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Trump's Rhetoric Influence on Filmic Images of Mexico:

The Case of *Miss Bala* (2019)

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Erica Berzaghi / Frank O'Sullivan

(Anglia Ruskin University)

This article draws on US president Donald Trump's assertions about Mexican culture and migration from Latin America to explore how far 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 produced 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.

Keywords: *Miss Bala*, *Bordertown*, Mexico, Trump speeches, migration



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Trump's Rhetoric Influence on Filmic Images of Mexico: The Case of *Miss Bala* (2019)

Erica Berzaghi / Frank O'Sullivan
(Anglia Ruskin University)

1) Introduction

When considering modern fights for equality, democracy, freedom of speech and movement, Trump's hegemonic rhetoric against migrants from Latin America sounds like an abhorrence. It could, however, also be regarded as a rather common strategy of finding a scapegoat in an ethnic minority during a time of national crisis. For example, one of the first laws in the USA, which restricted entrance to a specific ethnic group, was the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882. Following an increased inflow of people from China, it prohibited the entry in the USA to Chinese labourers and restricted the movement of those already in the country on the basis that they "were stealing jobs and depressing wages" (Misra 2015). Since 1965 Hispanic migration from Mexico has represented one of the major ethnic influxes in the United States, and that makes it an easy target for the current wave of discrimination. However, if this is a common mechanism in political discourse, to be identified according to Van Dijk largely by its key actors or authors, i.e. "presidents [...] and other members of government" (Van Dijk 1997: 12), why do people still respond to it positively?

Schaefer attributes the success of Trump's rhetoric to its links to emotions of shame, rage and disgust.¹ In fact, the current American president suggests: "The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems" (Trump in Washington Post Staff 2015) thus attributing the misfortunes of America to external factors. Not by coincidence his slogan is "Make America Great Again", which implies the nation has been wounded, belittled and Trump appears to insinuate that one source of national humiliation correlates with illegal migration from Latin America. Therefore, it appears to be his mission to reduce migration from countries south of the United States and he justifies this by employing negative hyperbolic terminology. Seeing the other as something 'less' than our in-group is often encouraged by political discourse but it is imperative to resist the 'naturalisation' of such concepts and the stereotyping of the other that often follows.² Such mechanisms are pervasive: From the political level they seep through

¹ See Schaefer (2019).

² See Chilton (2008: 60).

society and enter everyday ways of thinking. According to Foucault, in any given society whoever is in power can claim to be the depository of true knowledge, hence, power also creates the distinction between truth and falsehood.³ Needless to say, Trump does so in very explicit terms: "I give people exactly what they need and deserve to hear [...] and that is The Truth" (Trump 2015: 8). Therefore, the language used by politicians can have a significant effect on the way people see and interpret reality because of its assigned authority. Consequently, it is possible to assert that political discourse creates narratives that permeate and shape societies.

Much of the research done into Trump's speeches have exposed from different angles their structure, motives and context without considering the repercussions this kind of rhetoric has had on cultural production. For example, Goldstein and Hall studied his speeches in relation to racism and his use of denigrating humour arguing that Trump is relating racism to nostalgia (Make America Great Again) and how he brought his entertainer brand into politics.⁴ On the other hand, Rademacher has compared the presidential figure to hardboiled detectives in film noir in an attempt to examine themes of citizen estrangement and personal power. His findings suggest that, like in noir protagonists, Trump uses a "blame the victim" strategy, within which key aspects of racism, gender discrimination and xenophobia are combined to project accountability for a lost sense of power.⁵ There are also very interesting linguistic approaches, which include Savoy's statistical analysis of lemmas used in the 2016 presidential primary elections. It highlights Trump's frequent recourse to the personal pronoun "I" in TV debates as well as the frequent use of basic-level sentences, which appear to have the most effect because they tend to be remembered.⁶

However, so far very little research has been done into the effect of Trump on popular culture, including cinema, although there is ample proof for shifts in Hollywood images of Mexico that seem to correlate with continuities and discontinuities in political discourse. On the one hand, Noble highlights very convincingly how far "Hollywood's images of Mexican greasers, bandits and sultry *señoritas* replicate an ingrained tradition of (visual) representation that is bound up with Mexico's colonial legacy", i.e. Hollywood cinema "simply took up where earlier visual regimes left off" (Noble 2005: 29). Also, there is evidence that Hollywood tends to come periodically back to this, e.g. in the aftermath of the economic crisis in the 1940s when Mexicans were more often represented as bandits, rather than Latin lovers, a different image favoured in preceding decades. On the other hand, Wool argues that there was a significant shift

³ See Foucault (1980).

