XVIII. US-MEXICAN ENCOUNTERS IN CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN FILM

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Editorial

US-Mexican Encounters in Contemporary Film: Preliminary Remarks

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Throughout the 2016 US presidential campaign and Donald Trump's subsequent presidency, migration from Mexico to the United States and the growing number of Mexican-Americans have been central issues. When Trump announced his campaign, he was already very explicit about his negative view of Mexicans, on which his ongoing development of the US-Mexican border wall is based: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. […] They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists" (Washington Post Staff 2015).[1] Once elected, this ultra-nationalist binary presentation of a 'corrupt Mexico' contaminating the 'pure' United States continued, especially in the context of speeches about the Trump wall, which is supposed to keep these "bad hombres" out (Dopp 2019). These and numerous other comments signify a shift in the current US American presidency to discourses that promote essentialist and xenophobic notions of the Other as inferior and dangerous.[2] Trump's selection of Mexico as a 'scapegoat' for US domestic issues like increased drug consumption and ongoing American business interest in cheap labor is primarily questionable on moral and ethical grounds. Furthermore, given that Hispanics with Mexican cultural background form the largest minority group in the US, the potential socio-economic impact of extreme xenophobic rhetoric should also be considered. Albeit in a humoristic way, Sergio Arau's *A Day without a Mexican* (2004) has presented the potential consequences of white America left without its Hispanic population in sufficient detail well before the Trump era. In consideration of enhanced xenophobic rhetoric today, it provides a robust starting point for critical discussions from the Bush era.[3]

In contrast to populist ultra-nationalist political discourse, which Griffin discusses very convincingly as a key feature of neo-fascism,[4] many contemporary films in US and Mexican cinema and TV demonstrate a tendency to question monocultural and racist ideas, just as Arau proposed in 2004 and numerous other directors well before him. This correlates with an

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[1] See also Greenwood (2018).
[2] See Valverde (2016).
[3] See Barrow (2012) for an excellent discussion of the film.
[4] See Griffin (2008: 186ff.).

enhanced integration of Mexican migrant perspectives into Hollywood productions, partially through directors, but also actors, writers, producers and technical staff with a Mexican cultural background. Their input to Hollywood increases the potential to reach North-American mainstream audiences with alternative messages, and there is evidence that films like Nava's *Bordertown* (2006), Cuarón's *Desierto* (2015) and Ulrich's *Coco* (2017) aim to show perspectives of the Mexican Other that are not in line with Trump's rhetoric. Of particular interest is here the individualization and humanization of migration but also the more nuanced portrayal of Mexico, all of which provide a basis to subvert the rigid binaries set by ultra-nationalist political discourse in the United States. It could also be argued that the fluid and transgressive character of migrant Others might be a fruitful starting point for the critical interrogation of new monocultural politics, as is certainly the case in contemporary European migrant cinema.[5] Furthermore, *Coco*'s focus on Mexican culture and traditions has contributed to the categorization of the animated Disney feature as "the Pixar film that defies Donald Trump's Anti-Mexican Rhetoric" (Rose 2018).

On the other hand, Hollywood cinema has been repeatedly discussed as a form of cultural imperialism and/or colonialism,[6] while other publications explore its impact through concepts like "Hollywoodization" (Goering et al. 2016). Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that directors, scriptwriters and actors are resistant to well-established cultural binaries and hierarchies that shape contemporary forms of neo-nationalism. Finally, commercial pressures on film productions have enhanced tendencies to melodramatic excess, which might lead to the reconstruction of monocultural subtexts even within diversity-embracing films. These subtexts deserve further exploration as they might be the strongest obstacle for the development of convincing socio-political, cultural and economic alternatives to populist right-wing identity politics.

This *iMex* issue has to consider the wider spectrum of – and tension between – filmic images, ranging from transcultural solidarity constructs to enhanced monocultural portrayals. There is wider scholarly agreement that transcultural solidarity concepts blur the boundaries of individual cultures through their focus on the interconnectedness of our increasingly global environment.[7] Instead of further enhancing separatist concepts of national cultures, notions of transcultural solidarity start explorations from the "interlocking interdependence of cultures in the age of globalization" (Antor 2010: 12), which critically interrogate and destabilize

