying nativist connotations of homeland, the establishment of Homeland Security carries with it far reaching consequences for those born outside of America’s borders. This work sees 9/11 as a specific historical event which resulted in measurable changes to national policy regarding citizenship, mobility, and immigration. In contextualizing these representations
of certain borderlands, my work uses 9/11 as a specific historical event which resulted in measurable changes to national policy regarding citizenship, mobility, and methods of identification. In this context, 9/11 provides as a specific cultural moment in which the border’s discursive effects can be analyzed.

Border Studies

In merging an understanding of 9/11 with contemporary border studies, my work argues that the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is the moment the very function of the border changed. Post-9/11 marks a moment when previous debates concerning security, mobility, and citizenship in and around the border have become recast in regards to terrorism. Furthermore, I posit that in the post-9/11 paradigm, the border, and the management of its perpetual state of crisis, becomes a means to create knowable, and thus secure identities.

The term border is frequently encountered when discussing the physical makeup of a nation. The border is commonly understood by its literal definition as being a boundary demarcating the modern nation state. In geographical terms the border is a boundary between places or simply the physical manifestation of where a nation starts and stops. Previous studies regarding American borders, however, aimed to problematize the notion of what borders are and what they do. While some scholarship examines borders simply as territorial markers, others seek to reframe the border as a symbolic and ideological apparatus whose effects are much more complex and far reaching. Using the
border as a means of challenging the material existence of the nation state has been undertaken by several border studies scholars. 

A critical framing of the border has also been undertaken by writers such as Ali Behdad, who in his analysis of American immigration policy states that “the border not as simply as an arbitrary boundary demarcating one nation from another, but a disciplinary apparatus that, as scholar Ali Behdad states ‘articulates notions of national identity, citizenship, and belonging’ (109). Ali Behdad’s essay “In and Outs: Producing Delinquency at the Border”, is a useful tool in examining the interrelations of border spaces, security, and national identity in the post-9/11 world. The author characterizes the border as a site of perpetual crisis, one which necessitates a securing of the region through militarization of border space. The writer states, “The goal of delinquency as a strategy of disciplining non-citizens may be summarized as a double repression: to produce a cheap labor force, and to perpetuate a monolithic and normative notion of national identity through the ‘othering’ and criminalization of immigrants” (106). Behdad elaborates on the constitutive function of the border in stating “The border is the boundary that relentlessly separates the inside from the outside, the lawful from the prohibited, and the citizen from the alien” (105). In keeping with Bedhad’s examination of the border as a tool for discipline, Katarzyna Marciniak’s work focuses on consequences of those who must cross national borders. In her book Alienhood

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1 Various works on borders have been undertaken by writers such as Benjamin Johnson, Andrew R. Graybill, (2010) Kelly Lytle Hernandez (2010), José David Saldívar (1997). Many of these works focus on the policing of the US/Mexico territory and the attempts to reimagine the border by exploration of the Chicano experience.
Citizenship, Exile, and the Logic of Difference, Marciniak explores how the borders mark others as being different or abject through the highly racialized rhetoric of the alien, a term whose different meanings as an extraterrestrial and as someone born outside the nation’s borders often results in a disorientating sense of placelessness for immigrants who travel across borders. The importance of this scholarship is that it highlights the disciplinary purpose of the border. Specifically Behdad's arguments and perspective on the border will anchor and structure this dissertation in the existing theory regarding the importance of the border.

In regards to the US/Mexico border, Border Studies offers a means of exploring the discourse of boundaries and presents a reconceptualization not simply of the historical makeup of the present day southwest, but of the very notion of national borders. One of the most influential border scholars is Chicana theorist and activist Gloria Anzaldúa, who in her book Borderlands uses her personal experiences growing up in the US/Mexico border region to investigate the various non-geographic borders that demarcate everyday life. In Anzaldúa’s assessment, the geographic border which divides Mexico from the United States is just one of many divisions between language, race, and gender that occur both in the borderspace and beyond. In this intense bifurcation of culture Anzaldúa work presents a rich cultural praxis of autobiography, mythology, and language through which she is able to constitute a Mestiza identity, a “consciousness of duality” (59) that embraces the ambiguity of the borderspace. Anzaldúa is able to frame borders as something not merely oppositional in nature. Rather, her study of borderspaces reveals how in the spaces between nations we can learn about the constructed nature of life on
either side of the divide. In addition to the work undertaken by Anzaldúa, the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña has also focused on developing a more fluid conception of borders, particularly in regards to the border between the United States and Mexico. Through a use of various essays, poems, and performance art pieces Gómez-Peña critiques the rhetoric of supposed open borders of America with the often harsh regulations of movement along the US/Mexico border. Throughout his work Gomez-Peña critiques the binary conceptions of both spaces and the people whom inhabit them. His books *The New World Border* evokes the notion of hybridity as a way of challenging “old ways” of distinguishing one culture from another. Hybridity, as he points out is not an ideal, but a cultural fact. The old “binary models of us/them, North/South, and Third World/First World” are outdated because the distinctions have intermingled. Rather the author argues for a concept of “the Fourth World,” which opposes the simplistic notions of purity and the static identities that go with them in favor of what the author calls “new topographies that better reflect the movement and exchange of different populations”. 

(Gómez-Peña) This work sees Border Studies as a means challenging the naturalized state of such boundaries such as the US/Mexico border. As Anzaldúa argues “Borders are set up to define spaces. They are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them… the border is a vague and undetermined place created by the motional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (25). What is useful about the work of these border theorists is the methods of studying history, language and geography of the places where the nations meet. Their work presents us not only with a means of understanding both the fluid nature of identity, but the claims
that nation can make on identity as well. The work of these scholars demonstrates how to use the border as tool to both understand and challenge such claims. In short, this branch of border studies uses the border’s fluidity as a polemic through which to articulate the possibility of new homes, new places, and new identities that are not tied to the nation state.

Each of the films which I examine demonstrate how the border exerts a nation’s claims on identity and how crossing the unnatural boundary of the border transforms the immigrant into a potential terrorist, or a refugee into a criminal alien. Given the differing investments in the border, it would appear that the field of border studies is dominated by examinations of the disjuncture between the border’s literal presence and its symbolic and ideological power. It is in reconciling this existing debate between such literalism, who examine national borders in relation to the tangible problems of immigration and human rights, and those who situate the border as a symbolic site for the interrogation of identity, citizenship, and nation that genre films can be useful. Placed in the post-9/11 context the disciplinary powers of the border have become wider reaching. This work seeks to use film as a means of highlighting the borders polices of discipline violence and control, but to illustrate how the border itself can create new homes, new transnational relationships and new forms of identity. What my work seeks to draw from these critics of the US/Mexico border is a model for examining North American culture in the wake of 9/11 by using the border as both a tool and the subject of this analysis, we can contest the notion that nations are just naturally there and the citizenship is equated with personhood.
Genre and the Border

In examining borders through film, an understanding of genre is an important component of my interdisciplinary triangle. A traditional understanding of genre is provided by Lewis Turco who defines the concept as “types of literature that have been deemed worthy of study and preservation” (10). In relation to film, the concept of genre has been defined by a variety of theorists. Genre scholars such as Rick Altman define genre as a “pattern/for/style/structure which transcend individual film and which supervise both their construction and their reading by the audience” (14). The unanswered questions of genre scholarship are how much of genre actually exists and how much is constituted through film analysis. It is in exploring this question that other theorist such as Robert Stam and Barry Kieth Grant have even gone as far to question the validity of genre and raise the possibility it is simply an academic critical construct what produces a self-fulfilling taxonomy. Grant argues that genres cannot be systematically characterized and differentiated based solely on the interplay of codes, story, and style because they are based in instances of “repetition and difference” (48), making the concept of genre complex and somewhat illusive. In contrast, Rick Altman’s view of genre distinguishes between elements which he describes a synatic (plots and themes) and semantic (the presence of recurring signs and locations). Altman posits a hierarchal scheme of generic evolution in which genres begin with some sematic elements but can only be regarded as a complete genre when they develop syntactic elements as well. In keeping with Altman’s assessment this work situates the respective film genres as an
interpretive system by which through which we can understand iconography and
narrative of various films.

If post-9/11 America is characterized by a paradigm shift in the culture, it only
follows that its impact would be found in cinema of the period as well. In many ways the
question of post-9/11 cinema are the questions of genre studies. What are the borders of
a genre? How much of genre is a product of audience expectations and how much is a
product of the economics of film production? Such approaches are highly problematic
and raise important questioned as to what exactly constitutes this cycle of films. Is any
political film that was released after 2001 that deals remotely with terrorism a post-9/11
film? While I do not argue that post-9/11 film is a genre onto itself, the interplay of real
life events with the language of established film genres does create a unique phase of
filmmaking in which certain texts attempt to reflect and make sense the current post-9/11
geopolitical landscape. In regards to the role of film and media in translating the terrorist
attacks what proves significant is how the event was presented to most of the world as a
televised spectacle.

One of the great ironies of 9/11 was how many witnesses to the event described
the attacks as being “something out of a movie” or “just like an action movie”. Given
that there is no previous referent in American history for an event on the scale of 9/11,
Hollywood films provided both the imagery and language that cultural commentators
used to attempt to explain the attacks and their geopolitical implications. This sentiment
was even shard by Hollywood screenwriters such as Jon Hensliegh who when watching
the attacks on television was reminded of the end times setting he had envisioned in the
script for the film *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998). Others involved in the film industry even went as far as to say that 9/11 was outright inspired by Hollywood disaster cinema. In reacting to the attacks, filmmaker Robert Altman stated “movies set a pattern, and the people have copied the movies…Nobody would have even thought to commit an atrocity like that [the attack in the World Trade Center] unless they’d seen it in a movie” (Quoted in Bell-Metereu 143). In this respect, the horrific spectacle of 9/11 and its comparisons in film present a conundrum for both filmmakers and audiences. 9/11 may have looked like something out of a fictional Hollywood film, but the event obviously real. As a result, any computer generated disaster imagery that Hollywood could subsequently produce would only pale in comparison to the real events of the terrorist attack. It is in response to this dilemma that a variety of genres began to change their stories and their visual language to reflect the new realities of death and destruction in the post-9/11 world.

Perhaps the most direct incarnation of 9/11 in cinema are the films aimed to memorialize the event itself. Films such as *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006), *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006) *Reign over Me* (Mike Binder, 2007) and *25th Hour* (Spike Lee, 2002) each dealt either with the events of the morning of 9/11 or with the aftermath of the attacks as experienced by the survivors. These dramas were varied in their tone and style, ranging from portrayals of individuals who lost their families on 9/11 to outright documentary-like reenactments of the attacks as seen in *United 93*. For instance, Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* integrated both stock footage from the actual attacks, elements the melodrama and the Hollywood disaster film to dramatize the
story of two firefighters trapped in the debris of collapsed Twin Towers. Spike Lee’s *The 25th Hour* was the first American film set in New York to include direct references to 9/11 and its aftermath into its plot.

The film is based on the novel written by David Beinoff, and tells the story of a man dealing with his final twenty-four hours of freedom before he begins a seven year prison sentence. Even while the film is based on a pre-9/11 novel, director Spike Lee integrated references to terrorist threats and Ground Zero into several sections of the film. For instance, the film even opens with the inclusion of the *Tribute in Light* (the large blue lights which illuminated the New York night sky in the weeks following 9/11). In a later scene we see two men discussing the Norton’s character’s fate while in the background of the shot we see rescue workers searching for bodies in the rubble of Ground Zero. While *25th Hour* does seek to recreate the events of 9/11 as *World Trade Center* does, the reflections of the event does enhance the film’s theme of excepting consequences and adds another layer to the film’s plot which, in the words of Christine Rickli, “accentuates the importance of New York City as a multi-cultural space in which members of the community are responsible for their own deeds” (7). The impulse to recreate the reality of 9/11 was not exclusive to dramas. Both science fiction and horror films such as *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2006) and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reaves 2008) deliberately co-opt imagery from 9/11 into their stories. The purpose of these initial films was in part to memorialize the event, this film cycle also allowed audiences to revisit and in some cases re-experience the event on their own terms filtered through the lens of a specific genre, fostering a kind of healing process that
occurs at twenty-four frames per second\(^2\). These films have been a way of translating and reinterpreting the discourses an images of terror into their own cinematic language.

This cycle of post-9/11 films were not monolithic in its content or approach to the issues of terrorism. While the effects of the attacks to place on American soil, the effects of the 9/11 attacks extended beyond America borders. As a direct result of the War on Terror the enforcement of post 9/11 border policy migrated to places like Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and the battlefields of the Middle East.

This cycle of post-9/11 films were not monolithic in its content or approach to the issues of terrorism. The effects of the 9/11 attacks extended beyond America borders. As a direct result of the War on Terror the enforcement of post 9/11 border policy migrated to places like Guantanamo Bay Cuba and the battlefields of the Middle East. Spurred on by the ongoing Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the absence of WMD in Iraq, a latter phase of the post-9/11 film cycle saw an abrupt shift in subject matter from memorializing 9/11 to questioning the actions perpetrated in response to it. It is in this phase that more and more films began to challenge the growing tide of nationalism and the Bush administration execution of the War on terror through a series of films that critiqued America’s foreign policy. These films were a part of a phase in post- 9/11 cinema that was termed by some as the “Newly Politicized Hollywood” \(\text{(Wood 26)}\).

\(^2\) Various scholars have examined the re mediation of the 9/11 attacks through the various modes of genre. James Aston (2013) Aron Michael Kerner (2015) Tom Pollard (2011). In their book *Horror After 9/11*. Sam J. Miller and Aveva Briefel (2014) frame their discussion of a series of films in order to explore the relationship between horror (a set of generic conventions) and terror (the events of 9/11). Horror in particular became the choice amongst many filmmakers who wished to capitalize on the newfound anxiety over terrorism, biological disease, and the newly inaugurated War on Terror.
These films would include *Good Night and Good Luck* (George Clooney 2005) *Munich* (Steven Spielberg 2005) *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004). Rather than focusing exclusively on New York, these films told globe spanning stories each shared the similar theme regarding distrust of the current geopolitical climate and the exercise of American power abroad. In her study of post-9/11 conspiracy films, Laura Jones argues that this cycle of films reflects a moment when “political film has become commercially viable coinciding with a public demand to openly engage with ‘big’ issues in the wake of 9/11” (40). The growing viability of this newly politicized Hollywood could be traced back to a then growing discontentment with the direction of the country in the aftermath of 9/11. While the American public initially accepted the rationales for war in the Middle East and the binary logic of us vs. them “subsequent events in Iraq have seemingly catalyzed and increased public questioning of the US Government” (Jones 38) many Americans began to view the nation’s reaction to terrorism more critically. In his book *Post 9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*, John Market characterizes the cycle of post 9/11 films as a broad collection of films that dealt with issues varying from the memorialization of fire fighters and New Yorkers who survived the attack to the series of films that dealt with the war on terror released from 2004 to 2010. In Market’s assessment the film’s release during this period reflected and in some cases participated in the cultural political debate about how American military power would be exercised in the post 9/11 world. While the initial cycle of films sought to memorialize the event via stories of individuals effected by the attacks, these films were followed by a series a more polemical films which posited a less salutary and more divided depiction of life in post 9/11 America.
My readings of the individual films require that genre be thought as more than simple categorization. Rather this study is based on the assumption that genre is a discourse. In this case a discourse which provides the visual and narrative elements of genres give us a framework by which we can chart the changes in the depictions of the border region. By examining how the border is depicted in each respective genre, my work reveals how the border’s disciplinary functions operate. In regards to choice of genres, individual genres such as the western and the social problem film may be unique as they are built around individual across various boundaries. For instance, in the Social Problem Film the boundaries in question are usually those between rich and poor. In regards to western the boundary has traditionally been that between the frontier and civilization. In Science Fiction film have revolved around the boundaries between human and those designated as alien.

While various terms have been used to describe films dealing with the crossing of borders (Transnational Cinema, the Cinema of Globalization) in examining the border through certain genre films, this work employs the term Border Cinema. While this work does explore issues of migration and globalization as they relate to Post 9/11 America, my individual chapters focus specifically on the borders which surrounding the United States. This choice in methodology does require does require that the primary focus of this research be on the effect of the 9/11 attacks on American borders. In order to undertake a detailed reading of these ideas, the individual chapters of my work focus on a specific film and thus a specific border space. My first chapter will be textual analyses of the film *Three Burials for Miguel Estrada*. This chapter traces the evolution of the
US/Mexico border through its depiction in various genres including film noir and the western. Through this method, my project examines how the positioning of the border as a frontier has been influenced both by American foreign policy and the particular characteristics of each respective genre. In regards to *Three Burials*’ adoption and subversion of the conventions from the Western, this project utilizes the genre scholarship undertaken by Richard Slotkin and Robert Warshow, whose writings on the function of the western frontier in American cultural imaginings provides a useful conceptual framework for contextualizing issues of race and power in and around border space. In addition to its challenging of the frontier myth, this chapter also examines *Three Burials* depiction of a border community. By contrasting previous depictions of border town’s from both film noir and the western my analysis reveals how through embracing multilingualism and nonlinear editing the film disrupts the very place making function of the border.

The second chapter of my work examines the cinematic mapping of the US/Canadian border in *Frozen River*. In attempting to understand the power of borders, my work explores representations of the border on both poles of the continental United States. While a considerable amount of scholarship has been undertaken in regards to the enforcement of the US/Mexico border, the pouressness of the US/Canadian border has received newfound attention within 9/11 political rhetoric as a potential entry point for terrorist into the country. The open and virtually unregulated space of the US/Canadian border serves as an interesting point of contrast to the militarized and lethal US/Mexico border seen in *Three Burials*. I place *Frozen River* in the context of a series of recent
border themed works termed ‘Global Social Problem’ films. Using the GSP film as a point of contrast, I explore how *Frozen River*’s narrative makes explicit the gender, racial, and class dynamics involved in border enforcement and crossing. Within the film’s narrative of two impoverished women, one white and the other Native American, attempting to smuggle immigrants across the US/Canadian border, the film illustrates how the ability to circumvent the border is depended on the white skin privilege of the story’s main protagonist.

Through *Frozen River*, my dissertation examines the function of race in border crossing. If the enforcement of the border categorizes white skin as a secure identity, then whiteness is afforded certain mobility within the 9/11 border space. In examining the mobility of whiteness, the film’s line “they won’t stop you, you’re white”, which is spoken by the film’s Native American character, articulates how the border in carried in the very identities of the subjects its presence regulates. In examining the link between, ethnicity, identity, and border in *Frozen River*, Winfred Simmerling examines the border’s ability to inscribe meaning on both places and individuals. In doing so, the author argues that the border makes physical preexisting essentialist categories of identity. In *Frozen River* the border’s metaphorical functions are similar to those in film noir. In writing about depictions of the US/Mexico border towns in film noir Susan Mains suggest the border setting “effectively demarcates the departure from the normal modern world” (125). In further examining the US/Canadian borderspace in *Frozen River*, I use the concept of the frontier to describe how the legally ambiguous border territory has become a site for the trafficking of black market goods. In examining the desolate landscapes of
Frozen River and the mobility of the women within them, this project illustrates the problematic process of controlling mobility through the disciplinary apparatus of the border.

In regards to my final two chapters, an examination of post-9/11 entails consideration of certain films that are produced outside America and whose production is also global in nature. Therefore the third chapter of this work explores the use of borders in the dystopian science fiction film *Children of Men*. Set in the near future when the human race has become infertile, the film chronicles the journey of Theo, as he attempts to escort a young refugee pregnant with the last human child across a militarized London. I place *Children* within the context of a new cycle of science fiction films that deal explicitly with the idea of the alien as a means of challenging xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants, refugees, and other non-indigenous groups. While ostensibly presenting itself as another dystopian science fiction film, my project examines how *Children of Men* utilizes both the conventions of the science fiction genre and memorialized images from War on Terror in order to articulate a pointed social commentary on the politics of citizenship in the post-9/11 era. In doing so, my work uses the genre of science fiction as a hermeneutic through which the link between ‘alieneass’ and the disciplinary practices that generate the concept can be understood.

In reading *Children of Men* through the concept of borders, the genre of science fiction, particularly the scholarship regarding ‘the alien’, is used in contextualizing the cultural anxieties of which the film is symptomatic. I examine the existing scholarly
conceptions the alien in cinema and how *Children of Men* both enforces and alters the
generic conventions of science fiction.

In examining the link between the idea of the alien and the security of the border, *Children of Men* is the latest manifestation in a series of speculative science fiction texts in which the notions of otherness, border security, and infection are articulated through narratives of alien invasion. The presence of borders, both literal and symbolic, has been a significant characteristic of the science fiction genre. Historically, science fiction narratives have mediated racial, gender, and cultural differences, through the body of the alien. In the words of scholars Heidi Kaye and I.Q Hunter “Otherness and alienation are states of existence not only for imaginary E.T.s but for all who have been excluded from dominant categories of the human the natural and the native” (10). In this respect, any designation of ‘alienness’ is contingent on being outside the borders which surround a nation or a culture. In examining the relationship between the alien and post-coloniality writer Sara Ahmed points out “an alien signals the fact that one was born outside the United States and thus can never 'naturally' belong to the privileged national space” (4). Ahmed contends that the idea of the alien is only a category within a given community of citizens and subject. I argue that by populating the visual landscape of the film with security checkpoints and imprisoned individuals, the film maps these processes of alienhood onto the city space of London itself. In doing so, the film transforms London from a global city into a militarized borderpace. In short, the diegesis of *Children of Men* structuralizes the very power relations which lead to outsiders being classified as abject or alien.
In undertaking a spatial reading of the film, I feel it is necessary to contrast photographic images of London with their fictional representations in *Children of Men*. In contrasting these various public spaces of London, this methodology aims to examine how certain iconic public spaces of the city have been repurposed in the film as militarized spaces, which regulate and categorize the individuals within them as citizen or alien. In addition to the film’s repurposing the various public spaces in London, *Children of Men* also constructs its urban borderspace by appropriating various images associated with the War on Terror and the Holocaust. While *Children of Men* does present a fictionalized border space, this work aims to situate the film visual geography as symptomatic of contemporary concerns regarding border enforcement.

The fourth and final chapter of my work will examine the film *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008). Set in a not too distant future where the border between the United States and Mexico is sealed off, the film tells the story of a boy named Memo, a migrant worker in Mexico who in order to survive in Tijuana, surgically upgrades his body and becomes a node worker (a cyborg worker who plugs his body into a machines) that works in a factory in Mexico but operates robot construction workers in the United States.

*Sleep Dealer* is a film from director Alex Rivera. Rivera’s previous works have utilized various styles and formats, but have focused on the recurring themes of borders, discrimination against non-native groups, and America’s contradictory attitude towards immigrant groups and the labor they perform. In regards to the question of genre my work briefly contrasts *Sleep Dealer* with Rivera’s other border-centered work, specifically his pseudo-documentary, *Why Cybraceros*? Furthermore I place *Sleep
*Dealer* not only in the context of recent Science Fiction films, my work also examines the film in regards to recent border cinema from Latin America. In doing so this work seeks to place Dealer within a larger context of cinema that deals with issues of migration through the post- 9/11 global south.

In regards to the theme of mobility, Rivera’s film demonstrates the complexity of movement in the virtual world. The futuristic world of *Sleep Dealer* is filled with various kinds of connections and communication that is enabled via various computerized networks that flow across national borders. Through these transnational networks, the cybernetic factory workers in Mexico are able to achieve a type of virtual mobility through their physical connections to the machines of global commerce. By contrasting the film with real life industries along the US/Mexico border which American business export labor from, this work makes clear how the border enables the exploitation of migrant workers while simultaneously reaping the benefits of their labor. Furthermore by examining the film in relation to the idea of virtual labor enabling a virtual mobility my work will reveal how is the body of the worker is only allowed mobility once their body is subsumed into the networks of global commerce.

In examining *Sleep Dealer* through the concept of home, this dissertation explores how the concept has evolved in the virtual world. The film’s three main characters (Memo, Rudy and Luz) have each been displaced from their homes either by circumstances or, as in Rudy’s case, displaced by choice. In addition, each of these characters attempts to form different communal connections within the border region. In
creating a future where the virtual world is always in conflict with the physical makeup of the border, the very notion of home in the film falls into question.

In the world of *Sleep Dealer* the concept of the frontier had evolved greatly. In its story the border is not patrolled by cowboys or border patrol officers, but by a highly mechanized system of surveillance devices, virtual fences, and a fleet of unmanned aerial drones which constantly patrol the skies over the region. I explore how the mechanization of the border illustrates how the tactics of the War on Terror have been exported from the ‘frontiers’ of the Middle East to the new battlefield of the US/Mexco borderspace.

While the exact nature is still an important area of debate, I believe that by examining representations of the border, its discursive effects can be made clear. Through a blending of border studies and film studies, I wish this work to participate in a growing scholarly inquiry into how certain ideas of nation, identity, and citizenship are sustainable in an increasingly globalized world. Within these interrogations of the boundaries which make up a community, the specificity offered through the study of national borders become a rich site in which to examine how certain identities are constructed within a certain transient cultural space. Furthermore in reframing cinematic representations of the border as maps, the films selected present the potential for offering a richer more nuanced understanding of the border and the spaces that comprise it. My hope is that this work uses cinema’s indexical relationship to reality in order to illuminate how the contradictions and paradoxes of borders can be reconciled.
CHAPTER 1: THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA AND THE US/MEXICO BORDER

This chapter investigates *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* with the purpose of examining how the film uses the western as a means of challenging the genre’s depictions of the US/Mexico border region. Through a textual analysis, I argue that in telling the story of a white border patrol agent who is forcefully exiled to Mexico, the film reverses the trajectory of exclusion that historically characterizes the border space. More specifically, in making the central conflict of the film one between a cowboy and a border patrol officer, the mythology of the American western and the frontier myth is brought into collision with the realities of border enforcement. This chapter gives special attention to the conflation of the border with terrorism in the wake of 9/11. I argue that *Three Burials* challenges how the Frontier Myth has been utilized in post 9/11 rhetoric. In order to understand how *Three Burials* subverts the traditions of its genre, we must first examine the role of the western in visual rhetoric of this specific border territory.

In April 2005 a series of meetings occurred at various border towns throughout the state of Arizona. The scene resembled something out of a Hollywood movie as armed volunteers gathered along the Arizona-Mexico border and eventually converged on to the town of Tombstone. The location of Tombstone is important as it is the site of the now legendary Wild West shootout at the OK Corral between Wyatt Earp’s men and a gang of outlaw cowboys. Immortalized in both literature and film, the event has taken on a mythical status as an example of ‘frontier justice’. Like Earp’s men, these modern-day cowboys came in search of another confrontation. Only this time the outlaws were
“illegal” immigrants. Against this backdrop of Wild West shootouts and vigilante justice symbols, thousands of volunteers gathered to play a part in what they believed to be a new battleground in the emerging War on Terror, the US/Mexico border.