⁴ See Goldstein / Hall (2017).

⁵ See Rademacher (2016).

⁶ See Savoy (2008).

towards a celebration of Latin American culture in the 1950s when the good neighbour policy established in 1933 finally managed to dominate political discourse, correlating with pressures of an enhanced Cold War.⁷ In all cases, Hollywood narratives can be understood as "a practice not just representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough 1992a: 64). Furthermore, they can be regarded as "sensitive barometers of social processes, movement and diversity" (Fairclough 1992b: 209) as well as political reactions to it.

In this context, this paper will take some of the most controversial comments made by Trump about Mexican migrants and will use them to compare how two films produced in Hollywood, before and during Trump's ascent to power, present Mexico. *Bordertown* (Nava 2006) was chosen because it was shot and released during George W. Bush's term in office, the republican president preceding Trump, while *Miss Bala* (Hardwicke 2019) falls into the Trump presidency. Also, both films share common ground: Just like *Bordertown*, *Miss Bala* is a mid-budget film (\$21 million for *Bordertown* and \$15 million for *Miss Bala*) that draws on historical events, and in both cases the protagonists are Chicano women who fight against Mexican criminals. Analyzing differences and similarities in these films will help to explore the effect Trump's rhetoric might have had on representations of Chicanos and Mexicans in recent US cinema. While there are significant differences in the way Bush and Trump have voiced controversial opinions, there are also political continuities that might have shaped filmic images of Mexico. For example, by 2006, Bush had already increased funding for border security by 66% and vowed that by 2008 he would have 6000 more border patrol officers instated, meaning he had doubled the amount of border security staff during his term.⁸ Another aspect of Bush's discourse shared by Trump is his belief that the only way for an immigrant to become successful in the US is for them to speak English and assimilate: "When immigrants assimilate and advance in our society, they realize their dreams, they renew our spirit and they add to the unity of America" (Bush 2006.).

Another interesting similarity between the two films is the biography of their respective directors. Gregory Nava (*Bordertown*) has Mexican heritage while Hardwicke (*Miss Bala*) grew up in McAllen by Rio Grande, i.e. close to the Mexican border, which enhanced her awareness of socio-political and cultural relations.⁹ This helped to shape their films, and reflects in the narratives. In particular, Nava is the son of migrants and worked his way up to

⁷ See Wool (1981).

⁸ See Bush (2006).

⁹ See Burt (2019).

Hollywood. From this point of view, one could see how he might have used his understanding of Chicano identity in the workplace while directing *Bordertown*, where the main character is a career woman with a Mexican background who shows initially no intention to get reconnected to her roots: "If, in opposition to Toni, Lauren shows at first a strong rejection of her Mexican heritage, then this is mainly a result of external pressures of discrimination, racism and social injustice that she seems to have experienced as Mexican in the US" (Rings 2018: 134). On the other hand, Hardwicke saw Mexico as the land of parties, underage drinking, but also the place where violence would come from. Even though these directors come from different cultural backgrounds, they both have direct knowledge and experience of some of the issues portrayed in their films. Furthermore, despite being created for an American audience, *Miss Bala* is a remake that includes many crew members who worked on the Mexican homonymous film from 2011 (Naranjo 2011). This offers the opportunity to include in the analysis the original version so as to provide a Mexican perspective on the issues addressed in this paper.

In *Bordertown*, Lauren (Jennifer Lopez), a passionate American journalist with Mexican heritage, is sent to investigate the murders of women workers at US-American-owned factories in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. With the help of an old friend, Lauren tries to utilize a surviving victim (Maya Zapata) to catch her perpetrators and expose the tragedies that transpire just across the border. Unbeknownst to Lauren, this proves difficult as corrupt politics prevail not only in Mexico but also in the USA, where her story is threatened to be dropped. However, Eva, a survivor of the notorious Juárez attacks, and Lauren work together against other people's discouragement. Despite various difficulties, they manage to kill one of the men responsible for the rapes of the maquiladora workers in self-defense and publish the story.

