

## **The Other Side of the Wall: Technology and Borders in *Sleep Dealer***

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### **Abstract**

*Technological development is an essential component in preserving a globalised economic system. Job sectors must maintain a human workforce and therefore involve some sort of physical international border crossing. Trade, labor, and immigration between the American and Mexican border has been, and still is, the source of the most controversial border interactions for the last six decades. The U.S. currently lives under the paradox of harboring hostility towards Mexican immigrants, yet accepting their willingness to perform labor within the country that Americans themselves do not want to do. If America can extract non-physical labor from, for example calling centers around the world, how can they do the same with that of the physical, thereby eliminating the need to care for the worker? Alex Rivera's film *sleep dealer* envisions a dystopian world where technology is used by various corporations to extract labor without the "hassle" of supporting their laborers, but is revealed to have the positive value of facilitating a virtual experience of the world, despite some peoples' economic disadvantages.*

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Technological development is an essential component in preserving a globalised economic system. For example, current events are filled with stories of countries in the global South providing technical support over the phone to customers in the global North. Either way, these job sectors must maintain a human workforce and therefore involve some sort of physical international border crossing. Trade, labor, and immigration between the American and Mexican border has been, and still is, the source of the most controversial border interactions for the last six decades. The most consistent source of controversy over the years has been illegal immigration of laborers from Mexico into America. The U.S. currently lives under the paradox of harboring hostility towards Mexican immigrants, yet accepting their willingness to perform labor within the country that Americans themselves do not want to do. If America can extract non-physical labor from, for example calling centers around the world, how can they do the same with that of the physical, thereby eliminating the need to care for the worker? Similarly, given how much of a risk it is to cross the border and find work opportunities, Mexicans are at a loss to find how they can somehow glean the same opportunities and rewards for their hard work given the risks of the physical travel. Alex Rivera's film *Sleep Dealer* envisions a dystopian world where technology is used by various corporations to extract labor without the "hassle" of supporting their laborers, but is revealed to have the positive value of facilitating a virtual experience of the world, despite some peoples' economic disadvantages.

High security fences and armed guards stretching approximately 3000 kilometers in length (Noble 147) currently stands as a tool of both political and economic control between the two countries. The fence is also an architectural symbol of the narratives established by American political and cinematic rhetoric (and internalized to an extent by that of Mexico), separating "an idealized North from an increasingly impoverished South" (Zaniello). Cinema consequently manifests each side of the border's views of each other in a way that projects them to the rest of the world and reaffirms these messages for future generations. The majority of Hollywood films about immigration and the U.S./Mexican border convey the implication that when Americans are about to cross into Mexico, they must be nearly pushed south of the border or in search of a short-term debauchery spree. Their lives in America are so ideal, why would they ever leave the North for any long period of time? Meanwhile, no characters in other mainstream Hollywood films need an excuse to vacation in Western Europe to sample any and all parts of its different cultures. So why is it not as easy for mainstream films to feature a character who is motivated to do the same in Mexico? Charles Ramírez Berg (199) asks the same question in his publication *Latino Images in Film* and comes to the conclusion that going into Mexico would risk "the possibility of learning something from Mexico and Mexicans", something that is deemed risky in the first place because of Hollywood's previous construction of Mexico's image according the aforementioned binaries. Therefore, such narratives portray

Mexicans as coming into the country for better opportunities in labor and in civilization; immigrants as huddled masses fighting tooth and nail for the American Dream. On the other hand, most Mexican cinematic narratives particularly portray the United States as both a “hostile neo-colonialist power” and “the site of a deeply coveted capitalist modernity” (Noble 147). In real life situations and those portrayed in Mexican cinema, immigrating to America is the lesser of two evils, one that even if initially idealized by a traveling protagonist, risks cultural isolation, social agitation, and deportation (if traveling illegally), all to support their families abroad.