Figure 3: Volunteer police known as Arizona Rangers guard the streets of Tombstone, Arizona

In attempting to recruit volunteers to the Minute Men of Arizona, spokesmen Jack Wright described the surveillance of the US/Mexican border as an act of post-9/11 civic responsibility. “President Bush after 9/11 asked America to be vigilant” and help their country by being “another pair of eyes” (Juffer 664). Standing watch over the border, these self-appointed agents of border patrol, are part of growing movement along the border known as the 'Minuteman Project’ (a name with an almost immediate patriotic appeal because it calls forth the history of patriotic volunteers who fought against British rule of the American colonies). The Minuteman's goal was to monitor the US/Mexico border in the hopes of locating clandestine border crossers, as well as draw attention to the issue of immigration in the hopes of influencing federal policy. Furthermore, the Minutemen are vocal proponents of increasing the amount of troops along the border region or, as some desire, create an impenetrable border. Some commentators have
characterized these groups as vigilantes akin to right wing domestic terrorists who concern over security mask xenophobic and racist beliefs about Mexicans. In the words of Jane Juffer “Vigilantes step into the space between the state and market, representing community values, providing humanitarian assistance, and acting as a neighborhood /border watch groups” (667). In this aspect, the Minute men groups are extensions of the same protectionist attitudes that were institutionalized via the Department of Homeland Security. In ignoring calls by state and law enforcement to leave patrolling the border the and taking the law into their own hands groups such as the Minute men display the individualism of frontier justice as they offered a communitarian ethic of protecting the home and community during a time when the nation security was in doubt. In enacting this new brand of post-9/11 vigilantism why have these men chosen to cloak themselves in the mystique of the Wild West? Such a performance of cowboy masculinity cloaked in the mythology of the Wild West is keeping with the same type of nostalgia the permeated American culture in the wake of 9/11. This evocation of the Wild West has little to do with protecting the country from terrorism and more to do with evoking of a certain nationalist version of American history.

The evocation of the legendary battles of the Wild West don’t just inspire the desire for law enforcement, this strategy also evokes a powerful history in which the expansion and subsequent conquest of the American south was enacted by a violent form of frontier justice. The western has long been used to dramatize certain national, ethnic and geographical conflicts over space, often employing the narrative arc of the cowboy who leaves home and sets out on a journey to the untamed frontier in order to make
'civilization’ possible for the larger national community. Given these associations between the War on Terrorism and the Wild West an understanding of the western in relation to the frontier, mobility and home because essential to understanding how policy towards the border is informed by the Western The myth of the frontier as outlined by Richard Slotkin (1992) entails a separation form civilization, a violent regression to a more natural state, and a subsequent regeneration through violence. Fredrick Jackson Turner characterizes the west as a place where advancement exerts a powerful effect over the nation as a whole, particularly cities of the east. As he writes in his Frontier Thesis “with it [this expansion] individualism, democracy, and nationalism, and powerfully affects the east” (Qtd in Slotkin p19). For example “The effect of the frontier action upon the northern section is perceived when we realize how the advance of the frontier aroused seaboard cities like Boston, New York, and Baltimore, to engage in rivalry” (Qtd in Slotkin p13). This effect on the east is produced through the evolution of the “various kinds of frontiers” which each make way for the next…each frontier has made... contributions to American character” (Qtd in Slotkin p 17). In the context of border cinema the mythology of the frontier has been the Western.

Countless amounts of westerns both in literature and in film have narrativized the frontier in myth via stories of the cowboy. The strongest explanation of the impact of the frontier thesis impact has come from Richard Slotkin who in Gunfighter Nation argues that Turner’s notion of the American frontier has been used for various political purposes as a way to characterize an uncertain future. Thus the frontier has become ingrained in the collective experience of the nation as a symbol for the idea of progress of
new potentials for spiritual, moral and physical renewal at whatever price” (Quoted in Sharett 50). In Slotkin’s assessment the concept of the frontier endured well into the 20th century as John F Kennedy evoked the “New Frontier” at midcentury, after World War II and a decade of what represent sedentary stagnation.  

The prominence of anti-immigrant groups such as the Minutemen reflects a larger conflation in post-9/11 America between illegal immigration and the threat of terrorism. This linkage between the safety of the homeland and the security of the US/Mexico border would become further accentuated in the summer of 2004 when the Justice department referred to Latin America as the “Last Frontier for international terrorism” (Juffer 664). What moment is being invoked by the Bush administration when it refers to the Mexican side of the border as “the last frontier”? The description of the border space as a geographical boundary separating America from an unspecified western ‘frontier’ brings into question just what images of Mexico the Bush administration trafficked in. This blending of Western iconography with the security of the US/Mexico border is the latest manifestation of a history in which the border is filtered through the mythology of the frontier.

As a boundary that separates the United States from its southern neighbor, the US/Mexico region is one of the most frequently screened landscapes in film. What proves telling is how both American policies towards the border and depiction of the region in film have been informed by the perception of the region as a violent, unregulated, and

3 While John Kennedy’s notion ‘New Frontier’ is generally thought of in regards to the Space Race, the term however, was also employed more broadly to symbolize the possibilities America faced in the 1960s.
uncivilized place. In this respect, how the border is visualized becomes just as important as how the region is understood. Genre films in particular have become a means of both challenging and reproducing xenophobic attitudes towards the border. In this chapter, I wish to examine how discourses regarding the US/Mexico border territory have been repeatedly distilled through various genres, specifically the western.

Previous eras revisionist westerns reflected a combined desire to present the West in an historical light rather than a mythic or nostalgic one, and to modernize the western as a genre from a thematic base as determined by it materiel construction (dialogue, acting, cinematography writing). Their concern was with rewriting the western and directly acknowledging the genre history and implicitly acknowledging the genre history in relation to American history.

*Three Burials for Miguel Estrada* is just one of a series of contemporary western that have been characterized by their re-evaluations of the moral assumptions which underlie the genre. Recent westerns such as *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Cohen, 2007), *Assassination of Jesse James* (Andrew Domink, 2007), and *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) each use iconography of the Western in order to interrogate the complexities of violence and masculinity. In doing so, this new cycle of films not only exploits the power of conventional tropes of the genre, but as writer Brent Strang states “uses the genre’s own conventions to expose the deficiencies of violence and masculinity as well” (186). The revisionist western, *The Assassination of Jesse James*, reimages the legendary outlaw of the Wild West as a depressive figure filled with self-loathing and suspicious of his own celebrity, in addition to rewriting the traditional role
of violence in the western, these revisionist attitudes aim to reorient audiences towards the very history in which the western is grounded. Placed in the context of post 9/11 America and the political evocations of the frontier, the deconstruction of the western exposes the flaws of its utilization with post 9/11 rhetoric of security and terrorism.

*Three Burials* exemplifies this new cycle of films that Strang has termed ‘Post Mortem Westerns’. These ‘Post Mortem Westerns’ deploy the standard generic icons, only placing them in modern day settings in order to reinforce the western’s outmodedness while enhancing the genre’s capability to deconstruct its mythological roots. In this context *Three Burials* is a western that seeks to reconfigure the mythology of the genre in order to challenge the prevailing attitudes towards US/Mexico border space.

*Three Burials* is the first directorial effort by movie star Tommy Lee Jones. Jones became interested in making the film when he became outraged over the 1997 shooting of Texas youth Esequiel Hernandez Jr. by three U.S. marines on border patrol duty. The plot of the film follows the quest undertaken by Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones), to return the body of his slain friend Melquiades Estrada (Julio Cesar Cedillo) to his supposed family home in Mexico for burial. After learning that Melequiades Estrada was killed by the border patrol, Pete abducts the officer who shot him, Mike Norton (Barry Pepper), makes him dig up the body, and attempts to honor his friends promise to his friend to bury him in his small hometown of Jimenez. It is only after a hazardous journey across the border into Mexico that Norton and Perkins discover that neither Melquiades’s family nor the town of Jimenez actually exists.
Figure 4: Mike Norton and Pete Perkins attempt to cross the border

Figure 5: Mike Norton tries in vain to escape but is captured by Pete

The conflict between Pete and Mike illustrates the differing manifestations of justice at the border. Because they often geographically cross separate nations border regions are usually ambiguous when it comes to matters of the law and usually become entangled in legal gray areas. In this respect, we can see why the idea of extrajudicial punishment or frontier “justice” may appeal to more reactionary elements on the American side of the border. Placed in the context of post-9/11 terrorism and the potential for the Mexican border to be a gateway for terrorists into America, Mexican
immigrants are not just seen as a cheap labor force, but as potential threats to American safety. This conflation of terrorism and immigration has had deadly consequences for those who attempt to cross the border into America. These militaristic attitudes towards the border are embodied in the character of Mike Norton.

With his love of firearms and disdain for illegal immigrants, the Mike Norton character connects the film to larger institutional prejudices inherent in border enforcement. Norton, an ex-Marine, who moved to Texas from Ohio, is a bigoted individual who treats his wife Lou Ann as a sex object and frequently spends time looking at pornography and masturbating while patrolling the border. In addition, Norton is a racist and violent man who takes it upon himself to brutalize the Mexicans he captures attempting to cross the border. In one sequence, Norton even goes as far as to punch a Mexican woman in the face for attempting to flee from him. Being a border patrol officer, Norton's violent brand of frontier justice enforces the laws of the border through violence. Norton’s clumsy murder of Melequindes, however, serves as a referent to any number of countless deaths that have occurred around the border, including the real life death of Esequiel Hernandez Jr. which inspired the movie. Mike’s bigotry towards Mexicans, as well as his blatant contempt for having to speak Spanish places him in stark contrast to the heroic border patrol agents of previous border-centered films. Unlike the characters in those Hollywood films, Norton’s nationalistic attitude and hostility toward Mexican culture is not seen as a virtue. Rather, in creating Mike Norton, the filmmakers have compiled the most macho and xenophobic aspects of American ‘gung-ho’ military culture.
In contrast to the rigidity of Mike Norton, Tommy Lee Jones’ character is portrayed as bi-cultural figure who embraces elements of both Mexican and American cultures. Pete respects cultural differences and often commiserates with Melquiades in his native language of Spanish. Pete appears to be at peace with the differences of the border and does not seek to enforce them with violence. Like Melquiades Estrada, Pete is a rancher, not a soldier. While he may not share the racist attitudes of Mike Norton, when Pete discovers his friend was shot by the border patrol he responds with a violent act of retribution. With his cowboy hat, horse, and burning desire for justice, the Pete character is a deliberate evocation of the American cowboy. When Pete saddles his horse and forcefully carries Mike to Mexico, the event could be framed as the particular type of frontier justice which characterized the Classic Hollywood Western. Like a hero from a Classic Hollywood Western, the retribution Pete seeks places him outside the law. In order to understand how the Three Burials appropriates and subverts tropes of the western I feel it is necessary to examine how depictions of the border began and evolved.

The border as it known today is the outcome of long colonialist expansion that would help create the American Southwest. After the Mexican-American War, under the Terms of the Treaty of Hidalgo Guadalupe in 1848, the Rio Grande River was chosen as the geographic boundary line that would separate Mexico from the newly acquired American territory in California, Texas, and what are now eight other American states. In spite of the newly created border, America’s southwest region was still the site for several armed conflicts between American armed forces and Mexicans who challenged the validity of the United States’ annexation of land.
Since the earliest days of Hollywood, popular films have played a significant role in shaping images of the US/Mexican territory. For instance, in order to promote circulation of his West Coast newspapers, media baron William Randolph Hearst gave extensive coverage to the Mexican revolution and fanned xenophobic fears that the war would spill over the border into the United States. In this instance, the border’s close proximity to Hollywood influenced the production of border cinema as studios and news origination traveled to the region in the hopes of capturing footage of the Mexican Revolution. The image of Mexico which emerged was that of a violent battle zone seemingly free of any sense of law and order. Starting in the early 1900s, Hollywood began producing hundreds of films set on or around the then newly acquired Mexican border. Operating mostly as colonialist adventures, these border films were far from evenhanded in their depictions of Mexican people and culture. Mexicans were often depicted as uncivilized ‘others,’ while the American soldiers were often seen as heroes who bravely crossed the border into a Mexico that was coded as a violent frontier. This idea was propagated in various films such as the alarmist, anti-Mexican, *Across the Mexican Line* (Reid 1914) in which an American hero leaves his fiancée in order to lead American troops across the border. These border adventures imagined Mexico as an arena in which American colonialist spirit was acted out through the domination of an uncivilized frontier zone.

In viewing the border adventure as a colonialist narrative, the Mexican landscape is depicted as a space ripe for American colonization and conquest. As articulated by scholar Margarita De Oreilinna, “When the American hero entered this savage territory
he became a kind of animal at ease with the wild landscape. It was as if the hostility that he had faced gave him the strength of the pioneers who had conquered the west” (112). In a cycle of border films such as *Patria* (Thorton 1916), and *The Adventures of Pancho Villa* (Thorton 1917) we see the beginnings of a powerful geopolitical discourse in which the power, civility, and supremacy of the United States is communicated through its repeated juxtaposition with the violence of the Mexican territory.

As *Three Burials* unfolds, we are presented with a film that contains three distinct chapters. The first chapter, titled “The First Burial,” largely illustrates the events that occurred before or after the accidental shooting of Melquiades. The second chapter titled “The Journey” chronicles the kidnapping of Mike Norton by Pete and the two men's passage across the border into the deserts of Mexico. In order to better understand how *Three Burials* challenges the traditional depictions of the borderspace we must
examine each chapter separately. The first chapter of the film focuses on life in an unnamed Texas border community.

The Bordertown

This section will examine *Three Burials* in relation to previous depictions of communities located on the border. In *Three Burials* the border town setting assumes a multitude of resonances, spanning far beyond the simple dichotomies of America (good) and Mexico (bad). The desire for a more nuanced portrayal of the border region is echoed by director Tommy Lee Jones. In the film’s DVD commentary, he explains how he wanted his film “to show how things are different on each side of the river and how they are the same, and what the implications are of running an international border through the middle of a culture and calling it two cultures, and then enforcing that difference with violence” (*Three Burials*).

Historically, westerns set along the US/Mexico border have portrayed border communities as dens of crime where drugs, murders, and rapes are common occurrences. In contrast to the frontier vs. civilization polarities of the border adventure, the civilizations along the US/Mexico border was seen less as a setting for colonialist adventures and more as a territory associated with the transgression of the law. For instance in the crime thriller *Bordertown* (Mayo 1935) was set in a city modeled very closely after the real life border town of Tijuana. The film depicts the vice, scandals, and betrayals that occur in and around a casino run by a Mexican–American man in love with a white American woman. In *Border Incident* (Mann 1949) the film follows a police investigation of drug smuggling operation involving Mexican day workers. The border
towns in Mann’s detective thriller are dark and squalid places filled with violence and
criminal activity. It is this era of the border film which has drawn the most attention from
US/Mexico border scholars. At issue was how the border town was seen less as an
unexplored frontier and more as a Mecca for crime and criminals. Dominique Bregent-
Heald characterizes these cycle of border films in relation to the emerging genre of film
noir. Characterizing these films as ‘Border Noirs’, Bregent -Heald states that “the border
becomes the stage for a spectacle of often grotesque proportions. The border is indexed
as a surreal environment, where racial and sexual contact/contamination produces or
uncontrollable unexpected results” (129). The scholarship regarding this cycle of films
repeatedly situates the crossing of the border with a variety of moral and cultural
transgressions. “For Anglos crossing the border was a means of escaping justice, finding
a hiding place, or indulging is pleasures that they could not at home” (Schmitt-Pitiot 3).
What is clear is that this cycle of the border films were not concerned with the conquest
of Mexico as much as they were with revealing the pleasures crossing into Mexico could
provide.

Perhaps no film dramatizes America’s complex relationship with the border space
more than Orson Wels’s 1956 film Touch of Evil. In the film, the idea of the violent
frontier takes the form of a crime ridden border town, where certain, ethnic boundaries
that once separated certain groups have started to breakdown due to their close proximity
to one another in the border zone. The film depicts the efforts of a Mexican/Anglo
District Attorney played by Charlton Heston, to expose the corrupt practices of Detective
Quinlan, played by Wells, in the fictional town along the US/Mexico. Recent scholarship
regarding that the film centers on the dispute between two law enforcement officers: Vargas and a corrupt white policeman named Quinlan (played by Welles). The two men are characterized by their opposing political viewpoints and ethnic alignments. Vargas and Quinlan’s struggle is over authority which would justify their presence within the border space where only one or the other can fit. In depicting a white American police officer who abuses his authority over Mexicans, *Touch of Evil* lays bare its function as a critique of America's racist attitudes toward Mexican immigrants. Quinlin's abusive attitude towards the film's Mexican characters speaks to the larger racial fears that surrounded the border in the 1950s. At the time of the film’s release the U.S. government was in the midst of a massive roundup and repatriation of thousands of Mexican immigrants called Operation Wetback. Similar to the post-9/11 fears that terrorist could enter America from Mexico, Operation Wetback was launched in reaction to fears that communism could cross the border into America.

In its depiction of crime and corruption in the fictitious border town of Los Ablos, *Touch of Evil* provides a framework for understanding how particular fears and desires of 1950s America were translated through the genre of film noir and exported onto the border space. Film Noir with its emphasis on ambiguity and moral corruption demonstrates the evolution of depictions of the Mexico border as a frontier. In contrasting various representations of the US/Mexico border author Domanique Brigette- Herald’s essay “Dark Limbo” examines how the US/ Mexico border is represented in the Film Noir *Touch of Evil*. The author states the border setting in *Touch of Evil* effectively transmits a key discursive impulse in Film Noir by demarcating a departure from the
“normal” world within a unique transnational context” (126). As with the border adventure films from of the silent era, the border town of Los Ablos is depicted as gateway community. It is a place that marks the departure from the normal world, to an exotic world of moral transgressions.

Figure 7: Touch of Evil Detective Quinlan enforces his authority over the bordertown.

In many ways, Touch of Evil reaffirms the stereotypical notions of the border town. In fact, one of the film’s characters goes as far to say “border towns bring out the worst in people.” This idea is supplemented by the number of violent incidents that take place during or after crossing the border into Mexico. In the film’s famous opening sequencing a wealthy American is murdered by car bomb just after he has crossed into Mexico. Shortly after, the character of Vargas is nearly the victim of an acid attack after he crosses into Mexico to investigate the car bombing. In perhaps the film’s most controversial sequence, Vargas’s wife played by Janet Leigh is the victim of a gang rape by a group of Mexican thugs who have crossed the border into America. Each of these violent incidents propagates the notion of the bordertown as a violent place due to its proximity to Mexico.
Border films such as *Touch of Evil* provided a way of witnessing the spectacle of “Sin City” from a safe distance, but the pleasures of transgressing American law only operated upon crossing the border. Because they were occupied with criminal behaviors, the cultural nuances of border communities were overlooked by many Hollywood films. While Noirs such as *Touch of Evil* are built around the differences between two countries, throughout *Three Burials*, Jones emphasizes the commonalities between Mexico and the US rather than their differences.

One of the ways *Three Burials* emphasizes the commonalities within the border space is through its use of Spanish. The voice of the Hollywood borderspace was an Anglo voice cloaked in the authority of law enforcement. In many border-centered Westerns such as *Flashpoint* (William Tannen 1980) and *Borderline* (Jerrold Freedman 1981), the audience’s sympathies are aligned with the border patrol agent who acts as an American surrogate within this border space. The border patrol agents’ English voice could aurally position the audience on the American side of the border even if the character crossed into Mexico. A film’s choice of language is usually an indicator of geographic setting, the use of language in these films, however, reinforced the already existing racial codes of border cinema. While English was the language of the heroic cowboy or border patrol agent, Spanish was the language of the bandit and the ‘greaser’. This assigning of difference through language ignored the fluidity of language at the border. From its opening scenes, *Three Burials* the film exhibits a cultural parity, a Tex-Mex style mixing of Mexican and American culture via language.
This emphasis on the mutability of language is illustrated in several key sequences in the film. For instance, when Melquiades first appears in the film, he proclaims his own identity in Spanish and introduces himself to Pete as “I’m just a cowboy”. In Isabelle Schmitt-Pitoit’s reading of the film this linguistic introduction to Melquiades is important because “Letting Melquiades speak his own language with the soft sing-song of Mexican Spanish the film gives nobility to the Mexican, atoning for the greaser figure of many early films” (6). In addition, the doomed friendship that develops between Pete and Melquiades is spoken entirely in Spanish. It is in one of these Spanish conversations that Estrada first describes his home of Jimenez to Pete. The choice to use Spanish in these initial sequences is significant because “the interactions amongst the film’s characters are always differentiated from their ongoing struggles to understand each other” (Schmidt-Pitiot 3). In another telling sequence, after Pete has taken Mike across the border, the two men encounter an elderly blind cowboy (Levon Helm). When Pete sees the blind man listening to the Spanish radio, Pete asks the man if he understands Spanish. The blind cowboy responds, “No, I just like the way Spanish sounds, don’t you?”

Later in the film, after recovering from snakebite, a disorientated Mike comes across a group of Mexican workers watching an English language soap opera. Even though neither member of the group speaks the other's language, Mike is able to share a quiet moment of acceptance with the Mexican strangers. In this scene the linguistic differences here only seem to highlight Mike’s role as ‘other’ on this side of the border. More specifically, the English language program seems to trigger memories of family
and home in the now exiled Mike. Like Melquiades, Mike has become a stranger in a foreign land who comforts himself with memories of home. *Three Burial’s* commitment to the multilingualism of the border region is further illustrated in the film’s opening credit sequence, which displays the cast and credits of the film in English and Spanish. The Spanish-speaking Anglos and the English-speaking Mexicans of the film demonstrate how language is not bound to a single culture. Rather, language oscillates between the two cultures in the border space. *Three Burial’s* resistance to the binary oppositions of the United States and Mexico extends outside the use of language.

Through the use of editing, *Three Burials* goes as far as to disrupt the very place-making function of the border. In Chapter One of the film the audience is in constant flux as the film moves back and forth between past and present. The chronology of Chapter One is deliberately fragmented, cutting back and forth between past and present, while the journey depicted in Chapter Two unfolds in a more linear format. Through the various story fragments in Chapter One, we slowly piece together the events that led up to the murder of Estrada, including a brief affair between Estrada and Mike Norton’s wife Lou-Ann. This shifting between past and present causes the audience to continually reevaluate its own position in regards to this ever shifting border space. This sentiment is echoed by author Douglas Pye whose reading of the film suggests that the fragmentation of Chapter One “provides a brief snapshot into a society that lacks cohesiveness. We see several locations but have no sense of their spatial relations to each other, relationships between men in women seem unstable, and intimacy is fleeting”. By editing the first chapter of the film is such a manner it becomes difficult if not impossible to know for
certain which side of the border you are on while watching Three Burials. The fragmented mapping of the border town makes the assemblage of things like place and cause and effect tenuous at best. Absent a definitive sense of temporal and spatial place audiences are forced to consider just how effective a tool for place-making the border really is. It is only in the film’s second chapter, when Pete and Mike cross the border into Mexico that the film stabilizes its position in the present and its generic characteristics become more pronounced.

Mexico and the Frontier

This section will explore how the notion of the Frontier Myth is depicted in relation to the US/Mexico border in Three Burials. The journey to and from the Mexican border is a significant part of the western. Given the vastness of the unsettled territory of the American frontier in the 1800s and the ideological weight of the frontier myth where many westerns took place and the differing laws governing either side of the US/Mexico border the long journey from the civilization to that world beyond often carry significance for western heroes. For instance, the classic Western Rio Grande (John Ford 1955) told the story of Cavalryman lead by iconic John Wayne who do battle against a group of marauding Apache at the US/ Mexico border. In many way films such as Rio Grande is exemplifies the use of the border space in the classic Hollywood western. Rio Grande's violent dramatization of such a crossing not only exemplifies the familiar western trope of Cowboys vs. Indians is also reenacts the very westward movement (both real and imagined) that charted a path of Anglo Americans settlement and racial/cultural superiority. With depictions of the frontier such as these, we can see
the influence of the early Border Adventure films of the silent era on popular Hollywood westerns. Mexico was but an extension of the violent untamed and uncivilized territory that had not yet been conquered by expanding white civilization. As with the Border Noirs, crossing the border into Mexico marked a departure from one world to another. In short the US/Mexico border becomes the ideal staging ground in which to reenact Manifest Destiny.

With *Rio Grande* we see the cowboy’s journey into the frontier, in this case a war torn Mexico, as a means to civilize the territory in order to expand “civilization.” In addition to illustrating to conquest of the West, the journey into the American frontier is also a way to establish the character motivations of the cowboy. In those instance the journey from civilization to the untamed west serves as a metaphor for the narrative journey in which the cowboy transitions from a more violent state in order to become a more civilized man. For instance, the film *The Searchers* (John Ford 1956) depicts the long multiyear search for his kidnapped niece journey through the iconic multiyear valley parallels the internal journey which the character of Ethan Edwards must undergo in order to accept his abducted niece and reunite his family. The film tells story of a quest that will never end, for the story's hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), can never become a part of the civilization he strives to restore. In contrast to Ford’s picture, in Anthony Mann's *The Naked Spur* (1953), we have much more than the simple story of a veteran bounty hunter (Jimmy Stewart) who must both hunt for a fugitive and bring home a body; we have a complex story where vengeance and self-destruction are intertwined on a long journey through the frontier back to home.
The journey to the Mexican frontier is not always a matter of conquest. Given the legal ambiguity of the border space, the Mexican border is often depicted in the Western as a symbolic goal post for fugitive cowboys who wish to escape the law on the American side of the border. Westerns such as *The Magnificent Seven* (Strurgess 1960), *The Professionals* (Brooks 1966) and *The Wild Bunch* (Pechinpah 1969) all featured stories in which a group of American soldiers engaged in a violent adventure in Mexico. Many of these Mexico westerns are so called ‘professional plot westerns’ differed from the silent border adventures in their depictions of the territory. The romanticized violence and moral clarity of films like *Patria* had been replaced with cynicism towards the moral superiority of the homeland. For instance, the film *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Pekinpah 1969) depicts a gang of brutal bandits at the beginning of the story who race towards the border to avoid capture, but through their Mexican adventure they undergo regeneration. Indeed, the film’s fugitive cowboys rise from their lowlife selves to the level of heroes who fight and lose the battle to advance the cause of Mexican revolution. Even while *The Wild Bunch* is ambiguous in its feelings towards American expansionism, the Mexican half of the border is still depicted as a rejuvenative frontier. In westerns such as these, each depicts stories in which a group of cowboys undertake a violent race to Mexico in order to avoid capture by the American military. In this respect, Mexico was a symbolic goalpost for cowboys on the run from the law. The territory just beyond the border represented freedom for the American outlaw, a lawless space who cowboy and criminal alike can begin anew.
What distinguishes *Three Burials* is how the journey into Mexico reverses the trajectory of exclusion that has traditionally characterized American immigration policy post 9/11. As a border agent Mike Norton was tasked with arresting immigrants and expelling them from the United States. In Mike’s kidnapping and forced pilgrimage to Mexico has turned him into an immigrant of a different kind. In one important sequence Mike is bitten by a snake, near death he must seek medical treatment from one of the Mexican women he assaulted earlier in the film. Rather than be forgiving once Norton has healed the Mexican woman proceeds to break his nose in retaliation for the abuse she suffered when crossing the border earlier in the film. By turning Mike Norton into a defacto immigrant the border patrol agent is forced to atone for his murder.