Miss Bala tells the story of Gloria (Gina Rodriguez), a Latin-American makeup artist from Los Angeles, who during a visit to a childhood friend in Tijuana, is kidnapped by a Mexican gang, Los Estrellas. While trying to escape, she is arrested by the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) under suspicion of collaborating with Los Estrellas: in order to clear her charges, she has to work for the DEA. However, after the DEA agent leaves her unprotected during a shoot-out against the Mexican cartel, Gloria takes matters into her own hands in order to escape. She trades finding her friend Suzu in exchange for helping Lino, a Mexican who grew up partly in the US and the Los Estrellas' boss, to kill Suacedo (Damián Alcázar), the Mexican Chief of Police. Once reunited with her friend, Gloria discovers that she has been deceived by Lino and kills him, gaining the attention and a job from the CIA. Both films deal with criminal activities in Mexico related to historical events and are directed by people with Mexican cultural background. However, this paper will argue that the protagonists' relation to American values,

despite being both Chicanas, are represented differently and so is their relation to the criminals they are fighting against.

2) Immigrants' status and assimilation

The following chapters will use transcripts of Bush and Trump's speeches to capture common ideas regarding immigration. Relevant speeches include Bush's 'Address to the Nation on Immigration Reform' (Bush 2006), his speech against Trumpism (Bush in Vargas 2017) and his appeal to dial down rhetoric on immigration (Bush in Montoya-Galvez 2019), as well as Trump's announcement of the presidential candidacy (Trump in Time Staff 2015), his speech on immigration (Trump 2016) and an address to the nation regarding the erection of the border wall (Trump in White House 2019). It will be of key interest for the film analysis that Bush tends to differentiate sharply between illegal migrants and legal migrants when he argues to stop the former but welcome the latter, while Trump shows overall a less differentiated approach with most imagery verging around themes of: a) skills and status connected to levels of assimilation, b) victimhood and criminality, and c) criminals seen as animal-like and savages. These three themes will be used to assess in what ways and to what extent the films selected comply with such ideology. A comparison could be indicative of how much concepts such as assimilation, Mexican agency and criminality have changed over time and as a possible consequence of the shift in political rhetoric.

In this context, Trump talks about Mexicans often in terms of their status: sometimes specifying the illegal divide "most illegal immigrants are lower-skilled workers with less education who compete directly against vulnerable American workers" (Trump 2016). Other times, he generalizes: "when Mexico sends its people, they are not sending their best" (Time Staff 2015). In contrast, *Bordertown* presents with Lauren a first generation Mexican migrant-protagonist who does excellent investigative journalism for a well-established US paper, the Chicago Sentinel, which helps to deliver social justice. All this leads viewers to question Trump's opinion that Mexico does not send its best people. It is, however, in line with Bush's ideas that "the borders should be open to trade and lawful immigration" (Bush 2006), because Lauren was adopted by US Americans and that makes her a legal migrant. Importantly, though, Lauren's career is shaped by assimilation, which includes an almost complete suppression of her Mexican background.

On the other hand, Gloria shows in *Miss Bala* far less of a career and personal independence, which correlates with less assimilation. This can be seen very clearly if we compare Gloria and Lauren's interaction with their bosses. At the beginning of *Miss Bala*, we see multiple medium

shots of Gloria, who is a make-up artist in the fashion industry, trying to pitch an idea to her supervisor. She is in a central position in these medium shots, showing her in a position of vulnerability, and she is shown behind her supervisor while he is facing away from her as if she is inferior to him. The only time he turns around is to reject her and even then we are shown another medium shot in which they are facing each other but he is towering over her. Even if Gloria is usually represented as a strong-willed, competent and passionate professional like Lauren, she remains silent when told by her manager that she is not paid to think. When Lauren, however, is told she cannot print her story due to government censorship, we see close-up shots of her passionately fighting her case. She is also shot in the same way as George Morgan (Martin Sheen), which highlights them as equals. George then sits down and they are both shown in a medium shot with Lauren towering over him which is the complete opposite of what happens with Gloria.

