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The US–Mexico Cinematic Border: Screening the Southbound Movement

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Abstract

The dynamic field of borderlands studies, spanning disciplines such as geography, political science, history, economy, demography, and sociology, explores the evolving nature of global borders. This paper contributes to the discourse by focusing on the US–Mexico border, explicitly examining cinematic representations of the southward movement across its expanse. Unlike previous research, which has touched on various aspects of the border, this study delves into the American film industry's portrayal, unraveling its evolution and impact on the perceptions of the border's role in US security and national identity. Methodologically, it employs a cinematic analysis to explore representations from western industrialized Tijuana, California, to agricultural southeast Texas. By doing so, this research bridges a gap in the current literature. It sheds light on the transformation of the US–Mexico border from an open boundary to a highly militarized one, offering unique insights into this shift's geopolitical dynamics and sociocultural implications.

Keywords: Cinematic Border, Film, Southbound Movement, US–Mexico Border

Introduction

The cinematic portrayal of the US–Mexico border remains an underexplored terrain in the broader context of border narratives. While scholars like Kathleen Staudt have delved into the cultural production of the borderlands through films produced in both Mexico and the US, a focused examination of the American cinematic perspective is warranted. Staudt, for example, contends that cinematic depictions from both sides "bring(s) out the worst in a country."[1] In contrast to her approach, this study exclusively examines American movies, addressing the US–Mexico border as a geographical line. It specifically explores the representations of the southward movement across this border in various genres and regions, ranging from the western industrialized Tijuana, California, to agricultural Southeast Texas. The unique contribution of this research lies in its exclusive focus on American movies, offering a detailed analysis of the cinematic border within the US context. By narrowing the scope, this study aims to uncover nuanced representations of the southward movement, focusing on the intricacies often overlooked in broader analyses.

[1] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 465.

To contextualize this exploration, the evolving meaning of geographical boundaries is considered. Professor Joachim K. Blatter contends that geographical boundaries were not merely lines demarcating spheres of authority in the earlier stages of human history. Rather, they are demarcations of the basic entities of the social system. With the evolution of the modern political system, this perception underwent a dramatic shift: sovereignty, politics, nationalism, and territoriality emerged as cornerstones, empowering sovereign states to wield control over defined territories.[2] In his border theory, he explains the term border by distinguishing between four different dimensions: in the first dimension, he differentiates between perceptions of borders as zones and as lines, whereas in the second dimension, he discerns between conceptions of borders that focus on flexibility and those that stress stability. Moreover, he explains the third dimension as the importance of borders "for the contained entities," in other words, for the different territorial states. Meanwhile, "the fourth aspect differentiates symmetric boundary conceptions in which there is no basic recognition of the 'other' as a similar kind."[3]

Border scholars have relied on Benedict Anderson's ideas of nationalism: he defines the nation as an "imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[4] That is, the imagined alliance between people from the same imagined nation has a sense of strength to protect their nation, and sharing the same citizenship prompts them to imagine the boundaries of their nation even though the boundaries themselves may not physically exist. Anderson emphasizes territoriality as limited beyond which other nations have finite boundaries. In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, he delineates the invention of the concept of the nation "to be imagined, and once imagined, modeled, adapted and transformed." He also argues that nationalism is based on fear and hatred of the Other.[5] Drawing on Joachim K. Blatter's border theory and Benedict Anderson's ideas of nationalism, this paper grounds itself in a theoretical framework that connects sovereignty, politics, nationalism, and territory to the concept of borders.

Employing a qualitative research method to analyze a selection of movies, this study acknowledges its limitations, including the personal choice of films based on availability and narrative uniqueness. The cinematic border concept, despite being understudied, is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the southern US border. Building on works by Staudt and Elene Dell' Agnese, this research aims to unveil the various representations and

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[2] Blatter, "Border Theory," 48.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.
[5] Anderson, 141.

misrepresentations in the American film industry within the multiple US–Mexico borderlands, shedding light on regions that may be underrepresented in current cinematic discourse.