Events in recent history, from the hostility-inducing Mexican-American War (1846-1848) to the economic growth stimulated through the passing of the North American Free Trade Act (1994), prove that these dangerous borders are not a permanent or un-crossable entity. Especially, in terms of economic circumstances, the U.S./Mexican border was established and constructed to be crossed systematically, but in a way that is regulated and controlled by both parties. One of the first acts of economic border trade between the United States and Mexico was known as the “Bracero Program” (1942-1964). The program allowed a regulated supply of Mexican labor, or “braceros” which translates to either “arms” or slang as “a man who works with his arms and/or hands”. These laborers were sent to the United States in order to assist with all sorts of seasonal agricultural work. An estimated 4.5 million Mexican citizens were encouraged to migrate north of the border throughout the duration Bracero Program (Noble 150-151). However, an inestimable surplus illegal immigration simultaneously poured into America. This fallout prompted the 1950s reactionary “Operation Wetback”, which used mass deportation to control the illegal immigrant flow, followed by Proposition 187, a California law aiming to limit illegal immigrants’ access to health and social services and declaring a state of emergency in San Diego county campaigning “S.O.S.” (“Save Our State”) (Noble 159). These two legislations served as a catalyst for an increased prejudicial attitude towards the Mexican population that included the public, the media, and law enforcement. In 1997, director Alex Rivera released an online digital short film for the website Invisible Cinema titled *Why Cybraceros?* as a satire of migrant labor, globalization, digitalization, the original Bracero Program, and the cultural hostility towards immigrants following “Operation Wetback”. Rivera’s five-minute video is said to be made by the United States Department of Labor, who announces the creation of the innovative “Cybracero Program”. Using footage from the 1940s Council of California Growers advocacy film for the Bracero Program paired with footage of violent acts against Mexicans by the public or by law enforcement, the Department of Labor proposes a solution to the program’s fallout in the form of “cybraceros”, robots that work in the U.S. but are remotely controlled across the border on computers by Mexican workers. Cybraceros are also meant to eliminate other problems stemming from the Bracero Program, including situations in which some workers would run away and stay in the U.S. illegally, or when other illegal

immigrants evaded security by blending in with the legal braceros. Either way, this “promotional video” brags the program’s potential for their success to be able to give “all the labor without the worker” by using the cybraceros, regarded by the narrator as “a worker who poses no threat of becoming a citizen”. Made by the same director and referring to the technology of the same name and same purpose, *Sleep Dealer* can be considered as a sequel to *Why Cybraceros?* Rivera’s second film revolves around how people interact with the cybracero technologies that apparently solve more of America’s problems than Mexico’s. In the film, the protagonist “Memo” is a campesino who feeds his curiosity of the outside world and cybracero work by using a make-shift radio and satellite to intercept calls going across his village in Santa Ana del Río, Oaxaca, Mexico. His radio attracts the attention of a new-age drone, virtually operated in San Diego, California, U.S.A. by Rudy Ramírez, a Mexican-American military contractor for Del Río Water. Rudy’s mission is to destroy the source of the unlicensed frequency by dropping explosives, which end up decimating Memo’s cabin and killing his father. Overcome with guilt, Memo flees to Tijuana, Mexican capital of cybracero labor, to work and send money to his family. There, he meets Luz Martínez, a writer who sells video playbacks of her memories of previous encounters with other people as “stories” online, thereby spreading a much-needed perspective of the various forms of Mexican experience. All of these technologies are accessible by plugging into people’s “nodes”, ports installed in the back, arms, and back of the neck of a person in order to neurologically and physiologically access a virtual world of labor. In *Sleep Dealer*, nodes and the new technologies that come with them are essentially what connects people to the new age in a time where the world seems to be more disconnected and simultaneously more connected than ever before.