Also, while Lauren is seen doing research as soon as she gets to Juárez (Nava 2006: 00:11'), which correlates with Bush's ideas of all migrants (even illegals) as people "who work hard [...] and lead responsible lives" (Bush 2006), Gloria is presented as a petty criminal: Even if stealing two bags of makeup on her way out of work (Hardwicke 2019: 00:02') has to be interpreted as revenge from having been belittled, it fits in with Trump's imagery of Mexicans as thieves.¹⁰

Finally, there are differences in the importance given to assimilation. While Bush highlights that even illegal migrants "are part of American life" (Bush 2006) and proposes "openness to the new" as US-American key value (Bush in Montoya Galvez 2019: 02':27"), Trump focuses on assimilation: "We also have to be honest about the fact that not everyone who seeks to join our country will be able to successfully assimilate" (Trump 2016). If assimilation implies that migrants should absorb and emulate the host culture, then *Bordertown* presents in its first part an outstanding example for this: Lauren admits at that stage that she does not know anything about Mexico and that she is not able to speak Spanish very well. However, once Lauren becomes acquainted with Eva, she starts rediscovering and embracing her Mexican identity until by the end, she decides to work in Ciudad Juárez as the editor of the paper her friend used to curate. Therefore, by the end of the film, Lauren demonstrates that it is possible to create a constructive hybrid identity that can be used for the betterment of society: Her experience can help people gain a voice from within the society where they are repressed. All this is partially in line with Bush's comments on the importance to show 'kindness' defined as a result of empathy: "look at someone less fortunate and see yourself" (Bush in Montoya-Galvez 2019:

¹⁰ See Lind (2019).

02':52"-02':55"). However, for Bush, this is another key US-American value, while *Bordertown* presents originally Lauren's work for the Chicago Sentinel as mostly driven by egocentrism, i.e. her interest in further enhancing her career, and 'kindness' then develops in the course of hybridization, which could be read as a strong stance against assimilation.

On the other hand, as daughter of an American citizen who owned a maquiladora in Tijuana, Gloria grew up in both countries, and her initial attitude is presented as taking advantage of the opportunities offered in the USA while her emotional investment is actually in Mexico. However, since being taken hostage, she clings on to her American citizenship by reminding others, including the audience, of where she belongs. From a macro-narrative perspective, this attitude can be seen as opportunistic as she embraces her American identity only when in need. However, after the DEA agent fails to protect her, Gloria can be seen as acting above any national affiliation but by doing so, she embodies American values of individualism and masculinity,¹¹ which include looking after themselves and to do so with great determination and ambition. Therefore, it could be argued that in the second part of the film, Gloria's assimilation of American values pushes her from being an American citizen to representing America itself by fighting alone against crime. In her case, her hybrid identity is used, by the end of the film, to contribute to the work of the CIA, hence aiding the fight against drug cartels from the perspective of the American 'saviour', rather than from within society. In this instance, the incomplete assimilation of American culture is being exploited to infiltrate the 'enemy'.

Historically, this is a common practice that *Miss Bala* (2011) refers to with the character of Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena, an undercover American agent who got kidnapped and killed by Lino and his gang during operations with the DEA in 1985. Therefore, in this respect, Gloria fits in with American mainstream expectations of Mexican-Americans. However, in the 2019 version of *Miss Bala*, Lino also has a dual identity as he tells Gloria ("I am American, like you. I grew up in both places, like you") and his path is shown to have led him to a life of crime. As Monica Castillo mentions in her review of *Miss Bala* in regards to Latino talent getting parts in big Hollywood film, "I'm still very conflicted that the only way we could get this spotlight is by playing the worst versions of our communities" (Castillo 2019). In this sense, it could be argued that in 2019 *Miss Bala* focuses on the idea that migrants who do not assimilate US-American culture cannot have a positive impact in any society, which ultimately implies that Mexican culture cannot save itself, but it needs US-American intervention. In this case, such help is embodied by people like Gloria who, having assimilated American values, operate through

¹¹ See Hofstede Insights (2020).

individualistic values and from outside society thus echoing the positioning of Trump as superior to others.¹²