Screening the Southbound Movement across the Border from California to Baja California

Throughout history, southward migration predates the formal delineation of borders between the neighboring countries. Since Mexico won its independence from Spain and claimed Texas as part of its territory, the Mexican government needed to increase the number of inhabitants in Texas to ensure control over the Amerindians in the region. The flow of Americans toward the South kept growing during the time of the abolition of slavery in Mexico in 1829. Most Americans were Protestants and found it challenging to embrace the religion of the country, Catholicism. As Tim Marshall put it: "[…] Mexico tried to limit immigration, but Americans kept coming illegally, and by 1834 outnumbered Mexican settlers by nearly ten to one."[6] The main reason for immigration during that time was to escape slavery, where the border was unmarked and undefined. However, after the Mexican-American War ended in 1848, "Mexico lost about a third of its territory in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, including nearly all of present-day New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and California." Furthermore, during the same period, a six-year effort was made to establish the borderlines between the two neighboring countries, "but initially only fifty-two boundary markers designated the two-thousand-mile border, and the line was, by and large, only casually observed."[7] Marshall gives a historical background of the evolution of the US borders in relation to various events that resulted in the demarcation of US boundaries. Given the importance of the border, the cinematic production of North America's borderlands dates to the beginning of the American film industry in Hollywood. Although the cinema industry started as a means of entertainment, it managed to bring the border theme into the spotlight. The representations of the US–Mexico border region functioned as a prototype of the evolving relationships of the two neighbors. Borderland films reveal the ways Americans perceive their neighbors through their mythologies, regional fiction, and historical events.

The southbound movement across the border may be less visualized in motion pictures as frequently as the movement from Mexico to the United States. However, the

[6] Marshall, *The Age of Walls*, 47.
[7] Marshall, 48.

viewer may sketch some aspects of the border through specific scenes: in *Borderland Films: American Cinema, Mexico, and Canada during the Progressive Era*, Dominique Brégent-Heald deals with the cinematic production of borderland movies about the US borders. She argues that "borderland settings could convey the complex processes revolving around the creation and maintenance of boundaries, demarcations, and divisions between the land and its people. Borderland locations in the US–Mexico border could convey a wide range of utopic and dystopic possibilities."[8] Although most of the locations of the motion pictures that this research deals with are at or near the border, the stories of violence might be distorted. While the cinematic representations of the border can be related to both real and imaginary narratives, one may recall Anderson's idea of "imagined communities." This concept explores how communities are formed not just by physical borders but also by shared beliefs, cultures, and collective imagination. In this sense, cinematic productions play a significant part in shaping the collective imagination of a given nation.

Border scholars think that "imagined communities" have become constructed through the production of censuses, maps, and museums.[9] As the introduction mentions, Anderson defines nationalism as an imagined community where individuals relate to the territory as part of their 'nation-ness.' In this perspective, motion pictures may be a way to imagine territoriality and communities where most people attach themselves to a particular geographical space but have never visited it. Nationalists, like Anderson, territorialize identity and argue that attachment to the nation creates '"others' who occupy different spaces and exhibit different cultures, with positive or negative portrayals of people and places. Staudt also agrees with Anderson's ideas and argues that 'in the context of unequal and asymmetrical borderlands, concepts about stereotyping offer insight, especially to what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls 'The Other Question.'"[10] Film analyst Juan Alonzo studies the process of otherness in relation to his research of the border. He claims that although the relationship between the US and Mexico is not defined in terms of the colonizer and the colonized in the colonial discourse, the stereotype of otherness is a critical concept in understanding power relations.[11]

The physical borderlands stretch across "coastal, desert, and tropical climatic terrains of varying altitudes."[12] These geographical differences have added to the nature of border construction. Although only 700 miles of 2,000 have fencing in place, the Sonora Desert is

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[8] Brégent-Heald, *Borderlands Films*, 2015, 3.
[9] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 163–185.
[10] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 466.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Correa-Cabrera and Staudt, "An Introduction to the Multiple US–Mexico Borders," 385.

a natural barrier, and there is no concrete fence or wall; however, the nature of the border that separates Tijuana and San Diego is different:

> There is a high double fencing to deter people from crossing illegally. Part of the fence goes right through the beach and continues into a section of the Pacific Ocean. Further east, in Texas, there is often no fencing at all. The Rio Grande and the rugged terrain around the river serve as a natural barrier. In between, there is an assortment of fences with different shapes, sizes, and materials. These fences do not all connect to form one continuous line. Some areas have no fencing at all.[13]

Different types of physical borders are shown in movies depending on the shooting sites and the year of release since fencing has been a long process and continues to this day. The unilateral relationship between the US and Mexico has been reflected in the cinematic productions concerning the southern border. Characteristics of the physical border have been visualized differently depending on the geographical differences and the recurring themes in each region. For example, motion pictures produced in the San Diego–Tijuana area are numerous: *Blue Streak* (1999) tells the story of a jewel thief, Miles Logan, who steals a vast diamond, but when everything goes wrong, he hides it in a construction site before getting caught by the police. After spending two years in jail, he returns to the same building to take the diamond and is shocked that the construction site has become a police station. He changes his identity and pretends to be a Los Angeles Police detective to regain the diamond. After a long struggle with an old friend who turns out to be the villain in the movie, Logan chases the villain to get back his diamond. They cross the US–Mexico border, and Logan kills him in self-defense. He crosses, again, to the US side of the border after taking the diamond, continuing his disguise as a police officer. However, this time, he claims he is a "federale" working for his country, Mexico. He fools police officers while his two colleagues, who work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), figure out his true identity. Luckily for Logan, he has crossed the border, and his colleagues are not able to cross the borderline as FBI agents.[14]

Although this is an action-comedy film, the border scene informs the audience how serious the FBI is about international borders. According to fbi.gov, "On foreign soil, FBI special agents generally do not have authority to make arrests except in certain cases where, with the host country's consent, Congress has granted the FBI extraterritorial jurisdiction."