The perilous journey undertaken by Mike and Pete through the borderlands is not the stuff of Wild West myth. The forced exodus of the two men does echo the journey many immigrants face in attempting to cross a hostile landscape in order to reach the American border. In the aftermath of 9/11 and as a result of certain policy shifts in the form of the Patriot Act, the mobility of those who crossed the border became filtered through the lens of terrorism. As a result the immigration policy transformed from a practice to indefinite detention, trial, and subsequent deportation to Mexico or in some cases further south of the border. This increase of deportation of the Mexican immigrant ignores the reality of crossing the border in the post 9/11 world. The journey of the immigrant through the global south is one that is filled with danger. In addition to the enormous physical and mental endurance required to traverse hundreds of miles of desert, many immigrants face potential violent death or assault and the hands of coyotes and
other criminals who wish to exploit those desperate enough to cross the border. Border states like Arizona and Texas saw a sharp increase in the amount of deaths along the border region in 2013 and 2014. According to human rights groups, there were 463 deaths in the past fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30 — the equivalent of about five migrants dying every four days, according to analysis by the Washington Office on Latin America, a human rights group. In the time federal statistics have been compiled, only 2005 had more deaths, and in that year, there were more than three times as many apprehensions. In spite of the dangers faced in crossing, many migrants and undocumented workers face deportation from America sometimes very quickly after they cross. In forcing a white American border patrol agent to undertake the treacherous journey to Mexico, Mike Norton not only made to atone for Melquiades death, he is also forced to experience to the often deadly immigrant journey from one nation to another.

The second chapter of the film titled ‘The Odyssey’ depicts the arduous journey into Mexico. Unlike the first section of the film, Chapter Two focuses on the tripartite relationship between Pete, his unwilling hostage Mike, and the decaying corpse of Melquiades. Pete’s deep friendship with Melquiades depicted in the first chapter of the film becomes the basis for the forced abduction of Mike.

There is a very high value placed on friendship in this film. The love shared between Pete and his Mexican friend is evident in the first chapter of the film. Melquiades' evocation of an ideal home and family sets of the journey as being one based on nostalgia. The images of home and family evoked by Melquiades have no parallel in the Anglo world displayed in the first chapter of the film. This evocation of an ideal
community that could exist just south of the border places Pete and Mike’s journey in a different light. The two men’s odyssey into Mexico to return Melquiades remains is just as much a quest for home as it is an act of vengeance. A Pye comments, “Chapter One's presentation of the Anglo world makes the image of life of family in the Mexican town of Jimenez attractive and highly charged” (Pye 4). The juxtaposition of the Anglo world and the Mexican world has been highlighted by Brent Strang who argues that the evocation of Jimenez is ideal because it stands in such stark contrast the decentered fragmented world of the bordertown. Strang states that the film aligns itself with Pete subjectivity and, like him, “we become sick with the portrait of present day America and long for classic western justice to set things right” (40). In this respect Pete’s journey into Mexico is inaction of the frontier myth.

Keeping in mind the film’s revisionist attitude, we can view the journey depicted in Chapter Two as not only an exercise in frontier justice but also a means of exposing the shortcomings of the frontier myth as well. The journey of Mike and Pete takes on a similar structure. Mike and Pete are separated from civilization and reduced to a more
primitive state of living by trying to survive in the Mexican desert. Historically the western has identified Mexico as a mythic space where seemingly idyllic communities such as Jimenez are possible. Despite Pete’s honorable intentions, he has foolishly invested in the same fantasy that has driven the frontier myth of the border space for several generations. It is the myth’s final regenerative phase, however, that ultimately proves to be nonexistent here. It is Pete’s hope that the burial of Melquiades in his home land will somehow heal him which proves to be a mere fabrication. Like the town of Jimenez, the regenerative qualities of the frontier are nonexistent. The final revelation of Jimenez’s nonexistence is the film’s sharpest indictment of the frontier myth. This denial of rejuvenation undermines the established trajectories of both the frontier in American mythology and the border in Hollywood westerns. This challenging of American myth resonates precisely because the US/Mexico border is not a mythical frontier, but a militarized border that has claimed the life of an innocent man.

Furthermore, by pulling the rug out from under its audience, the film once again destabilizes the viewer’s position within this border space and forces its audience to
reevaluate the limitations of their understanding of Mexico and Mexicans. “This deconstruction of the frontier myth is personified by the ever-present decaying corpse of Melquiades Estrada” (Pye 42). The frontier that emerges from this film is not a site of rejuvenation, but a site of death.

What of the decaying body of Melquiades Estrada? Why is it so important that this body be buried in his hometown? As Pete and Mike's perilous journey into Mexico continues the film does not shy away from the reality of carrying a decaying body through the scorching Mexican desert. At one point Melquiades’s body begins to decompose to such a state that ants begin to eat him, this eventually causes Pete to respond by setting Melquiads’ head on fire in order to solve the problem. Pete's bizarre, even fetishistic treatment of Estrada’s decaying remains has inspired different readings of the film. For instance Issabelle Schmidt-Pitiot contends that *Three Burials* should be watched as a paradoxically optimistic Mexican feast of the dead and a burial of the Western; “The fact that the body is carried into Mexico a place where figures of death mingle with the living also emphasize the notion that this is a genre that is haunted by ghosts” (42). We can find support for this idea in an earlier scene in which after assisting the two men in their journey across the border, Levon Helm’s aging blind cowboy asks Pete to shoot him. Even though the blind cowboy sees his request as an act of mercy, Pete still refuses him. Both with its blind cowboys and its aged central character of Pete, the frontier as portrayed in *Three Burials* is not a place that is dying, it is already dead. As Douglas Pye asserts, “Melquiades Estrada's body represents the present condition of the frontier myth, what is long dead and what Pete tries against all odds to resurrect” (43).
Put simply, once these men have crossed the border they are not on the frontier, they are in Mexico. In being both based on a real character and operating in a fictitious revisionist western, Estrada's body is a link between the myth and reality of the border that the film has grappled with.

As a victim of racialized violence the decaying decomposing body of Melquiades serves as a potent reminder of the genre's legacy of the racial violence that was exercised upon the Mexicans in the name of the frontier myth. In this respect, Pete and Mikes cross the border in order to rehabilitate all those villainous Mexican characters that populated all those previous border films for decades.

As the two men venture deeper into Mexican territory, it soon becomes clear that Pete’s grasp on reality may be slipping. In one important sequence Pete and Mike have become lost and wonder into a nameless Mexican community. Pete enters a small local store to ask for directions to the fictitious town of Jimenez but all the local residents consistently deny the existence of any such place. Pete then shows the residents the
picture of a woman that Melquiades said was his wife, a local immediately recognizes her a woman named Rosa and not his friend’s wife Viela. Melquiades’ lie is confirmed when Pete meets Rosa and she contends that she has never met Melquiades and has never heard of the town of Jimenez. Pete soon learns that the town of Jimenez does not exist and that his friend Melquiades may have lied to him. Eventually Pete comes across the ruins of an old house. Pete, based solely on his intuition decides that this must be the home that Melquiades had described to him previously. The old adobe house is dilapidated, roofless, and crumbling. It is in these scenes however; that we hear the voice over of Melquiades describing what his home Jimenez looked like. Is this Melquiades telling the truth, or has Pete’s idealized memory of his friend clouded his memory? The film is never entirely clear on this matter. In spite of Jimenez not existing Pete convinces both himself and Mike that this is now his friend’s home and that it must be rebuilt so that they can bury his friend’s body there for a third and final time. After rebuilding the home with sticks, mud and rocks Mike and Pete entomb Melquiades’ body in the newly reconstructed house. In the final burial of Melquides, Pete not only lays to rest the myths of the frontier but may also rehabilitate the regressive image of Mexicans within that myth.

In the western, the concept of home serves an important function. Whether it is the besieged farmhouse of the film *Shane* (George Stevens 1953) or the isolated cabin of the Edwards family in *The Searchers* (John Ford 1956), the domestic interior space often serves as a point of departure for the cowboys journey and marks the division between the civilized domesticated world and the untamed open frontier. This idea is even
embodied in the opening scene of *The Searchers*. In that sequence the door of the Edwards home is used to frame the camera as is slowly zooms out revealing the vastness of the American frontier which lies just outside its walls. In this civilization vs. Frontier home vs. exterior paradigm the cowboy operates as a liminal figure: someone who is in a constant state of limbo between the safety of the home and the taming of the frontier. He is impossible for protecting the home and civilizing the frontier, but he can never become a member of the civilization he protects. In short while the cowboy makes home possible he can never return home himself.

Ultimately what defines the cowboy is his absence of home. There is a certain placelessness to the cowboy as he wanders back and forth between homes of others and the frontier. We can see this concept of placelessness in *Three Burials* in relation to the blind cowboy. While the blind cowboy may have a physical home (a dilapidated shack in the middle of the deserted borderland) his old age and loss of sight emphasizes his helplessness. He is a cowboy who has no place in the non-mythic frontier. He has no war to fight, and the real world has left him behind a long time ago. This sense of placelessness is exhibited in Pete Perkins character as well. Pete parts ways with Mike Norton in the Mexican town and, like many cinematic cowboys before him, rides off into the sunset. Mike has completed his journey as well and is free to return to the American side of the border. What home can either of these men return to? Mike’s wife has left him during his ordeal in Mexico and Pete has lost his friend and is now a fugitive from justice. Both men seem to be left in a figurative limbo. Each has completed their journey, but neither can find their way home. In adducting Mike Norton coupled with the
revelation that Jimenez does not exist mean that he has neither a home to go back to nor a home to journey to either. Like Ethan Edwards at the end of *The Searchers* Pete has voluntarily exiled himself to the frontier because he knows his place is not among the living. In the end Pete like many cowboys before him can never return home.

![Figure 11: Pete looks over the decaying body of Melquiades](image)

Throughout the 20th century the US/Mexico border has been and continues to be a film space of some significance. In forming national policies towards the Mexico, the region has continually been framed as an open frontier. In propagating this understanding of the region, the border spaces of Hollywood cinema continue to frame and re-frame the process by which geographic regions designate self and other. From the border adventures of the early 1900’s to the more recent revisionist westerns the genre’s attitude towards the border has continued to evolve and adapt to the current political climate. In these representations, however, the Mexican border is less of a geographical boundary and more of a gateway into the last frontier. It is only though exposing the schism between the myth of cinematic frontiers and the reality of government policies that we archive a richer more nuanced understanding of Mexican people and places. It is precisely this framing of America’s national borders in the frontier myth that must be
challenged. Even though the historical phantasms of Turner’s frontier myth were evoked a century ago, their consequences still reverberate in the national security and immigration policies to this day. Be they the silent border adventures of early cinema or Border Noirs such as *Touch of Evil* the US/Mexican border continues to be the site of a great American psychodrama in which the identity of the homeland is decided through violence. The linkage between the security of the US/Mexico border and the safety of homeland took on particular resonance in the wake of 9/11. The description of the border as the Last Frontier in the war on terror only highlights the powerful link between myth and the discursive functions of the border. While many contemporary westerns reciprocated the border’s exclusionary functions, recent westerns such as *Three Burials* have attempted to challenge both the colonialist representations of Mexico and the role of the frontier of immigration policies.
CHAPTER 2: FROZEN RIVER AND THE US/CANADA BORDER

This chapter will examine the depiction of the US/Canada border in the film *Frozen River* (Courtney Hunt, 2008). I argue that *Frozen River* is a complex text that challenges prevailing attitudes towards the US/Canadian border space. What distinguishes *River* from border films of the same time period is its assertion that the border does not exist. This chapter examines how *Frozen River* depicts a disputed region along the border and challenges attempts to define specific territories as either Canadian or American. In examining the various contradictory views of this region we can understand how films such as *River* frame the border as a complex geographical space, which is fluid, unstable and thus constantly changing. In order to examine how the film challenges the border’s existence we must understand how the US/Canada border has been conceived of in recent scholarship.

As a result of both continual geographic and demographic changes in the region, the US/Canadian border has become the subject of increased scholarly attention. This new interest was part of an attempt to shift the discussion away from the US/Mexico paradigm that has dominated discussions of both American borders and immigration. In the past, theorizing about transcultural spaces was largely viewed through the work of Chicano scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, and others. While the contributions of these previous scholars cannot be overlooked, the deliberate shift away from US/Mexico paradigm and toward US/Canada provides a new way of examining the discursive effects of borders on individuals, spaces, and cultures. In contrast to the US/Mexico border, which was used to mark the divide between the first world and the
'third world', US/Canada border studies focuses more on points of synthesis between the two regions. Recent trends in US/Canada scholarship focus on the integration of French, Canadian, American, and Indigenous cultures along the border region. More specifically, this area of study seeks to examine how instances of cultural integration in a region persist and in some cases thrive in spite of the increased militarization of American borders in the wake of 9/11. In examining the various discourses around the US/Canada border, what proves noteworthy is how the very existence of the US/Canadian border has always been in question.

US/Canada Pre and Post 9/11

In contrast to the highly militarized border dividing the US from Mexico, various political discourses surrounding America’s northern region have repeatedly characterized the region as open⁴. This perception of openness was largely attributed to the borders low-key approach to issues of security. Pre-9/11, the security of the US/Canadian border could be described as minimal at best. Although, the border between the US and Canada was not free from security concerns, the primary focus of US/Canadian border security was drugs and illegal immigration. Perhaps the most significant event which lead to the institutionalization of the open border was the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. NAFTA promised to rush in a new of era of mutual cooperation between North American nations. One of NAFTA's defining characteristics would be the

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⁴ The use of the term "open" to describe the border between United States and Canada can be found various studies of the region, particularly in regards to the post NAFTA era. Some of these works include the work of Peter Andreas, Emanuel, Brunet-Jailly, Henderson, W. Conway Jane Hellener.
elimination of trade tariffs making it easier for foreign goods to travel across borders. Indeed, prominent free market advocates often point to the US Canadian border as an example of the positive effects of the so-called 'economic integration' of North America.

In a speech given during the 1993 NAFTA signing ceremony, President Bill Clinton framed the legislation as a positive outcome of globalization. “We cannot stop global change. We cannot repeal the international economic competition that is everywhere. We can only harness the energy to our benefit” (Clinton). In spite of this new era of economic integration, NAFTA was not without its critics on both the right and left. Labor leaders fought against NAFTA fearing that thousands of jobs would move from America to Mexico or that wages would decline in the wake of competition from Mexico. Even while labor unions pointed out the potential downsides of NAFTA, the conservative critiques of the policy propagated the idea of Mexican encroachment into “American Jobs”. In an effort to protest the ratification of NAFTA, conservative commentator Pat Buchanan stated, “It’s Not About Free Trade — It’s About Our Way of Life…No matter the cash benefits, we don’t want to merge our economy with Mexico, and we don’t want to merge our country with Mexico. We don’t want to force American workers to compete with dollar-an-hour Mexican labor. That’s not what America is all about” (Buchanan 1993). The economic integration of North America was not without its Canadian critics either. Many Canadians worried that closer economic relations to the United States would result in the America economy and culture absorbing the economy and culture of Canada.
In his study of transnational production and consumerism in border regions, Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly argues that the increased availability of American goods that enter through the border has led many Canadians to harbor mixed feelings towards the boundary that separates the two countries: Brunet-Jailly states Some Canadians like the border the way it is: permeable for the purpose of circulating goods, services, and persons, and fixed for the purpose of articulating national difference” (34). In spite of the intense criticism on both sides of the border as America entered the 21st century, in the aftermath of NAFTA, American political leaders positioned the US/Canadian border region as a gateway to a new economic openness and cultural integration that would define the next century. Marking and maintaining the border had been such a low priority that it had famously been called the longest undefended border in the world. This low-key approach to border policing was mutually convenient for both sides and persisted throughout 1990s. While the assertion of an ‘open’ border between US/Canada is a highly problematic one. The free flow of goods and commerce does not translate into the free flow of people. This perceived openness, which had historically been a source of mutual pride between two nations, would suddenly become a source of high anxiety in the wake of 9/11.

The 9/11 attacks dramatically changed the perception of the border between US and Canada. As part of President Bush’s newly inaugurated War on Terror, the protection, defense, and surveillance of America's borders would now be the responsibility of the newly formed department of Homeland Security. The merging of “Homeland” with “Security” post- 9/11 would have far reaching implications for
American borders, especially for US/Canada. The christening of America as 'the Homeland’ is a powerful rhetorical statement in itself. In creating this domestic security organization the Bush administration could have named the agency the Department of Internal Security or the Department of National Defense. Why name this new organization Homeland Security? Of course, the title appeals to commonality and to the shared ancestry that permeated post-9/11 public discourses. The idea of a homeland is an evocative spatial metaphor that carries with it various contradictory meanings. In writing about the relationship between domestic and foreign spaces Amy Kaplan argues that the idea of the nation as home relies structurally on its intimate opposition with the notion of the foreign. In addition, the idea of a foreign policy depends on the sense of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of “at homeness,” in contrast to the external world perceived as alien and threatening.

In Kaplan's assessment the sense of the foreign is necessary to the boundaries that enclose the nation as a home. “Furthermore,” she continues “the evocation of the ‘Homeland’ indicates a return to a basic notion of patriotism, to the love of country and the desire to protect it” (85). Given the fears of potential foreign infiltration into the homeland, the security of the longest most undefended border in the world quickly became a point a public anxiety and would eventually come under scrutiny from both the media and political leaders. The collective anxieties over terrorists entering the country by way of Canada resulted in a massive increase in security along the border region. During one 2001 congressional hearing on the security of the US/Canadian border Senator Bryon Durgon held up rubber traffic cone and stated ‘This is America’s security
at our border crossings. It is not enough; America cannot effectively combat terrorism if it does not control its borders” (Durgon). The Senator’s words are oddly similar to those used to describe security at the Mexican border throughout the 20th century. The equating of secure borders with a secure 'home' reveals the multifaceted role of the border. The gradual closing of the open US/Canada border becomes a way not just of protecting the homeland, but a way of defining the Homeland as well. If the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center revealed how national borders have been eroded by the forces of globalization, then efforts to close open borders such as the one between US/Canada should be viewed as attempts to define American space as much as it is an attempt to exclude foreign threats. In opposition to the pre-9/11, pro-NAFTA world, the borders of the post-9/11 world would be fixed, finite, and closed. The rhetoric of homeland simply makes the exclusionary work of the border easier to categorize. In the words of Peter Andreas, “While the process of North American integration has not been reversed, it has been slowed and complicated by the US law enforcement squeeze on the cross border transportation arteries that provide it its life blood” (Andreas 8). From the dramatic increase in border security guards and Coast Guard officers following 9/11, to the subsequent opening of five US military bases in states that border Canada, by the end of 2001 we saw how the conception of the US/Canadian border had undergone a significant change.

According to director Courtney Hunt, her film Frozen River is in part a response to the restructuring of the US/Canadian border-zone in the wake of 9/11. The film tells the story of an impoverished white mother named Ray (Melissa Leo) who is struggling
to make ends meet as she raises two kids on her minimum wage job. Ray’s predicament is complicated by the fact that her gambling addict husband has left with the money that she was going to use to purchase a new mobile home. While searching for her husband, Ray encounters Lila Littlewolf (Misty Upham), a Mohawk woman whose own economic hardship has forced her to live in an unheated trailer and prevented her from maintaining custody of her child. Incidentally, the character of Lila is also seeing impaired and therefore unable to drive any automobile herself. In order to resolve both their personal and financial hardships, the two women form an unlikely partnership and begin to smuggle illegal immigrants across the Canadian border into America.

Figure 12: Frozen St. Lawrence River

In undertaking my analysis, I focus on three scenes that depict the film’s two main characters crossing the border between US and Canada. By examining these border crossing scenes in closer detail, the distances between individual cultures and regions facilitated by the border are both literally and metaphorically bridged. In bringing together two conflicting characters, with two conflicting views of the border, Frozen River challenges the singular view of the borderland. In her director's commentary,
Courtney Hunt stated, “The whole idea of smuggling and the protectionist attitude we have about our national borders which we got under President Bush after 9/11 is operating a lot in Frozen River” (49). Furthermore, Hunt intended her film to challenge what she saw as inconsistencies in American border policy, “I’m fascinated by the idea of borders; of lines that are just drawn randomly. You walk two steps in a certain direction and you’re under different rules. The whole notion that what is good is on this side of the border and what is not is on the other side of the border is very interesting to me in general” (Hunt 49). Thus, Hunt’s framing of the film within the context of post-9/11 border security speaks to a larger trend within both mainstream and independent film.

Whether as a commercial response to the globalization of the film industry or, as some would argue, a deliberate political response to American foreign policy 9/11, the Bush era multiplex was filled with films whose storylines focused on the crossings of national borders. The distinguishing features of this new cycle of border films are a matter of dispute. A number of scholars have attempted to place this cycle within the larger context of the Cinema of Globalization. While globalization is often characterized as the widespread integration of economies and cultures, my definition is informed by the work of Tom Zaniello who situates globalization as the effects of transnational and multinational corporations on people, communities, and the environment. Central to these films are the power relations between individuals and nations. In Zaniello’s assessment, this cycle of films were directly concerned with the relationships between individuals and powerful multinational corporations whose actions those individuals are directly affected by. In the Cinema of Globalization borders and border crossing is often used to make
social political points. Their stories explicitly address questions of globalization and relations of power between nations and individual people. These films include *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006) *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005), *Lord of War* (Andrew Niccol, 2005), and *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom 2003). In contrast to previous border films, such as *Touch of Evil* (Orson Wells, 1958) or *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones 2005), which center around the single location of the US/Mexico border, these new border films focus on a multitude of interconnected individuals. In addition to being transnational in their production, cast, and crew, each of these films explicitly address the connectedness of institutions across national borders.

In contrast to Zanelio’s study, which focuses on how Hollywood has become more globalized in the production and distribution of its films, Andrew Deward distinguishes this new cycle of border films by their overtly political content. Deward contextualizes this cycle as another manifestation of the classic Hollywood social problem film of the 1930s and 1940s. The social problem film covers a wide range of
movies that integrated a larger social conflict (race, class, labor issues) and the individual conflict between its characters. In Deward’s words, “Both the product of an emerging global consciousness as well as fortuitous industry developments, the GSP is in a unique position with which to raise awareness of pertinent global problems” (2). Deward deliberately terms these movies as “Global Social Problem films” due to the fact that this cycle of border films address a wide spectrum of social issues within the context of their respective genres such as poverty, racism, and immigration on a global level.

For instance, the geo-political thriller *Syriana* depicts a vast multi-connected story of individuals who are all touched in some way by the oil industry. Through its various interconnected story arcs the film is able to explore the linkages between oil producers in Saudi Arabia, oil consumers in America as well as connections between oil and terrorism. Furthermore by setting its story in multiple countries the film is able to trace the consequences of the west’s dependency on oil. No one event or individual in these films is completely independent from the actions of another. Through their emphasis on connectedness, the map of the world which emerges from these films is a vast network of institutions connected by the routes of free trade. In attempting to depict the interconnectedness of events in the globalized world, these films uphold the border's existence rather than challenge it. Borders may be transcended in Global Social Problem films, but in rooting their story lines in multiple locations, genuine cultural differences are simplified. In the words of Deborah Shaw “an implied world cinema gaze is built upon empathy, audiences can transcend national borders and share the pain of the
character” (27). In this way the viewers of the “Global Social Problem Film” are elevated into a unique spectator position of citizen of the world.

In its depiction of a multi-lingual, globe-spanning drama *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2007) exemplifies the characteristics of the new Global Social Problem film. As with other Global Social Problem films, by focusing on multiple stories that take place in multiple languages and in different parts of the globe, the film highlights the connectedness of all people in spite of their cultural differences. More specifically, it is the multiplicity of language’s and its ability to confuse, divide, and unite individuals that is one of the central themes of the film. In *Babel’s* assessment, the nuances of language inhibit us from the recognition of a common humanity.

As Gonzalez notes, “By filming *Babel* I confirmed that real borderlines are within us and more than a physical space. What makes us happy as human beings could differ greatly, but what makes us miserable and vulnerable beyond our culture, or financial standing is the same for all” (23). In seeking to illustrate ‘what makes us human,’ González Iñárritu and his collaborating screenwriter, Guillermo Arriaga creates a text that propagates a universal humanist attitude toward globalization. This universal humanism is deeply problematic as it relies on a sense of masochistic identification with the suffering of the film’s characters. In her analysis of the film, Deborah Shaw suggests that *Babel’s* characters, “are connected within the text by their suffering: a reduction of heterogeneity is sought through an appeal to a universality of emotion and a globalized form of pain in a bid to create the sense of a ‘world village’ where we all care about each other” (Shaw 22). *Babel* and other border films in this cycle seek acceptance for the
foreign other, but this is because s/he is like us on an emotional level—whoevers “we” may be. There is an appeal to a universal humanity of emotion in a bid to create a new world village where we can all care about each other.

Even as this cycle of Global Social Problem films critiques aspects of globalization, border films such as *Babel* reaffirm the idea of the ‘global village’ in which all human beings can inhabit. This well-meaning, but somewhat problematic depiction of the other cultures simplifies the genuine difference between America and the rest of the world as it perpetuates the idea of a Global Village in which we can all become citizens. Both as a matter of ideology and aesthetics, the universal humanism propagated through these films is contingent on a view of a world that is connected, networked, and that underneath it all most people are essentially the same. It is in challenging this universal approach to the globalized world that *Frozen River* gains its power as a border film.

With *Frozen River* we see a border film that challenges the humanist impulses of the Global Social problem film. Rather than asking an audience to identify with a group of interconnected characters across several spaces, *Frozen River* challenges the audience by giving us two characters that have conflicting views of the space which they inhabit.

The First Crossing

*Frozen River*'s first crossing scene explores the complicated geography of the St. Regis region. This sequence features Ray and Lila on a tripartite journey that begins in New York State, and moves across the frozen St. Lawrence River to Canada, and then back to the United States. The setting of the St. Lawrence River provides a unique geographical location for the subversion of the border’s power. This subversion partially
stems from the denial of the border’s very existence from certain communities in the St. Regis area.

Figure 14: Ray and Lila form an uneasy alliance in order to cross the border

During this initial crossing Lila forces Ray at gunpoint to drive them to the edge of the frozen St. Lawrence River. Not wanting to cross the US/Canadian border, the two women have a telling exchange of words.

Ray: I can’t go through there, that's Canada.
Lila: That’s Mohawk land: the reservation is on both sides of the river
Ray: What about the Border?
Lila: There is no border.

Lila's claim that there is no border may seem as strange to an American audience as it first does to Ray. In Ray's eyes, the river is a clear, definitive boundary that marks the division between America and its northern neighbors. The unique history of the St. Regis territory, however, effectively negates any boundary that separates U.S. from Canada.