3) Victims, perpetrators and saviours

Despite his stance against illegal migration, Bush argues already before *Bordertown* that "the vast majority of illegal migrants are decent people" (Bush 2006) and, more recently, distances himself from the white supremacy rhetoric under Trumpism.¹³ Trump himself continues to prefer a clear cut division between good US-Americans and bad migrants, saviours and perpetrators. Not by coincidence, Schaefer summarises that his "rhetorical signature remains strongly marked by a programmatic division of the world into in-groups and out-groups" (Schaefer 2019: 9). In line with Bush and in distance to Trump-style rhetoric, *Bordertown* calls for shared culpability for what happened in Juarez, where we can see that rape, violence and criminality are connected with issues around Western exploitation and corporations turning a blind eye to injustice and corruption. For example, Lauren is offered a lot of money to drop the story back in Chicago and in another scene she tells off an American manager of the maquiladora for not taking responsibility for his worker's welfare. The 2011 version of *Miss Bala* has a similar interpretation of such relation as *Bordertown* offers: the USA promotes crime in Mexico by trading arms for drugs or laundered money.

On the other hand, the most recent version of *Miss Bala* can be argued to portray the corrupted Mexican system as the only villain while the United States, even if through dubious means, investigates and fights Mexican cartels. That highlights Mexican affairs from a dramatized and polarised perspective that follows Trump's portrayals of Mexico and its citizens as troublesome and focuses on the dichotomy of US-American saviors vis-à-vis helpless victims of Mexico's own untrustworthy system. All this is reminiscent of Hollywood films of the 1960s, starting with *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges 1960), the US-American remake of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), in which rural Mexicans turn to US-American outlaws for help against Mexican bandits, while in the Japanese original the samurai-saviors are – just like perpetrators and victims – from Japan. Although the Mexican villagers do not say explicitly why they are searching for US-American help, repeated plundering without intervention by the Mexican army suggests that no one in Mexico seems to be able or willing to provide effective help against a brutal and corrupt system. By looking at *Bordertown* and both versions of *Miss Bala* the shift in blame towards a unique culprit is clear and very much in line with both

¹² See Çalışkan / Preston (2017) and Rademacher (2016).

¹³ See Bush in Vargas (2017).

traditional Hollywood images and Trump's demands: "Stop the criminal gangs, drugs smugglers, and human traffickers" from Mexico (Trump in White House 2019).

By claiming that most Mexican immigrants are bringing trouble, Trump could also imply that they are to blame for their own misfortune, hence positioning them as victims of their own destiny. By analysing Eva in *Bordertown* and Suzu in *Miss Bala* (2011/2019), it is possible to examine Mexican agency more closely. The more passive Suzu could be interpreted as a burden to the United States that has to deploy resources to save the Mexican, while the rather active Eva appears self-reliant and brave in her defiance of a culture that allows crimes to be left unresolved and criminals to go unpunished.

Eva is relatively active because she has the courage to find her rapists and have them persecuted; her will to bring justice against crime that seems impenetrable sets her out from the attitude of other people around her who discourage both Lauren and Eva in their pursuit. Also, in one of the final scenes of the film we bare witness to Lauren being strangled by one of Eva's attackers. The scene is set in what could be seen as a shanty town, it is night time and everything is on fire. Lauren is being strangled by a rapist and murderer in a dark room which is only lit up by the fire that is engulfing it, the literal pits of hell. In this situation, Eva picks up a wooden plank that is on fire and begins to viciously attack the perpetrator with no remorse. The plank at one end could be seen as symbolic of a torch, a catalyst in guiding their way to freedom through the darkness that the attacker physically and mentally burdens them with. Eventually, Eva beats her attacker into the fire, we see him immersed in the flames and watch him burn to death. This seems like a fitting death, because the attacker seems to perish in the flames of hell, which he helped to create. It is possible to argue, that Eva manages all this only thanks to Lauren's help,¹⁴ but this study contends that their relationship is symbiotic: While Lauren provides Eva with encouragement, information and protection, Eva gives Lauren a chance to get in touch with her past and helps her identity to develop. Also, ultimately, it is Eva who saves Lauren from the hands of one of the rapists. It is true that the film shows Americans in Mexico helping bring justice, as in *The Magnificent Seven*. However, it also exposes the corruption and lack of responsibility of some American people and corporations. Furthermore, Eva defies the stereotypical representation of the victim by showing determination and bravery in the face of the status quo. Such a role, in fact, contrasts with typical orientalist and colonialist view of the other as a passive, problematic figure.¹⁵ By looking at the role of Eva, one could argue that

¹⁴ See Rings (2018: 145).

