Semiospheric Borders and the Erasure of Latinx Subjectivity in *Culture Shock* and *Sleep Dealer*

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Abstract

Recreating the problematic relationship between the US government and the influx of migrant laborers, the films *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and *Culture Shock* (2019) both reflect a state of exception existing on the US–Mexico border. In both films, the border is represented as a peripheral locus where the migrant subject is emptied of humanity and political subjectivity, in thrall to the panopticon embodied by the American immigration and border enforcement system. In their real world, the migrant protagonists are denied access to the central, culturally dominant space; instead, they are offered a virtual realm, a digital access that is subordinated to the level of legitimacy they achieve. The blurring between the organic and the cybernetic contributes to shaping a dehumanized borderland realm, in the service of a nativist state power that tries to obliterate the presence of migrants despite their fundamental role in the US capitalist economy. However, the cyborg subject embodies the possibility of resistance to that same power. Relying on their humanity, and yet through the projected digital versions of themselves, the protagonists can eventually counter the dominant order—albeit mostly to an individual extent. Drawing on the relatively extensive academic literature on *Sleep Dealer*, this analysis highlights similarities and differences between the two films, focusing in particular on *Culture Shock* and how its virtual reality device allows an expansion on the topics of forced assimilation and erasure of Latinx subjectivity.

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Reproducing digital spaces connected to the US–Mexico border, the films *Sleep Dealer* (2008) and *Culture Shock* (2019) both reflect an existing state of exception whose pivot is represented by the boundary and Latin American migration to the United States. Both films overtly tackle the problematic relationship between the US government and the influx of migrant laborers, which has historically influenced the related policy making and, consequently, the course of transnational migration fluxes.

In both films, the border is represented as a peripheral locus where the migrant subject is emptied of humanity and political subjectivity, in thrall to the panopticon embodied by the American immigration and border enforcement system. In their real worlds, the migrant protagonists are denied access to the central, culturally dominant space; instead, they are offered virtual realms, a means of digital access that is subordinated to the level of legitimacy they can achieve. Despite the apparently futuristic characterization, the peripheral cyberspace inhabited by the migrant—as opposed to the dominant cultural core—shares evident similarities with the reality of the existing US border system. The resultant blurring of the organic and the cybernetic contributes to shape a dehumanized borderland realm,[1] in the service of a nativist state power that tries to obliterate the presence of migrants despite their fundamental role in the US capitalist economy.

Alex Rivera's and Saul Guerrero's constructions of virtual semiospheric realities reflect the asymmetrical relationship between the United States and the migrant subject. At the same time, though, the cyborg subject embodies the possibility of resistance to that same power through what David Dalton calls "robo-sacer resistance," a dynamic that "occurs when oppressed individuals and communities employ technologies of domination in subversive ways that reject the reigning biopolitics."[2] It

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is, indeed, in the liminal spaces where their condition relegates them to that forms of creative resistance flourish, exploiting the technology that is meant to exploit their bodies. Relying on their humanity, and yet through the projected digital versions of themselves, the protagonists can eventually counter the dominant order—albeit mostly to an individual extent. Drawing on the relatively extensive academic literature on *Sleep Dealer*, this analysis highlights similarities and differences between the two films, focusing in particular on *Culture Shock* and how its virtual reality device expands on the topics of forced assimilation and erasure of Latinx and Latin American subjectivity.[3]

The Borderlands as Transnational Digital Semiosphere

Assuming a critical stance infused with Latinx futurism, Peruvian American director Alex Rivera began to work on the exploitation of immigrant labor in the mid-1990s. The feature-length film *Sleep Dealer* expands on his preexisting audiovisual work focused on the US–Mexico border. In fact, Rivera had already depicted the concept at the basis of the Bracero Program and the discourse intrinsic to its propaganda in various ways prior to *Sleep Dealer*, recreating cyborg versions of Mexican laborers who could work for American firms without actually entering US territory.[4] In 2019, the streaming platform Hulu launched the tenth installment of its anthology series *Into the Dark* dedicated to horror reinterpretations of US national holidays. Thematically connected to the celebration of the Fourth of July, *Culture Shock*, directed by Mexican Canadian Gigi Saul Guerrero, focuses on the crossing of the US–Mexico border by a group of migrants and their consequent imprisonment in a border facility, where they are used as test subjects in an experimental program for brainwashing and assimilating Latinx migrants. In both films, the borderlands—both geographically and metaphorically—come across as a fundamental backdrop and almost a character themselves.

Considering the borderlands as a semiotic space, the region can be seen as the peripheral part of the semiosphere as intended by Juri Lotman,[5] as well as scholars working on cultural semiotics expanding on the work of the founder of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School—which explores the heterogeneity of the cultural polyglotism inherent to semiotic systems.[6] The semiosphere is characterized by a mechanism of self-descriptive centralization that "articulates the separating/defensive and the constitutive functions of the border,"[7] creating an idealized description that corresponds to a dominant cultural hierarchy and a perceived homogeneity. Reflected in the power asymmetries peculiar to the related social structure, such hierarchy establishes the differences between a dominant—ideally homogenized—core and the peripheral "outskirts,"[8] as well as the boundaries external and internal to the semiosphere. The border of the semiosphere represents "a multiplicity of points, belonging

simultaneously to both the internal and external space" and thus, a locus of translation between the heterogeneous elements coming from both the external stimuli and the internal boundaries that define what is other than the core.[9] Characterized by the opposition and, at the same time, dialogue between the core and the border, the entire semiospheric space is "transected by boundaries of different levels, boundaries of different languages and even of texts."[10] The topography of the semiosphere is, in fact, "discontinuous and heterogeneous,"[11] while its border and internal boundaries embody a "bilingual mechanism" connecting "different semiotic systems and [opening] them to an inexhaustible interplay across borders."[12]