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[13] Almond, "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like."
[14] *Blue Streak* (1999), 01:19:00–01:26:30.

The moment Logan crosses the borderline, the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) cannot cross it because they represent US jurisdiction; therefore, they cannot pursue suspects on international territories, which marks the separation and differences in their sovereignty.[15] The reason behind the analysis of this short scene is the perception of the border as a dividing line between two sovereign states, the US and Mexico. This reflects the jurisdiction given to the FBI around the time of production and release of the movie.

Another case in point would be a more contemporary movie, *Miss Bala* (2019), directed by Catherine Hardwicke, distributed by Sony Pictures, and produced by the US and Mexico. It is based on the Spanish language film *Miss Bala,* released in 2011. This action movie narrates the story of a Mexican–American woman, Gloria, who crosses the border to visit her friend Suzi, where she gets involved in drug-related murders and is forced to do as told in order to save her friend. *Miss Bala* (2019) fixates the audience's attention on the physical border separating San Diego and Tijuana. At the movie's beginning, the camera sketches the border checkpoint and the regulations for US citizens crossing to the Mexican side, which are easy and fast. The border patrol agent at the inspection needs to check her passport. At the same time, the camera's circular movement showing the fencing's surroundings along the border checkpoint is clear and thorough: the camera is moving from left to right, that is, from the US side of the border towards the Mexican side.[16] From an analytical perspective, the camera movement serves a specific purpose, which goes hand in hand with the overall narrative of the movie. It simulates the regular legal crossing through one of the border checkpoints. A second southbound movement can be found in this movie when Gloria smuggles guns from the US across the border.[17] In this scene, the camera lens shows the border fence between San Diego and Tijuana stretching into the Pacific Ocean from above. Hence, the film accurately visualizes the physical border through long shots showing the fence from a distance and emphasizing the location.[18]

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[15] *Blue Streak* (1999), 01:26:30–01:30:14.
[16] *Miss Bala* (2019), 00:02:57–00:03:16.
[17] *Miss Bala* (2019), 00:49:25–38.
[18] *Miss Bala* (2019), 00:39:33. (fig. 1).

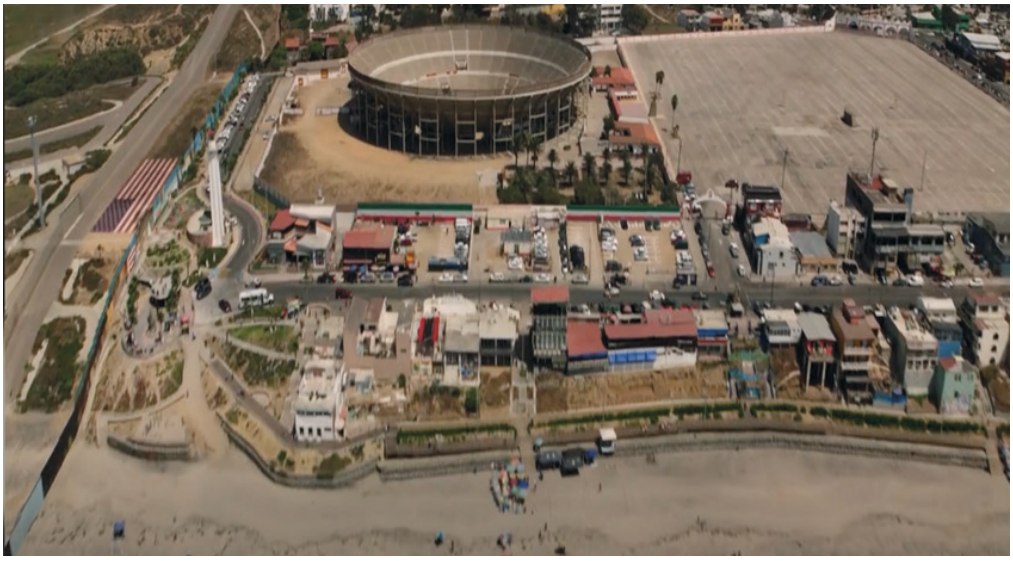

Figure 1. The Tijuana–San Diego dividing line from the movie Miss Bala. Performance by Gina Rodriguez, Sony Pictures Releasing, 2019.