The technological advancements that are more connected to the real world than any other in *Sleep Dealer* are those that secure the power of Del Río Inc. The American company is undoubtedly a huge, neo-colonial presence in Oaxaca, due to its corporate control over the natural Mexican water supply. Memo’s father used to own a sizeable portion of land where he grew crops that survived on the local river. Memo remembers fondly about how people used to call him “King of the Town”. All of this changed when the Del Río dam was built. The dam is enormous, its wall as dry as the desert around it, indicating how impenetrable it may be. As Memo and his father climb a set of steps towards a high, barbed wire fence where they are supposed to purchase the amount of water they need from the dam, shadows of a drone disappear and reappear several times over their heads, reminding them and the audience how heavily secured and monitored this area is. An American voice from a speaker hastily says “alright, don’t make any sudden moves” followed by a recorded Spanish translation of the phrase. The English live phrase coming before the Spanish recorded one indicates that this is an entirely American-run company that is taking no “risks” with hiring any Mexicans to do any work for

them. During this sequence, we see that the talking speaker is fitted with a camera and a small machine gun that rotates towards wherever Memo and his father move; this, along with the way the American speaks to the two lends further evidence towards the hostile attitude the company has towards the locals of Oaxaca. The speaker informs Memo and his father that the 35 liters of water they requested costs 85 dollars, the most recent increase in price as of that day. Del Río Water charging so much for a natural resource and changing the prices without alerting the locals are the last indications we need as to how powerful the company's influence over the region truly is.

The incredibly invasive presence of American technology and security not only establishes that America wants to keep Mexican immigrants out; it also presents the intention to regulate the amount of Americans entering the country. It recognizes the American political and cinematic belief that the only reasons an American citizen would ever want to enter Mexico would be to run from the law, or for upper-class Americans to travel for small intervals to take advantage of the country's natural (beaches, weather) or economic (currency exchange rate, purchase of cheap commodities including drugs) resources. As apprehensive as the U.S. is towards Mexican travel, it is conveniently comfortable with accepting the land as having exotic, although barbaric, appeal. This is evident when Rudy decides to cross the border from California to Tijuana in order to apologize to Memo for killing his father. He is met by a sign that reads "Warning: enter Mexico at your own risk" and a cybracero-like speaker/camera fixed with a small machine gun that comes to his car window to identify him, both of which thereby establish apprehension. After Rudy states his reason for traveling is to go on a short holiday, it does not take the robot long at all to open the gate and let him pass into Mexico, thereby establishing acceptance.

The overall neo-colonial nature of Del Río Water and all its corresponding technology is nothing new to Mexican cinema and history. Del Río Water's buyout and restriction of land access and consequent regulated sale of river water is another example of what David Harvey calls in *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* "accumulation by disposition" (249). In 1951, Grant County, New Mexico, workers of Mine-Mill Local 890 went on a revolutionary strike against the Empire Silver Company that included white and Mexican-American workers and their wives, members of the Auxiliary 209. Years later, an entire HUAC (House of Un-American Activities Committee) blacklisted cast and crew that included screenwriter Michael Wilson and director Herbert J. Biberman teamed up with Local 890 and Auxiliary 209 to make *Salt of the Earth* (1954) (Corrigan & White). The film is entirely based on Local 890 and Auxiliary 209's experience, even going as far as keeping members of the strike on set to consult, write parts of the script, and stand in as actors/extras (characters based on actual participants changed for their safety). The key source of struggle for the residents of Empire Zinc