In more concrete terms, the borderlands are characterized by a blend of elements that evidently are opposed to the sociocultural core represented by the dominant US culture—Anglo, monoglossic, middle-class, and Protestant (Illustration 1). Spanish-speaking communities—as well as communities sharing Mexican heritage—function as connection between the core and the Mexican space external to the US American semiosphere; at the same time, the Spanish language constitutes an internal boundary. Likewise, migrant labor exploitation—and the consequent interdependence between Mexico and the United States—functions as a connection to the core and yet, it establishes internal boundaries that isolate migrants to varying extents.

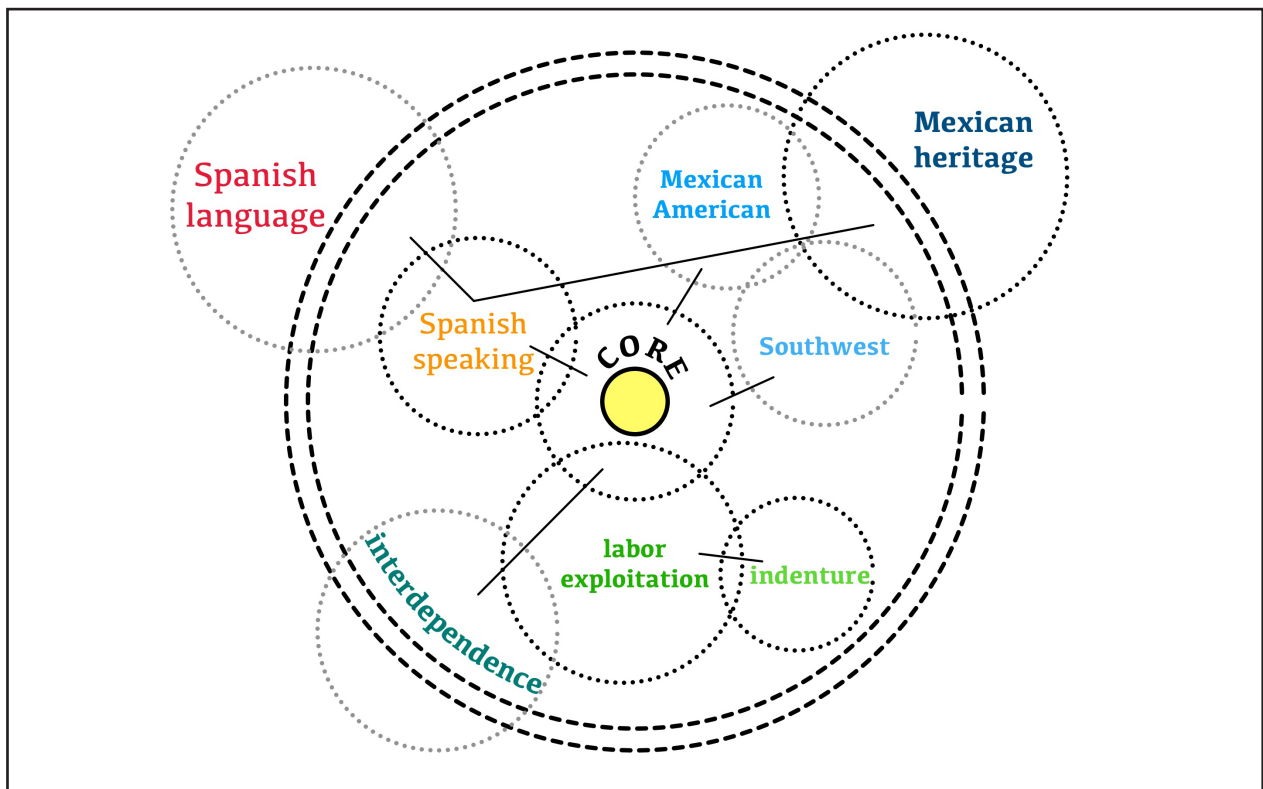In both *Sleep Dealer* and *Culture Shock*, the borderlands embody the semiosphere's

Illustration 1: Example of how the US–Mexico borderlands can be intended as a semiospheric boundary. Author's illustration.

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boundary, a porous place where exchange and necessary translation happen. The transnational border region represents a geographic location and a metaphorical locus of encounter, where a mediation of otherness is necessary in both senses. It is, in fact, a space where "penetration, filtering and the transformative processing of the external to the internal" are regulated.[13] Furthermore, the borderland futurity—embodied by the digital heterotopic dimensions in which the migrant characters move—is made possible by the existence of a transnational cyberspace. Given the global character of the digital semiosphere,[14] cyberspace can be considered a self-descriptive semiosphere as intended by Lotman, characterized by a "constant exchange with other semiospheres" and in "a permanent process of self-transformation resulting in an ongoing growth of signs and culture."[15] The nature of the borderland cyberspace is still inherently peripheral. The access to the digital dimension does not change the peripheral, boundary-ridden position of the migrants who are granted with it; rather, it reflects their contrast with the dominant sociocultural core and evidences the power asymmetry they remain subjected to. The digital semiosphere reproduces and, to an extent, amplifies such power disparity, relegating the migrants to a subordinated subjectivity that they—apparently—cannot escape. In the two films, the protagonists' "upgrade" to cyborg subjects keeps them under control and avoids any deviance from the established pattern of assimilation.