A similar realistic photograph John Moore took shows the representation's resemblance and accuracy.[19]

Another physical portrayal of the border fence can be seen in the movie *Born in East LA* (1987), which tells the story of a Mexican–American-born citizen, Rudy, who goes to a factory in Los Angeles to pick up his newly arriving cousin from Arizona, Xavier. However, he is mistakenly deported to Mexico when an immigration authority raid busts the factory. Because he did not have his papers on him at the time of the incident, the immigration officers did not believe him even though he spoke English fluently, albeit with a heavy Spanish accent and a small amount of Spanglish. However, he is deported to Tijuana because of his Hispanic looks, with the rest of the undocumented immigrants caught in the factory. The film shows the deportation process during the 1990s. Rudy is deported to Mexico, although he has never been there before. The bus stops at the border, and border patrolmen guide all the undocumented immigrants through the border entry point. The latter is visualized as a rusty old fence with a revolving door and very little security. In the 1990s, there was no imprisonment for illegal immigrants. At that time, illegal crossing of

[19] *Almond,* "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like," (Figure 2).

the US–Mexico border was not yet criminalized: during the deportation, a Mexican illegal immigrant tells Rudy that they will try again to cross the border on Monday without fear of criminal prosecution. Kelly Lytle Hernandez explains that prosecutions for unlawful crossings remained low until 2005, with few exceptions. "The George W. Bush administration directed the US attorneys to adopt an 'enforcement with consequences' strategy"[20] as part of the war on terror.

Figure 2. The border fence separating San Diego from Tijuana, Mexico, extends into the Pacific Ocean taken by John Moore from Almond, Kyle. "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like." CNN Politics, March 2013, edition.cnn.com/interactive/2018/12/politics/border-wall-cnnphotos/.

In the 21st century, the border management paradigm shifted from guarding and policing towards cooperation with Mexico to secure the border. As Matthew Longo highlighted, "You cannot successfully manage the border just from one side."[21]

To understand the shift along the US–Mexico border, one should revisit the US–Mexican relationship after the 9/11 terrorist attacks: it is essential to know that borders during the 21st century are no longer a mark of division but rather a space of joint maintenance. Co-bordering began with the cooperation of the US and Canada through information sharing and border patrol officers. The latter was implemented afterward on

[20] Hernandez, "How Crossing the US–Mexico Border Became a Crime."
[21] Longo, *The Politics of Borders. Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11*, 87.

the US–Mexico border through "the Merinda Agreement, announced in October 2007, which centered on the US providing funding and training to the Mexican government to counter drug trafficking."[22] In *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11,* Longo gives the reader a detailed account of the bilateral agreements between the US–Canada and US–Mexico, which resulted in enhanced co-bordering strategies and, therefore, more secure borderlands.

The Arizona–Sonora Border Region

The Sonora Desert covers large parts of the southern border in both the US and Mexico territories. It was established due to the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, and it stretches from the western Chihuahuan Desert to the west of Nogales. James S. Griffith comments on this border in the following way: "Belonging truly to neither nation, it serves as a kind of cultural buffer zone for both cultivating its own culture and traditions. Like other borders, it both attracts and repels. Like them, it is both a barrier and a filter. It is, above all, a stimulating cultural environment."[23]

The western part of the Sonora Desert earned the name "El Camino del Diablo" (The Devil's Highway), for it is mainly uninhabited. The border stretches between five paired towns from east to west:

> Douglas/Agua Prieta, Naco/Naco, Nogales/Nogales, Sasabe/Sasabe, Lukeville/Sonoyta, and San Luis Rio Colorado, which has no corresponding town on the Arizona side. Between these towns stretches the border, for the most part, marked by a three-strand, barbed-wire fence, and a series of monuments. The latter are spaced to make each one visible from its counterpart to the east and the west. The fence penetrates valleys, mountains, lush thickets, and sparse desert shrubbery.[24]

The American film industry has produced many movies in the Sonora Desert, dealing with various topics. However, there aren't American films available focusing on the southbound movement across the Arizona–Sonora border region. Most of the movies produced are either independent or Mexican, whereas American-made movies focus on the northbound movement across this region, especially dealing with topics like

[22] Longo, 86.
[23] Griffith, "The Arizona-Sonora Border."
[24] Ibid.