¹⁵ See Said (1978: 46).

Bordertown, in contrast to Trump's representations, sends a message for collective responsibility and for collaboration across borders.

On the other hand, Suzu, in both versions of *Miss Bala*, is presented as the fun-loving friend who enjoys taking advantage of a corrupt system to pursue her goals but who becomes very quickly a marginal character. In *Miss Bala* (2019), Suzu is seen as wanting to play the game of 'rubbing elbows' with the people that might make her win the pageant and at the club trying her best to seduce the General who is also involved with the contest. However, during the shoot out, she gets kidnapped and used as a prostitute by Los Estrellas. Her passive position is highlighted during the post-pageant party when she is portrayed either as hanging around with men or being dragged by the arm by Gloria. Suzu comes down the stairs of the smoke-filled house in between two men, this represents her power position. She is entrapped in this lifestyle of being used and controlled by men, that is until Gloria saves her. In this scene, Gloria attains masculinity through the gun she wields, "as otherwise helpless victims, they are able to 'achieve masculinity' with firearms" (Stroud 2012: 220). Therefore, Suzu is controlled, essentially, by masculine individuals. She does not take any action to resolve or understand her situation and in the end she is returned home thanks to Gloria's deal with Jimmy (Anthony Mackie), a CIA agent. She is a helpless subject rather than an actor in the perpetration of Mexican crime. So, in this respect, Suzu in *Miss Bala* represents exactly what Trump seems to convey about Mexicans: people with no escape and no hope they must be ultimately saved by their American friends.

4) Drugs, rape and violence: criminals as savages

Trump often implies (or says directly, that being his style) that Mexicans are "bringing drugs" to the US. Logically, for drug trafficking to be lucrative, it has to find a market. In other words, it is known that Mexico and other Latin American countries produce drugs, but it is their demand in the US that fuels their commerce. For example, other recent productions such as *Birds of Passage* (Gallego / Guerra 2018) explore in a candid way the greed for drugs and money from the USA and Colombia respectively creates a symbiotic relationship that spirals into criminality and murder. Therefore, it is interesting to see how this relationship is explored in the films under consideration. In *Bordertown*, the cause of criminal actions is not related to either drugs or weapons, but to something much nearer to people's everyday life: cheap goods – in particular computer screens. Even if marginally, the exploitative relationship between Mexico and the USA is narrated explicitly by Nava both through the words at the start of the film and in the scene where Lauren goes back to her US office and throws monitors around or

when she shouts: "It isn't free trade! It's slave trade. It's a goddamn scam, and everybody is making too much money to give a shit about these women!". Similarly, *Miss Bala* (2011) depicts the exchange of drug money for guns as a straightforward and marginal affair to the film narrative: America sells guns fueling criminality by accepting laundered money and drugs. However, in *Miss Bala* (2019) the dealer in the USA turns out to be an undercover CIA agent, pointing at the never-failing righteousness of the American system, i.e. they fuel criminal thirst for guns for investigative purposes, hence for the greater good only. Interestingly, such connection is presented as a subplot to which only a few scenes are dedicated and not fully explored. Consequently, it is possible to argue that *Miss Bala* 2019 tends to obscure the responsibility of the USA in the fueling of the drug smuggling.

According to Trump, migrants from Mexico do not tend to conform to American culture, hence keeping their habits from Mexico which, according to the president's speeches, include rape and violence: "They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they are bringing those problems with them. They are bringing drugs. They are bringing crime. They're rapists" (Time Staff 2015). Trump gives his audience very graphic descriptions of what illegal aliens do in their countries. He often associates them to animals, considering them "vicious coyotes" (Trump in White House 2019) and even explicitly summarises them as "animals" (Lind 2019), which correlates with the use of adverbs like "brutally" and "savagely". This could be regarded as a colonial perspective within which the subaltern is dehumanized, partially through the presentation of brutal details: "They stomp on their victims. They beat them with clubs. They slash them with machetes, and they stab them with knives" (Trump in Lind 2019). If Trump's imagery has an impact on filmic representations, it would be possible to note an exaggeration in the description of criminal activities and personalities in *Miss Bala*.