The Migrant Body: Location and Exploitation

In the 1990s, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) established the transnationalization of corporations and the circulation of goods, but not the free movement of people.[16] *Maquiladoras* became the symbol of a context marked by power asymmetry: transnational companies would exploit cheap Mexican labor force by situating their manufacturing lines south of the border, avoiding the migration of their workers into US territory.[17] As they settled along the border in order to produce for American companies, the migrants' labor was disembodied to become "actually embodied in the exported products,"[18] despite the systematic "devaluation of the Mexican body as it feeds into the US labor market."[19] The neoliberal functioning of the latter depends on the presence of Latinx laborers. Such interdependence can be traced in the history of border- and immigration-related US policy-making.

Border science fiction has often favored horizontal paradigms, which articulates power relations that are "not between upper and lower worlds but across spaces whose interdependence is as pronounced as their inequalities."[20] However, both films analyzed also tackle vertical paradigms, reclaiming a digital realm that allows them to defy economic and ethnic hierarchies, and they do so from two different perspectives. The most evident difference lies in their premises and is represented by the location in which the migrant protagonists are allowed to access the digital semio-

sphere. In *Sleep Dealer*, the workers migrate from their towns to the US–Mexico border to work for US companies in facilities that are physically located on the Mexican side. In *Culture Shock*, migrants are kidnapped as they cross the national boundary and held in a facility north of the border, where the US federal government can exert its sovereign authority.

In *Sleep Dealer*, Rivera expands on the notion of a cyber connection to human neural networks in order to operate mechanized robots,[21] imagining a border futurity in which the role and meaning of human agency is instrumental to the functioning of a regime of technologized labor.[22] The film reprises the idea at the basis of the director's short film *Why Cybraceros?* (1997), using footage of the original videos promoting the Bracero Program in 1959 and creating a new kind of *bracero* or agricultural laborer. Both works play with the discursive justification of the program, which pretended to regulate immigration by channeling it according to US economic needs, exploiting the migrants' labor seasonally and "sending them back" to Mexico when their physical presence was not required. Rivera pushes these conceptual boundaries and locates his migrants south of the border, connecting them to virtual reality machines that allow them to operate robots for US-based corporations—transforming them into workers "who [pose] no threat of becoming citizen[s]."[23] Through its evident connections to the Bracero Program,[24] Rivera's work exposes quite realistic "white supremacist fantasies built around the possibility of extracting a maximum of labor from workers of color, without having to deal with the materiality of their bodies, their rights, their culture, and above all, their presence."[25] In this dystopic reality, Memo (Luis Fernando Peña) dreams of becoming a node-worker employed by these transnational companies. When his father is killed by a drone attack in defense of water resources controlled by American corporations, he migrates northbound, gets his nodes implanted by a "coyotech"—a cyber version of the coyote—and finds a job as a virtual construction worker in what can be described as a "digital sweatshop."[26] In *Sleep Dealer*, the migrant body remains confined south of the border, where it is technologically mediated and exploited to produce capital carrying out manual labor at distance through automata. A futuristic form of *maquiladora* is thus reproduced, and the migrant peons conduct their existence mostly in a digital world that drains their energies in real life. Tijuana becomes a "terminal city,"[27] as laborers physically converge there, and their bodies become terminals for the *infomaquila*'s network. The reconstruction of the border city as the place to where migrants move in order to find jobs as node-workers is not a fictional backdrop; rather, it reproduces the reality of the border and the topography of the *maquila*. Shanty towns and factories influence—and mirror—the workers' lives, their bodies becoming just as degraded and unwanted, physically unwelcome within the labor market.[28]

Conversely, in *Culture Shock*, the migrant body is physically allowed to enter US

territory, but its presence is counteracted by isolating it and allowing it agency exclusively in a virtual dimension. The first part of the film follows Marisol Ramírez's (Martha Higareda) attempts to move to the United States in search for a better job. During her first try, she was raped and abandoned by her boyfriend; heavily pregnant, she decides to try again on her own, relying on a local coyote and crossing with a group of fellow Mexican and Central American migrants. The undocumented migration process is reconstructed in a realistic way, showing contexts and situations typical of the immigrant experience. Through all the stages of the crossing, the asymmetrical power relation between the coyotes and the migrants is evident. The smugglers treat all of them ruthlessly, bullying each of them according to the migrant archetype they represent. Besides Marisol—the abused/abusable woman crossing alone—one of the main characters is Santo Cristobal (Richard Cabral), a heavily tattooed Central American gang member who needs to enter the United States to carry out a criminal task. He is depicted as devoted to the syncretic cult of the Santa Muerte, characterized by esoteric practices and—despite its social transversality[29]—popularly associated with criminal organizations, which often venerate the eponymous skeletal embodiment as a patron figure. Ricky (Ian Inigo) is a Guatemalan child traveling alone, carrying fake Mexican documents in the hope that they will make his life easier during the trip and across the border. Historically, Central American migrants crossing Mexico are often victims of racism and differential treatment due to their origin—through forms of discrimination that Gregory Nava's seminal film *El Norte* (1983) reproduced accurately and that are still current. However, the characterization fails at updating to more recent policies regarding the migrants' nationality: since 2008, unaccompanied Central American minors apprehended by US border enforcers are now bound to go through an assessment process, whereas minors carrying Mexican documents are liable to be immediately expelled and transported south of the border.[30] By depicting such a diverse—albeit archetypical—group of people, *Culture Shock* gives a sense of the multifaceted reality of makeshift crossing parties and references both fictional and documentary representations of Mexican and US American xenophobic discrimination. As it happens in most films depicting undocumented migration, each migrant is alone in their attempt, even though temporary solidary connections are established between the components of the group.