illegal immigration and drug dealers. On the other hand, many documentaries have been showing life across the Arizona-Sonora region, and they are worth checking for facts. Historically speaking, there have been instances of southbound movements that are worth mentioning. During the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), some Mexican Americans and Mexican workers moved south of the border due to the political and social upheavals in their home country. These movements were often influenced by personal and family ties. Another instance of southbound movement across this region was during the Great Depression. Marshall states that "with serious economic problems throughout the USA, the issue of immigrants taking American jobs became key, and Mexicans were targeted in particular—during the Mexican Repartition, somewhere between five hundred thousand and 2 million people were deported to Mexico, many of whom were US-born citizens."[25] During President Hoover's term, he ordered the massive deportation of Mexicans and the closure of the border. The number of deported Mexicans during his presidency was huge: "The US deported a million of its own citizens to Mexico during the Great Depression. Up to 1.8 million people of Mexican descent—most of them American-born—were rounded up in informal raids and deported in an effort to reserve jobs for white people."[26] President Hoover ordered the mass deportation of Mexicans during the 1930s in order to preserve jobs for white Americans during the economic crisis. The slogan used by his administration at that time was "American jobs for real Americans," which implicitly connotes racism.

Additionally, this border region has witnessed various demographic shifts and movements over the years, reflecting the intertwined histories of both neighboring countries. This section of the border is considered a natural barrier; however, with the border militarization efforts, especially in the wake of the 9/11 events, sections of the border 'wall' were built during the Trump administration. "The administration has used the REAL ID waivers to push hundreds of miles of border wall construction, rumbling through whatever patch of sacred Native American sites, private property, or federally protected land and gets in its way. With 66 miles completed thus far, the president is nowhere near the 500 miles of border wall he promised for his first term."[27]

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[25] Marshall, *The Age of Walls: How Barriers between Nations Are Changing Our World*, 48.
[26] Little, "The US Deported a Million of Its Own Citizens to Mexico during the Great Depression."
[27] Rayan Devereaux, 2019.

El Paso–Ciudad Juárez Border Region

The central borderlands have become an iconic region where many filmmakers have constructed various narratives. This section is devoted to the movies covering the changing representations of the central geographical borderlands through time in the American film industry.

Babel (2006) is a multi-plot film directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu in four countries: the USA, Mexico, Japan, and Morocco. Regarding the narrative in the USA and Mexico, the film draws attention to this heavily studied part of the central US–Mexico border through the eyes of Amelia, her nephew Santiago, and two American children, Debbie and Mike. At the same time, their parents, Richard and Susan, embark on a tourist adventure to Morocco. Amelia, the housekeeper, takes care of their children. She receives a phone call from Richard to cancel her son's wedding, and he promises her to pay for a better wedding ceremony, but Amelia tells him that everything is ready and that they cannot cancel the wedding. She asks him if someone else can come and take care of the kids, but he is angry, and no one else can replace her.[28] Amelia tries very hard to find a replacement for one day but in vain. As a final solution, she decides to take them to Mexico instead of leaving them alone or with a stranger. The children are excited to see her house, which she says is not so far, which denotes that she lives in a city near the border.

Crossing the border southward is accompanied by traditional Mexican music. The scene opens with a Mexican male looking towards the American side at the top of the border fence. The camera's focus shifts to show the compositions of the physical edge of the border from the Mexican side, where a US Border Patrol vehicle lies in the background. From the camera movements, the director wants to compare the checkpoints in both directions. On the one hand, the camera lens displays how rigid and well-controlled the crossing from Mexico to the US is when a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent checks vehicles accompanied by a dog searching for drugs while vehicles are lining up at the checkpoint entries.

On the other hand, the southbound movement across the border is effortless and uncontrolled: the audience can notice the absence of the simplest form of checking.[29] After crossing the checkpoint without being checked, Santiago tells the children, "Do you see how easy it is to reach paradise?" Debby answers with a question: "Is this Mexico?" and then her brother continues, "Mom and Dad told us that Mexico is very dangerous,"

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[28] *Babel* (2006), 00:12:30–00:14:25.
[29] *Babel* (2006), 00:31:51–25.

and Santiago starts laughing.[30] Both Debby and Mike acquired knowledge about how dangerous Mexico is from their parents. Their general perception of the Other has been developed through emotions of fear and ignorance because they are children, and they do not have a clear perception of the world around them yet.

