Farm Worker Futurism

Cassandra Smith
Ethnic Studies 323
Dr. Navarro
Final Essay
December 12, 2016

The history of agriculture workers in the United States is a troubled story with both an unsettling past and future. Gaining momentum along with national attention in the early twentieth century, the United States has seen millions of both documented and undocumented people cross its borders from neighboring countries in the south. Once crossing the border the people of Latino decent fall into the stigmatized label of unwanted, problematic, and a drain on U.S. resources. This label often times prevents them from obtaining job security outside of the job sectors that Americans have in turn also deemed unwanted. One of these being farm and agricultural laborers, positions that require a tremendous amount of physical input with limited pay return. In his 2008 film, *Sleep Dealers,* director Alex Rivera depicts a twisted and off-setting view of the future of the Mexican agricultural workers and wage earning laborers and their relationship with the United States. Portrayed as a futuristic science fiction film, Alex Rivera's use of CGI, music, and setting help convey the message that the past as well as the future of Mexican laborers in the United States is an emotional as much as it is a physical sacrifice. The juxtaposition of the main characters Memo and Luz shows that, even in unfavorable circumstances, reaching for connectivity within "the system" can be achieved through different forms of individual sacrifice.

Sleep Dealers is the most recent and first feature length film made by Latino filmmaker Alex Rivera. Born in New York City, his father was a Peruvian immigrant and his mother an American citizen. He received his political science and media theory degree from Hampshire College in 1995. Rivera himself is a Sundance Institute Fellow, USA Artist Fellow, Creative Capital Grantee Fellow, and a Rockefeller Fellow and has had his work screened internationally at various museums, film festivals and radio venues. (www.sundance.org) His films are commonly known to touch on themes of immigration, labor, and politics and *Sleep Dealers* does not

stray far from these topics. *Sleep Dealers* is a futuristic science fiction film that revolves around the personal consequences and tribulations of the consolidated economic and political control the United States has over its foreign laborers. The film, in its entirety, focuses on two young Mexican adults who have traveled from their home cities to Tijuana in hope of joining in the labor market; which is controlled by new global systems. One important aspect of this film is that it is not considered a part of Chicano Cinema. According to Jason C. Johanson, a writer and former professor of Latino film and media, Chicano Cinema is made by, made for, and is about Chicanos. (Johanson, 303) Because Sleep Dealers was not made by a Chicano, the characters portrayed and the actors playing them are not Chicano, and only to a small degree showcase Chicano themes. The film however, fits into the overall representation of Latino themes and challenges, specifically focusing on Mexico's relationship within the U.S. market system and providing their laborers. Coupled with intense character development and cinematic elements, this festival award winning film brings attention to the future and reality of Latino Immigrants as they attempt to access U.S. labor markets.

It is through cinematic elements that audiences receive the intended message and theme of a film. A few of the main cinematic themes that aided in conveying the message of the future of laborers was CGI. Individually and collectively they work to connect audiences to the film's implicit and explicit meanings. CGI stands for computer-generated imagery and refers to the digital effects and images that appear on the screen and are sometimes hard to recreate while filming or simply do not exist. In the case of *Sleep Dealers,* Alex Rivera's use of CGI effects helped to add an unknown and mysterious ambiance to the film's science fiction genre. In an interview with ComingSoon.net, Alex Rivera explains how, in terms of scenery and location, CGI was used

secondarily. He explains, "We did a bit of everything… the way that I wanted to create the visual world was the exteriors, I tried to scout and find real-life science fiction locations." (www.com-ingsoon.net) It was the later coupling of special effects that turned the already science fiction locations within Mexico (where it was filmed) into the futuristic setting he was striving for. Colorful flashbacks, robots and drones, and the body-mind connection of the nodes are a few of the computer-generated images that made Rivera's futuristic world believable.

The setting was another aspect of the film that added to the overall futuristic storyline and plot. The film is about the transcending future of foreign laborers, specifically Latino migrant workers, and their relationship with the United States. The film however, takes place in Mexico with only a few scenes showing laborers such as Memo "working" in America. The work of the future, as depicted by Rivera, is done completely with drones connected physically and technologically with human beings through nodes, tiny sockets on the human body that connect to the nervous system. As explained in an Article by the New York Times, the American border has been walled completely off and migrant worker labor is now, "exported north while their bodies stay in Mexico." (Scott, 2009) Depicting the future of migrant labor this way extends far past the makings of a complex storyline and into the realms of a realistic future. While the U.S. values and practically survives off of the unregulated dirty work of foreign immigrants, they value less their physical being and presence within the societal system. The future holds, as it would turn out, a way to keep the *labor* but not the *laborer*; leading Rivera to focus on Memo's American work experience from within the confines of his home country.