After days in the desert, the group is detained by the Border Patrol and brought to a detention center run by a nondescript militarized agency. In the facility, the migrants are attached to virtual reality machines, drugged, and projected into an idealized American suburban village they cannot escape. The foreign migrant body is emptied of its cognitive function and reduced to a shell attached to machines in order to be culturally assimilated—and to obliterate its subjectivity. Once they have assimilated the American Dream ideological construct, the brainwashed migrants

can be introduced to American society, posing no threat to the preservation of the dominant cultural system. The forced assimilation seems to be the necessary passage to ensure the exploitation of the completely "Americanized" migrant worker, who is stripped of the "alien" ethnic component to become acceptable for integration. Such a narrative construction speaks indirectly to the contemporary debate on post-racialism and the overlapping color-blind racial ideology in the United States. Barack Obama's electoral and presidential speeches were characterized by a post-racial discourse, stressing an alleged race-neutral universalism and successful overcoming of racial differences. If, on the one hand, this kind of discourse admits that "racial progress exists alongside ongoing discrimination and salience of race," on the other hand, it condemns those who "fail to acknowledge" such alleged racial progress.[31] Post-racialist ideologies contribute to a sociocultural process that aims at rendering invisible the still-existing racial structural violence. Imagining a dystopic reality in which the bodies of Latinx immigrants become a shell "refilled" with dominant ideological constructs, Saul Guerrero builds a universe in which the phenotype and overall physical aspect of migrants is no longer a source of discrimination per se if—and only if—they renounce their ethnic consciousness, heritage, and native language.

Digitalized Cross-Border Dehumanization

The militarization of the US–Mexico border has been progressively implemented in particular since the mid-1980s, linked to restrictive immigration measures and the construction of a border security apparatus.[32] The Border Patrol's Operation Blockade—also known as Operation Hold-the-Line—initiated in 1993 in El Paso marked a shift in the approach to border enforcement, transforming it from a low-intensity conflict to a system based on "prevention through deterrence." Operation Gatekeeper (launched by the Clinton administration in 1994) led to the start of the controversial construction of a militarized infrastructure along the whole US–Mexico borderline, involving a significant increase in surveillance equipment and workforce to achieve operational control of the border. The security measures taken on a national level in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks deeply affected the handling of border issues as well, exacerbating the notion of the necessity of deterrence strategies. In 2003, the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was formed, integrating the Border Patrol, and the Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) agency was created to exert control on illegal cross-border activities; both federal law enforcement divisions operate under the US Department of Homeland Security. The Secure Fence Act (2006) allowed the following administrations to further strengthen the existing infrastructure and increase the use of surveillance technology, as well as biometric profiling and tracking.

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Among the most contentious measures that characterize the management of undocumented immigration has been the application of "indefinite detention of migrants and the imposition of restrictions on asylum granting, as well as the limitation to opportunities of trial upon detention and obtainment of a provisional legal status."[33] Carried out in ICE facilities, detention becomes indefinite both in a legal and temporal sense: its extrajudicial quality is particularly problematic, as it corresponds to a suspension of judicial order peculiar to states of exception, in which the judicial exception becomes the norm justified by sovereign power.[34] In fact, the border can be identified as "a permanent state of exception which renders the limit of the sovereign possible and unproblematic."[35] Its apparatus based on surveillance and security enforcement has progressively evolved into a highly militarized infrastructure, connected to the carceral complex with a plethora of facilities in which the migrants are handled upon detention and until their deportation. With the implementation of biometric profiling, the sovereign state can exert its power supported by—and at the same time fueling—security-related concerns and discourses, as "securitization has become another hegemonic discourse" increasingly pervading the public sphere.[36] Despite anti-immigrant movements and biased media coverage of border issues, the number of yearly apprehensions of Latin American immigrants crossing the US–Mexico border has been oscillating in the same range since the mid-1970s,[37] mostly influenced by local political unrest and transnational economic cycles. The construction of a "crisis at the border" discourse has contributed to legitimize the creation and maintenance of a state of exception, characterized by extrajudicial practices, a suspension of the constitutional normative structure, and the exercise of a Foucauldian power over life and right of death.[38] Such kind of discourse is usually based on nativist tropes and populist discursive strategies focused on a xenophobic characterization of the border,[39] fueling the depiction of immigrants as a threat to both the state's security and the integrity of the idealized American society. Their entrance and unmediated integration would taint the idealized homogeneity of the dominant cultural core, creating disruption and inducing a more heterogeneous characterization of society per se.