Interestingly, Lauren can create safety nets for her protection, Diaz and police collaboration, but is also allowed to move in and out of Mexico with some degree of freedom. Gloria, on the other hand, has her passport taken, therefore she is properly absorbed into the criminal system and held as a hostage. One possible reading is to create a greater impact on the American audience, in line with Trump assertions such as "Americans are hurt by uncontrolled, illegal migration" (Trump in White House 2019). In the scene where Gloria is in the bedroom with Lino, she is represented as his sex slave. For example, he orders her to take off his shoes and then to undress in front of him. The close-up shots show both of the character's faces while this interaction occurs: Lino's face lacks emotion and he appears to be falling asleep, this could be due to the fact that he has been in this position numerous times and it is essentially just another day in the office for him. On the other hand, Gloria is shown in medium and close-up shots,

they pan up and down her body as she removes her clothes, objectifying her naked body. As well as this, the close-up shots of her face show obvious distress, something we do not tend to see on other sexualised Mexican women, such as the prostitute who comes out of the club toilet with the police officer (she smiles). Overall, the "threat of sexual assault hangs over *Miss Bala*, but Hardwicke walks a thin – precariously thin – line" (Edelstein 2020). In this sense, rape is never explicitly shown on-screen, potentially because of the PG-13 rating Sony wanted to achieve. However, sexual harassment is often implied or shown lightly (e.g. groping of Gloria in the club) and, above all, it is inflicted on an American citizen. This is particularly interesting because the historical events did not involve any American citizen. One could argue that this creates a higher empathy with Gloria and therefore more disdain towards the actions of the Mexican gang.

In *Bordertown*, scenes of rape, machismo and violence are shown only when central to the narrative, and the crimes are perpetrated by gangs, e.g. when a bus driver takes women to a remote place so that they can get raped and killed. One of Eva's rapists is seen at a party but his character remains undeveloped, which could be interpreted as generalized portrayal of criminals operating through a web of connections that dilutes individual responsibilities in a system shaped by corruption and protectionism. At a first sight, this bodes well with Trump's rhetoric of Mexicans being rapists, killers, and brutal savages. However, *Bordertown* also shows how this web goes beyond borders and is nothing else but a branch of a system where corporate greed from external/richer countries, in this case, the USA, foments such criminal acts. In this sense, *Bordertown* depicts a country imbued with corruption and intimidation but also exposes the other side of the coin, where even independent media abroad are asked to silence the voices of those people who want to expose such injustices. All this breaks with Trump's binary view of the United States on the one hand and Mexico on the other.

In *Miss Bala* there are numerous scenes that seem to serve the sole purpose of highlighting Mexico as a place where sexual favors, machismo and forced sex are common occurrences. Already in the club scene, in which Gloria and Suzu go to enchant the pageant jury, the audience is presented with people snorting coke, most probably having sex in a toilet cubicle and the dancing is very sexual too. Even when such activity is not central to the action, prostitution and gang members fiddling with weapons are part of the *mise-en-scène*: For example, when Gloria enters in Casa Rosita we see girls by a pool being charmed by elderly men, while another girl with only lingerie on and a bottle of wine in her hands enters a room where a man waits for her. Overt rape is never shown, but there are several instances where it is implied, and the spectacle is exaggerated to the point of stereotyping: Mexicans are portrayed as being mainly driven by

either sexual or violent impulses and guided neither by reason nor control, therefore more similar to animals than humans.

An interesting case is the portrayal of Lino (Ismael Cordoba) as a more nuanced character: Despite being shown as a respected and ruthless leader (he mercilessly kills a woman suspected of being a spy), he constantly worries about Gloria's reactions to their depravities. For example, when noticing Gloria's shock about the bombing of a DEA safe house, he commands silence and tries to justify his actions. Furthermore, he shares his dreams with her, e.g. when he takes her to an idyllic and peaceful place where he explains the reasons behind his actions and his desire to settle in the countryside. However, he cannot be trusted: Not only does he deceive Gloria about the whereabouts of her friend, but in the end he tries to kill her to save his own life. His double-crossing could come as somewhat of a surprise and, possibly because of this, the message that Mexicans can not be trusted hits home more poignantly.