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[5] See Rings (2018).
[6] See Anderson (2007) and Trinder (2020).
[7] See Antor (2006) and Rings (2018)

traditional binaries of Self and Other. This includes more recently the discussion of "transcultural memory" (Moses/Rothberg 2014) and affect.[8] On the other hand, ultra-nationalism is shaped by monocultural identity constructs, which are examined as 'island' or 'container' concepts of culture that show homogenous, separatist and essentialist features.[9]

While transcultural solidarity tendencies in Chicano cinema before the Trump era have been discussed at length, both within *iMex*[10] and elsewhere,[11] there has been no substantial in-depth research on the impact of the Trump era on images of Mexicans and Chicanos in recent US and Mexican film. This *iMex* issue aims to reduce that gap in research by exploring how far and how exactly the monocultural shift in political rhetoric in the era of "Trumpism" (Çalişkan /Preston 2017) has affected filmic portrayals of Chicano and Mexican identity. Close readings include films that focus on migration from Mexico to the US (e.g. Cuarón's *Desierto* 2015), Mexican drug trafficking and US intervention (Netflix's *Narcos* TV series, Grünberg's *Rambo: Last Blood* 2019), life in Mexico (Hardicke's *Miss Bala* 2019), Trump's wall project (Masters's *The River and The Wall* 2017) and the portrayal of Mexican cultural identity (Unkrich's *Coco* 2017).

In 'Poética contra política', CÉCILE BROCHARD and OSCAR TORRES examine the performative power of fiction in Jonás Cuarón's film *Desierto* (2015). In particular, they want to determine how far the entertainment esthetics of this film support its skepticism about the reemergence of nationalists, racists and supremacists speeches in the context of Trump's presidential campaign, speeches that were used as a political subtext during the promotion of *Desierto*. The article concludes that the esthetic choices are partially counterproductive to the original purpose of a politically engaged film aimed to fight against the reduction of the Other.

The next two articles examine images of America's "War on Drugs" on TV and in cinema. DOUGLAS E. FORSTER's '*Narcos* Television and Trump's Politics of Fear' explores how the Netflix television series reinforces negative images of Latinos as dangerous drug-lord criminals who threaten the safety and sanctity of US citizens. The author argues that this enhances Trump's politics of fear, which not only got him elected, but has broadened and strengthened his support from conservatives. His study focuses on selected scenes from episodes of three Netflix series: *Narcos*, *Narcos: Mexico*, and *El Chapo*, offering evidence of why such programs have become so popular for American viewers, who have been made to believe that illegal immigrants come across the border to destroy conservative white America's way of life. At the

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[8] See Massumi (2002) and Breger (2014).
[9] For a more detailed conceptual discussion see Rings (2018: 8-17).
[10] See Rings (2012).
[11] See Gabriel Melendez (2013), Raab (2014) and Castro Ricalde et al. (2017).

same time, the series mocks US law and journalism, which supports Trump's political agenda further. In 'Contested Border Crossings in Shifting Political Landscapes', LARA LENGEL and VICTORIA A. NEWSOM develop Forster's argumentation through an in-depth analysis of representation of Mexicans in the recent US blockbuster *Rambo: Last Blood* (2019). Drawing upon hypermasculine, gun-wielding characteristics associated with the political right and its military industrial complex, their study critiques how far and how exactly the current political climate marked by alt-right, ethno-nationalist constructs in the era of Trump has given rise to anti-immigration discourses that reinforce racialised fears and the belief that nationalists are the rightful heirs to white privilege. Through original literary work on the five-film *Rambo* franchise, the authors trace the characterisation of John Rambo from Vietnam veteran anti-hero, via Reagan-era champion, to Trump-era anti-hero killing the Other as he invades the US southern border. In particular, this article argues that the most-recent *Rambo* film evokes the frontier mythology and a fear of the foreigner encroaching upon the homeland. The study questions anti-Mexican and anti-immigration discourses of both Trump and *Last Blood*, and Rambo's role in necessitating empowering heteronormative masculinity and the American male prominence of the savior figure. It also illustrates topoi underlying these constructs and critiques political and cultural influences and audience reception reflecting shifting political interests and fears – most notably immigration and human/sex trafficking.

ERICA BERZAGHI and FRANK O'SULLIVAN's 'Trump's Rhetoric Influence on Filmic Images of Mexico' draws on Trump's assertions about Mexican culture and migration from Latin America to explore the extent to which his hegemonic rhetoric has contributed to shaping images of Mexico in Hollywood film production. Informed by Van Dijk's concept of political discourse and Fairclough's notion of media discourse, this study proposes a qualitative film analysis to approach the research objective. In particular, it examines continuities and discontinuities in two key films made during two different republican governments, *Bordertown* (2006) – produced and disseminated under the Bush administration – and *Miss Bala* (2019) – made during the Trump administration. Based on their analysis, it is possible to argue that there is a shift towards a more negative portrayal of Mexicans, which is very much in line with the shift in political discourse from former US President George W. Bush to Trump.