Company-owned “Zinc Town” is the history of the land on which they work and live. Ramon Quintero, one of the leaders of the Zinc Town strike, tells the story of how the land that he and the other workers mine, originally part of Mexico, was lost in the Mexican-American War, but still belonged to his grandfather. That is until the Empire Zinc Company bought out his family’s and others’ neighboring lands and now demand labor from the presiding residents. The situation is made worse due to the fact that Empire Zinc Company keeps its residents and laborers so poor due to low wages and high expenses, and therefore so dependent upon the company, that it would be impossible for them to afford to live elsewhere. *Salt of the Earth* and Empire Zinc Company’s “accumulation by disposition” resembles that of Santa Ana in *Sleep Dealer*. No Mexicans work for Del Río Water, so they cannot contribute any resources to make purchasing their expensive water any easier. Memo and his family live in what seems like an endless desert; therefore trying to travel and find free water nearby would be a risky option. The most dangerous option would be to break into the reservoir and steal water. We however learn of its danger from a Del Río Water transmission Memo intercepts with his radio in which the company is quick to send the drones after any perpetrators. When Memo accidentally intercepts Del Río Water’s military communication system, we find out the line is reserved for tracking what the military calls “aqua terrorists”. The scene cuts to San Diego, California, depicted by *Sleep Dealer* to be a far more advanced and clean city than Tijuana. The camera takes a considerable amount of time to pan over the towering, all-glass building that is Del Río Water’s military headquarters, as a reminder of how powerful the company is. Compared to the rest of the film, the facility is the most high-tech looking virtual labor factory we will see; as in real life, jobs and workers on American soil are treated much better than those overseas. This is supported by the fact that the machinery on which pilots remotely control drones via their nodes are the most clean and expensive-looking than anything we will see in the factories of Tijuana. The steel elements have a pristine, chrome sheen to them. The room in which Rudy is working is not too bright and coolly lit with a blue tint as the pilots are sitting comfortably while they “fly”. The lighting and seating arrangements offer a sense that, unlike the rest of the factories we will see, neither the supervisors nor the pilots have to worry about falling asleep on the job, because the pilots here are cared for more than Mexican cybracero workers. Their dispatcher suspect the four people-shaped shadows on their screens who have broken into the reservoir are in fact aqua terrorists and instruct a drone pilot at the helm to eliminate them. There is no dramatization of any kind at this point; the audience watches Memo simply listen as three “pops” are heard on the other line. The dispatcher congratulates the pilot on his success, later telling him to “get the other one”. *Sleep Dealer* has essentially created an environment where a company like *Salt of the Earth*’s Empire Zinc has established a level of control and dependency amongst its neighbors and intensified it to deadly levels with the assistance of advances in technology.

Luz Martínez's sales of playback memories of recent experiences is *Sleep Dealer's* technological manifestation of dismantling stereotypes of Mexican culture by sharing truer, in-depth instances of the Mexican experience to a wide audience. Referring to herself as a writer, Luz sells her memories of previous encounters to the online company "TruNode: the world's number one memory market". TruNode is assumed to be an American company due to its English name and the English-dialect pronunciation of the brand. After meeting Memo on the bus, Luz comes home to her Tijuana apartment where she checks incoming hologram video messages recorded on her desktop computer. Luz's nodes provide her computer access to her memory and give her the ability to record her narration in order to attach to the memory itself, thereby creating a story out of it. We then see her "plugging" herself in, her wires and ports look to be in much better condition than those in the cybracero factories, confirming her self-employment. She takes care of her bodily equipment because she is her own boss and her own employee, and therefore not subject to the same abuse most cybracero workers face. Her memories for sale on TruNode are posted as icons containing a small, three-second or so clip of their whole stories under the "El Otro Lado Del Muro" (The Other Side of the Wall) collection, titles of which include "The Struggle Over A Well", "An Encounter With The Rebels", and "First Installation of [My] Nodes". She starts a new "document" titled "A Migrant From Santa Ana del Río" and begins orating the story of her encounter with Memo in tandem with the images from her memories that are being shown on her glass, dual-sided screen. Excluding "First Installation of [My] Nodes", all of her stories revolve around the personal experience of another person who is not herself, giving variety to the perspectives she wants to share. Not only have memories become the newest form of storytelling, but there is also a sense that because Luz is writing non-fiction stories, she can program her computer to interpret via biological connections through her nodes whether or not she is lying, thus damaging the accuracy of the story, and correct her of that mistake. When she says, "I met [a migrant] today, I didn't think much of him-", she is interrupted by her computer who orders her to "repeat the last ten seconds...Please tell the truth". Luz then corrects herself and continues "writing". She thus programs her computer in a way so that she can deliver honest, rarely seen perspectives from "the other side of the wall".