Under the Terms of the Jay Treaty 1794, the indigenous residents are permitted to cross the international boundary dividing the United States from Canada. Even as the
geographical area shares territory with New York, the Mohawk population and the area which they inhabit are regarded as a sovereign nation. What is significant is that the reservation itself is divided by the St. Lawrence River. This is the frozen river of the film’s title. Thus the US/Canadian border which runs through the reservation is not recognized by the indigenous population. This places the Mohawk reservation in a legal gray area. Further complicating matters, the area in question falls under the jurisdiction of three nations (the United States, Canada, and St. Regis tribal council) as well as various local and state agencies. The regions ambiguous legal status has made it an ideal space for the exploitation of various types of transnational crime. The inherent legality or criminality of moving either goods or people across the border is precisely what *Frozen River* brings into question. Both Ray and Lila are briefly able to successfully move between the two countries by exploiting the 'in between space' of the St. Regis Indian reservation. As the first crossing sequence continues, the two women cross to the Canadian side of the border where they meet another smuggler and agree to have two immigrants hide in Ray's trunk as she drives them back to America. In an important exchange of words, Ray hesitates to transport a pair of immigrants to America. By detaching the St. Regis region from the US/Canadian border the legality or illegality of their actions falls into question. More specifically the movement of people through this territory is not a crime if, as Lila says, there is no border

Ray: I'm not taking them across the border it’s a crime
Lila: This is not a crime this is free trade between nations
Lila’s claims of free trade may in reality be simply a means of justifying the smuggling of immigrants across the border. Lila’s claims actually reflect the position many Native American’s of the St Regis region. In her thorough analysis of the St. Regis reservation, border scholar Ruth Jamison points out that the Warriors of Kaknake (another Mohawk community located nearer to Montreal who trade with the Akwesasne Mohawks) “describe their own trade in smuggled cigarettes, fuel (Kerosene, gasoline, heating oil, buildings materials, alcohol, firearms, etc.) as ‘international free trade’ on the grounds that the Mohawk Nation claims sovereignty over its own territory” (263). Furthermore many in the indigenous Mohawk communities feel that the trade of cigarettes and other goods within their own homelands is not smuggling and that suppression of this trade represents a form of economic colonialism or subjugation. Given the promise that NAFTA would herald openness of North American borders, one should note the irony of the claims of free trade made by the residents of St. Regis. Whether or not the moving of drugs, cigarettes and alcohol across the border constitutes trafficking or free trade has long been a point of contention for indigenous community. In examining the history of illegal trafficking on Mohawk territories, Sarah Kershaw writes “In upstate New York and across the Canadian border, the roughly 11,000 Indians living there have long dipped their hands onto the rewarding till of smuggling, moving goods as varied as diapers and tobacco across the lightly patrolled frontier  Some there even say smuggling, dating back to before the days of Prohibition, is a birthright” (Kershaw 1). Given the sovereignty of the Mohawk community, such flagrant disregard for border laws is understandable. Indigenous communities have seen little benefit from the free trade agreements between
the United States and Canada. Reporting on the reaction of Mohawk communities to recent North American trade agreements, Rick Honung writes “Indigenous nations by force of experience have a dimmer view of the promise of a free-trade agreement. To them it looks more like exposures to a harsh northerly wind. An ingenious nation alone, facing large cooperation’s roaming across continental marketplace” (Honoug 1). In this respect the trafficking of goods across the frozen St. Lawrence not only becomes a means of free trade, but a deliberate assertion of an economic self-determination that many in the region lack. It is these legally recognized claims of sovereignty that place Lila and Ray’s crossing in a much different light.

Ray, the white American, voices a traditional conception of the border as a geographical demarcation of a nation state. For Ray, the US/Canadian border is fixed, distinct, and crossing it for the transporting of undocumented aliens is unquestionably a crime. In contrast to this traditional view of the border, Lila, the Mohawk woman, sees no geographic border, only the continuation of her native territory. In her conception of the Mohawk territory the border simply vanishes. Lila’s contention of free trade even stands to reason; one cannot break the laws of the border if there is no border there to begin with. What adds to the film’s sense of complexity is the fact that Frozen River takes no particular side in this debate. The questions of the border's validity or the Mohawk's claims to free trade are left unanswered. This ambiguity forces the film's audience to draw their own conclusions regarding both parties’ perspectives on the border. These conflicting views regarding the St. Regis region frame US/Canadian border as potentially nothing more than an ideological construct. Frozen River illustrates
the paradox that characterizes US/Canadian border. The paradox is that the border is present and at the same time absent. Given the fact that the perspectives of three separate nations are each mutually recognized, the very existence of a border becomes questionable depending from whose perspective you are looking.

This challenging of the border's fixity can be seen in its depiction of the St. Regis landscape. As the film opens, we see various man made indicators of place. There are signs as well as bridges, fences, barriers and other means of demarcating the US from Canada. As the opening continues, the film juxtaposes these shots with the openness of the natural landscape. The opening of the film is filled with images of snow and ice blanketing the entire town. What is significant about the film’s snow covered mise-en-scene is its ability to visually unify a setting that is geographical separated. It becomes difficult, if not impossible to distinguish one nation from another. Like the character of Lila, the audience sees only an endless frozen landscape which is free of boundaries or any clear separation of ‘here’ from ‘there’. In this context, we cannot understate the importance of the St. Lawrence River as a natural boundary line.

The St. Lawrence River represents a national and geographical border. It serves as a point of demarcation separating one nation from another. In this film, however, as its title indicates this natural border is frozen, turning what was once a boundary into a bridge, even if it is a somewhat unstable one. Because the river is also crossable during winter its status as a bridge in only temporary. In its current state the river also becomes something solid, concrete, a temporary resources that can potentially free its two characters from poverty. By depicting the transformation of the natural border into a
means of crossing that same boundary, the film provides a useful illustration of the paradox of presence and absence that characterizes the border space. The natural border is still present, but in freezing the river the border fixity and function have changed into something that enables free movement. In Frozen River’s assessment the border is fluid and changing symbol that is unstable and constantly shifting.

In Frozen River's assessment, the border is brought into being through conflicting and highly racialized investments in the history of the territory. We can see the importance of race and the border during the second half of Ray and Lila's initial crossing. Upon returning to the United States with the two immigrants now stowed in Ray's trunk, the two women slowly approach a border checkpoint.

Ray: I can’t cross there, what about the border patrol.
Lila: They won’t stop you. You’re white.

This exchange between the two is brief, but Lila's assertion of Ray’s whiteness as an advantage is the most significant words spoken in the film. In highlighting Ray’s white skin as well as her seeming naivety to the mobility it affords, River positions the enforcement of the US/Canadian border as inextricably tied to white skin privilege. Lila's identification of white privilege are even supported by recent studies conducted on race and US/Canada border region. In his study of racial profiling at the US/Canada border writer Jane Helliner argues that the “whiteness of a constructed Canadian landscape extends to the dominant construction of a white US/Canada border (contrasted with the white/brown US/Mexico), reinforcing normative white citizenship and locating nonwhites regardless of citizenship, as outsiders in border space and as allegedly appropriate targets of heightened surveillance” (Heller 112). Furthermore, in the wake of
9/11, the mobility of nonwhites in border space in measured against a racialist structure of citizenship in which people of color are suspected of duplicity, and must police and be kept at the margins of law and community. If the enforcement of border security privileges the mobility of whites, then the Mohawk perspective of a non-existent border becomes subordinated and even criminalized. While both the American and Mohawk perspectives of the border are mutually recognized by US and Canada, the opposing views of the region are not equally enforced.

While at first Lila's “They won’t stop you you're white.” just seems to reflect the realities of racial profiling in America, I suggest that the most important part of the views of the Lila’s statement are not the words “you’re white”, but the assertion that Ray won’t be stopped because of it. If the border does exist, then whites move freely throughout it. Lila claims of free trade between nations may be legitimate, but the enforcement of border security is completely in line with Ray's American view that the border stops at the St. Lawrence River. Since these debates over the border are rooted in the conflicting views of two sovereign nations, it stands to reason that the enforcement of the American view of the border would take on certain racial implications. Given the Mohawk reservation’s claims of free trade, the various movements of the indigenous tribes would be subjected to far more scrutiny than the movements of the white Americans.

The idea of certain movements being legitimate while others are seen as illegitimate has even been institutionalized through government organizations such as the Department of Homeland Security. In the words of the Homeland Security secretary Tom Ridge “The benefits of globalization available to peace loving people, are available to
terrorists as well” (Ridge). Framed in this way, the problem becomes one of isolating the legitimate 'inside' transborder activity of the global economy, and securing them from illegitimate 'outside' of those who would exploit the possibilities of open borders” (Moore 337). The idea of illegitimate and legitimate mobility becomes yet another way to project the American perspective of the border onto the St. Regis area. Given the economic predicament of the women in *Frozen River*, the ability to move across the border becomes a matter of survival.

This importance of mobility is illustrated in Ray and Lila's initial meeting. When the film opens, Lila and Ray are in conflict with one another over possession of a car. During this first meeting Ray threatens Lila with her gun in order to repossess the car that Ray’s gambling addicted husband has sold to her. Lila then forces Ray to take her across the US/Canada border at gunpoint. The car is not only a means to travel through the St. Regis area, but also a means to smuggle illegal immigrants across the border. Possession of the car may seem like a minor point, but given the mobility which Rays white skin affords her, the car becomes a valuable tool for the economic survival of Ray and Lila. In this context, Ray’s white skin and car give her slightly more power in their relationship as she can move between US and Canada uninhibited. If we return to the idea of legitimate mobility, in *Frozen River* it is Ray's white skin that serves as her passport and legitimates her travel through the border space. Ray's effectiveness as a smuggler, however, is still contingent on the access Lila has to the St. Regis reservation which provides the route to the frozen St. Lawrence River. In short, both women need each other to cross the border.
The dense and conflicting perspectives regarding the border can only be successfully navigated if the two women cross together.

In addition to harboring two conflicting views of the border, the mobility the border region affords the two women is contingent on their races. Such racial alliances as seen in *Frozen River* are not uncommon to the GSP film. For instance, the film *Blood Diamond* shows a tenuous partnership between a white war photographer (Leonardo DiCaprio) and a black mine worker (Djimon Hounsou) as they navigate the industry of African conflict diamonds. *Syriana*, with its multi-characters story depicts an alliance (Matt Damon) between a white American lawyer from the oil industry and a Saudi Prince (Alexander Siddig). Often these racial and predominantly male alliances are formed in order to fulfill some kind humanitarian cause. In keeping with the universal humanism of this cycle of films, partnerships between different races can be read as symbolic partnerships between two different cultures that unite to confront a specific global problem. Unlike other racial alliances in the GSP, Ray and Lila are not attempting to resolve a social problem. Rather, the two women’s border crossing is depicted as a means to an end, a necessity to lift both women out of poverty. At the end the film's initial crossing, the pair’s alliance has troubled the perceived stability of the border region. In introducing two differing investments in the same space, *River* begins to chip away at the attempts to define and mark the border which characterize the region post-9/11.
The Second Crossing

Even though the two women are suspicious and openly hostile to one another during their first crossing, Ray and Lila agree to cross the border again, only this time the two will cross in the middle of the night. I want to focus on this second crossing sequence in more detail as it provides a moment in which we see the intersection of both race and gender at the border space. More specifically the second crossing provides a turning point in which Ray and Lila will begin to see the immigrants they are smuggling as more than just cargo.

In this second crossing sequence, Ray and Lila attempt to smuggle a young Pakistani couple across the frozen St. Lawrence River. Upon arriving at the designated pick up point Ray is surprised to learn that she may have to transport a Middle Eastern couple. While Ray is immediately suspicious of the couple Lilia voices no such objections as to who is crossing. “Wait a minute, they're not Chinese.” Ray states. Lila responds by saying “They're Paki’s what’s the difference?” Ray responds by stating “There's a huge difference.” As the couple sneak into the trunk of the car, Ray demands to know what is in the Pakistani woman's bag, but she gets no response from the non-English speaker. When the two eventually cross the river, Ray stops her car and deposits the bag on the ice. When Lila asks why, Ray responds that the bag “could contain nuclear powered bombs, poison gas, who knows what they could have in there. I’m not going to be responsible for that.” Ray ultimately concedes and agrees to transport the couple across the border, but only after she has profiled them and stripped away their possessions. As they drive the couple back to America Ray says “Well let's just hope
they're not the ones who blow themselves and everybody else.” While this statement clearly demonstrates Ray's xenophobic attitude towards Middle Easterners, her words also echo the protectionist rhetoric of securing the homeland in the wake of 9/11. We should note that Ray does not object to the Pakistani couple crossing because they may steal American jobs or that these immigrants might be criminals. Rather, the Pakistani’s reasons for wanting to cross the border are explicitly a terrorist threat to the United States. As the driver of the car, Ray’s legitimated mobility gives her the power to either allow or deny mobility to others.

Courtney Hunt describes this as an act of “twisted patriotism”. Apart from the obvious racial stereotyping on display in the scene, with the profiling of the Pakistani couple, Ray acts as a type of border enforcement, even if she is ultimately an ineffective one. Such behavior of separating, searching and surveying the Pakistani couple further demonstrates both the supremacy of the American perspective of the St Regis area and the racialized structure of border’s enforcement. Ray's ability to enforce the American view of the region however, is contingent of her white skin privilege and the mobility that it affords her. While both Ray and Lila have economic motivations for transporting people across the border, the profiling of the Pakistani couple demonstrates that it is ultimately Ray’s choice who will and will not be allowed to cross.

Ray’s categorization of the Pakistani couple as potential terrorist is the only clear reference in the film to fears of terrorist entering America through the border, but the scene also demonstrates how Ray seeks to distance her from the immigrant groups she transports across the border. Ray’s distancing of herself from her 'cargo' will soon stop
when she learns what was in the bag she left in the borderlands. When it is revealed that
the bag she disposed of contained the couple’s baby, both Ray and Lila return the frozen
river to retrieve the abandoned child. The two women return just in time to save and
revive the lost child from the brink of death.

The second crossing sequence provides another instance of Ray and Lila’s
familial drama being reflected in the problems the immigrant characters face when
crossing. In addition to their poverty, the one characteristic that both Ray and Lila share
is that they are both mothers. Up until this moment, the smuggling of illegal immigrants
is seen as a purely economic exchange for Ray and Lila. The rescuing of the lost child is
the first action the two women both take in the film that is not motivated by money. It is
both their responsibilities as mothers and estranged relationships with their children that
have led them to go into the smuggling trade. Given that this shared sense of motherhood
is the motivating factor for the rescue of the abandoned child, it is fitting that the
catharsis of the scene is a shot of Lila, the mother estranged from her own child, holding
the baby as life returns to its fragile body. The rescuing of the lost baby from the frozen
river is a dramatic turning point for Lila in particular. The crossing scene ends with Lila
returning to her home and putting on an old papoose, as if she is returning to the idea of
being a mother once again.

The crossing scene's emphasis on mothers and children serves as a stark
counterpoint to the rhetoric of protectionism that characterized discourses on the border.
In her zeal to protect the homeland, the property Ray immediately categorized as a
potential threat turned out to be a helpless child. By contrasting the predominately
patriarchal rhetoric of protectionism with Ray and Lila's sense of matriarchal identification, Frozen River provides a way by which the two differing views of the border region can be reconciled. Motherhood, more specifically the recognition by the border agent (Ray), the border crosser (Pakistani couple), and the free trader (Lila) of one another as mothers and not simply as predetermined racial categories, becomes a means of bridging the gap between the cultures that intersect at the border. Ray sees the Pakistani woman as a mother not just a predetermined racial category. Lila sees her as more than just cargo. More importantly both women see the frozen river as a cold and hostile terrain which is indifferent towards political or historical debates. In Frozen River's view, matriarchal identification becomes a way to disentangle both women from their previously held positions and look at the border anew.

The Third Crossing

Up until now, we have seen the border’s very existence thrown into question. We have seen the power of enforcing the border be subverted by access to the frozen St. Lawrence River. In this final crossing scene, however, we can view the border as a place of lawlessness. As the sequence begins, the stakes could not be higher for Ray and Lila. Through the money they plan to make during this last smuggling run, both women will be able to afford new homes. Ray will be able to make the down payment on a newer more expanded mobile home for her family. In the case of Lila, a new home could mean regaining custody of her lost child. Of course their last smuggling run does not go according to plan. During their final smuggling attempt a brief gunfight breaks out between Ray and corrupt smugglers on the Canadian side of the border. Ray and Lila
barely escape this gunfight, but the shootout quickly draws the attention of the border patrol. As they attempt to drive back across the St. Lawrence the frozen river begins to thaw and then collapse, temporarily stranding the women in the border land. In response, the two women seek refuge in the Mohawk reservation where the border patrol has no authority.

![Figure 15: Ray and Lila encounter violence in the borderlands](image)

Up until now there has been little to no violence in the film, as the exchanges between the smugglers on the Canadian side of the border have been relatively peaceful. Ray and Lila's final crossing scene is the only instance where violence breaks out on the smuggling run. Even as the film has attempted to challenge conventional wisdom about border space, the brief shootout only reaffirms the idea that violence is found just beyond a country's borders. In the film's assessment, the border may not be a gateway for terrorists, but in existing outside the respective laws of a nation, the region is still an area filled with danger and potential violence. As with the previous depictions of the US/Mexico, Frozen River has returned the border to the idea of the frontier. This idea of the border being lawless was even echoed by director Courtney Hunt. In Hunt’s own words
“The chief genre guiding me in this film became the idea of the old West, that you go west and there would be lawlessness and you would be defining it as you went along. It's odd that it’s Native Americans who are embodying this notion of the Wild West on their own reserve” (49). While *Frozen River* does not outwardly resemble the Western, Ray and Lila's shootout on the border does harken back to the outlaws of the Wild West. Both their shootout with fellow smugglers and their subsequent race to the border in an attempt to avoid capture are both mainstays of the Western. In this crossing scene we see a dramatic reversal of the frontier myth previously used to characterize the border between United States and Mexico. Only in this instance the frontier is not being used to displace indigenous people in order to make way for white settlers. Rather this lack of definition has opened up a frontier of free trade; albeit one that indirectly benefits the Mohawk population. A new conception of frontier is perfectly in line with the previous claims shared by St Regis Mohawks that the moving of goods through the territory is a form of free trade between nations.

In crossing into the St. Regis reservation, Ray's white skin privilege becomes nullified and it is Lila’s racial background as a Mohawk woman that protects Ray from arrest. It is only inside the St. Regis reservation that Lila is able to exercise her autonomy and move freely without the protection that Ray's white skin provides. In order to placate the border patrol, the elders of the St. Regis reservation decides that either Ray or Lila’s must be turned over to law enforcement to pay for their smuggling crimes. According to the rules of the tribal council, if Lila is arrested she will be exiled from the reservation and will never see her child again. Ray's first impulse as to run from the law
because crossing the border back into America Ray could avoid capture by the authorities. As Ray makes her way on foot back to America she suddenly stops her tracks. The film cuts to a close up of Ray's face as she looks out upon the frozen St. Lawrence. In this moment that Ray decides to sacrifice her own freedom and go to prison so that Lila can remain free. Ray even goes as far to hand Lilia the money she was going to use for the down payment on the new house and makes Lila promise to look after her kids while she is away. Ray's chose to exile herself from her home and family is the final and perhaps most significant association between Ray and the exiled immigrants she has transported. Ray will be exiled to a prison where she will be separated from her home and community; her mobility will be severely controlled by the state. Of course we can only take these associations so far, Ray’s has not been exiled from her country, and her choice to serve jail time was still her choice and not forced upon her by political pressure or war. Even with Ray's selfless gesture is not free of the paradigm of race. Because Ray is white and a first time offender she will only be in jail for four months.

Figure 16: Ray has to defend her life at gunpoint
The choices that Ray and Lila make to aid one another families punctuate the transformation both women have undergone throughout the film. The recognition of the other is achieved through recognition of motherhood. Ray's decision to turn back and accept punishment for her crimes is triggered upon her realization that Lila is a mother who will never see her children again if she is charged with a crime. In turn Lila's recognition of Ray as a mother in need prompts her to be a caretaker for her would be partner while she does prison time for smuggling. As with the two women previous rescuing of the lost child in the borderlands, Ray and Lila learn to negotiate the border by seeing ‘the other’ in human terms rather just in terms of cultural difference. It is though this matriarchal identification that both women are able to negotiate the laws of the Mohawk reservation and the border patrol.

As *Frozen River* draws to an end Lila has completed her journey from symbolic communal exile and found a new family as a caretaker to Rays’ children while she serves out her prison sentence. At the film’s conclusion we see the construction of a temporary family that is composed of people once separated by race, history and geography. In spite of the upbeat conclusion of the film the new trans-border family formed at the end of *Frozen River* is in no way utopic. The film’s narrative has gone against any easy feminist alliances which are the hallmark of several Hollywood Women’s films. Rather, the relationship between Ray and Lila has been fraught with racial tension and even violence. The partnership the two have formed in the end is not a response to some patriarchal threat, but is an extension of the already existing trafficking partnership which each formed in order to guarantee their mutual mobility within the border space. As with
the smuggling partnership, Ray uses her white skin in order to ensure a shorter prison sentence, while Lila uses the sovereignty of the Mohawk community to purchase Ray’s new home and look after Ray’s family. In this respect racial differences have not been overcome as much as they have been reconciled. Ray and Lila have moved from a relationship based on violent confrontation to interaction based on economic necessity to a socially conscious finally an emotionally caring relationship. The desire to cross the border has led to the crossing a distinct social border and lead to the creation of new familial relations that are not based on blood or ethnicity, but on mutual caring of one human being for another.

Since the passage of NAFTA the border separating the US from Canada has been characterized as open. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the porousness of the border, lead many American political leaders to believe that the region could be an ideal crossing ground for terrorist seeking to enter the United States. The border crossing scenes in the film Frozen River attempted to challenge these protectionist attitudes by setting its story in a place where the border’s very existence is thrown into question. Throughout the film, the attempts to define the border fail due to the existence of the frozen St. Lawrence River. Both of the film's two main characters attempt to exert their views of the space over the other only to be unsuccessful. Even though her skin color allows her to move freely across the region, Ray's attempts to enforce the border along racial and ethnic lines fail when her racial profiling almost results in the death of an innocent child. Lila's tries to deny the border's existence and exercise free trade between nations, but she is impeded by both her lack of eyesight and her ethnicity. The differing investments in the border are
only reconciled through motherhood. As demonstrated in the second crossing scene, the recognition of the outsider as a mother becomes a point of mutual understanding outside the predetermined categories of race.
CHAPTER 3: BORDERS IN CHILDREN OF MEN

This chapter investigates *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2005) with the purpose of examining how the film uses the conventions of science fiction to challenge the categorization of immigrant and refugees as aliens. I place *Children* within the context of a new cycle of science fiction films that deal explicitly with the idea of the alien as a means of challenging xenophobic attitudes towards immigrants, refugees, and other non-indigenous groups. As the product of a joint British and American film studios and a Mexican director, *Children of Men* epitomizes the concept of a global film production. While my previous chapters focused on depictions of American borders, the British setting of *Children of Men* demonstrates how the US response to the War on Terror extends beyond Americas borders to certain sections of the world at large. More specifically, *Children of Men* utilizes both the conventions of the science fiction genre and memorialized images from War on Terror in order to articulate a pointed social commentary on the politics of citizenship in the post-9/11 era.

From the flying saucers of *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1955) to the otherworldly refugees of *District 9* (Niell Blomkamp, 2009) the idea of the alien has been an important means of distinguishing human from non-human. The rhetoric of 'alienness' has far reaching implications for both immigrant groups and the nations which categorize them. A definition refers to the alien as a hypothetical or fictional being from another world. The history of the word alien reveals that it carries with it a double meaning; the first being a foreigner, the second is a being from outer space. What proves telling is how

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5 As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary the word alien is defined as “a foreigner, especially one who is not a naturalized citizen of the country where he or she is living” (“Alien”).
the two meanings often blur during times of national crisis. The notion of aliens from outside our borders invading and infecting the body of the homeland continues to be a popular narrative within certain stands of anti-immigrant discourse. Science fiction film in particular has played a significant role in the perpetuation of the human vs. alien paradigm. *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2005) offers a useful dramatization the process of categorizing certain groups as 'alien'.

With its story of a group of individuals trying to survive the apocalypse, *Children of Men* can be read as a harrowing adventure story set during the end of the world. The film also functions as both a speculative look into the future and as a fluid critique of globalization’s effects on immigrant groups. I argue that *Children of Men* is one of a series of recent science fiction films in which both literal and figurative aliens are featured in order to invite audiences to rethink the anti-immigrant rhetoric which has proliferated in the post-9/11 era. In addition to *Children of Men* films such as *Code 46* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), *Elysium* (Niell Blomkamp 2013), *The Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008), and *District 9* (Niell Blomkamp, 2009) each used the visual language of science fiction to examine contemporary attitudes towards immigration and borders. This new cycle of science fiction films demonstrated a critical consideration of the link between being human and being a citizen that distinctly resonate with the post-9/11 era. In these films, the border that separates citizen from non-citizen is allegorized via borders which divide the human from the alien. These aliens, however, are not the slimy menacing invaders who secretly infiltrated a human community. Rather, most of these aliens are migrant workers, exiles, and refugees who were simply not recognized as
human. In expanding the depictions of the alien these films use the language of science fiction to illustrate and ultimately challenge the figurative ‘de-humanization’ of immigrant groups. By examining the fictional borderspaces of *Children of Men* in relation to home, mobility and frontier this work explores how the systematic categorization of certain immigrant groups as 'aliens' becomes a method of establishing the criteria for who will be considered human and who will not.

Figure 17: Kee reveals that she is carrying the last known human child

**Genre Definitions**

*Children of Men* is an adaption of PD James's dystopic novel set in the year 2027. The story concerns life in London during the aftermath of a global pandemic of infertility which has left all of humankind unable to produce offspring. In the face of civilizations around the world collapsing, England has chosen to 'carry on' alone. As both hope and resources become scarce, the reigning totalitarian government has closed the country’s borders to all outsiders and asylum seekers which results in the abuse of immigrants and refugees as fugitives. As the film’s characters walk through the streets signs and posters warn citizens to “Report Illegal Aliens” and remind them that “Avoiding Fertility Tests is
a Crime.” Once England has erected a wall around its borders various immigrant groups are hunted down, caged, and deported to prison camps. As the film opens it is revealed that the world's oldest living child, an eighteen year old named Baby Diego has just been killed. Facing the extinction of the human race, a white citizen of London named Theo Faron (Clive Owen) is chosen, against his will, to help the world's last pregnant woman, a young black refugee named Kee (Claire-Hope Aishiety). In order to give the human race one final chance at survival, Theo must help Kee cross war torn England's multiple border checkpoints and get her and her child to a ship named the 'Tomorrow' (a vessel belonging to a group sympathetic to the plight of refugees). After a harrowing journey through battle ravaged England, *Children of Men* concludes with the birth of the first human child and the characters reaching the ship ‘Tomorrow’, but not before Theo has sacrificed his life so that Kee and her newborn baby can live. In depicting a hopeless future where immigrants are treated as less than human *Children of Men* uses its science fiction narrative to allegorize how humanity can regain hope and become fertile once again.

