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

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This article analyses ideas of retributive justice and US interventionism through the *Sicario* films. By identifying cross-border interventions into Mexico by the US as retributive justice in the form of nemesis, this article highlights the problematic representation of Mexico in North American cinema. It brings together discussion of equilibrium – as a structuralist narrative feature highlighted by Todorov (1969) – with the socio-political analysis of Ronfeldt (1994) to demonstrate how the representation of US interventions in Mexico takes its place against a backdrop of shadows and cynical stereotypes. In doing so, the article demonstrates that cinematic representations of retributive justice depend very much on socio-political and historical perspectives, and on conditions of production.

Keywords: Sicario, Nemesis, Narrative, Retributive Justice, Representation

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

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1) Introduction

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

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

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

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

[1] See Lee / Kube (2020).

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

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

2) Nemesis, Hubris and Retributive Justice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3) Nemesis and Border Crossing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4) Equilibrium and Representation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5) Conclusion

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

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

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

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