In *Sleep Dealer*, transnational states of exception are facilitated by the digitalization of labor. Both in his rural town threatened by exploitative corporations and then in Tijuana, Memo's experience is characterized by an "ambient violence" shaping spaces of exception in which their inhabitants are constantly exposed to varying levels of structural and direct violence.[40] Like many other strategic locations, the dam in his native Santa Ana Del Rio, Oaxaca—one of the poorest and less developed Mexican states—is surveilled and defended by drones whose pilots are based in the United States. Unmanned drone warfare allows its perpetrators to detach themselves and feel absolved, in a mechanism of deresponsibilization that characterizes

Border Patrol and ICE officers in reality as well.[41] Furthermore, the transnational mainstream audience can follow drone operations broadcast live as a gamified reality TV show, constructing a sort of gamespace and contributing to a further dehumanization of the drones' victims.[42] The detachment of drone pilots and their carrying out tasks at digitalized distance "parallels the alienated technologized labor regime of the film."[43] Meanwhile, in the cyber *maquiladora*, Memo and his colleagues depend on machines that widen "the state of exception and the intensification of exploitation facilitated by cybertechnology,"[44] creating robo sacer subjects.[45] Drawing on both Giorgio Agamben and cyborg theory, David Dalton highlights how these characters become "intimately connected to and influenced by foreign technologies of power,"[46] exposing the exacerbation of racialization and socioeconomic disadvantage intrinsic to the implementation of first-world technologies. Sleeplessness and exhaustion become tools to erase the Latinx migrant subjectivity and maintain the laborers under control,[47] transforming them in a perishable, easily replaceable bodies that remain constrained and exploited in the American technotopian labor fantasy.

In *Culture Shock*, the connection to the reality of immigration enforcement and its infrastructure based on detention centers is abrupt. Cape Joy—the virtual town where the migrants are kept—is a colorful, neat, and luminous setting whose uncanniness is constructed through the use of saturated pastel colors and the constant repetition of the US flag in various forms. At two thirds of the film, Marisol suddenly disconnects from the virtual reality due to a system failure and the facility where the migrants are detained appears for the first time. The detention center is depicted as grim, dark, and characterized by a livid green palette, in stark visual contrast to Cape Joy. The machines look oddly anachronistic—almost like 1960s science fiction computers and machinery—with lines of buttons, convoluted tubes and cables, and murky plastic sheets dividing the different spaces. Marisol overhears fragments of dialogues between the scientist in charge, Thomas (Shawn Ashmore), and his superior, George Attwood (Creed Bratton), through which the viewer discovers that the experiment is part of a contract with the Pentagon to give migrants "a transition" by being kept in a sort of virtual holding cell where they are unwittingly brainwashed. The topic of private prisons and correctional facilities is hinted at, as private detention service providers are present along the border and all over the US territory working along federal enforcement agencies on behalf of the state.

The cynical Attwood goes as far as to state that they are not "paid to give them the American Dream, [they]'re paid to keep them out of it," as the migrants per se are not acceptable. The devaluation of their life, the reduction to inferior beings, and the erasure of their subjectivity is condensed in Attwood's conviction that these migrants can be used for illegal experimentation, as "nobody gives a fuck about these

people."[48] Thomas's character embodies attitudes in line with the notion of banality of evil outlined by Hannah Arendt, describing the detachment of Nazi officers who would perpetrate and participate in crimes against humanity by dutifully carrying out their bureaucratic tasks.[49] Thomas justifies their deeds to Marisol by saying that he is only a scientist wanting to be part of a project that would change the world, as he believes that the virtual reality brainwashing technology imposed on migrants is, per se, brilliant. Despite his apparent intents to help Marisol, it seems that his main concern is to help her cope with the experiment rather than facilitate her escape. At the very end, when the migrants manage to cause disruption in the facility, he is clearly most worried about his own fate rather than truly helping the subjects of his experiments.

Thomas interacts with Marisol in the virtual reality, embodying a kind of mediating character who tries to legitimate the forced assimilation. He explains Marisol's upset by saying that it is a matter of "culture shock" and a normal process most people must cope with when moving to a foreign country. To make his point, he recounts his travel to India in graduate school, linking culture shock with "sweating a lot" due to the different climate and getting bowel issues due to the food.[50] His take evidently comes across as superficial and condescending, alien to the reality of undocumented immigration. Furthermore, the story supports the assimilationist discourse intrinsic to the experiment: assimilating to the dominant culture is merely a matter of adaptation and habit. The minimization of the migrants' heritage pervades their interaction with the American characters, and cues of patronizing attitude toward Latinx and Latin American cultures are subtly scattered throughout Marisol's time in Cape Joy.

Thomas—and consequently the virtual Latinx avatars—does not speak Spanish, mispronounces the migrants' names, and occasionally inserts words in broken Spanish to elicit bonding, such as *amigo*. During their first meeting, Thomas asks Marisol if she has ever seen fireworks, which seems to confuse her for a moment as Mexico has a consolidated and articulated pyrotechnic tradition. He then tells her that the town's Fourth of July celebrations "will be a wonderful experience" for her, something that she clearly could never experience in her homeland.[51] Likewise, the minimization of the migrant trauma is evident when the Anglo virtual characters insist that one must choose to be happy, as if it were solely a matter of personal choice. By consequence, the responsibility of not being happy falls on the individual and their compliance with society; Marisol's inability to fit in is interpreted as incorrect and against the "acceptable" integration in US American society.