Through cinematic elements Rivera creates and depicts a seemingly bleak future for migrant workers. However, it is through the development of the two main characters Memo and

Luz that he also establishes a sense of hope and willingness to seek out what the future holds.

With their individual reasons for wanting to participate and connect to the global system, it becomes apparent that the film is meant to showcase both fear and hope for the future. The first

character introduced is Memo Cruz, a young man who travels to Tijuana to find work as a sleep

dealer after witnessing his father mistakenly identified and killed in a water terrorist attack.

Memo, played by Luiz Fernando, is meant to portray one of the millions of Mexican migrant

workers that the United States has seen over many decades. Migrant workers are willing to work

for tireless hours risking their health for low wages, which oftentimes is sent back to family

members. The migrant farm worker system is repetitive and highly flawed and has had problems

since its initiation. The current system we see today, as well as the version portrayed in the film,

can trace their roots to the Bracero Program of the 1940's. Controversial from the beginning, it

was designed with good intentions, using safeguards to protect farm workers already within the

United States, and the migrants who came from Mexico in times when labor was needed.

(braceroarchive.org) However, as both documented and undocumented workers sought work

they were offered unfavorable jobs, low wages, and were denied a dignified social status within

the fabric of the American society, forever setting the precedent we see today. In the film,

Memo's character represents this age-old system and how, even in the future, things only end up

changing for the worse. Memo risks his physical and mental health so that he can fulfill his desire to help his family as well as feel a part of the global system. Like many other migrant workers he is attracted to the idea of being a part of something larger than himself so as to rise above

the restricted world he comes from. It's seen as an escape and a chance to mark your spot in the

world. But, as we come to learn, being a part of the global system has its limitations.

While Memo represents the dark future of the migrant worker, the other main character Luz represents the positive aspects of the future that Alex Rivera creates. Luz Martínez, played by Leonor Varela, is another young adult with nodes working and living in Tijuana. She first meets Memo on the bus into the city and directs him on how to find a coyotek to give him the nodes and obtain work. From the very beginning Luz is portrayed differently than Memo, especially in her attitude and knowledge about the nodes and the global market. It is quickly revealed that Luz was a student, as she is threaten with an email about student loan debt and in order to earn money, uses the nodes to sell her memories to people around the world. Breaking from the stereotypical Latina role, as laid out in Bill Nichols' book Movies and Methods, Luz is an independent woman who is simply seeking to fulfill her creative outlet. She is neither a virgin, nor a sexually promiscuous Latina and she is definitely not a dutiful wife or mother figure. (Nichols, 399) She is simply seeking an intellectual and stimulating connection through the nodes at her own will and not at that of others. At one point, she and Memo do connect with each other physically and romantically through the nodes, as a way to demonstrate to him that they can be used for more than just objectified labor. She regards the nodes as the vehicle to freely connect to others around the world. Luz is the counter example of Memo in this futuristic landscape, she is the hope that not all individuality is lost in the new polarized labor system.

Sleep Dealers is the influential and mind-opening work of Latino filmmaker Alex Rivera. Known for its influential themes of immigration and labor, Rivera did not hesitate when it came to his portrayal of the future of migrant workers and the relationship they have with the U.S. Through the use of CGI, setting, and contrasting yet complementing characters, he brought to life a futuristic world plagued by the systems of the past that was fearful and hopeful all at once.

The film itself is dynamic visually, as well as it is conceptually, leaving its audience feeling

scared and intrigued. Overall it does an excellent piece of work that will continue to challenge

the current mindsets of those who view it.

Works Cited

"About." Omeka RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.

Douglas, Edward. "Exclusive: Alex Rivera Talks Sleep Dealer - ComingSoon.net." ComingSoon.net.

N.p., 12 Aug. 2014. Web. 13 Dec. 2016.

Copy & paste citation

Johanson, Jason C. "Notes on Chicano Cinema." The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture.

Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993. 303-07. Print.

Nichols, Bill. "Feminism and Film." Movies and Methods. Berkeley: U of California, 1985.

395-431. Print.

Saturday, January 28th 2012. "Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prizes Awarded to Robot & Frank

and Valley of Saints at 2012 Sundance Film Festival." Sundance Institute. N.p., n.d. Web.

13 Dec. 2016.

Scott, A. O. "Tale of an Anxious Wanderer." The New York Times. The New York Times, 16 Apr.

2009. Web. 15 Dec. 2016.