In 'Politics in *The River and The Wall* (2017)', MARTINA MOELLER examines how far Ben Masters manages to combine in his documentary two goals – to document the borderlands and to explore the potential impact of a future wall on the natural environment. In this context, the study explores in detail how discourses around nature, border fences and immigration are presented in the film and to what extend they are critical of Trump's wall project. The author

comes to the conclusion that the film's suggestion to create a bi-national park along the borderlands is strongly reminiscent of John Muir's romantic legacy. However, precisely this romanticized focus on nature seems to undermine the political discussion because, in its nostalgic proposal to go back to cowboy 'roots', it marginalizes key aspects of the debate such as illegal migration and drug trafficking.

The next two studies explore the portrayal of Mexican culture in Hollywood cinema, with particular focus on Unkrich's *Coco*. JESSICA WAX-EDWARDS examines in 'Re-animating Mexicanidad' *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017), which present the Day of the Dead from very different perspectives. In particular, her article explores how these two depictions of Mexican heritage relate to the industrial structures that created them as well as the differing socio-political climates in which they were produced and released. The author argues that both animations serve contrasting ideological functions: While *The Book of Life*, which was released two years prior to the controversial presidential campaign of Donald Trump, offers a touristic gaze of Mexico as an exotic other, *Coco* could be regarded as a mildly subversive film. The latter correlates with its production during the time of Trump's election, and the director's interest to provide a more detailed and positive representation of Mexican cultural heritage in a climate of increasing political antagonism towards the country. In 'Approaching Pixar's *Coco* during the Trump Era', SANDRA L. LÓPEZ VARELA focuses more in detail on the tensions and contradictions within *Coco*'s stand against Trump's presentation of Mexicans as "rapists and drug-trafficking criminals". She argues that the film, despite its praise by audiences and critics as 'pro-Mexico' film, does ultimately not vindicate Mexico's 'good people'. Instead, it promotes an institutionalized nationalist image of Mexico's heritage and identity going back to the 19th century. The study comes to the conclusion that Lee Unkrich's good intentions to make this film 'right' help to disseminate and support the Mexican government in its reconstruction of an imagined sociocultural homogeneity, which marginalizes non-dominant ways of life in a culturally rich and diverse country.

Filmography

ARAU, Sergio (dir.) (2004): *A Day without a Mexican*. USA/Mexico/Spain: Eye on The Ball Films, Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE). 100 min.

BAIZ, Andrés (dir.) (2015-2018): *Narco*s, *Season 1-3*. Mexico: Gaumont International Television/United States: Netflix, different episodes of around 50 minutes each.

CONTRERAS, Ernesto / José Manuel Cravioto (dirs.) (2017): *El Chapo*, *Season 1*. Mexico/USA: Univision Studios/Netflix, different episodes of around 50 minutes each.

CUARÓN, Jonás (dir.) (2015): *Desierto*. Mexico/France: Esperanto Kino/CG Cinema. 88 min.

GRÜNBERG, Adrian (dir.) (2019): *Rambo: Last Blood.* Screenplay co-written by Sylvester Stallone and Matthew Cirulnick. US: Lionsgate. 89 min.

GUTIÉRREZ, Jorge R. (dir.) (2014): *The Book of Life.* USA: Reel FX Creative Studios, 20th Century Fox Animation. 95 min.

MASTERS, Ben (dir.) (2019): *The River and the Wall*. Mexico/USA: Fin & Fur Films. 137 min.

HARDWICKE, Catherine (dir.) (2019): *Miss Bala*. USA/Mexico: Columbia Pictures/Canana Films at al. 104 min.

NAVA, Gregory (dir.) (2006): *Bordertown*. USA: Nava/Lopez/Fields. 108 min.

RUIZPALACIOS, Alonso (dir.) (2018): *Narcos: Mexico, Season 1*. Mexico/USA: Gaumont International Television/Netflix, different episodes of around 50 minutes each.

UNKIRCH, Lee (dir.) (2017): *Coco*. USA: Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar Animation Studios. 105 min.

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