What characterizes *Children of Men* as science fiction? In his book, *Genre and Hollywood* writer Steven Neale attempts to synthesize various definitions of science fiction. Neale points out that various authors have previously attempted to define the genre. For instance in his reading of the genre Richard Hodgens argues “that Science fiction involves extrapolated or fictitious science use of scientific possibilities or it may simply be fiction that takes place in the future or introduces some radical assumption about the past and present” (100). In contrast to Hodgens, scholar Vivian Sobcheck in
her landmark work *Screening Space* offers a more nuanced reading of the genre. Sobcheck argues that science fiction is mostly concerned with the idea of the unknown. “The visual surface of all SF film presents us with a confrontation between a mixture of those images to which we respond as ‘alien’ and those we know a familiar” (101). In depicting an unknown future in which a fictitious plague of infertility has decimated the world would fall into both Hodgens and Sobcheck’s definitions of the genre. How does this genre scholarship examine the concept of the alien? In his analysis of the genre Keith M. Johnston traces a similarity between the western and science fiction through their reliance on the frontier. In Johnson’s assessments “both the Western and science fiction are fascinated with the frontier (the final frontier of space would become a common generic reference) and contain a similar thematic opposition between wilderness (desert) and civilization (urban city)” (10). In this aspect science fiction offers a series of direct oppositions, making the boundary that separates human from alien in just another frontier to be explored. In further examining the function of the alien in the genre, Thomas Schatz focuses almost exclusively on the invasion films of the 1950s and argues that the “milieu of the science fiction is one of contested space, in which the generic oppositions are determined by certain aspects of the cultural community. The contest here is the contest between ‘the human community’ and some kind of ‘alien’ or monstrous force. The community in question may be a small town or even the world as a whole” (qtd in Neale 102). In Schahtz’s assessment, in 1950s era science fiction it becomes impossible to tell human and alien apart. Furthermore, in Schahtz’s reading of the genre the very definition of what is human begins to change due to advances in
technology. It is within this constellation of generic concerns that includes the tenuous line which divides alien from human that the dramatization of these concerns is depicted in science fiction.

While *Children of Men* is set in an apocalyptic future, its story is more a mediation on the present day condition of the globalized world. This sentiment is echoed by director Alfonso Cuaron who states: “It was not until I realized that the premise of the film could serve as a metaphor for the fading sense of hope that it could be a point of departure for an exploration of the state of things that we are living in now. The things that are shaping the first part of the twentieth century” (Konyer) The use of future as a means of diagnosing contemporary issues has been a distinguishing characteristic of the science fiction genre. Here, the marriage of random violence with biological infertility is more than just a science fictional premise; it is a potent symbol for a humanity that may become morally infertile. In this aspect, *Children of Men* exemplifies what scholar Rjurik Davidson calls a ‘genre of estrangement’. In Davidson assessment genres such as science fiction is really “a thought experiment in which an audience can imagine certain things, presuppose other things and exercise other elements to see what happens. By developing this genre of estrangement, science fiction asks us to reflect on our own world” (Qtd in Davidson 129). By seeing how this alternative world functions we are asked to ponder what it might tell us about our own. In depicting a hopeless future where immigrants are treated a less than human *Children of Men* uses its science fiction narrative to allegorize how humanity can regain hope and become fertile once again. In *Children of Men* in particular, the question of who is recognized as human and who is
categorized as alien is at the heart of the film’s dystopian narrative. In order to better understand the role of the alien in this film, we must first contextualize how the term alien has been previously linked with immigrant groups.

Figure 18: Kee and Theo must cross the war-torn borderlands of England

Immigrants and Illegal Aliens

The perceived endangerment of the homeland plays a significant role in the rhetoric against immigrant groups. A cursory look at recent anti-immigrant discourses contains several references to the idea of alien invasion. In the wake of 9/11, the rhetoric of invasion has found new life amongst those who oppose the demographic changes of America. In this paradigm the notion of the homeland takes on a significant role as those born outside its borders are cast as aliens. The association with those outside our borders and alien beings from outer space has repeatedly been used to reciprocate these xenophobic attitudes. For instance, in his book *State of Emergency*, conservative commentator Pat Buchanan used the rhetoric of invasion to characterize certain

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6 The rise in nationalistic attitudes in the wake of 9/11 is further expanded upon in Nicolatta Karmen 2012, Kyle Kusz 2007, Nicholas De Genova 2007. Various other scholars have examined the expansion of security along the US/Mexico border in the wake of 9/11: Robert Alvarez (2005), Louis Amoore (2006), Laura Jones (2008), Robyn Rodriguez, and (2011) have each examined how the border has been framed as a new battleground in the war against terrorism.
demographic changes taking place in the United States. In relation to immigration, Buchanan writes “This is an invasion the likes on which we have never seen, the greatest invasion in history” (17). He also wrote: "We are witnessing how nations perish. We have entered upon the final act of our civilization, the penultimate scene, now well underway, is the invasion unrestricted" (19). In associating the influx of a non-white immigrant population with the fall of Western civilization one could easily mistake this anti-immigrant rhetoric for the plot of a popular Hollywood science fiction film. Only here the aliens are arriving in busses and in boats and not in flying saucers.

In America, the association between immigration and the alien invasion of the homeland is not without precedent. Post 9/11 fears of terrorism do share some similarities with the Red Scare of the 1950s when Cold War America was gripped with the fear of invasion from communist nations. Perhaps the Cold War and the post 9/11 eras share these similarities because the reactions by the country to a perceived threat to America were so similar. Only here the nuclear threat prevalent during the Cold War has been replaced by the threat of terrorism. The department of Homeland Security issued survival guidelines on how to survive a terrorist attack in your city. While the 1950s were characterized by backyard bomb shelters and the government telling citizens to ‘duck and cover’ in case the Russians dropped the bomb, the aftermath of 9/11 would be characterized by gas masks and color coded threat assessments. The Department of Homeland Security issued survival guidelines on how to survive a terrorist attack in your city. Although they are separated by five decades, in both eras constitutive function of
the homeland is predicated by a desire to protect the nation from threat posed by those outside its borders. Propelled both by the expansion of the Soviet Union and xenophobic attitudes at home, much early Cold War propaganda was specifically designed to make the Soviet menace seem like a terrifying threat to American life as much as possible.

Science fiction films of the 1950's famously participated in this phenomenon, reciprocating these xenophobic attitudes through the phenomenon of alien invasion films. Movies such as *Thing from Another World* (Howard Hawks, 1955), *War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953), *Invaders from Mars* (William Menzies, 1953) and many others allegorized the fear of communist invasion via an attack by menacing foreign aliens. This rhetoric of alien invasion allowed for the specification of the threat posed to the country by outsiders. In this scenario, aliens were a threat not simply because they were amongst us, but because their nation of origin was outside the homeland. Furthermore, by telling these stories of alien invasion through the perspective of an embattled American community (usually a small town) these texts created a powerful geographic discourse in which the American citizen stands in for the human race.

Homeland

The perceived ethnic homogeneity of the homeland becomes a source of contention over the motives immigrant groups have for traveling to America. That their country of origin is outside America’s borders has led many anti-immigrant groups to ask whether or not the undocumented immigrant wants to be an American or just use America? In this respect, the alien is marked with a certain degree of ambivalence and instability. This ambivalence has led many to question the immigrant’s legitimacy or
loyalty, especially when it comes to matters of institutional importance. Therefore, the borders that define the homeland become significant in that they not only delineate inside from outside, here from there, but human from alien as well.

The perceived illegitimacy of immigrant's patriotism has been used by several anti-immigrant groups to cast suspicion on native people. For instance, during an April 2006 broadcast of his CNN show, Lou Dobbs referred to potential "army" of "illegal alien" "invaders" taking over southwest stating: "There are some Mexican Americans who want to see California, New Mexico and other parts of the Southwestern United States given over to Mexico. These groups view the millions of Mexican illegal aliens in particular entering the United States as potentially an army of invaders to achieve that takeover" (Lou Dobbs Tonight). If the loyalty of the alien can be questioned, then the influx of immigrants groups takes on negative connotations. In the wake of 9/11, the rhetoric of alien invasion in Hollywood film transformed into new set of anxieties. Rather than simply depicting the alien as invaders of the homeland, these newer films emphasized the exclusionary power of the homeland. In doing so, those categorized as alien take on a multitude of meanings ranging from literal aliens from another world to refuges who live outside a certain border.

Given this complex history of the alien, contemporary science fiction reconfigured the idea of the alien in order to reflect the anxieties of the globalized world. The 2003 film Code 46 (Michael Winterbottom) depicts a future in which an elite group of citizens live in highly secure and highly modernized corporate mega cities. Moreover, advances in genetic research have made the genetic makeup of an individual their
passport. Thus, in this future genetic passes are required to gain access into to these materially wealthy cities. Those who are denied a pass to the cities are forced to live outside in city in squalid subhuman conditions. The film’s central conflict stems from a love story between a wealthy insurance investigator (Tim Robbins) and a low-level factory worker (Samantha Morton). *Code 46* depicts a dystopian future where surveillance and corporatism have taken over everyday life. Furthermore, the vast economic and social inequality which is depicted in the diegesis has led to a geographic division among its genetically superior class and those designated as genetically inferior. Inside of these corporate megacities lie vast hubs of economic activity and advanced technology, while outside these megacities, the world has turned into an arid desert which is occupied mostly by the poor and people of color. *Code 46’s* continual juxtaposition of the privileged urban cities inside with the natural world outside accentuates the link between citizenship and humanity. Those who are genetically granted citizenship are bestowed the protections of the state and the comforts of life in the future; while those who are designated biologically inferior are subsequently denied citizenship and any basic human rights. In examining the relationship between the alien and post-colonialism Sara Ahmed contends that the idea of the alien is only a category within a given community of citizens and subject, “An alien signals the fact that one was born outside the United States and thus can never 'naturally' belong to the privileged national space” (2). Through its link between biology and citizenship, *Code 46* illustrates how definitions of alienhood function as a means of categorizing membership and exclusion within a community where notions of belonging are in contention. In addition, the
assigning of alieness is facilitated by a deliberate geographical framework in which the human is permitted inside while the alien must languish outside on the other side of the border.

The 2009 science fiction film District 9 is also significant in its association of aliens, immigration, and borders. The movie is set in a South Africa where aliens from outer space, derogatorily referred to as 'prawns' have been living in Johannesburg. The prawns have lived in a squalid refugee camp isolated from the rest of the population for the past twenty years. The main conflict of District 9 concerns the character of Wikus Van De Merwe (Sharlto Copley), who leads a project to evict the aliens from their homes in “District 9” and resettle them further from the city. During a house raid, Wikus is sprayed in the face by a canister of fluid derived from alien technology. The fluid makes him sick, and it soon becomes clear that it is causing his body to metamorphose into that of an alien. Upon being hunted by a group of humans who which to dissect him, Wikus must form an alliance with the alien refuges in order to survive.

With its story of displaced refuges and human/alien hybridity, District 9 invites multiple readings. Because, the spaces in the movie are marked by clear divisions between human and alien District 9 can be read as a metaphor for apartheid. In this case the divisions between human and alien stand in for the historical segregation of blacks and whites. Perhaps the most obvious interpretation is to read District 9 as an allegory for the treatment of contemporary refuges. This interpretation is bolstered by the film's director Niell Blomkamp who drew parallels between his film and his native South Africa. In explaining the allegorical quality of the aliens in his film Blomkamp states “I
was inspired by just everything that goes on in that country—xenophobia, the collapse of Zimbabwe and the flood of illegal immigrants into South Africa, and then how you have impoverished black South Africans in conflict with the immigrants” (Qtd in Vaughan). In Blomkamp’s story, the fear of bodily contamination illustrates a larger cultural anxiety about the proximity of immigrant bodies to citizens within the South African homeland.

Figure 19: Character from District 9 slowly transforms into an alien

Even while the exploitation of these aliens is designed to elicit sympathy from the audience, the prawns are still a highly problematic depiction of the other: The aliens in the film are depicted as slimy insect-like creatures who live and breed off of human waste. In his reading of the film James Zoborowski argues that its depiction of the other is highly problematic; “The allegorical immigrants of District 9 are beings without prospect or remedy, the threatening marauding uneducated slum dwelling social problem of the xenophobic imagination. They reproduce without socializing their offspring, and lack prospects or even potential so in this respect the film ends up validating the reaction
to immigrants it ostensibly condemns” (4). Through the character of Wilkus we have a human who has become abject through his proximity to the alien. In no longer being recognized as human Wilkus loses all claims to citizenship and human rights in this community. Subsequently his character is hunted down like an animal and imprisoned in a refugee camp where he will eventually transform completely into an alien by the end of the film. *District 9* demonstrates the importance of proximity in regards to alieness; “aliens allow for demarcation of spaces of belonging; by coming to close to home they establish the very necessity of policing the borders of knowable inhabitable terrains” (Ahmed 3). While the foreignness of the immigrant stems from the individuals place of origin, their categorization as alien is contingent on the proximity to the homeland. The immigrant is only an illegal alien when they have crossed the border that divides insider from outsider. As the outsider who is now inside, the alien takes on a spatial function, establishing relations of proximity and distance within the homeland. In this context the abject green skinned parasites of *Independence Day* (Ronald Emmerich 1996), or the Martians from *War of the Worlds* (1953) as well as other categories of ‘alienness’ serve an important categorical function as they allow for the familiar to be established as familial. Thus, the alien is not just the outsider who has penetrated the border, but a figure that, as Ahmed puts it, “reminds us of what is beyond the limit of what is subject to representation” (3). While both *Code 46* and *District 9* differ in their depiction of the non-human, in both films a physical border is used to separate those designated as human from those designated as non-human. *Children of Men* differs from previous depictions
of the alien because the exclusionary power of the border is built into the very geography of contemporary London.

*Children of Men* expands on the linking of immigrant and the alien. In doing so, the film’s mapping of London provides a visual framework through which the designation of aliens can be examined. Furthermore the film makes explicit how the contemporary practices of the War on Terror are utilized in categorizing certain nonnative groups as alien. In describing *Children of Men's* insider vs. outsider depiction of London, the film has appropriated language from the War in Iraq specifically the idea of a Green Zone. The term Green Zone has its roots in the US invasion of Iraq. The American occupation of Iraq has produced an extreme, insider/outsider paradigm which is expressed materially and cartographically in Iraq by the division between the Green Zone in central Baghdad and the rest of the country which is often referred to as the Red Zone. This binary of dividing spaces into areas that are either for the United States and their allies or against them has been referred to by Naomi Klien as a “Global Green Zone”. Thus, those who are inside the Green Zone have adequate infrastructure, food, security, water, and other various resources, while those outside the Green Zone do not.

In commenting about the film’s specific choices of locations, Cuarón states: “That the locations are part of the observation of the reality that we are living. The whole idea with that is to try to bring the state of things, what is happening outside the Green Zones that we happily live in and what happens if we bring the world into the green zones. We're using England as a Green Zone, a comfort zone; the characters feel they're lucky to live there, but there are a big percentage of outsiders waiting to get in” (von Busack). In
choosing to arrest time from a few years after the film’s release date in 2006, London of 2027 is immediately recognizable for the contemporary viewers. In an interview on the bonus material DVD, he declares: “I would like as much as possible references of iconography, contemporary iconography that is already ingrained in human consciousness” (Cuarón). The various locations of the movie include the iconic landmarks Battersea Power Station, Trafalgar Square, and Admiralty Arch, all of which are woven into the film's visual structure. While in reality these various sites function as open public spaces and tourist destinations, in the film these locations will be transformed from public spaces into highly militarized border zones.

The film's initial depiction of London as a police state occurs in one of London's most well-known urban areas. In one important sequence, we see a group of immigrants locked in cages while the police ransack a nearby apartment complex. The sequence in question was filmed in the Dorsett Estates apartment complex in the neighborhood of Bethesda Green. Dorsett would be indicative of London’s Red Zone a place which is populated by, the exiled, the poor and the unwanted. As with the real life Red Zones in Iraq, Dorsett Estates is seen in the film as an insecure and potentially dangerous place where police keep a continuous presence. The location has been featured prominently in many British commercials and films as exemplary of London’s diversity. In real life the area of Dorsett Estates has even become famous for its racial and ethnic makeup and its upwardly mobile residents. *Children of Men* appropriates this location and transform it into a staging ground for a mass liquidation and removal of immigrants. Specifically, the Dorsett Estates scene concludes with a telling shot of large groups of immigrants locked
in cages like animals. Through images such as this, *Children* demonstrated how the perceived utopian dream of diversity has now become a nightmare.

Even though the once thriving factory has been abandoned for many years, the building has become an iconic landmark in various depictions of London in contemporary film. The depiction of Battersea Power Station in *Children of Men* is not a simple contemporary building, for Battersea is now the location of the highly secure Ministry of Arts. In the film, the building is surrounded by various security checkpoints.
and armed guards in order to allow certain people in and keep outsiders out. Battersea Power Station in this scenario is the well-maintained, modern building, which stands amidst the urban landscape which has fallen into complete dereliction. The dramatic reversal of the real life Battersea station from a dilapidated structure to a privileged yet militarized storage space of Western culture only punctuates how far contemporary London has fallen.

Figure 22: Battersea PowerStation in Central London

Figure 23: Ministry of Arts in *Children on Men*
In *Children of Men* London has been turned into a border zone which is strictly divided into two separate categories, one that is a secure zone and populated by a privileged native born elite, the other an unsecure zone that is populated by excluded alien outsiders.

In another telling scene early in the film, Theo drives through the streets of London in order to meet his brother at the Ministry of Arts. The importance of the scene lies with how certain sections of the city people are allowed access and other people are
not. As the scene begins, Theo is being driven through a frantic crowd of impoverished people. Once Theo is inside this section known as London’s Admiralty Arch (Figure 24), the contrast between the two areas couldn’t be starker. While outside the city's police round up immigrants and place them in cages. Theo’s drive to through Admiralty Arch there is a world that is kept in a sort of protracted stasis. In the area on the other side of the checkpoints there are soldiers on horseback and beautiful parks where wealthy citizens relax and play with little to no indication of the chaos that stands just outside the walls. In actuality, Admiralty Arch is one of busiest public spaces in the city as it provides access to London Mall and connects the cities southwest and northeast sides. In *Children of Men* the space is used as a border to mark the divide between the elite citizens of the Green Zone and the illegal aliens outside. Ultimately, these references to spaces within contemporary London force a critical evaluation of the link between security of the homeland and the country’s foreign policy. By turning iconic landmarks into sites for a militarized police state, *Children of Men* invites viewers to link anti-immigration policies to the methods used to fight the War on Terror.

Through this complex depiction of a city encased in various layers of security, *Children on Men* distinguishes itself from other examples of apocalyptic fiction. Here, the end of civilization is not depicted as a vast spectacle of destruction and death. Rather we see the end of the world is shown as a militarized borderspace. In *Children of Men*, the multi-connecting borders which create the film’s Green Zones are porous when it comes to the mobility of its native citizens such as in the case of Theo. The deliberate juxtaposition between Theo’s mobility and the stagnation of the refugees around him
generates two distinct yet interrelated geographies of London 2027; one in which the 
borders are open to the native, mostly white citizens of the country, and the other in 
which the borders delineate a closed omnipresent police state where the exclusionary 
power of the border is enforced at the barrel of a gun.

Mobility in Apocalyptic London

Mobility and the power to move through space is one of the recurring themes of 
the film. Theo is repeatedly shown passing through security checkpoints and other 
barriers that separate the Green Zones from Red Zones in the film. What makes these 
scenes so impactful is the film’s use of nonconventional editing schemes, particularly the 
films use of the long take. Children of Men is shot with highly choreographed fluid long 
takes with seemingly very little editing. As a matter of aesthetics, the long take allows 
for a seamless transition from one space to another. Through the use of the long take we 
are able to see Theo walk from points of relative safety in the Green Zone to more 
chaotic areas that lay just beyond the zone's borders. The use of the long take is even 
illustrated in the film’s infamous opening shot. As the film opens, the camera is placed 
behind Theo and follows him walking into a coffee shop where he learns of the death of 
baby Dieago, the world’s youngest person. In a world in which the population has 
become sterile the death of the last naturally born individual only confirms that 
humanity's time is running out. As Theo leaves the coffee shop the camera slowly moves 
in front of him as we see building he just left explode into flames. We later learn that 
violence like such as this has become routine, as the rest of the world has descended into 
chaos and barbarism. While the sequence is filled with various digital edits the sequence
shirks conventional Hollywood editing techniques and is able to connect Theo’s
movements with phenomenological reality.

Figure 26: Opening shot of *Children of Men* ends with explosion

Figure 27: Battle of Bexhill depicted via long take

*Children of Men*’s use of the long take not only give the appearance of continuous
movement through space, it also lends a certain reality to the events in the film. In
shirking traditional editing techniques of montage, *Children of Men* strongly echoes the
ideas of cinematic realism posited by Andre Bazin. For Bazin, the non-realist techniques
of montage and heavy editing had the effect of distorting reality rather than reflecting it.
Techniques such as the long take, however, were capable of producing a version of
reality that was completely objective and organic. For Bazin, the long take is the
principle means of directly linking the cinematic image with phenomenological reality, which the medium can then directly record. In Bazin’s assessment, the long take allowed for fictional films to exhibit the documentary-like qualities found in the films of Italian Neorealism. In the film’s DVD extras, Cuarón and his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki explained that their use of the long take was done “in order to take advantage of the element of real time, [we] opted for the long take because they didn’t want to glamorize the film's violence, and they took their cues from news coverage or documentary footage of wars” (Children). In this respect, the cinematic realism which Bazin and Cuarón strive for is not a capturing of phenomenological reality as much as it a capturing of its mediation through the documentary. In this aspect, the film’s use of public locations within London both illustrates the disciplinary power of borders in the post 9/11 world and further the world of the film as being ‘real. Thus Cuarón is able to make his dystopic world look ‘real’ through the implementation of documentary-like visual style. This strategy echoes a similar approach used by Cuarón in his previous film Y Tu Mamá También (2003) to show a much larger world than simply what is happening to the characters themselves. Although there is debate about the political use of the long take the use of the long take in this fashion Children’s use of the technique has also been described as “mega-realism”, by Terrel Bacon and Govinda Dickman, who articulate its usefulness in creating a sense of reality interior to the film (158). Both through the film’s references to the contemporary iconography of London and its use of the long take, Children visualizes a speculative future through very precise references to reality. The reality the film references is primarily images associated with the War on Terror. While
the world of *Children* is designed to look as real as possible due to the careful
construction of its visual style, the film’s overtures to the events in the post 9/11 world
extend beyond the use of the long take.

In the film’s violent third act Kee and Theo have been arrested and taken to the
town of Bexhill. In this extended portion of the story *Children* will utilize the themes of
mobility, home, and frontier to demonstrate the consequences of the dehumanization of
immigrant groups through border security.

**Frontier**

The extended sequences in the town of Bexhill demonstrates the evolution of the
frontier in the context of the War on Terror. While the Frontier Myth framed certain
national borders such as US/Mexico as a boundary that separated civilization from the
uncivilized territory that lies beyond it, the notion of the frontier changed in the wake of
the 9/11 attacks. The war zones of the War on Terror, specifically Afghanistan and Iraq,
become the geographical embodiment of a new frontier zone that must be conquered in
order to maintain the security of the homeland. Rather than making the associations
between border security and the War on Terror explicit, *Children* employs a unique
visual style which combines the long take with visual illusions to the War in Iraq and
Afghanistan. In doing so, the film links the tactics used to fight the wars in the Middle
East with the systematic dehumanization of those designated as alien.

The visual structure of the film has gained attention from various scholars. In this
reading of the film, Slavoj Žižek situates *Children of Men* as a film in which the
background persists, even though it is not the primary focus of the story. According to
Žižek, “by orienting the cameras gaze through the bracketing of the white male antihero whose journey from apathy to reawakening the film serves as a kind of prism through which we can see the background even more sharply” ('Hope'). The film’s background serves as a second layer to the film, whose legibility is rendered through its interaction with the characters in the foreground.

Similar to Žižek, Zahid Chaudhary argues that the film’s “structure of visibility is one in which the background of the frame, rather than the putative object of cinematic focus carries the weight of signification” (80). This emphasis on background and foreground is a deliberate choice by Cuarón who wanted to emphasize the tensions between background and foreground used to emphasize Theo’s alienation from his environment. The film’s mise-en-scène tells much the story on a subliminal level. This formal mode was a deliberate choice by Cuarón that he and his cinematographer, “we did not want to favor character over environment, we want to keep a balance, and that means you don’t do close ups, so you use only very loose shots because then the character ideally blends into the environment and hopefully has a conflict. So you can have tension between background environment and your character” (Davidson 127). The disunity between Theo and his environment is best illustrated in the scene in which Theo is forced into Bexhill prison camp.

In Children the small coastal town of Bexhill has been turned into a prison camp for illegal aliens and refugees. The sequences which takes place in Bexhill are arguably the most important the film. In this section of the movie, the background carries the weight of signification. The entrance into the prison camp is told through a fluid long
take. Once there, Theo, Kee, and Miriam (Kee’s friend, played by Pam Harris) are being taken to Bexhill refugee camp by bus. Kee begins to have contractions and while Miriam attends to her the Kee looks out the window and the camera makes them marginal to the frame as Kee looks out the bus window at the scene of the detention camp. The lights in the bus are shut off so the camera can focus maximally on the scenes of subjection outside the bus. As the scene continues, the lights in the bus are switched on and the camera focuses in a guard who enters the vehicle and orders everyone to leave the bus presumably to be beaten and tortured by his cohorts. Miriam is asked to leave and as the guard drags her out the lights in the bus go out again leaving Theo and Kee to enter the prison camp alone.

The sequence only last three minutes, but in it the camera follows Theo and Kee as they are marched through the detention camp and witness a variety of abuses. Refugees are locked in small cages and are forced to wear orange jump suits and black bags over their heads. As the scene continues we see another group of prisoners which are forced to strip naked and are attacked by prison guard dogs. Apart from being just background, this scene is deliberately meant to evoke the abuses of Guantánamo Bay and the American run prison ant Abu Ghraib. Cuarón's film deliberately uses haunting, iconic images from the Iraq War, not only to tap into the viewers’ collective memory, but also make ‘real’ this apocalyptic dystopia through references to the War on Terror. Given the anti-immigrant context of the abuses depicted in the film, these citations to the War on Terror invite the audience to associate the dehumanization of the alien with the security practices a that have come to prominence during the War on Terrorism.
Proponents of a more reactionary immigration policy benefited from association of immigration and terrorism. After 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security was dramatically overhauled its long established practice of ‘catch and release’. Instead Homeland Security mandated that all undocumented workers (aliens) can be rounded up imprisoned, detained, and deported and held indefinitely in privately run prisons and detention centers. In the years that followed 9/11, the federal government has embarked on an unprecedented campaign to round up, detain, and eventually deport illegal immigrants under the guise of bolstering national security. While there is little to no evidence that deportation actually prevented any acts of terrorism, the imprisoning of “criminal aliens’ continues to be a means by which the security of the homeland is enforced. Post 9/11 rhetoric was not only concerned with the tighter regulation of the border, but with the presence of illegal aliens already on the homeland. The association of nonwhite immigrant groups with the alien continues to circulate through discourses of immigration and borders.
Thus, the practice of capture, detain, and imprison is reflected in Theo and Kee’s treatment in Bexhill prison. Despite being a science fiction film, the atrocities witnessed in the film are made believable through association with these images of tragic-but-real horrors from recent memory. While using imagery associated with the War on Terror may make the film’s world more believable, there is also a critical consequence these references.