On the eve of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon building just outside Washington, DC, the vision of a border-free North America was one of the first to meet its end. In policy practice, US borders have been re-designed as part of the 'war on terror.' The immediate response to the terrorist attacks in 2001 was that the US tightened its borders' inspections and controlled the flow of immigrants more than ever. Borders became a matter of national security, and border policies had to change to cope with new threats. Peter Andreas, in his article "A Tale of Two Borders: The US–Mexico and US–Canada Lines After 9-11," argues that "terrorism has predictably heightened the American public's awareness of and fears about porous borders. According to a Zogby public opinion survey a few weeks after the terrorist attacks, 72 percent of those polled said better border controls and stricter enforcement of immigration laws would help prevent terrorism."[31]

The portrayal of the southbound movement across the border manifests through the film *Sicario* (2015). It is a borderland movie directed by Denis Villeneuve. The narrative starts with FBI agent Kate Macer leading an operation near Chandler, Phoenix, Arizona, to find hostages. Afterward, she is recruited to work with a special operations team led by the CIA agent Matt Graver. The US government gave him a particular assignment, which was to eradicate drug cartel leaders Manuel *Díaz,* his brother Guillermo, and a drug lord named Fausto *Alarcón.* Matt recruits Kate because the mission needs someone with knowledge of tactical procedures. Kate accepts the assignment because she wants to stop drug cartels. Meanwhile, he introduces her to Alejandro, who is part of the team but seems mysterious, and Kate needs to understand his role in the mission entirely. After arriving in El Paso, Kate learns that the team members have different backgrounds and that some served in the Afghanistan War. During their mission, she gets confused about the team's ways of handling situations, which, for her, does not seem legal. The whole mission revolves around understanding the end goal of the mission while she also tries to understand why she is recruited.

The title, *Sicario* (2015), is a Spanish word for 'assassin' or hitman. The film portrays modern border policing at the southern border. Several scenes in this movie visualize the

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[30] *Babel* (2006), 00:31:22–43.
[31] Andreas, "A Tale of Two Borders," 2003, 2.

physical borderland and the border crossings to Mexico. In the first crossing to Mexico, the circular movement of the camera lens from above is essential to cover the physical border fences fully. The different fragments of the border fence built in the region of El Paso–Juárez infiltrating the desert were captured by the camera:[32]

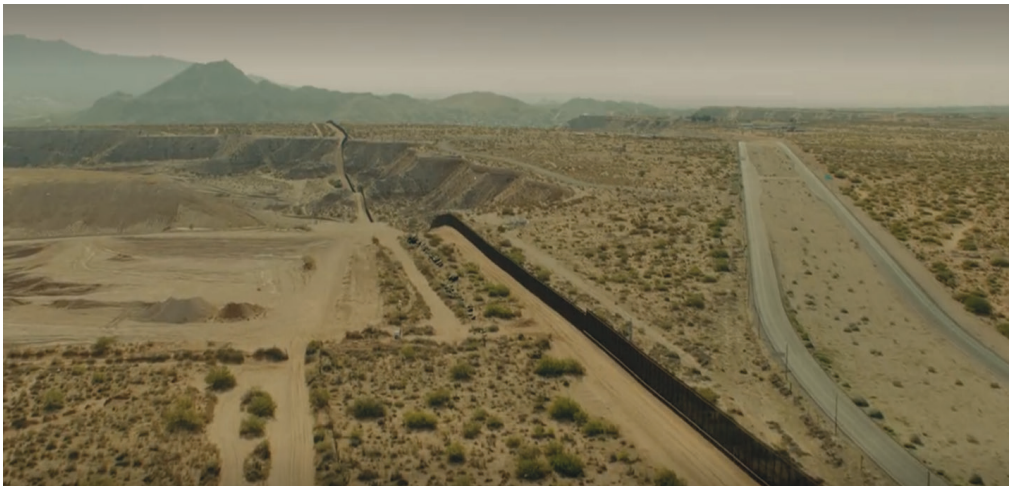

Figure 3. A long shot taken from above the physical border in the El Paso–Juárez region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from Sicario. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performance by Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin, and Benicio Del Toro, Lionsgate, 2015. Netflix.

The first border fence penetrates the desert,[33] the second fence separates the inhabited cities of El Paso and Juárez, and the third is a continuation of the second.[34] The central borderlands previously were described as having "an assortment of fences with different shapes, sizes, and materials."[35] The comparison between what Almond describes and shows in his article about the different shapes and sizes of the physical border is authentically visualized in Villeneuve's movie.

[32] Figure 3. Long shot taken from above of the physical border in El Paso–Juárez region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from *Sicario* (2015).
[33] Figure 4. A part of the physical border fence in El–Juárez Region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from *Sicario* (2015).
[34] *Sicario* (2015), (00:24:35–00:27:05).
[35] Almond, "This Is What the US–Mexico Border Looks Like."