The Semiospheric Periphery as a Locus of Subversion

Opposition to the imposed dominant order is, indeed, a central theme in both films and seems to correspond to the nature of the semiospheric boundary. The border is necessary to define the cultural semiosphere, which "requires a 'chaotic' external sphere and constructs this itself in cases where this does not exist."[52] Irregularity is inherent to the semiosphere in opposition to the dominant core; as Lotman stresses, "In the reality of the semiosphere, the hierarchy of languages and texts, as a rule, is disturbed: and these elements collide as though they coexisted on the same level."[53] Peeter Torop defines dialogue as an "ontological characteristic of semiosphere,"[54] and Daniele Monticelli observes that binaries between opposing forces can be "replaced by complementarity, interaction, conflict and dialogue" situated at peripheral and internal boundaries.[55] When such dialogue seems impossible, though, the border allows the creation of interstitial spaces of resistance. Drawing on Indrek Ibrus's expansion on Lotman's semiosphere, the cyber-semiosphere is "a space determined by power asymmetries and a centre–periphery dynamics."[56] Both films examined embody a mode of social science fiction in which our social reality is faced with speculative worlds in "enantiomorphic structures."[57]

In *Sleep Dealer*, the resistance of the laborers as robo sacer entities emerges as a subversive potential when their cyborg identity can be instrumentalized to "deconstruct the social constructs that signal them as inferior."[58] The Cronenbergian node-based connectivity allows the Latinx subject to access a space of exploitation and, at the same time, opens the possibility to infiltrate the system and counteract employing the tools the very system provides them with. Besides the *cybermaquila*, in Rivera's reality, personal memories of Latin American people are commodified for the US public's consumption, eager to entertain itself with stories that are "other" and possibly exoticized. Through a virtual narration produced by Luz Martínez (Leonor Varela)—the protagonist's friend and possible love interest—drone pilot Rudy Ramirez (Jacob Vargas) discovers Memo's identity as the son of the victim of his attack. Haunted by remorse, he tracks Memo down and offers revenge by piloting his drone through an attack to the water dam in Santa Ana del Río. Such an operation is made possible by the hacking of Memo's virtual reality machine: Rudy connects himself to it and through the system's transnational connectivity carries out the attack. Disappointed by the (cyber) American Dream—albeit in different ways and for different reasons—the two establish a momentaneous solidarity and subvert their subordination to the machines regulating their labor lives.

Likewise, the demise of the overbearing, non-consensual assimilation system in *Culture Shock* is provoked through the subversive instrumentalization of the system itself. The dehumanization and capitalization of the migrant inherent to the experi-

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ment leads the scientists to avoid control tests on drug safety, as the government requires the system to be applied on migrants en masse. A week-long sequence attached to the virtual reality machine is supposed to suffice for complete assimilation, and yet Marisol's body seems to require a different tranquilizer dosage to remain unconscious throughout. She is the first experimental subject to move within the virtual space without a drug-induced acceptance and forceful suspension of disbelief. The unreality of Cape Joy strikes her from the start as uncanny: from her first awakening in the virtual world, she notices the saturated colors, the abundance of non-staple foods—such as cakes and desserts—and the disturbingly fixed smiles on the avatars' faces. According to her virtual host Betty (Barbara Crampton) and Thomas himself—who appears in Cape Joy as the town's mayor—such uneasiness is caused by Marisol's Mexican origins, implying that she comes from a place where "good things" are not the norm.

Marisol questions the nature of Cape Joy by embodying an anomality against the smooth assimilation her migrant fellows seem to be undergoing. Shortly after her arrival in the virtual town, she happens to recognize her ex-boyfriend. Oscar (Felipe de Lara) evidently managed to cross the border after raping her during their first attempt and he acts now as a happy citizen of the virtual reality town. The trauma connected to him hinders Marisol's blissful assimilation, as she is haunted by his presence despite the forced obliteration of her memories. She is aware of her difficulty to retrieve her past and interrogates Betty, who simply tells her that she crossed the border and was lucky to be rescued. Her upset is countered by the female avatar, who insists that she should not "worry about what [she has] lost, think instead of all that [she has] gained"—that is to say, a place in the idealized American society.[59] The illusion of having "made it" is key to the success of the brainwashing process, leveraging the desperation and desire for a better life that led the migrants across the border in the first place. Betty pushes her to explore Cape Joy, telling her that she can find a job right away and questioning her will to; as mentioned above, the discourse internal to the virtual reality assumes that happiness is a matter of individual will, acquiescence, and conformity to the dominant system.

In Cape Joy, the migrants' avatars automatically speak English fluently and carry out no meaningful conversations between them. However, Marisol's previous intimacy with Oscar suddenly makes her realize that he—as well as the migrants she crossed the border with—should be speaking Spanish instead. Alienated by this sudden realization, she tries to elicit past memories in her fellow migrants by resorting to cultural heritage markers that characterized their existence before the crossing: she sings the Mexican national anthem and, with Santo, she spells his own prayer to the Santa Muerte. Whenever she gets upset and doubtful—or she provokes a distressed reaction in her companions—she falls unconscious, and her virtual day starts

anew. The "reboot" is marked by the changing pastel color of her lace dress, whose style is exactly the same; the virtual existence as guest of the suburban smalltown fantasy that is Cape Joy assigns the same daily pattern and assimilation procedure to her, increasing her frustration. The fact that she cannot interact with her new-born also sparks suspicion in Marisol, accompanied by nightmares regarding her baby and hallucinations due to her failing integration in the virtual reality. The cyber semiosphere in which she is forced to move fails at providing a satisfactory cognitive experience and its failing liminality provides the space for resistance: the Latinx cultural consciousness becomes the tool for subversion.