Why use such provocative imagery from history in a science fiction film? The answer may lie with Slavoj Žižek who argues that the metaphorical infertility of *Children of Men*’s signifies a “lack of meaningful historical experience in the face of new globalization” (‘Clash’). For Žižek, this infertility is spawned from the loss of a cohesive worldview, a loss that forms when individuals are disconnected from larger collective or communal experiences. As an example, Žižek notes a scene in which Theo visits the Ministry of the Arts that is housed in Battersea Power Station; there Theo sees classic works of art in the residence, which are also completely stripped of their cultural and historical significance. In particular, Theo lingers on a statue of David that seems to function as nothing more than window dressing. Žižek interprets this scene as demonstrative of how life like art in the age of globalization, is no longer meaningful when it is stripped of its historical context, and when it no longer signals a viable, or fertile, worldview. It is in creating meaningful historical experiences that the references in the Bexhill sequence prove significant.

This film’s contemporary references do not stop with the War on Terror. The abuses depicted in Bexhill prison camp evoke the Holocaust as well. In one scene we
see Theo and Kee shuttled past a pile of luggage and shoes. This shot aims to deliberately evoke imagery from the death camps used during the Nazi extermination of the Jews.

This moment deliberately recalls images of piled suitcases and shoes commonly found in Holocaust memorials. In examining the film’s evocation of Holocaust imagery Sarah Schwartzman argues that *Children* use such iconography because it wishes its audience to see the dehumanization of immigrants as structural, Schwartzman states “By recreating several well-known images of historic suffering, Cuarón allows us to link ‘our own’ historic or memorialized suffering with the suffering in the film, in the hope that it will prod us toward a common recognition of real, structural evils” (Schwartzman). Through the repeated associations between immigration, terrorism and invasion, *Children* creates a speculative image of the future in which the inverting of the frontier has allowed the border’s exclusionary power has become omnipresent. In creating a world in where movements are either legitimated or policed, where individuals are categorized as citizen or as alien, and where public spaces have been turned into prison camps, the apocalypse is not a world of fire and brimstone, but a militarized border space that turns person against person. In this respect, the use of iconic images from history becomes a poignant way for Cuarón to create a “meaningful historical experience” that Žižek addresses, in order to draw the viewers out of their individual viewership and into a collective, historical recognition of structural injustices.

Theo and Kee’s journey into Bexhill is the penultimate destination of their journey to the Tomorrow vessel. Once Theo and Kee have passed through the area's security checkpoints they are forced into the town square. Upon entering Bexhill’s town
center, the film shows how the once open coastal town has been reduced to a squalid prison camp where dead bodies line the streets and homes have been reduced to rubble. The refugees imprisoned in Bexhill are not recognized as human by the state; they are without infrastructure political representation and are excluded from exercising any basic human rights. What proves telling about this portion of the film is how through his proximity to a black refugee, Theo has lost all his privileges of citizenship. In this respect *Children of Men* illustrates how easily one can be reduced to an alien by the border. The character of Theo is a citizen who is also a self-hating alcoholic in the film and the epitome of the privileged British citizenry. His status as a native born citizen guarantees him transit through the country. At the start of the film, as refugees are continually arrested and confined to cages around him, Theo initially seems to pays very little attention to this occurrence. As the film continues and the character ventures deeper into England's Red Zones Theo begins to lose the assurances his citizenship provides. For instance, while on the bus headed to Bexhill a security guard stops the bus enters with a German Shepard. Kee then goes into labor causing the guard to threaten her. “What's wrong with you?” To distract the guard, Theo pretends to speak in broken English and shouts “Caca Piss Smell Girl”. Because he is speaking in a foreign accent, Theo is mistaken for a non-English refugee and is quickly abused by the police, who quickly say to him ‘You people make me puke!’ Through his treatment at Bexhill prison camp, Theo comes to recognize his precarious place within this borderspace in spite of his nationality. As with the white border patrol agent in *Three Burials* we have another white character who slowly becomes the other after crossing a border. This figurative
othering of a white citizen can also be seen in *District 9*. Like the character of Wikus in *District 9*, when they become associated with the aliens, white citizens are not immune from being categorized as an alien themselves. Because the tools once used to secure the border have now been inverted back onto the homeland no one is immune from losing their privileges of citizenship and being categorized as an alien. In addition to Theo, the character of Kee occupies similar yet unique positions of alienness.

In *Children of Men*, Kee’s status as a refugee reduces her to a status of non-human, however, her pregnancy problematizes the link made between identity and citizenship. On the one hand, the state has made it clear that Kee has no legal rights as she is neither a national subject nor naturalized citizen. Her in-between status as a refugee places her outside the law excluding her from all political life. As the last pregnant women in the world, however, the birth-citizenship link would allow her child to become a citizen of England and free it from ‘alienness’. In short, Kee’s pregnancy disrupts the citizen-human linkage of the London fascist government. The revolutionaries in the film (Fishes) make it clear they believe that the government would most likely take her baby and deny that a refugee was the mother: “Do you see what they do refuges in this country. They will take her baby as pass off a posh white woman as the mother”. While the dehumanizing world of *Children of Men* leaves little likelihood that Kee will be treated with dignity, the eventual birth of Kee's baby opens up the possibility of an end to human/citizen link. During the film's violent climax Theo and Kee attempt to make their way to the edge of Bexhill so they can escape by boat. In the midst of a fierce battle between the Fishes and the British military, Kee cradles her baby in her arms.
and attempts to make her way through the fighting. As both the soldier and the Fishes see a child for the first time in decades each side briefly ceases the fighting in order to let her and her child pass. For a brief moment, Kee is not categorized as an alien. Rather, the sight of a child causes both police and revolutionaries to momentarily reassess their attitude toward the alien and towards each other. The sight of the child enables both sides to see Kee as more than a non-citizen. Seeing Kee’s baby causes one of the soldiers to say “I forgot how beautiful they look.” This moment in the film is reminiscent of a similar moment of realization in the film Frozen River when Ray, a mother who is also a smuggler, is able to see the immigrant she is smuggling as more than just cargo when she recognizes her as another mother. Children of Men posits that through the breaking of the citizenship/human link that we can recognize the alien as human and the future can once again become fertile.

Figure 29: Kee and Theo escape Bexhill with her child

The films end with a telling image with Kee floating on a small boat in the ocean with her newborn baby in her arms. The image of a boat reinforces the lack of roots and marks the possibility of a new identity that has nothing to do with nativity or citizenship.
Children of Men is deeply polemical film that seeks to challenge attitudes towards the immigrant that have proliferated in post 9/11 America. Unlike other films situated in and around border regions Children uses the elements of science fiction to speculate about a future in which the world has been transformed into a series of Green Zones and Red Zones. In depicting the dystopian future, the film visual structure is deliberately evokes imagery from the War on terror as well as other historical events.

The use of iconic images from the War on Terror enables the film to tap into viewers 'collective memories' and associate the actions depicted in the film with the larger inaction of American foreign policy. Here the protectionist’s attitudes which flourished under Bush era Homeland Security are associated with the very mechanisms of exclusion and dehumanization which entrap the characters of Theo and Kee. Their journey is the ultimate manifestation of the relationship between proximity and alienation. In Children of Men the war on terror is not confined to some distant foreign land. The war has come home and its tactics and being exercised upon the bodies and territories of country that is waging the war.

Figure 30: Kee and Theo floating to Tomorrow
CHAPTER 4: CROSSING VIRTUAL BORDERS IN SLEEP DEALER

This chapter examines how Sleep Dealer (Alex Rivera, 2008) uses science fiction as a means of illustrating the ways in which the border’s power is exercised in the virtual world. I argue that in telling the story of a Mexican migrant worker who becomes a cyborg in order to cross the US/Mexico border virtually, Sleep Dealer demonstrates the border’s ability to virtually disembody the labor of certain immigrants. By reading Sleep Dealer in relation to the themes of virtual mobility, frontier, and home, this chapter uses the film’s narrative to explore how the very technology that facilitates trade in the virtual world can be used control the mobility of immigrant bodies and forever alter the landscape of the US/Mexico border region.

Sleep Dealer begins with an unusual image of a human being who has slowly been transformed into an alien body. This alien body is not strange green-skinned visitor from another planet, but the body of a young Mexican man named Memo who has been forced to ‘upgrade’ his physical body in order to work in an advanced factory on the US/Mexico border. In a close up we see a shot of Memo, who has been connected to a machine while his arms and his back are covered in sockets and cables. Ensnared in this web of glowing blue wires and aging cyber-tech, the young man goes about his work, his cybernetic eyes staring at virtual images while his surgically upgraded hands make a series of automated movements. As the scene continues, we see that this futuristic factory houses of a vast assembly line of technologically upgraded workers, each of whom is “enhanced” just like Memo, each of whom is making robotic movements with their arms, each of whom has their body connected to a machine.
The factory in which Memo finds himself in is no ordinary place, it is known as a ‘Sleep Dealer’. Both the name and title of the film refer to these factories where a type of ‘virtual labor’ is performed by Mexican workers and then transmitted virtually across the militarized Mexican border to the United States. The ‘sleep’ in the title references the sleep inducing effect which the long shifts have on the factories workers as they perform various forms of virtual labor in countries in which they are not physically present in. In the image of the technologically upgraded body of Memo we see a subject of the border that is defined by his various contradictions. He is a liminal figure who is caught between two worlds and two contradictory stages of being. He is a cyborg, someone who is neither entirely human nor entirely machine. He also is a resident of a border town located between two nations. By preforming a type of virtual labor, Memo is present in his current space, but at the same time he is absent from that same space. In creating this technologically modified, yet contradictory body of a Mexican worker, *Sleep Dealer* illustrates the various contradictory attitudes towards immigrants and the labor which they perform.

Rivera’s film depicts a futuristic world where the border between the United States and Mexico has been sealed off and labor has been transformed via cybernetic technology into virtual labor. Told through a series of flashbacks, Memo begins as an amateur computer hacker who has become dissatisfied with his life in Mexico. Memo’s home of Santa Del Rio is arid desert-like community in which water resources are scarce thanks to a newly constructed corporate dam. Memo also dreams of escaping the confines of his home and becoming more connected to the world by traveling to the
border town of Tijuana, which Memo describes as “the city of the future.” After hacking into a military surveillance network, Memo’s home is attacked by an unmanned American drone. The drone attack kills Memo’s father and subsequently causes him to flee his hometown and go on the run to Tijuana in the hopes of starting a new life. In order to find work and survive, a now destitute Memo is forced to surgically upgrade his body with cybernetic nodes that allow him to plug into the Sleep Dealer’s machines. By becoming a ‘node worker,’ Memo’s new cybernetic enhancements allow him to operate a robotic construction worker on the other side of the border in the United States. The subsequent narrative of the film details Memo’s slow transformation into an automated being that is being clandestinely pursued by Rudy, the drone pilot responsible for the death of his father. The films ends with Rudy repenting for his murder of Memo’s family and deciding to use his skills as a drone pilot to destroy the same corporate dam that has been controlling the water resources in Memo’s hometown.

Figure 31: Memo connects his body via nodes
The Works of Alex Rivera

This section will examine *Sleep Dealer* in relation to the previous work of Alex Rivera, paying specific attention to how Rivera uses the language of certain genres to create his critique of American border policy. *Sleep Dealer* must be understood in the context of director Alex Rivera’s larger work on borders and immigration. *Sleep Dealer* is part of a larger examination of cultural migration, technology and US border policy undertaken by the film’s director. The director’s previous experimental films utilized the same hybridized format of mixing specific tones and styles in order to communicate a political message regarding the border. Similar to the themes explored in *Sleep Dealer*, Rivera’s previous work has used genres such as political documentary and science fiction film to dramatize the virtualization of immigration and labor.

Rivera’s work ranges from feature length films such as *Sleep Dealer* to short experimental works and instillation pieces. Each of these works is united by their exploration of the politics of the US/Mexico border. His first film, *Papapapá* (1995) takes the form of a humorous documentary and examines the strange history of the potato.

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The title *Papapapá* is a play on the words dad (papá) and potato (patata)
(specifically how the Peruvian food migrated south and became french fries) in order to examine the immigrant experience of his father. In addition, by focusing on is father’s love of Spanish language channel Univision, Papapapá emphasizes the role of television in becoming a way for the Latino immigrant to reconnect with their indigenous culture. Rivera’s work also employs elements of humor and parody in challenging America’s contradictory attitudes towards immigration. His short film Dia De la Independence (1997) is a parody of the movie Independence Day and takes the form of a typical Hollywood movie trailer in order to poke fun at the nation’s obsession with the alien invasion stories that filled multiplexes in the 1990’s. In both of these works Rivera uses satire of popular American entertainment to frame his critique of the cultures far reaching anti-immigrant attitudes.

![Figure 33: Poster to Papapapa](image)

One of Rivera’s most pointed criticisms of American immigration policy was found in his short film Why Cybraceros? (2005) a humorous pseudo-documentary that aimed to critique what he felt was America’s deeply hypocritical attitude towards Migrant workers. In the short film he uses the term ‘Cybracero’, which is a play on the
word and the idea of a bracero, which loosely translates to “one who works with his arms”. The Bracero Program was a government sponsored program that began in 1942 in which Mexican workers were allowed to come to America as guest workers. Rivera’s short film is directly inspired by the Council for California Grower’s *Why Braceros?* (USA 1959), a privately financed domestic propaganda film that presents itself as a ‘public service.’ In order to fully understand Rivera’s critiques of American immigration policy in both *Why Cybraceros?* and *Sleep Dealer* we must first examine how the issue of immigration is framed in the original 1950s film *Why Braceros?*

The original *Why Braceros?* sought to explain the benefits of Mexican migrant labor to American business. Deploying the traditional format of an expository documentary, the film attempts to convince U.S. citizens that “imported” labor from Mexico benefits them and the country as a whole. In arguing for the benefits of Mexican labor, *Why Braceros?* even utilizes a rational, authoritative, white-sounding male narrator who unequivocally interprets meanings from a disparate series of visual images which make up the film. The propaganda film attempts to convince U.S. citizens that “imported” labor from México benefits them. In addition the film further incorporates testimony from a Mexican politician, dubbed into Spanish-accented English as proof that U.S. immigration policies do not exploit Mexicans. In utilizing the documentary film format, *Why Braceros?* is meant to leave the impression that Mexicans are not being exploited, but receiving medical attention, food and water, live entertainment, and access to television. The film also deliberately sidesteps both the racial and class dynamics of migrant labor as the impoverished and substandard conditions of many migrant workers
lived in is left unaddressed. In summation, the film’s salutary view of Mexican migrant labor ignores the underlying conditions that drive transborder migrations.

In his first film *Why Cybraceros?* Alex Rivera used *Why Braceros?* as a point of contrast to take on American immigration policy. In doing so, Rivera adopts the form of a pseudo-documentary format in order to draw attention to America’s contradictory attitude towards immigrant labor, particularly immigrant labor from Mexico. The Cybraceros film is built around the marketing of fictional farming equipment as the solution to America’s immigration problem. The nonexistent equipment in question are robots, which are controlled by migrant laborers from outside America. In writing about Rivera short *Why Cybraceroes?* Dale Hudson comments that the film’s satire is in how it highlights the erasure of the underlying economic conditions that drive transborder migration to the United States. Through Rivera’s deliberate use of voiceover, Hudson argues that “the film’s primary voiceover inscribes racialized differentiation at the level of language” (3). In marketing the “new and remarkable experimental equipment,” the voiceover assures audiences that “Mexican citizens, sometimes called nationals or Mexican nationals the term most commonly used is *braceros* “benefit the United States through policies that ensure *braceros* only appear “in right place at the right time”(ibid).

As with *The Sleep Dealer*, Rivera creates a text in which advanced cybernetic technology is being used to exploit the labor if immigrant groups while leaving their bodies on the other side of the border, thus solving the country’s “immigrant problem.”

*Why Cybraceros?* further contrasts itself with *Why Braceros?* by using a female narrator. The use of a female narrator highlights the dilemma of migrant labor, by stating
“Mexican workers stay illegally in the United States or cross the border illegally and then blend in with the bracero workforce, so that no matter how they arrived here, the presence of braceros creates a climate of racial and economic suspicion that is framed to continue more than three decades after the end of the Bracero program” (2). The narrator goes on to say “For the worker, it’s as simple as point and click to pick, for the American farmer, it’s all the labor without the worker.” Through its sales pitch of workers who can never become citizens Rivera reveals the contradictory attitudes towards immigration in America. The voiceover goes on to say; “but in American lingo, cybracero means a worker that poses no threat of becoming an citizen—and that means quality products at low financial and social cost to you, the American consumer.” By cloaking itself in the structure of a documentary, Why Cybraceros? attempts to make clear the racialized paradigm in which American border policy is situated. The United States wants Mexican labor without having the actual Mexicans. What is telling is how Rivera satire frames the immigrant debate as a matter of controlling mobility through virtual technology. In fact the video even goes on to say that the cybracero poses no threat of citizenship.

Placed in the context of Rivera’s previous work Sleep Dealer is a continuation of the director’s interest in the concept of tele-migration, or how individuals are allowed to migrant virtually yet still be physically unable to cross certain borders. As with the technology of The Sleep Dealer, the underlying appeal of this technology lies in its racial as well as financial benefit to American companies. In this aspect, the true appeal of such technology is in its ability to transmit labor while simultaneously immobilizing the immigrant body.
With *Why Cybraceros?* Rivera creates a film that reveals how the very conception of immigration and labor has been filtered through the lens of race, specifically the Anglo business establishment. In doing so, Rivera’s work exposes how the racial and humanitarian aspects of transborder migration are erased and reduced to a matter of labor and profit. The verisimilitude provided by the documentary format draws attention to racialization within transborder migrations. Rivera’s film condemns the reductionist view of migration in *Why Braceros?* for, as Dale Hudson states, “limiting notions of rationalism, based on scientific reason and logical thought, and its limiting notions of progress and development, defined in terms of efficiency and profitability” (2). In one
final ironic twists to the Rivera’s *Why Cybraceros?* film, soon after the video was released according to Rivera, the director received offers from real business who were interested in how they could acquire this non extant technology. In each of these works digital technology plays an important role in framing the critique of American border policy.

**Genre and the *Sleep Dealer***

In analyzing the function of genre within Rivera’s work, the language of genre, specifically the genre of science fiction, becomes a means of framing the director’s critique of American border policy as well as exploring the role of technology in the exercising of the borders disciplinary powers. Classifying *Sleep Dealer* as a specific genre proves to be a difficult task. In critiquing America’s border policy through the story of a Mexican migrant worker, Rivera’s film does share some similarities with a group of works concerning migration across borders. At the time of its release, *Sleep Dealer* was just one of a series of films made by Latin American directors that focused on the precariousness of life in the global south. The films include such works as *Sin Nombre* (Cary Fukunaga 2007), *Roma* (Adolfo Aristarain 2004) *Maria Full of Grace* (Joshua Marston 2004), and *Babel* (Alejandro González 2006) and *Biutiful* (Alejandro González Iñárritu 2010).

Encompassing various styles and subjects films of the so called ‘Latin New Wave’ often dealt with the perils of migration to ‘El Norte,’ the violent political conflicts in places like El Salvador and Mexico, as well as an explicit critiques of NAFTA and the detrimental effects of global trade on various Latin American countries. For instance, the
film *Sin Nombre* depicts the journey to the north through the eyes of a pair of young teenagers who attempt to escape the gang violence that has consumed their community by riding atop giant freight trains that ship cargo across Mexico. Similarly, *Maria Full of Grace* depicts the story of a young pregnant girl who is forced to become a drug mule. In doing so, the film examines the underlying economic conditions that drive people (in the case of *Maria* mostly young women) to cross the border illegally. In the “El Norte” narratives that constitute both *Maria Full of Grace* and *Sin Nombre* we see the complex attitudes toward both immigration and immigrants within Central America. Both the Honduran gang members in *Sin Nombre* and the reluctant Columbian drug smugglers in *Maria Full of Grace* face hostility and death threats from Mexican natives on their journey northward due to the perception that immigrants are outsiders who are only exploiting Mexico in order to gain entry into the United States. Each of these films depicts individuals who become subjects of the border’s disciplinary power simply by crossing a certain geographic space. Furthermore, each of these migration films use the story of one or a pair of individuals in order to illustrate the much larger humanitarian plight of those who attempt to make the perilous journey northward in order to survive.

The increased interest in these films stateside, be it at film festivals or university screenings, has been attributed to both the increasing Latino population in the United States as well as the growing public debate pushed by human rights groups over the treatment of those who cross the border seeking refuge in the United States. In her essay

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8 The structure of the El Norte film is best demonstrated by the film *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, 1983).
‘Migrant Identities in Film’, Deborah Shaw characterized this wave of Latin Cinema as an attempt to put a “human face” on the institutional policies that have had a detrimental effect on many Central American countries. In Shaw’s words this collection of films use an emotional identification with the migrants to counter the reactionary anti-immigrant discourse so prevalent in right wing media” (238). With its emphasis on the plight of immigrants and migrant workers in the global south, *Sleep Dealer* could be classified simply as an El Norte migration film. Instead of telling its migration story in a realist mode, the film opts to use its futuristic setting to draw corollaries between its story and the real life plight of immigrants and other migrant groups.

Memo’s journey from an isolated village in central Mexico to the vibrant and globally connected city of Tijuana is similar to journeys undertaken by characters in El Norte narratives. As in previous migration stories, Memo chooses a type of exile as he is forced to leave his home and journey to the north. Once Memo has reached the edge of the border he faces death or economic exploitation at the hands of other, sometimes equally desperate, workers. Similar to both *Sin Nombre* and *Maria*, the exploitation of the migrant worker takes the form of relinquishing control over their body. In this aspect, Memo’s cybernetic enhancement of his body is another, more futuristic form of the exploitations which migration films have always depicted. While the narrative of *Sleep Dealer* does bare strong resemblance to certain El Norte films, in challenging America’s contradictory attitudes towards the border, Rivera’s film employs elements from various genres. Since the film’s ideas are articulated through a story that contains cyborgs, robots,
and is set in the near future, it would be more accurate to classify *Sleep Dealer*, at least partially, within the genre of science fiction.

Why does *Sleep Dealer* use elements of science fiction? Because the genre at its core concerns speculating about the future, the film’s director argues that science fiction has always been useful for thinking about various social issues such as immigration and poverty. In director Rivera’s words “to think about the future is to open up spaces of possibility and it is something that has never happened in science fiction cinema of the Global South” (Gullen, 2008). Various definitions of science fiction emphasize the notion of speculation and the unknown. In putting forth one of the first definitions of science fiction, writer Robert A. Heinlein posits that the genre can be understood “as realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method” (qtd. in Eschbach). In Heinlein’s assessment the knowledge and understanding of the present day real world becomes the barometer by which a science fiction story articulates a vision of the unknown. In this context, science fiction stories such as *Sleep Dealer* use the conditions of the present to establish a way of speculating about the future. Furthermore, this engagement with current political and environmental conditions allows science fiction to hypothesize what their outcomes and effects will be if certain conditions are left unchecked. As with the treatment of refugees in *Children of Men*, *Sleep Dealer* is using the plight of immigrants in the present in order to speculate on how the future of the nation will look if conditions do not change. In the case of *Sleep Dealer* the speculative nature of science fiction is being used to examine the
evolving nature of embodiment through the use of advanced technology. More specifically, the technological upgrading of Mexican immigrant labor in the film becomes a troubling parable for the ongoing virtualization of the border in the years following 9/11.

In my previous chapter on *Children of Men*, I examined how borders in science fiction films are used to separate human from alien as well as citizen from immigrant. Rather than manifesting the unknown in the form of an alien from another world the dehumanization of the immigrant is manifested in the physical altering of the human body into a machine. In addition, the film’s futuristic setting coupled with its interest in humanity’s growing relationship with technology would fulfill established definitions of the genre. In his reading of the genre J. P. Telotte argues that science fiction entails some exploration of the boundary of the human. While non-human entities can be found in other genres such as horror and fantasy, for Telotte the issue of who is and who is not human lies at the heart of science fiction and it is focused in particular on the future of the robot and the cyborg. Telotte sees the serials of the 1930s and 40s as revealing a growing fascination with the technological and its potential reshaping the human body. Furthermore, Telotte traces the function and meaning of these figures in films such as *Metropolis* (1927) on and the *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *The Island of Lost Souls* (1932) as depicting in the then current gothic horror mode of the “violent efforts to redefine the human body as some sort of raw material” (qtd. in Neale 102).

With its emphasis on blurring the line between humans and machines, *Sleep Dealer* creates a Mexican cyberpunk aesthetic; a branch of science fiction that explores
the rapid deterioration of society due to corporate technology. In various incarnations of cyberpunk, technology has become so ubiquitous that the humans actually begin to alter their bodies to accommodate plugs and ports in order to physically insert cybernetics into their bodies. The film’s cyberpunk aspects can be seen in its theme of virtual labor’s effects on the global economy. The virtualization of the body within networks of global capital has far reaching effects on the mobility of those who choose to cross borders. By presenting a version of the future in which the body and the labor it performs have been geographically separated, the notion of the unknown is manifested in the film’s reification of the body within virtual space.

In *Sleep Dealer’s* futuristic world the border between the United States and Mexico has been sealed off via a giant wall, yet it is possible to live in Mexico and still be working in the United States without your body every leaving the Mexican territory. In order to obtain these ‘virtual jobs’ on the other side of the border migrant workers such as Memo must enhance their body with nodes. These cybernetic nodes are implanted in their body and enable workers to plug their bodies into a cyber-network which facilitates their virtual work in American factories all through the United States. In order to obtain these enhancements, Memo must first seek out a Coyotek. The term “Coyotek” makes a direct reference to technology and the coyotes, the migrant smugglers, but the Coyotek’s purpose is to implant modes for people who want access to the virtual world. Given its complex story, we can characterize *Sleep Dealer* as a film that mixes genres. Its story is comprised of references to science fiction, border cinema, and documentary. In this
respect, *Sleep Dealer* uses the language of the genre of science fiction in order to examine the social inequalities produced by the moving of the border into virtual space.