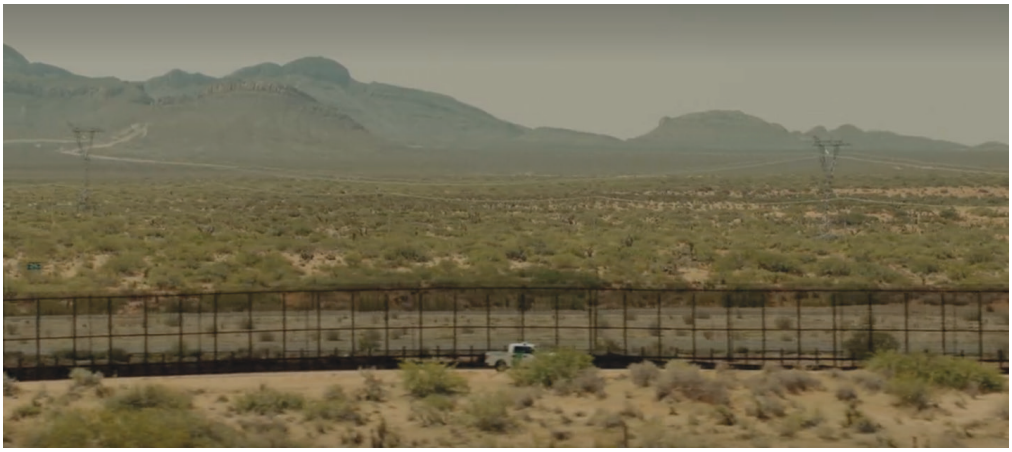

Figure 4. A part of the physical border fence in El–Juárez Region (00:24:19–00:25:24) from Sicario. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performance by Emily Blunt, Josh Brolin, and Benicio Del Toro, Lionsgate. 2015. Netflix.

Staudt argues that "the borderlands became the gateway for international criminal organizations in gun and drug trafficking, ongoing immigration, and the violence associated therewith."[36] In *Sicario*, while Matt and his team are driving across the Mexican border from El Paso to Juárez through the Bridge of the Americas port of entry, naked bodies hang from one of the bridges, displaying torture and violence through disfigured and missing body parts like heads, legs, or arms. The scene is accompanied by threatening music, and the camera moves from the moment they cross the border until they return, connoting the danger surrounding Ciudad Juárez. The "[…] pounding beat recalls a war drum. The sound alone is enough to induce sweaty palms."[37] Johann Johannsson was nominated for BAFTA's Best Original Music Award in the film *Sicario*; the score's originality adds relentless suspense to the border narrative. It also reflects Kate's anxiety, fear, and shock from the start: the violent and dangerous situations she finds herself in are shocking, and they affect her life. She has many questions unanswered regarding Matt and Alejandro and their way of solving things while they give her little information to grasp.

Moreover, Villeneuve's movie occupies a spectrum between thought-provoking and mind-bending scenes: one of the elements that made the film special is Matt's exceptional team, which is composed of recently returned soldiers from Afghanistan who are recruited to patrol the southern border. Indeed, this element reflects the post-9/11 border policies

[36] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 472.
[37] Merry, "'Sicario' Takes a Jarring Thrill Ride South of the Border."

in positioning soldiers returning from Afghanistan at the border securitization plan. This film displays the border not only as a passage for drugs and human trafficking but also transforms it into a war zone. The scene of the interrogation in the movie connotes the post-9/11 US methods of torture. One may bring into light rendition, which, according to Britannica, refers to an extrajudicial practice carried out by US government agencies of transferring a person from one country to another to circumvent the former country's laws on interrogation, detention, and torture. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US resorted to new ways of interrogation, among them rendition. The latter was also used in the second movie of the sequel *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018), directed by Stephano Sollima.

The Eastern Borderlands from Del Rio–*Acuña* to Brownsville–Matamoros

This part of the southern border stretching from Del Rio–*Acuña* to Brownsville–Matamoros is somehow under-represented in American films. Parts of this region in Texas are emphasized; however, the more one goes east, the less representation there is in cinema and the academic field.

An example that illustrates this observation is the motion picture *No Country for Old Men* (2007), directed by Ethan Coen. It tells the story of Llewelyn Moss, who discovers a massive amount of money at a crime scene in the West Texas borderlands of 1980 (desert), where several drug dealers lie dead. However, he is chased by a psychopath criminal, Anton Chigurh, who is seeking to get the money. Crossing the border checkpoint at Del Rio represents the solution for Llewelyn Moss to hide the cash.[38] The Mexican side represents a refuge for the outlawed. The storyline takes place in Eagle Pass, Texas, during the 1980s. Eagle Pass is visualized as a lawless border town thriving with crimes and drug trafficking. After being shot, Llewelyn crosses the border to the Mexican side to escape Chigurh and to hide the two million dollars he stole. He was shot on the US side of the border, so he gets medical care in Mexico because if he goes to an American hospital, he will be caught by the police. Border crossing is easy for Llewelyn because it is at night, and the border patrolman is asleep. The film visualizes the everyday crossing for border towns' inhabitants when Llewelyn encounters three youths drinking alcohol while they are returning from the Mexican side on foot. They are not worried about crossing the border because they are American citizens.