Finding his behavior suspicious, Marisol follows Thomas to the limits of the neighborhood and discovers the interface point used by the scientist to exit Cape Joy's virtual reality. The gateway is depicted as surface mirroring the neighborhood, hiding in the mimetic repetition of the virtual environment. When Marisol crosses it, she awakes in the real world, realizing that she is attached to a virtual reality machine and that she is still pregnant. Pressed by her desperate questioning, the scientist carelessly reveals that when she hears dogs barking in Cape Joy, the system is down for maintenance. Such knowledge gives Marisol a powerful tool to fight the assimilation protocol effectively. Refusing to abide by the predetermined behavioral patterns, she waits for the barking to disrupt the system once more. As she opposes, her virtual reality glitches, and her host Betty—who turns out to be a "firewall bot" in charge of keeping her under control—pursues her until she walks through the gateway. She suddenly wakes up in an empty, labyrinthic and claustrophobic virtual version of the detention center. Upon her first disruptive episode, Thomas programmed a virtual reality escape loop to avoid her waking up in reality and "bouncing from the system," as Atwood comments. Once she is back in Cape Joy, the scientist tries to talk to Marisol through the Betty bot—revealing that he marked her as a "potential deserter"—pleading her to blend in until he allegedly finds a "solution."[60]

At the end of the week-long brainwashing program, the virtual town gathers to celebrate the Fourth of July. Marisol pretends to blend in at first, then provokes a glitch disrupting the community's dinner by repeatedly asking for Latin American desserts—arroz con leche, pan dulce, and "pinche flan" instead of the customary, very American apple pie with ice cream.[61] She also starts singing the Mexican national anthem, inducing a series of glitches that allow migrants to regain consciousness as their machines malfunction. Incidentally, she goes into labor causing her own machine to crash; managing to run through the gateway, Santo frees himself and helps her to give birth before escaping. Ironically, as a state of emergency ensues in the center, the loudspeaker's message of alert is in English but—outside Cape Joy—none of the migrants can understand it. Attwood orders the killing of all migrants before evacuating the facility and Thomas shoots him, possibly to escape freely and avoid the

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consequences of his involvement in the experimental program.

The non-diegetic soundtrack of the escape is "Y volveré" by the Chilean Mexican band Los Ángeles Negros, debuted in 1970 and based on Alain Barrière's "Emporte-moi." The song is well-known to the Latinx and Latin American public and its lyrics provide a commentary to the sequence. The chorus in particular underlines Marisol's decision to return to Mexico: "Y volveré / Como un ave que retorna a su nidal / Verás que pronto volveré y me quedaré" [And I will return / Like a bird returning to its nest / You'll see that soon I'll return and stay]. The closing titles are accompanied by a satirical mockumentary coverage of the disruption at "the pilot immigration and cultural rehabilitation center," for which the previously seen coyotes are accused to have trained radicalized Marisol Ramírez who led the "terrorist assault." Remindful of popular nativist border discourses, the bottom line is a justificatory construction of the assimilation program's purposes, stating that "innocent Americans just trying to help the migrants while solving our border crisis lost their lives."[62] The news anchor closes by mentioning the fictional US president's commentary on the assault, evidently lifted from former president Trump's tweets.

Conclusions

The fundamental notion both *Sleep Dealer* and *Culture Shock* play with is condensed in the explanation of the *cybermaquila* that Rivera's foreman of node operation gives to Memo: "This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they've always wanted, all the work—without the workers."[63] In *Sleep Dealer*, the node system and cyber exploitation "facilitate and also prevent the film's protagonist from achieving his desires,"[64] revealing the duplicitous, dichotomic nature of the semiospheric boundary. The virtual mobility offered to Latinx subjects does not lead to an actual integration, nor to physical and social mobility; it represents the deployment of power that deepens even further the socioeconomical gap between the laborers and the capitalist system they are bound to.[65] The construction of these fictional digital spaces apparently transcends the border while, in fact, it reinforces the existing ideological boundaries connected to it.

Culture Shock reveals that the border is indeed metaphorical as much as material. Within the boundaries of Saul Guerrero's reality—remindful of the systematic structural and cultural violence the Latinx minority has historically experienced in the United States—the migrant subjects represent a threat to the integrity of an ideal American society that would be tainted by their entrance. Through its location north of the border and the similarities with ICE detention centers—where migrants are reduced to bare life status and their subjectivity is emptied and erased—the film also manages to play with the avoidance of responsibility mechanisms that facilitate

the actual functioning of a state of exception apparatus.

Whether it relies on exhausted submission or brainwashing, the forced creation of "good migrants" reprises a rather consolidated discourse in the American public sphere, which identifies and categorizes the Latinx legitimacy—or lack thereof—to be part of the dominant social zone. The cybersphere becomes the peripheral space where the dominant, monoglossic, and Anglo US culture is presented—paternalistically and violently—as the only "good option" for migrants. The migrant subject is defined by negation and there is no acknowledgment of alternative views opposed to, or diverging from, the vision of the dominant cultural core. *Culture Shock* taps into discourses peculiar to the post-racial ideology and Trump era constructions,[66] for which the acceptability of immigrants and Latinx citizens is achieved through assimilation and the embrace of nationalist views.