**Virtual Mobility and Global Connectivity**

This section will examine the theme of mobility in *Sleep Dealer*, specifically how the notion of virtual mobility reconfigures traditional notions of immigration. In both *Sleep Dealer* and *Why Cybraceros?* we see American immigration policy framed as a problem of mobile bodies. The body of the illegal immigrant carries with it a variety of different meanings which are all attributed to its country of origin being outside the homeland. Furthermore, immigrant bodies are often equated with ideas of otherness and invasion. Within anti-immigrant rhetoric the spread of immigrant bodies is often characterized in terms of disease and infection. While at the same time, upon returning to their country of origin the immigrant body may take on added significance as a symbol of overcoming and surviving the dangerous journey cross the border. This over-determination of the immigrant body has been explored by various scholars. For instance, in “Migrant Bodies: Corporeality Sexuality and Power among Mexican Migrant Men,” Rorigo Parrini argues that “In the United States, the migrant body symbolizes otherness and thus attracts discrimination and racism, whereas upon its return to the place of origin, the body signifies and so invites exhibition and celebration” (62-63). After undoing the process of crossing the border and the potential physical damage the journey entails, the immigrant body comes to represent intrusion once it has entered the host country. As Parrini notes “the body becomes the ultimate basis of the illegality that is attributed to it: a body that inhabits a certain space contrary to the laws of a country” (66). In Parrini’s
assessment the migrant body is problematic not just because of its potential for citizenship, but its presence raises a series of legal humanitarian and ethical issues. In this context, at the heart of the current American policy towards immigration lies a paradox. This paradox is characterized by the desire to control the mobility of immigrants who cross the border and a desire to reap the benefits of cheap immigrant labor.

It is this dilemma over the presence of immigrant bodies that is at the heart of Sleep Dealer’s narrative. In one telling scene, upon first entering the Sleep Dealer factory, Memo is told by another employee that being a node worker enables the American Dream: “This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they’ve always wanted: All the work without any of the workers.” In addition, by sealing off the American border has insured that migrant workers stand little chance of entering the homeland. While at the same time this transition to the digital world insuring that the combination of robotics and virtual technology has eliminated the responsibility of taking care of the physical body of the immigrant.

In regards to the dilemma of the migrant body, director Rivera states that bodies come with responsibility. Commenting on his film, Rivera explains further what is meant about his statement about factories in his movie being the “American Dream.” The worker comes with a body that needs healthcare, gives birth to children, and that needs to go to school. So keep the body outside of the United States. Suck its energy and leave the cadaver or the problematic shell out of the picture” (qtd. in Silverman). As framed within Rivera’s work, with the body comes the responsibility of taking care of it. The bodies of migrant workers continue to be a point of contention within American
immigration policy for the simple reason that American businesses desire the cheap labor which some immigrants provide. Much of the debate surrounding American borders centers around the unspoken need for cheap labor. While various businesses depend on the cheap labor supplied by immigrants, anti-immigrant groups as well as the Department of Homeland Security have advocated for stricter immigration policies in response to both 9/11 as well as various humanitarian crisis which trigger mass migrations of refuges crossing the US/Mexico border.

In addition to the politics of border enforcement, the monitoring and the physical round up and detention of those who cross it illegally is a costly venture. In the years that have followed 9/11, the budgets for various government security agencies reached record levels as various government agencies fell under the control of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. In this context, at the heart of the current American policy towards immigration is a paradox. This paradox is characterized by the desire to control the mobility of immigrants who cross the border and a desire to reap the benefits of cheap immigrant labor. It is in attempting to reconcile this paradox that mobility of the virtual world becomes significant.

The importance of mobility in the Sleep Dealer must be understood in relation to both the technological and economic integration of North America. In the aftermath of NAFTA (1994), the priorities of global capital became radically restructured as Canada, United States and North America eased trade restrictions of products making it easier for goods to be circulated across national borders. As I have stated previously in regards to the film Frozen River, after the passage of NAFTA, the US Canadian border was
characterized as “open” due to its relatively low border patrol security presence and emphasis on obstruction of drug traffic rather than enforcement of immigration laws. While NAFTA permanently altered the physical makeup of borders, its implementation coincided with a growing connectivity in the virtual world.

The passage of NAFTA coincided with the onset of what some have termed “digital modernity,” an idea characterized by a growing connectivity across national borders due to the increased use of telecommunications technology. As Fiona Jefferies points out, “The promise of digital modernity is inextricable from the revolutionist claims about the possibilities of global connectivity” (6). This perceived new modernity brought about via the virtual world was heralded by both leaders and entrepreneurs such as Nicholas Negropante who argued for the transformative power of global connectivity. In 1996 Negropante predicted that in the near virtual future “there will be no more room for nationalism than there is for small pox” (qtd. in Osnos ). More specifically, technological developments such as the Internet together with advances in telecommunication and cheap international phone calls are at the center of this new phase of connectivity. These technological developments have extended the interconnectedness across borders enabling a type of virtual mobility (a type of mobility without the body). In the era of global trade agreements such as NAFTA, various cultural commentators posited the creation of a “Global Village” spurred on by the global connectivity offered by the World Wide Web.

These technological innovations were not monolithic in their effect. Innovations such as cheap international phone calls allowed for migrant groups to maintain linkages
to their country of origin. In Rivera’s film, the character of Memo even celebrates the connectivity and technological advances of the future, which stand in stark contrast to the stasis of his isolated hometown of Santa Del Rio. For all the optimistic rhetoric of a Global Village being formed through technology and trade agreements, anti-immigrant groups used the perceived erosion of national borders to rally support for the building of a wall around the border. Furthermore, this rhetoric of open borders referred almost exclusively to the circulation of information and goods while the borders that separated people and nations remained firmly in place. In regards to the conception of his film in relation to global connectivity, Rivera stated:

Two giant threads inspired my thinking about the future. On the one hand I’ve been fascinated by the dream of the “global village” inspired by the Internet. Thanks to technology, the world is far more connected now that it has ever been before. On the other hand, as the son of an immigrant (some of my cousins came to the US as undocumented immigrants) I’ve been horrified to see the world becoming more and more divided. Borders are violent and increasingly closed. The attacks on immigrants around the world only seem to intensify. The ‘Global Village’ seen from the other side of a giant border wall looks pretty strange (qtd in Jefferies).

In Rivera’s assessment, the Global Village of the 21st century is still a place where the border’s power is enforced stringently. In its depiction of cyborg workers performing a type of virtual labor, Rivera’s film demonstrates how the human body specifically the immigrant body, has been subsumed into the machinery of global commerce. *Sleep Dealer* directly engages with these twin desires to control mobility of people while simultaneously facilitating the flow of global capital. The virtual labor in *Sleep Dealer* reconciles the dilemma of mobile bodies, by creating a being that only has mobility in the virtual world. Like the virtual labor and robots of *Why Cybraceros?* the immigrant
workers of *Sleep Dealer* never leave Mexico and present no threat of ever becoming American citizens.

The work Memo undertakes in the factory places his life in constant danger. In one disturbing sequence, Memo watches as another factory worker is accidently electrocuted by his machine. The workers body is quickly disconnected and hauled away like a broken piece of equipment while a new node worker takes his place. While Memo may be in control of a robot worker in the United States, the machines of the factory ultimately have control over him. Throughout the film we see electric currents flow directly into Memo’s body through his cybernetic nodes, increasing the chance of short circuit. His connection also stimulates all of his senses, allowing him to experience a type of virtual vertigo as his robot climbs tall buildings in America. As the film continues, and his body becomes more and more mechanized, Memo states “My energy is being drained. What happened to the river in my home is now happening to me.” Memo has become isolated in a different way than he was in his hometown, as he goes on to comment: “I work in a place that I will never see. I can see my family, but I cannot touch them.” As an explanation of Memo’s isolation, Libia Villazana states that “In addition to being constrained, since for survival reasons Memo constantly needs to be connected to the machine, the ultimate price to pay to please the global economy is the loss of his own life” (223). Even while Memo is locked in the Sleep Dealer factory, his cyborg nature has enabled him to achieve a type of virtual mobility. The robot which Memo controls from Mexico has allowed him to project his consciousness across the border to the United States, albeit as an indentured worker.
The virtual mobility granted by *Sleep Dealer* further problematizes the concept of borders as it collapses the spaces between here and there. Throughout the film the boundaries between transnational and national become blurred; geographies and territories seem to merge, but are shapely separated at the same time. In one particular scene we merging of geographies when Memo in Tijuana and there the robot whom he controls in San Diego look at each other through glass which there are both handling. This scene serves to both merge and define these separate geographies all at once making their process of virtual mobility more explicit.

*Sleep Dealer’s* premise of Mexican workers exporting their labor to America while being regulated to a border town has correspondence in real life. The Tijuana factory shown in the *Sleep Dealer* bares strong resembles to the Maquiladora factories that have proliferated along several Mexican border towns. The Maquiladora industry demonstrates how global capital has created a system that is capable of exploiting Mexican labor. As a solution to the ending of the Bracero program in America and spurred on by the passage of NAFTA, Maquiladora factories have become a more and more prominent source of manufacturing in North America. The factory system works by importing raw materials and unassembled components of technology to Mexico, assembling them using Mexican labor (mostly female workers) and exporting the fully assembled goods back across the border to markets in the United States. In many Maquiladoras workers perform repetitive actions such as inserting smart phones and laptops into protective packages.
This triangular journey of raw materials from America to Mexico and then back to America has drawn criticism from various human rights groups. Many of the workers in these factories are single women, raising families and working in the Maquiladoras, which are often polluted, toxic environments. The benefits of such a factory system are its proximity to the United State. A cell phone or other tech device can be assembled quickly and is able to reach the US market faster from a Mexican border town, than from a factory in China. The factories have been a huge boost to Mexico’s sluggish economy and have benefited Border States such as Texas and New Mexico, as American businesses build more and more facilities that ship raw materials across the border to Mexico’s Maquiladoras. More than 50,000 jobs in El Paso are attributed directly to the Maquiladora industry in towns like Juarez. More than 70 buildings in El Paso are occupied or exist because of this industry.

In addition, upon being captured and deported from the United States many Central and South American migrants are sent to Mexico regardless of whether or not that is their country of origin. The Maquiladora industry is filled with migrant workers who were once deported from the US. The unfocused and imprecise execution of American immigration policy has kept many migrant workers in virtual limbo between nations. Without any means to return to their home, they become aliens of a different kind in Mexico. Many border towns such as Tijuana fill the Maquiladora factories with individuals who have been deported from the United States. By exiling immigrant workers to Mexican border towns such as Tijuana and forcing those same workers into the Maquiladora system, American businesses receive all the benefits of Mexican labor
while the American homeland is free of the responsibilities associated with the immigrant body.

Figure 36: Comparison between Maquiladora workers and Sleep Dealer worker

In this respect, the prominence of Maquiladoras illustrates a certain type of outsourcing that Delgado Wise and James Cypher termed “disembodied labor.” As defined by Wise and Cypher, the Maquiladora industry has become so prominent in Mexico that it has even lead to “disguised maquiladoras” industries which have copied the business model and are built on the shipping of raw materials into the country that are assembled for low wages. Wise and Cypher argue that the Maquiladora industry and the
disguised Maquiladora industry constitute a “disembodied export of cheap labor, with the labor actually embodied in the exported products... Mexico is not really exporting goods, because with minor exceptions, the only Mexican-made/input in this complex transnational process is cheap labor” (121). As Rivera states “One could hire telepresence workers from Indonesia or China-whoever is cheapest. It’s a race to the bottom enabled by the global connectivity championed by NAFTA” (qtd. in Anders). Since the Maquiladoras factory system does not offer specialized production of goods, the product that is being exported becomes cheap labor.

It should be noted that the association of Maquiladoras with disembodied labor proves to be problematic. One could argue that any labor in which American goods are manufactures outside the borders of the United States would be disembodied labor. A key component however of the Maquiladora system is the raw materials that come to the factories from the United States. After those goods are assembled, they are then shipped back to the United States for distribution. In this respect, the goal of trade deals such as NAFTA is not simply to facilitate free trade, between North American countries, but to export Mexico’s most valuable resource, which is labor from low-wage workers.

By placing the Maquiladoras factory in a futuristic context, Sleep Dealer demonstrates how American border policy uses technology to figuratively disembody Mexican workers. The factories are much like Maquiladoras, but rather than working on an assembly line manufacturing real products for the American market, the laborers control machines located in the United States. The assembly line structure of the maquiladoras system requires its female workers to essentially become machines as they
work long hours repeating the same physical movements thousands of times a day for little pay. We find a similar situation facing the factory workers in Rivera’s film. Throughout his extensive work shifts, Memo repeats the same automated movements again and again. This mechanization of the body reveals a telling irony of disembodied labor in the virtual world. The boundaries that once separated human from machine begin to erode. The disembodied worker gives a strange sort of life to the machine, while the human body is reduced to a series of mechanized movements occurring thousands of miles away. The machines in *Sleep Dealers* have done more than just change Memo’s body. His body has essentially become colonized by global capital. We can see this linkage between mechanization/colonization in the scene where Memo explains in voiceover exactly what is happening to his body.

As Memo explains how the system works, the film takes us inside his body and shows a close up of blood with its platelets and then cuts to large pipes used to remove the water from the his home town. The film visually contrasts the extraction of water and labor as similar resources that the United States takes from Mexico. Whereas the water is the direct resource that the United States extracts from Mexico, the blood and platelets refer to the extraction of Mexican labor to support US business. Through these visual associations we are supposed to link the colonization of Mexican land with the exploitation of Memo’s body. Here, the energy of the workers is sucked out leaving the body hollowed and zombie like. As the scene comes to a close, Memo punctuates his land/body connection by saying “I am the dam.”
By reducing him to just another mechanized body, Memo has been transformed from a migrant into a ghost. Like the lost cowboys of *Three Burials*, Memo is defined by his placelessness and lack of home. This disembodiment of the worker reveals how the border can operate in the virtual world. Rivera’s film reveals that there are always certain types of communication and interrelation between Mexico and the United States that are extremely necessary for the Mexican economic structure and the US’s infrastructure. Ultimately, the virtual mobility afforded Memo is only facilitated because it is so crucial to the global economy. In other words, Memo is only aloud to move virtually in the United States because his labor is necessary for American business. In presenting this type of virtual migration northward along transnational networks of business, *Sleep Dealer* shows the dark endpoint of the so-called Global Village. When the border is closed and immigration is forbidden the only type of migration that will be allowed is virtual migration facilitated by interconnected networks of capital. In order to travel along these networks workers must exchange the only part of themselves which is valuable, their labor.

The Frontier in *Sleep Dealer*

This section will examine how the notion of the frontier has evolved via the technology of the virtual world. Rivera’s film creates a complex and nuanced view of Mexican territory. While previous border films tend to be simplistic in their representations of Mexico, usually showing Mexico as a vast desert completely devoid of any signs of modernity, the Mexico shown in *Sleep Dealer* takes on a multitude of resonances. More specifically, given Rivera’s concern with binaries the film depicts two
different Mexicos: a Mexico stuck in the present and a Mexico of the future. *Sleep Dealer* is able to use Memo’s journey though the country to depict the border region as a hostile desert territory and as a modern metropolis. When we first meet the character of Memo we see that his home of Santa Del Rio is a place that seems to be stuck in the past. Memo’s home was designed to look the same today as it was 100 years ago. The house is a poor dilapidated structure erected in the middle of nowhere. In contrast to the advanced factories in Tijuana, Memo’s home lacks any sense of connectedness. It is that same lack of connectedness that causes Memo to yearn to go north where he believes his future lies.

In the aftermath of his father’s death Memo is forced to go on the run to the north, eventually making his way to the border town of Tijuana. The bordertown of *Sleep Dealer* differs from other border towns in Hollywood cinema. As the location for various sleep dealers Tijuana is filled with migrant laborers who are willing to surgically modify their bodies in exchange for employment. Similar to the border town in Orson Well’s *Touch of Evil* (1956), Tijuana is depicted as a corrupt community in which vice and crime (drugs gambling prostitution) carry on unabated. Given the importance of nodes and surgical enhancement what proves telling is how all these vices are given a technological spin. Here black-market node dealers and underground surgeons offer their services in dark alleys and backstreet corners on the border town. In one scene, Memo enters a border town bar only to discover laborers injecting their bodily nodes with needles as if it were a drug.
In spite of the futuristic technology on display in Tijuana the community still contains border zones and a hierarchic structure amongst its immigrant population. Memo soon discovers that migrant laborers from the south must live in squalid conditions on the outskirts of town while local workers have access to factories and resources within the town. As in previous depictions of the border in westerns and film noir, communities on the edge of the American border are seen as dens of corruption and crime. Unlike those border films however, Tijuana is not the setting for a colonialist fantasy or a playground for American travelers. Because the border is closed, Tijuana has become a technologically advanced company town where workers colonize their own bodies for as chance at virtual labor. While Memo’s journey northward to Tijuana reverses the traditional southward trajectory of American border films, *Sleep Dealer* still depicts the border town as a type of gateway community, a place where the body must be modified so that one can cross the border in the virtual world.

![Rudy controls drones flying over Mexico border](image)

Figure 37: Rudy controls drones flying over Mexico border

In the *Sleep Dealer* the border region has been transformed into a militarized frontier in a technological war for resources. Mexico that has become a highly
militarized series of border zones in which perimeter fences come armed with machine
guns and panoptic surveillance equipment monitors the movements of local residents.
Furthermore, in *Sleep Dealer’s* world, water has become a precious natural resource and
due to the construction of large corporate dams many of the Mexican population have
turned to so called “aqua terrorism” (the attacking of cooperate owned water supplies) in
order to survive. In an effort to guard against potential attacks from these aqua terrorists,
security forces patrol dams and power stations in communities along the border. In one
telling sequence, Memo and his father must walk several miles to a gated water reserve
that is guarded by surveillance cameras with a mounted machine gun. In order to even
get access to the water the two must pay a fee to the automated guard. This
mechanization of border security as depicted in *Sleep Dealer* could be dismissed as
simply the musings of a fantastical science fiction film. The virtual fortification of the
border region, however, has already begun.

In explaining the current state of border security in Arizona, chief of the Border
Patrol David Aguilar stated “We are living on the dividing line between the old Border
Patrol and the new patrol of the future” (qtd. in Archibold). The newer, more futuristic
border patrol is evidenced in the use of advanced surveillance technology in various
border towns in both Texas and Arizona. What was once the work of anti-immigrant
militia men and would-be cowboys nostalgic for a bygone era has now fallen to machines
programed 100 of thousands of miles away. For instance, the then Governor of Arizona
Jane Breuer proposed a multimillion dollar virtual fence which would be installed along
the state border in order to protect against drug traffickers and illegal immigrants. The
28-mile virtual fence would not entail any physical walls. Rather its walls would be virtual through the use of tracking GPS, radar, surveillance camera watchtowers and underground sensors. This technology augments the existing tactics of border enforcement through surveillance. Specifically, the virtual fences and cameras, set off by radar, are to beam high-quality images of targets miles away to field commanders and agents, making it possible to determine almost instantly when and where people where crossing the border illegally. The information is to then flow over a high-speed wireless network into laptops in dozens of Border Patrol vehicles that, in theory, would respond quicker and more efficiently to those security breaches than they currently do now. This type of virtual border enforcement has its proponents among those seeking tighter regulations on the border. For instance as means of protection his state against the perceived threat of terrorism, State Senator Bob Worsley has proposed putting 300 watchtowers, complete with the latest technology, to put what he called extra "eyes on the ground" capable of watching over the roughly 350 miles of border Arizona shares with Mexico.

Figure 38: Gated water reservoir in Sleep Dealer
The proliferation of virtual border fences as a means of securing the homeland echoes the post 9/11 rhetoric of the US Mexico border being the “Last Frontier in the War on Terrorism.” The emphasis on surveillance technology coupled with increasingly militarized border patrol agencies only strengthens the linking of immigration and the threat of terrorism. Because the border has been a physical boundary running thousands of miles and designating the both the end and beginning of a certain geographical space, certain regions of the border were always physically nonexistent. While some anti-immigrant voices advocated for the building of a border wall that would physically define the boundary between the two nations, vast areas of the border remained physically abstract. The appeal of a virtual border remains that it does not require the building of a physical wall. Through the use of strategically placed GPS posts and surveillance towers the border would be physically invisible, but still able to monitor and track those who crossed. In spite of the fact that this technology would cost taxpayers upwards of two billion dollars and has in the past accounted for less than one percent of arrest along the border, many branches of border patrol have already begun to implement these surveillance tools into the daily monitoring of the region.

The desire for ‘another pair of eyes’ explains the proliferation of the newest and most controversial tool for border security, unmanned drones. According to an investigation by the Associated Press, there have been about 10,000 drone flights over the border since these programs went into effect beginning in March 2013. Vastly

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9 As of January 2015 US Border Patrol had a fleet of nine unmanned Predator Drones patrolling the US/Mexico border.
expanding the range of the border patrol’s surveillance capacities, these unmanned drones are being deployed in an effort to control 900 miles of remote areas, allowing border patrol agents to focus their resources elsewhere. In an interview with the associated Press, Richard Gil Kerlikowske, the commissioner of the Border Patrol's parent agency, Customs and Border Protection, said his agency only had “finite resources in the situation. You want to deploy your resources to where you have a greater risk, a greater threat” (qtd. in Spagat and Skoloff). The proliferation of drone technology and surveillance technology along the US/ Mexico border points to a fundamental shift is how the culture conceives of frontiers in the digital age. By bringing the border into the virtual world, the ambiguities that once defined the physical border can be erased.

The surveillance aspect of drones is important to understanding the danger posed by their use in non-combat areas such as border spaces. The point of contention lies not simply in how unmanned drones are used as weapons in certain regions, but how they are used as a tool for information gathering by which targeting decisions are made. The remote controlled violence against those designated as enemies of the United States depends upon intensive aerial surveillance of bodies and movements on the ground below. The primary function of drone technology is their ability to seek, locate, and gather information which is subsequently transmitted back to their operators in the United States. The primary goal of drone surveillance in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was to collect overhead imagery that might prove tactically useful to soldiers and commanders in the ground.
In writing about the use of drone technology at home and abroad, Torin Monahan argues that these instruments are just the natural evolution of the desire for omniscience and surveillance that seeks to acquire knowledge through observation. Monahan states “The desire for omniscience through total visions a common motif in theoretical treatment of surveillance. These rationales of so called objective knowledge valorize the status quo while enforcing the exclusionary politics that denies or subjugates alternative ways of knowing” (243). In Monahan’s assessment, while the information that is gather from drones in assumed to be objective, the very nature of drones as an information gathering resource is fraught with potential errors. The drones used in war zones cannot distinguish between soldiers, or civilians, or in the case of the border, migrant workers, refugees, or drug dealers. In short, while the long computerized gaze of the drone is capable of tracking movements along the border, they are incapable of gathering or transmitting the motivations of the subject it is supposed to monitor, even as its records and transmits their actions. From the thousands of feet above the sky, differences among people are much less detectable or perhaps more accurately- the motivations that make certain groups cross the border maybe conflated with the overarching rive to engage the enemy. When these mechanisms and logics or surveillance are imported into non-combat setting, such as border zones and civilian territories, they may further the violent dehumanization and non-differentiation of people marked as other while expanding the scope of who can be included in the drones gaze.

It is the drone’s inability to distinguish between its subjects/targets that has led some border scholars and human rights groups to advocate against their use in civilian
areas. In questioning a soldier about the use of this technology the drone pilot stated, “Everyone looks like germs or like ants from a Hunter drone 15000 foot point of view, especially when the anthill breaks apart and everybody scatters in a dozen different directions. This particular articulation makes no distinction between “illegal immigrants’, political refugees or Mexican-American citizens” (qtd. in Monahan 244). In this aspect, the drone’s ambiguity towards its targets may be part of its appeal as a military weapon. In writing about the use of drones in border spaces Monahan goes onto say “The drone power further abstracts targets from political, cultural and geographical contexts thereby reducing variation and difference that may impede the action in question or introduce any moral ambiguity” (244). Place in this context, by reducing its subjects/targets to mere data, drones further normalize the ongoing dehumanization of those marked as other.

At its essence this virtualization of the frontier only strengthens the disciplinary powers of the border as it radically homogenizes these identities into a single cluster of racialized information that is used for remote controlled process of control and harm. Much like the migrant node workers of Sleep Dealer this disembodied technology reduces both its handlers and its targets to mere bodies. The bodies monitored below by drones become things to track monitor apprehend and kill. We can see the homogenizing effects of drones in Rudy’s rather clumsy murder of Memo’s father. As with real life drone operators, Rudy’s knowledge of the both the border region and the people who live there is totally reliant on the information gathered via surveillance from unmanned drones. Early in the film we learn that it was Rudy who was responsible for operating the
unmanned drone that had killed Memo’s father. As the film unfolds, Rudy become obsessed with tracking down Memo. Rudy does not want to kill Memo as much as he wants to apologize for the unjust murder he committed on behalf of America. As a drone pilot who enforces security along the border region, Rudy’s story serves as an important counterpoint to Memo’s. Both men are Latino; both men have ancestry in southern Mexico but unlike Memo Rudy was born in the United States. The similarities between Memo and Rudy extend to the virtual world as well. In operating an unmanned drone, Rudy has enhanced his body with the same type of cybernetic nodes as Memo has in his factory. Because these unmanned drones are operated virtually, Rudy is able to stay in America while through a series of automated movements operate the drone’s weapons thousands of miles away in Mexico. As with the Maquiladora factory system in Mexico, both Memo and Rudy perform a type of disembodied labor for machines that export that labor to a different geographic territory entirely. Through his cybernetic nodes Rudy is given a type of mobility in the virtual world but is still locked to the machines which interact with his body.

As with the cybraceros of Rivera’s previous film, unmanned drones aim to resolve the problem of being responsible for the physical body, in this case protecting the soldiers so they do not have to go to battle. This virtual enforcement of the borders contains no threat to American lives as the border presence can be enforced in the virtual world. In the context of Sleep Dealer, there are no more cowboys patrolling the frontier, as the American border is enforced/defined almost exclusively in the virtual world. Historically the frontier has marked the edge of civilization, often becoming a site for
American colonialist fantasy. The ambiguous yet ever expanding frontier was once the home of cowboys and bandits is now patrolled by unmanned drones and other machines. Today the border’s ambiguity has been remedied in the virtual world. As it is depicted in *Sleep Dealer* the virtual world has produced not just disembodied labor, but disembodied security as well. The film demonstrates this in its introduction of the Rudy character. In the film unmanned drones are not just used to patrol American borders they have also become the source of popular entertainment. Here, the TV show called “Drones”, similar to the reality TV show ‘COPS’, has become one of the most watched shows in the nation. Its structure consists of viewers watching real time footage from drones as they fires missiles at their targets (so-called aqua terrorist). It is even during one of the episodes of ‘Drones’ where Rudy mistakenly kills Memo’s father. In using unmanned drones in order to wipe out the Mexicans for the sake of corporate interests, *Sleep Dealer* shows a disturbing evolution of the Frontier Myth. Here, Mexicans fighting for access to water are targeted for extermination, similar to how the native population of America was wiped out in order to make way for the expanding Anglo civilization. In one brief scene, we see Memo watching a Western on his TV in which Native Americans are being massacred by cowboys, bored with the program Memo quickly changes the channel to the TV show “Drones”. This component of the film uses televised spectacle to demonstrate how the media undercuts class divisions produced by the border. The exploitation of Mexican migrant workers and their subsequent murder at the hands of American drones is reduced to entertainment or just another form of reality TV. In
showing cybernetically enhanced soldiers wiping out faceless Mexicans who have been dubbed terrorists the televised border has detached viewers from reality than revealing it.