Trump warns us by making a generalized remark about one criminal: "We cannot continue to allow thousands upon thousands of people to pour into our country, many of whom have the same thought process as this savage killer" (Trump in Lind 2019). By allowing the audience to know Lino and discover, even if just for a short part of the film, a caring and sensitive side to him, the director has let the audience empathize with him. Creating this momentary emotional connection can be seen as a way to let the character "pour into our" hearts, implicitly emulating thus the feelings and consequences of letting savage killers "pour into our country". Trump admits that "they want [us] to suffer", and if we identified with the story, we do feel betrayed by Lino as much as Gloria is. In contrast, both the rapists in *Bordertown* and Lino in the 2011 version of *Miss Bala* remain undeveloped. Even if Lino in the 2011 version plays a central role in the film, he doesn't disclose any information about himself so the audience has no background to his motives, therefore, no hooks to feel any empathy towards him. In this way, the audience is kept at a safe distance.

5) Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the comparison between *Bordertown* (2006) and *Miss Bala* (2019) enabled us to identify to what extent and how political discourse influenced the portrayal of Mexico in these films. In particular, *Bordertown* exposes the shared culpability between nations for the lawlessness of the border region in Mexico. Furthermore, it is worth stressing that the crime is not resolved by the US-American protagonist alone, but by Lauren's collaboration with Mexican Eva, who has the courage to fight back. All this is at least partially in line with Bush's perspective, who argues that the vast majority of migrants to the United States are "decent"

people (Bush 2006), and it is an original finding of this study. So far Lauren has predominantly been examined as the "savior from the North" (Rings 2018: 145), which does not consider that rising up to injustice is in *Bordertown* actually a collaborative effort. It can also be argued that the film follows Lauren's journey as a return-immigrant: While getting more disillusioned with the opportunistic attitude of her colleagues, hence with American values, she gets closer to her suppressed Mexican identity. Through this interpretation, Lauren, by the end of the film, can be seen as representing Chicano identity rather than assimilated US identity. In this sense, the saviour is ultimately not a direct embodiment of American values but someone who took a journey of self-discovery and integrated successfully values from both countries. For example, in Lauren's character Mexican concern for members of the community finds renewed strength when combined with American belief in "liberty and justice for all" (Hofstede Insights 2020).

On the other hand, more in line with Trump's perspective, *Miss Bala* shifts the blame onto Mexico alone and presents the country as incapable of resolving their issues, instead relying on American intervention as embodied by Gloria. In particular, the audience is often presented with references to prostitution and criminality even when not strictly necessary for the narrative. Also, the portrayal of Lino as a sympathetic character, only to betray Gloria and the audience in the end, amplifies the message that one should mistrust Mexicans. If we consider Trumpism as an epistemological violence, this analysis may be indicative of a shift alluded to by Saramo, who argues that violence is often at first received with shock, but when repeated it becomes part of people's everyday life who then stop questioning it and rebelling against it.¹⁶ One of the greatest risks for violence is to enter the common vernacular and become invisible to the public. Therefore, the films chosen serve as a reference point for subsequent research in an attempt to further analyse and increase awareness of this phenomenon.

Filmography

GALLEGO, Cristina / Ciro Guerra (dir.) (2018): *Birds of passage*. Colombia et al.: Snowglobe/Blond Indian Films et al. 125 min.

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

KUROSAWA, Akira (dir.) (1954): *Seven Samurai*. Japan: Toho Company. 160 min.

NAVA, Gregory (dir.) (2006): *Bordertown*. USA/Mexico: Möbius Entertainment et al. 112 min.

NARANJO, Gerardo (dir.) (2011): *Miss Bala*. Mexico: Canana Films/IMCINE et al. 113 min.

STURGES, John (dir.) (1960): *The Magnificent Seven*. USA: The Mirisch Company/Alpha Productions. 128 min.

¹⁶ See Saramo (2017).

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