[38] *No Country for Old Men* (2007), 01:05:10–38.

With the absence of Kate Macer from *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018), who represented Americans' anxieties, fears, and confusion, the second movie in the *Sicario* sequel deals with the drug wars on the US–Mexico border, which has escalated after the cartels started to trafficking terrorists across the border, which led to the categorization of cartels as terrorist organizations, therefore, a new way of dealing with new threats. This film narrates a new level of danger, and henceforth, it shows the US borderlands as a global border where the US tries to eliminate all dangers. The film director, Stefano Sollima, uses the same multi-plot technique as González Iñárritu in *Babel* (2006). He used two narratives that overlap at a certain point: the first is based on starting a war between drug cartel leaders through kidnapping Isabel Reyes, while the second is built on Miguel, the schoolboy who lives in McAllen, Texas, a border town and gets involved in human trafficking.

Matt's new mission is to find the people responsible for the terrorist attacks in different places in the US. The aim of crossing the border is to implement the new mission by kidnapping Isabel, the daughter of a cartel leader in Mexico, as a strategy to create chaos and turn cartels against each other. Southbound movement across the southern border aims to take Isabel Reyes home to Mexico. Matt prepares his team for this mission with the appropriate weapons and surveillance plane going from the US Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, Texas, to Mexico with the help of seven Mexican police vehicles who take orders from Graver during his mission on the Mexican part of the border. Moreover, the southbound movement across the border is embodied by displaying images of the border landscape from an airplane through a horizontal camera movement. It moves from the US side of the borderline to the Mexican one. It shows the physical border as a line and the landscape as primarily a desert.[39]

After a few minutes of driving into the Mexican part of the desert, they infiltrate the soil road and use special thermal goggles to see through the storm. These thermal goggles do not work in such a climate, which makes Matt nervous. Like *Sicario* (2015), a piece of threatening music accompanies the process of the crossing, telling of the imminent danger ahead of them, which becomes real when the Mexican Federal police, who are supposed to cooperate with the convoy, turn against them.

[39] *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (2018), 00:50:42–00:58:28.

Conclusion

The aim of this research is to examine the various representations of the US–Mexico borderlands in American films. From analyzing various movie genres that deal with the US–Mexico borders, I can say that the American film industry produced and reproduced the cinematic border primarily as a dividing line rather than a zone of contact and encounter between two different cultures, languages, sovereign states, and economic systems.

Dividing the border into four regions, Tijuana–San Diego, Sonora Desert–Arizona, El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, and Del Rio–Acuña, helped understand the differences and similarities between multiple US–Mexico borders. Besides, a multiple borderlands approach is considered crucial in understanding the US–Mexico and border relations regarding economics, cultures, and border policies. From this perspective, I had the chance to depict a variety of themes and issues related to each region, like drug trafficking in the Arizona–San Diego region, alcohol smuggling in the Sonora-Arizona borderland, violence and lawlessness in the central borderlands, and human trafficking in the eastern borderlands.

The southbound movement across the border emphasized separation rather than hybridity by visualizing the physical border as a division line. Noticeably, the movies analyzed here convey the differences more than the similarities. Screening the southbound movement across the US–Mexico border in various film genres has shown the negative portrayal of Mexico in the American film industry in multiple borderlands and different periods. All movies that are mentioned in this study show that although crossing the border is easy and fast, Mexico represents danger, crime, lawlessness, poverty, and death. One exception that may manifest as a positive portrayal of the journey to Mexico is through Mexican-American characters who cross the border to visit family members or friends, like Gloria in *Miss Bala* (2019) and Amelia in *Babel* (2006). Both southbound movements are accompanied by happy music. Noticeably, as mentioned earlier, all the cinematic crossings were legal through border checkpoints. Most of these films display the southern border crossing in both directions to compare the processes. Ironically, film directors hardly ever focus on the regular life pattern at the border; instead, they mostly fixate the audience's attention on more exciting and shocking topics like crime and violence.

This research further supports the recent studies conducted by both Staudt and Dell 'Agnese about the cinematic border, indicating that "it is films about the border, not the border itself, that bring out the worst in the borderlands of countries, at least in the multiple borders of the US–Mexico border region."[40] However, we should not ignore that most

[40] Staudt, "The Border, Performed in Films," 475.

of the above-mentioned films offer realistic representations of the physical border at one level. However, they also lack multi-layered portrayals of the border—with few exceptions. This study has provided more insight into borderland studies by analyzing new movies that have not yet been explored in the academic field. Meanwhile, the scope of this research was limited by the unavailability of essential movies online.

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