Figure 39: Reality TV show based on unmanned drones

In *Sleep Dealer* the depiction of a militarized borderspace the film demonstrates how the technology employed on the battlefields of the Middle East has migrated to communities in the homeland. In this aspect, border security has merely been a training ground for a much more far reaching militarization of the homeland via domestic police forces. In the aftermath of the protest against police brutality in Ferguson Missouri in which peaceful protesters were confronted with a police force armed with tanks, grenades and automatic weapons, the national the growing militarization of the police was pushed into the national spotlight. For instance, in his reporting on the use of unmanned drones in police investigations, Michael Gould-Wartofsky revealed that in 2012 FAA fielded several request from various police departments and National Guard units to fly drones in domestic airspace during large citywide protest. In addition the Los Angeles Police Department in 2012 acquired several unmanned drones to use during various tactical events. This expanded militarization of the homeland extended beyond the border zone.
This dramatic change in police weaponry has been referred to by Arthur Rizer and Joseph Hartman as “weapons inflation”

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks when President Bush declared war on terrorism there has been an important yet often unrecognized shift in United States policy towards domestic policing. Given the preoccupation with the threat of terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 the role of combatting terrorism fell to the US military. During the waning days of the United States’ decade long occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military sold off large amounts of surplus equipment designated and designed for the battlefield to metropolitan police forces all across the country. In addition, many soldiers who came home from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan found employment in their local police departments. This practice of training local police to be less of a domestic peacekeeping force and more like soldiers fighting terrorists in a foreign land does have its roots in the responses to the perceived inadequacy of domestic police forces response to terrorism in the wake of 9/11. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, various police forces throughout the country not only purchased surplus military equipment, but adopted military training and sought to internalize a soldier’s mentality among their ranks.

Furthermore, the militarization of domestic policing in the United States coincided with the onset of two ongoing ‘wars’; the first being the War on Terror and the second being The war on drugs, which began in earnest in the 1980s which assumed much greater demission’s in the 2000s. In writing about the effects of police militarization in inner city neighborhoods Arthur Rizer and Joseph Hartman argue that this shift on police tactics has had detrimental effects in poor communities, particularly
communities of color. Normally nonviolent drug arrest, as well as other interactions with
civilians, turns into military style raids that quickly escalate into violent confrontations.
Rizer and Hartman argue that instead of maintaining a focus on keeping the peace many
police have assumed the characteristics of soldiers and have adopted a militaristic
strategy in domestic activities. Apart from intimidating to curtain communities the
practices have instilled a military style mentality a growing number of pole departments
as police see themselves akin to soldiers defending themselves in a foreign country.
This ‘Indirect Militarization” of domestic police forces occurs when those charged with
protecting the homeland force acquire certain military characteristics overtime. Instead
of just performing their standard function of enforcing the laws to protect property, police
began proactively to seek criminals and to use military strategy and tactics. Incentives
facing the military and the police departments results in the relationship between the two
whereby each benefits from expanded interactions. The military looking to extend its
powers expands its budget and increases its personnel, has an incentive to expand into
and exert influence over domestic police activities. By providing weapons training and
other resources to the police the military effectively augments the power of various
agencies and a number of personnel under its influence.

The shift in the practice of domestic policing marks an important evolution in the
notion of the frontier. As I have written about previously in regards to Three Burials, the
frontier was used to mark the expansion of American territory westward, demarcating the
uncivilized unconquered lands of Mexico from civilized and domesticated territory of the
Americas. In the aftermath of 9/11 the US/Mexico border became equated with a
boundary that secured America from potential attacks from terrorist interesting from the Mexican territory. Within post 9/11 political discourse the frontier myth was often used to characterize countries in the Middle East, thus offering justification to America’s subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. The increasingly militaristic stance of the various police agencies demonstrates how the tactics used to ‘pacify’ the frontiers of the Middle East have gradually made their way back to the homeland. Rather than guarding against threats from outside the nation’s borders, military weapons are being utilized to enforce the figurative borders within that divide rich and poor, black and white. In this aspect, the use of drones and other advanced military technology to control certain communities does resemble the Green Zone versus Red Zone geography depicted in *Children of Men*. In that scenario, various borders were erected not simply around a nation but within it to control the movements of those unlucky enough to be categorized as other. The weapons inflation on display in certain non-combat areas has a dramatic impact on certain communities particularly those that are poor and communities of color. By moving the weaponry of war from the battlefield to certain communities within the homeland and other non-combat areas, there is a heightened danger that the existing legal protections and rights of individuals within those communities will be violated in the process, thereby escalating the dehumanization that already harms marginalized populations.

As the rhetoric of frontier was used to characterize the wars in the Middle East, it was perhaps inevitable that technology that was used to enforce an aggressive foreign policy abroad would be used to enforce immigration policy at home. While the use of
digital surveillance technology points to an ongoing virtualization of the border space the drone technology displayed in the *Sleep Dealer* has its roots in the War on Terror. As we have seen depicted before in the film *Children of Men*, the tactics and technology used abroad to fight the War on Terror have migrated back to the homeland and are now being excised right on America doorstep.

The Boundaries of Home

The idea of home plays an important part in *Sleep Dealer*. The film’s three main characters (Memo, Rudy and Luz) have each been displaced from their homes either by circumstances or, as in Rudy’s case, displaced by choice. In addition, each of these characters attempts to form different communal connections within the border region. In creating a future where the virtual world is always in conflict with the physical makeup of the border, the very notion of home in the film falls into question. Through its juxtaposing of the virtual mobility offered in cyberspace with the physical restrictions of the border, *Sleep Dealer* reveals how the virtual world problematizes the geographical and ethnic assumptions that homeland is tied to a common ancestry history and bloodline. Furthermore, *Sleep Dealer* contradicts the assumption that the digital age would provide a borderless world. Rather, the film explores how boundaries of a nation are remapped and reformed in cyberspace allowing for newer forms of community to take hold across borders.

In the film we see Memo’s home is depicted as a place that is locked in perpetual stasis. Santa Del Rio is an image of Mexico as it would have appeared 100 years ago. Because the area’s water reduces have been exploited by corporations the once futile land
of the region has been turned into a desert. In depicting the state of Memo’s home, *Sleep Dealer* does convey a traditional somewhat stereotypical image of the country as a harsh desert landscape that is free of any signs of modernity. The idea of Santa Del Rio as a pre modern community is done in part in order to contrast it with the technologically advanced city of Tijuana. Home is not the idealized place in *Sleep Dealer*, unlike the depiction of home in *Three Burials* and *Frozen River* these three characters do not seek the creation of an ideal home that is found just beyond the border’s space. Rather the destruction of Memo’s home at the begging of the film presents an image of Mexico that is locked in the past and perhaps Memo’s father is unprepared for the hostility of life in the 21st century.

![Figure 40: The death of Memo’s father](image)

How does the cyberspace of *Sleep Dealer* change the notion of the Homeland? In both the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security and its use in post 9/11 political rhetoric, the notion of the homeland was defined by its closed and defensive connotations. In referencing her conception of homeland, Amy Kaplan examined how the linkage of home with a specific section of land contributed to growing nativist
attitudes in the wake of 9/11. Kaplan argues that the notion of homeland “plays a role in shoring up the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign. It does so not simply by stopping foreigners at the border, but by continually redrawing those boundaries everywhere throughout the nation, between Americans who can somehow claim the United States as their birthright, their native land, and immigrants and those who look to homelands elsewhere” (87). Home traditionally evoked associations with a specific physical space and a necessity of borders to define outside from inside. The nativist conceptions of home being locked to land also contribute to the expansion of military powers abroad as the best means of protecting the homeland. As Kaplan states “a relation exist between securing the homeland against the encroachment of foreign terrorists and enforcing national powers abroad. The homeland may contract borders around a fixed space of nation and nativity, but it simultaneously expands the capacity of the United States to move unilaterally across the borders of other nations” (88). While home may serve an important rhetorical function by policing the boundaries between domestic and foreign, such boundaries are not always apparent in the virtual world. Such nativist aspects of homeland work in tandem with the advances in virtual border technology on order to manifest the border power in the virtual world.

Similar to the story arc displayed in the Sleep Dealer, various advocates for immigrants’ rights are using both social media and mobile technology in order to challenge the border’s fixedness. For Instance, in 2010 border scholar and activist Ricardo Dominguez in conjunction with Electronic Disturbance Theater released phone app known as the Transborder Immigrant Tool (TBT), a mobile-phone technology that
provides poetry to immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border while leading them to water caches stashed in the Southern California desert. For Dominguez crossing the border is not a matter of politics or security, it is a simple matter of life and death. In attempting to cross the border hundreds of people have died over the years due to not being able to tell where they are in relation to where they have been and which direction they need to go in order to reach the north safely. With the rise of multiple geospatial information systems such as GPS and Google earth it is possible to develop mobile technology to assist those choosing to cross the border into the United States. In explaining the benefits of his phone app Dominguez states “This will allow a virtual geography to mark new trails and potentially safer routes across the desert of the real” (qtd. in Berens). The Transborder Immigrant Tool would not only offer immigrants access to this emerging virtual map economy, but the app is also designed to add an specific algorithm that would lay out the best routes and trails on that day and hour for immigrants to cross this landscape as safely as possible. By placing the technology previously used to track undocumented immigrants in the hands of those same individuals, activist such as Dominguez aims to deliberately subvert the authority of organizations like the border patrol. In Dominguez ‘s words “The Transborder Immigrant Tool would add a new layer of agency to this emerging virtual geography that would allow segments of global society that are usually outside of this emerging grid of hyper-geo mapping power to gain quick and simple access to GPS systems” (Quoted in Berens).
Technology such as the app offered by Ricardo Dominguez stands in stark contrast to the virtual border security technology currently being implemented in Texas and Arizona. While the virtual border technology attempts to impose state control over the mobility of immigrants through surveillance, in contrast Ricardo Dominguez virtual border tools aim to empower individuals crossing the border, subsequently lending a certain amount of agency and control over their journey which completely subverts the authority of border patrol. Both the virtual border fence and the immigrant border tool present two competing yet alternate geographies of the same space each filtered through virtualization to reframe the border and challenge its very existence.

In addition to using mobile technology to challenge to border’s power, certain diasporic communities have taken to social media to form online communities in the virtual world. In examining the use of online communities within the Eritrean diaspora, Victoria Bernal examined how refugees from Eritrea have been able to use a vast collection of websites and cybercafés to establish long distances communications among those in the diaspora, bringing about new forms of political participation. Bernal argues
that “transnationalism and the internet have been seen as breaking down certain barriers. Perhaps we should look not for a borderless world, but for a reconfiguration or remapping of the boundaries so that what might have been outside the margins of the nation is now more effectively incused within the larger framework of the imagined community” (165). Taking into account the type of connectivity offered by the internet, the conception of a public sphere and whose voices are included begins to expand outside American borders. While one cannot argue that a physical community is interchangeable with a cybercafé, the growing ability of various immigrant groups to form virtual communities in the digital world speaks to a redrawing of the boundaries of exclusion that characterize American borders. In short, communities that were once separated by the border can form a type of connection in the digital world. In this context, *Sleep Dealer* demonstrates how the boundaries of belonging and exclusion become redrawn in cyberspace.

The very technology used to prevent immigrant bodies from crossing the border has also expanded the ability of those same immigrant groups to form communities in the virtual world. The virtual labor offered by the *Sleep Dealer* factories just one of the forms of connection found in the film. Throughout the story we see family members correspond with other family members via the internet. Via nodes, creative workers sell their real life memories over the web to the highest bidder. Most importantly, drone pilots such as Rudy are able to view the memories of the individuals targeted by their weapons. Each of these connections are formed in cyberspace and across national borders. The
various modes of connectivity displayed in *Sleep Dealer* demonstrate how the boundaries of the homeland become more perforated and fluid within cyberspace.

In the film, the character of Luz is able to physically plug herself into the internet and communicate with a virtual community. Using a technology called *Tru Node*, Luz is able to upload her story about Memo to the internet. It is here that she shares the story of his exile from his home enabling which in turn leads Rudy to begin his search for the fugitive. Luz’s virtual community is a vast global network of refugees and other immigrant workers who have each been displaced from their homes. Through the connections offered by the networks of cyberspace these various groups are able to form a community beyond the borders that separate them.

While the connections of cyberspace do enable Luz to form a type of virtual community, the film also demonstrated how the connections between various immigrants groups and their home are very tenuous. In one important scene we see Memo attempting to speak with his brother and mother back home via an advanced video phone. Upon receiving his first paid wages from his factory job, Memo is able to send money instantaneously back home to Mexico. The amount of his money transfer home is significantly reduced from $227 to $180 due to high taxes. What becomes clear through this exchange is how the *Sleep Dealer* factories have orchestrated to prevent migrants such as Memo from forming networks or communities of any kind in the host country; every aspect of the permitted migration, including virtual connections and correspondence, is tightly controlled.
As with the virtual labor he performs in the *Sleep Dealer* factory, Memo’s relationship with his family has become virtual as well, as it is mediated through the networks of telecommunications. In this respect, the immigrant’s connections to a home are reliant on the pre-established networks of communication which are controlled by businesses interest which seek to exploit immigrant labor. Memo’s dilemma is does illustrate the problems of many real life migrant workers who must send *remesas* (money sent from host country to their families back in their host country). Like countless immigrant workers in real life, Memo is no longer a physical presence in his family. Rather he is forced to support them ‘via wire’ as he sends then the money he has accumulated as a disembodied node worker. In this respect, the immigrants connections to their home and family are reliant on the pre-established networks of communication which are controlled by the same businesses interest which seek to exploit immigrant labor.

Lastly there is the character of Rudy, his position as both a drone pilot and as a Mexican–American citizen place him in stark contrast to the outsider status of Lusk and Memo. It is through Luz’s *Tru Node* uploads that Rudy is able to connect with Memo and learn his responsibility in the death of his innocent father. Upon expressing remorse for the death of an innocent man Rudy’s family assures him he was just doing his patriotic duty to the United States. In this exchange, Rudy exclaims: “Most of the time I don’t feel anything. I killed a man”. His mother comforts him by saying; “We are so proud of you. You don’t know what that man was going to do; you don’t know how many people you saved.” These responses by Rudy’s parents could point to how
immigrant families conform fully to the values of their host country. Because Rudy is a militarized node worker who is allowed virtual mobility through the border, he cannot distance himself from the violent events he participated in outside the homeland. As with Memo’s virtual travel to America via the Sleep Dealer factory, the boundaries which once separated here from there have begun to collapse making the connections between the two more pronounced. As a result of his connectivity to the border space Rudy is afflicted with guilt over the death of Memos father, as a result his characters privileged American home life. Rudy carries the murder he committed in Mexico hack with him to America. Ultimately home is not a place either Memo or Rudy can return to. Through the connections of the virtual world the character of Rudy is able to form a temporary alliance with both Luz and Memo to help destroy the corporate damn is Santa Del Rio. The connection formed between the three characters is not built around the desire for a physical home. The solidarity they share is in keeping with the trans-border alliances formed in Three Burials, Frozen, River, and Children of Men.

Sleep Dealer attempts to explore the different types of mobility allowed in the virtual world. In doing so the film shows how advances in virtual technology have led to an expansion of the border’s disciplinary powers. While traversing the border had proven difficult for many immigrant groups, much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric that had proliferated in the wake of 9/11 aimed to further control the movement of people across national borders. In addition much of the concerns over the mobility of undocumented immigrants centers on responsibility for their physical presence in the homeland. The post 9/11 era corresponded with the onset of global connectivity spurred on by various
forms of technology. While the connectivity of the digital world does enable a type of virtual mobility, the borders power is still exercised in the virtual world through the practice of disembodied labor. *Sleep Dealer* demonstrates the practice of separating the body into a virtual form, allowing for the circulation of global commerce while simultaneously immobilizing nonnative people in their country of origin.
CONCLUSION: BORDERS IN POST 9/11 FILM

At the conclusion of this work I am compelled to return to the beginning. The genesis of this research began with the observation by Ali Bedhad who, in his analysis of American immigration policy states “the border is not as simple as an arbitrary boundary demarcating one nation from another, but a disciplinary apparatus that, “articulates notions of national identity, citizenship, and belonging” (109). Throughout this dissertation, I have explored how borders articulate notions of belonging, identity and alienness through their depictions in film. Rather than being thought of as a simple territorial marker, this work has reframed the border as a complex disciplinary apparatus whose function is to apply definition to ambiguous spaces and identities. While one cannot overlook the clear geographical component of borders, my work has synthesized film history and the history of America’s ever-changing polices toward its borders. In creating an interdisciplinary triangle which brought together the fields of 9/11 Studies, Border Studies, and Genre Studies, my work has traced the discursive effects of borders beyond their geographical location.

As I have pointed out in previous chapters, the traditional definition has defined the border in mere geographical terms or simply as an international boundary between two nation-states. In my research, I have demonstrated how much of post- 9/11 border policy was characterized by direct attempts to uphold the rigid territorial boundaries of the homeland. As a response to the 9-11 attacks, both policymakers and large majorities of the American public sought to re-frame or in some cases physically reconstruct the border as a fixed finite boundary which separated one nation from another. In this work
I have used the 9-11 attacks as a historical moment which marks a paradigm shift in the way America understood its boundaries. My work has examined the ways in which the responses to the terrorist attack were used as means to both delineate and strengthen the boundaries between one nation and another. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, various discourses successfully re-framed the attacks on the twin towers as a particularly American tragedy. Such post 9-11 nationalism thus worked to reproduce what Benedict Anderson famously referred to as a national “imagined community.” This US nationalism, formed around fear and retribution, would result in a vast expansion of the state security apparatus that sought to overhaul control of immigration, security, and mobility.

The films which I have analyzed provide a context for challenging nativist discourses that stem from the anxieties surrounding the border’s security. If the border gets its power from separation and division the border films I examine center around slippage and points of disruption in the region around which counterhegemonic narratives can be formed. While each of these texts can be viewed individually, my project has drawn certain conclusions regarding the three themes with which this research began.

In relation to genre, this work has demonstrated how the cultural perceptions of certain border spaces have always been articulated through the language of popular Hollywood genres such as the western and film noir. Through my analysis of a particular cycle of border films this work has demonstrated how a deconstruction of certain genre films offers a means of challenging the essentialist attitudes toward other cultures.
In regards to the notion of home, this work links this larger institutionalization of
the homeland through the establishment of ‘homeland security’ to nativist practices
which have permeated discussions about American borders. Perhaps the most significant
development in the response to 9-11 was the creation of a new department of Homeland
Security. The framing of America as a “home” is in itself a powerful rhetorical device as
a link between a collective citizenry and a certain section of land. In regards to borders
and immigration homeland plays a role in empowering borders and boundaries between
the domestic and the foreign, the inside and the outside. It does so not simply by
stopping immigrants at the geographical border, but by continually redrawing those
borders everywhere throughout the nation. This association inevitably creates a conflict
between Americans who can somehow claim the United States as their home, their
birthright, and those whose homelands are elsewhere and are rendered as inexorably
foreign, alien, or other.

In addition, this cycle of border films suggests the potential for a new concept of
home both figurative and literal that are based on tangible friendships and not imagined
communities. The film *Three Burials* challenges the domestic/foreign binary created by
the evocation of the homeland. In *Three Burials*, we see the depiction of a friendship
between an American cowboy and Mexican cowboy who is also an illegal immigrant.
The two men create a multilingual friendship that is shared across borders. It is only
through the intervention by a racist border patrol agent that the life of the Mexican
cowboy is taken. The relationship between two men is juxtaposed with the prisoner/
prison guard relationship formed between Mike and Pete which forms after their crossing
the border into Mexico. Through their illegal journey into Mexico, both Pete and Mike Norton lose the privileges of American citizenship and are reduced to a primal state of exile. While the film goes to great lengths to show the abuses suffered by Mexican immigrants as they attempt to cross the border, it is still the white male that must be enlightened and redeemed by the odyssey into the west. In contrast to previous depictions in border film, *Three Burials* shows the militarized enforcement of the homeland’s borders as a destructive act. At the end of his journey into Mexico, Pete chooses to build his friend a crudely formed home out of rocks, mud, and debris. It is in this home where Pete is finally able to lay Melquiades to rest. Much is being buried in this border film, the western, the frontier myth, and the cowboy, but out of the past the film suggests the creation of something new: a new home that is not bounded by geographic or racial. Even more so than *Three Burials*, *Frozen River* brings into contrast the difference between an imagined community of a nation and the tangible communities and friendships that are formed at the border space.

The idea of home plays an important role in *Frozen River* as well. Through an alliance between two women who live on opposite sides of the border, Ray and Lila are able to overcome the laws of two nations and form a new familial unit with Lila taking care of Ray’s children. Furthermore, Ray’s broken home (the house is literally fire damaged trailer) is figuratively repaired by the actions of Lila. It is fitting that *Frozen River* ends with a shot of Ray’s new mobile home being delivered to her. A house which strangely enough is purchased with the money she had earned from smuggling people across the border. Like we have seen previously with *Three Burials*, *Frozen River*
evokes the idea of a new home. These new homes in these films can be seen a hopeful and inclusive spaces that stand in contrast to the militarized border spaces the characters tried previously to cross.

In *Children of Men* we see a homeland that has been turned into a militarized borderspace. More specifically we see a homeland that has two distinct geographies, while citizens like Theo can move freely through out this space, those categorized aliens are arrested and imprisoned. While the characters in *Children of Men* do not seek a home in the traditional sense the search for the Tomorrow vessel does illustrate a desire for refuge, safety, and a place free of the nativist restrictions of the homeland.

In *Sleep Dealer* we see how both the border and homeland is being transformed in the virtual world. At the start of its story, traditional Mexican home is destroyed by American drones, forcing its main character to flee north to join an emerging community that is formed in the virtual world. In these films, the homes and communities are formed in spite of borders and become populated by multiethnic groups and are not enforced by exclusion.

This research has also pointed out how the myth of the frontier has been employed in discourses of the border. The creation of the US/Mexico border has been described as one of America’s last frontiers. These colonialist attitudes were even shared by film noir and the classical Hollywood western. The films discussed in this project each challenge the notion of the frontier and argue for a more nuanced understanding of communities in and around the borderspace, by showing the perilous journey from an American to a Mexican town that does not exist. *Three Burials* is a western that seeks to
atone for the racist portrayals of Mexico and Mexicans which has characterized the genre. In setting its story in a disputed territory, *Frozen River* illustrates a dramatic reversal of frontier myth. In its crossing scenes we see this reversal previously used to characterize the border between the United States and Mexico. Only in this instance, the frontier is not being used to displace indigenous people in order to make way for white settlers. Rather its ambiguity has opened up a frontier of free trade, albeit one that indirectly benefits the Mohawk population. A new conception of frontier is perfectly in line with the previous claims shared by St Regis Mohawks that the moving of goods through the territory is a form of free trade between nations. In *Sleep Dealer* the frontier has been brought into the virtual world. Furthermore, the violence that occurs at the border has been augmented with technology from the War on Terror, further extending the border’s paradigm outside its geographic setting to various communities within the homeland.

In the wake of 9-11 movements across borders were viewed through the lens of terrorism. In examining the various border crossing scenes, my work has demonstrated the role of race and citizenship in regards to mobility in and around borders. In *Three Burials* we see a bigoted border patrol agent who has the power to control movements across the US/Mexico border undergo a journey toward redemption. By showing the border patrol agent being kidnapped and forcibly exiled to Mexico the film reverses the trajectory of exclusion that has characterized enforcement of the border. *Frozen River* further emphasizes the relationship between race and mobility. The film’s narrative demonstrates how white skin enables its American characters to have a wide ranging ability to cross back and forth between the US and Canada territories. The racial alliance
that is eventually formed in the film by a Mohawk woman and a white woman allows them to overcome the border’s ability to legitimate certain movements. In *Children of Men*, the city of London is divided into Green Zones for citizens and a Red Zones for non-citizens. In contrasting the two differing geographies the film illustrates the relationship between mobility and citizenship. While *Children of Men*’s main protagonist Theo is able to move freely throughout the militarized city, through the use of the long take, his movements are visually contrasted with the stagnation of the city’s refugee population. Furthermore, this work has argued that with the onset of virtual surveillance technology, G.P.S., and virtual border fences we have seen the border disciplinary powers extend into the digital space. In addition this work has argued how the virtual mapping of the border has allowed advocates for immigrant rights to circumvent the border’s disciplinary powers providing a newfound agency to those who wish to cross.

This project has explored how these border films have each problematized the assumptions about where a community begins and ends. By showing how the border operates within these various genres we can better understand how the discursive effects of borders extend beyond their geographical location. Films about the border present an image of a region where ambiguity is not eliminated but embraced. Representations of borderspaces allow for an alternative understanding of a certain space and force viewers to confront the complex, often unpleasant, effects of the War on Terror. By questioning the historical traditional understanding of the border space this discussion seeks a more nuanced portrayal of American history and a more humane approach to the how the border is framed within popular discourse. In spite of their increased militarization,
borders do present us with an opportunity to rethink and understand how the American community will evolve in the globalized world.

The interdisciplinary triangle this project has utilized could be applicable in future areas of research. In regards to genre studies, the virtualization of American borders and the militarization of the domestic police has been examined in several recent science fiction films. For instance, the plot of the film Robocop (José Padilha 2014) explores the militarization of the police for deployment in war zones abroad and urban areas at home. As seen previously with Sleep Dealer, the film depicts a story in which the human body is not only enhanced with technology, but how such technology changes the geography of certain spaces, collapsing the distinctions between human and machine. In addition Chappie (Neil Blomkamp 2015) tells the story of a robot police officer trained to combat urban crime. Blomkamp’s film expands on the concept of disembodiment as some of its human characters eventually transcend the borders of the human body and achieve a type of consciousness in the digital world. Similar to the film examined in this work, this new cycle of border film expand upon the idea of militarized borders and designating certain groups as alien.

In addition, by synthesizing border studies with film studies I wish this work to contribute to a growing field of scholarship that denaturalize the border’s presence. The films I have discussed each speak directly to the policy changes and cultural anxieties that have permeated the nation in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Now at a time when so much of the national dialogue concerns securing the border from the threat of terrorism, who will be included in the American community and who will not be, it is important to
understand how cinema can challenge and shape the way we understand other people and places. The films I have discussed illustrate how such an understanding can be achieved. This understanding is achieved when the heroic cowboy sets aside the regressionist myth of the frontier and atones for his troubled past. It is when the border is seen as an open landscape and not as a gateway for terrorists. It is in the recognition of the immigrant as a mother, and in resisting the stigma of alienness in the face of global extinction. The proliferation of films about borders and immigration in the 21st century implies a strong need to rethink our definitions of home, alien, and frontiers. My wish for this work is that it will ultimately contribute to the ongoing study of how borders function and fit into a larger discussion of how film represents other people and places.


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