Nevertheless, the cyber realm in which the migrants are forcibly placed fosters an interstitial space of subversion. In such a space, there seems to be the possibility to recognize and enhance the "singular and collective capacity for both ethical accountability and alternative ways of producing knowledge."[67] As Memo does in *Sleep Dealer*, Marisol and her fellow migrants make the most of their technologically mediated bodies in creative and unexpected ways, becoming digitally mediated activists—or hacktivists—in the way "the marginalized have used [technology] to mobilize emerging political consciousness and resistance" and disrupting the mainstream notion of immigrants as subjects bereft of any effective agency in the techno- and cyberspace.[68]

Notes

1   David Punter, "Cyborgs, Borders and Stories for Virgins: Mexico and the Gothic," in *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016); Samantha Kountz, "The Other Side of the Wall: Technology and Borders in *Sleep Dealer*," *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (2014).

2   David S. Dalton, *Robo Sacer: Necroliberalism and Cyborg Resistance in Mexican and Chicanx Dystopias* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2023), 6. On the cyborg subject, see Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991).

3   In this article, the term "Latinx" is used to identify individuals with Latin American heritage, who might be to some extent integrated in US society and/or its economic system, regardless of gender—thus, including both US-born Latinx individuals and Latin American migrants who work and/or live in the United States.

4   For the transmedia project, see Rivera's mock website http://www.cybracero.com, as well as Jennifer M. Lozano, "Digital Rasquachismo: Alex Rivera's Multimedia Storytelling, Humor, and Transborder Latinx Futurity," in *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, ed.

Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019).

5   Juri Lotman, "On the Semiosphere" [1984], *Sign Systems Studies* 33, no. 1 (2005), DOI: 10.12697/SSS.2005.33.1.09.

6   Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel, "An Outline for a Semiotic Theory of Hegemony," *Semiotica*, no. 182 (2010): 450, DOI: 10.1515/semi.2010.067.

7   Daniele Monticelli, "Borders and Translation: Revisiting Juri Lotman's Semiosphere," *Semiotica*, no. 230 (2019): 394, DOI: 10.1515/sem-2017-0125.

8   Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 210; 214.

9   Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 208.

10   Juri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 138.

11   Winfried Nöth, "The Topography of Yuri Lotman's Semiosphere," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 17, DOI: 10.1177/1367877914528114.

12   Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 210; Monticelli, "Borders and Translation," 396.

13   Lotman, "On the Semiosphere," 210.

14   Indrek Ibrus, John Hartley, and Maarja Ojamaa, *On the Digital Semiosphere: Culture, Media and Science for the Anthropocene* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 59–60.

15   Nöth, "Topography," 15.

16   Claudia Sadowski-Smith, "Introduction: Border Studies, Diaspora, and Theories of Globalization," in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

17   *Maquiladoras* (also known as *maquilas*) are assembly plants located along the border on the Mexican side, usually owned by transnational companies. Since its advent in the 1960s as part of the Border Industrialization Program, this type of industry expanded substantially in the 1990s, facilitated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994) and the wage gap existing between the United States and Mexico.

18   Raúl Delgado Wise and James M. Cypher, "The Strategic Role of Mexican Labor under NAFTA: Critical Perspectives on Current Economic Integration," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 610 (2007): 121, DOI: 10.1177/0002716206297527.

19   Christina L. Sisk, "Disembodied and Deportable Labor at the U.S. Mexico-Border: Representations of the Mexican Body in Film," *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 3, no. 2 (2014): 41, DOI: 10.5070/T432022922.

20   Sarah Ann Wells, "The Scar and the Node: Border Science Fiction and the Mise-en-scène of Globalized Labor," *The Global South* 8, no. 1 (2014): 74, DOI: 10.2979/globalsouth.8.1.69.

21   J.V. Miranda, "Techno/Memo: The Politics of Cultural Memory in Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*," in *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 249.

22   Camilla Fojas, "Border Securities, Drone Cultures, and Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*," in *Latinx Ciné in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Frederick Luis Aldama (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 240.

23   *Why Cybraceros?* dir. Alex Rivera (Los Angeles: Freewaves, 1997).

24   Thomas Prasch, "Aquaterrorists and Cyberbraceros: The Dystopian Borderlands of Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008)," in *Border Visions: Identity and Diaspora in Film*, ed. Jakub Kazecki, Karen A. Ritzenhoff, and Cynthia J. Miller (New York: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 44.

25 Luis Martín-Cabrera, "The Potentiality of the Commons: A Materialist Critique of Cognitive Capitalism from the Cyberbracer@s to the Ley Sinde," *Hispanic Review* 80, no. 4 (2012): 590, DOI: 10.1353/hir.2012.0043.

26 Martín-Cabrera, "The Potentiality of the Commons," 591.

27 Geoffrey Kantaris, "Terminal City: Immaterial Migrations, Virtual Detachments and the North-South Divide (Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer*, 2008)," in *South and North: Contemporary Urban Orientations*, ed. Kerry Bystrom, Ashleigh Harris and Andrew J. Webber (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2018).

28 Jungwon Park, "La frontera en ruinas: el cuerpo enfermo y la biopolítica global en *Maquilapolis* y *Sleep Dealer*," *Revista Iberoamericana* 84, no. 265 (2018): 1119, DOI: 10.5195/REVIBEROAMER.2018.7680.

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45 Dalton, "Robo Sacer," 16.

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59 *Culture Shock*.

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