Such honest Mexican perspectives are more present in Mexican cinema than anything coming out of Hollywood. Films like Tony Richardson's *The Border* (1982) feed on the hot topic of illegal border crossing and dramatize the very serious political issues surrounding such occurrences. Despite being based on a series of *LA Times* articles about illegal Mexican immigrants, the film manifests into a social thriller told from the perspective of American police and border patrol officers. Even the critically acclaimed *Traffic* (2000) by Steven Soderbergh only donates a third of its screen time from the perspective of Mexican citizens, despite the entire

plot being about one Mexican-based drug trade's influence on the entire cast of characters. What it comes down to is a typical, damaging representation of Mexico as a land of poverty and a harbor for drug lords, where even its most reputable citizens turn out to be corrupt cops. Meanwhile, Mexican cinema is filled with oppositional perspectives of the Mexican experience, although hardly any of these films are seen in America. Those that reach American screens are handpicked because of a director's reputation or because of it being close to having an "acceptable" message. Even Alejandro Galindo's *Espaldas mojadas* (1955), one of the most famous Mexican border films in cinematic history, had been pressured after two years of release delays by the U.S. State Department to include an introductory warning text because of its apparently subversive subject matter. One of the main characters, Rafael, crosses the border with the goal of chasing the American Dream. During his time in the country, he bounces between low-paying jobs while having to face excruciating instances of racism, cruelty, and exploitation. He decides that while the jobs in America were plenty, he was treated with far more respect and dignity in Mexico, and crosses the border homeward bound. Seeing as the film did not portray America in any positive light whatsoever, the warning message in the opening of the film as approved by the U.S. State Department was written as follows:

Our intention is to warn our compatriots of the problems associated with trying to leave the country illegally, which carries with it the risk of awkward and painful situations that could even cause difficulties for the good relations that fortunately exist between our two countries (Noble 152).

These examples highlight the fact that there is an ideological distance between Mexico and the United States that exists today. Such distance is certainly not absent in the universe of *Sleep Dealer*, but is gradually disappearing via TruNode and the potential of node technology, especially according to Luz as she declares, "I hate that there is so much distance between people. The only good things nodes do is to destroy that distance".

The primary technology used in *Sleep Dealer* are "node" enhancements, which are installed on a person's body so they can plug into, and establish an online connection with, the global economic network. The worker plugged in enters a state of "sleep" in which they consciously "become" their robot on the other side of the border, performing tasks such as construction, housework, and lawn care. In the world of *Sleep Dealer*, America has ultimately solved the "problem" of giving migrants working in the country healthcare, benefits, housing, and education by virtually gleaning their energy and resources from their homeland of Mexico. When Memo arrives in Tijuana, it is clear that so many other Mexicans are as desperate as he is because there are so many "coyoteks" following him around. Coyoteks are those who are

available for cheap, back-alley node installments and Rivera's play on the term "coyote" branded for those who help smuggle undocumented Mexicans into America. If there are so many people like Memo who are so desperate to get nodes they will solicit a coyotek, then there are just as many people who end up over-working themselves just to earn more money and overlooking the fact that the cybracero companies take no mind to the condition of the workers who suffer extreme exhaustion, hallucination, or electric surges causing seizures, blindness or death.

*Sleep Dealer* opens with a sequence taking place inside the cybracero factory Memo works in. The camera fades in and out from black, to close-ups of fluorescent green-lit tubes and wires plugged into exhausted workers, and to black again. The fluorescent green lighting is a stylistic choice that commonly accompanies films about technology and its darker shade is an indicator that the following story will not be an entirely pleasant one. The lighting itself is dim and therefore casts shadows among the machinery, making it look even more threatening. As the montage continues, it is accompanied by an ominous soundtrack of a simple melody paired with echoing technological moans and pitches, adding to the unsettling nature of the scene. The editing and camera work establishes a sense of isolation and commoditization of these laborers, by shooting pieces of their bodies connected to pieces of machinery as one in the same. The opening sequence continues as the camera focuses on a pair of node-modified arms whose hands seem to be grasping nothing, and cuts to the face that belongs to the same body. The film will later clarify that this is Memo's face; for now however, this is a face that appears to be in a daze, startlingly clouded eyes that are gazing aimlessly. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Memo's entire face to reveal that he is wearing a breathing mask that is low-tech looking in comparison to the machinery attached to his arms and back. The wires that are attached to his nodes hang loosely around him and are covered in several kinks and bends, hinting that the machinery is not in the best condition and that many other people before him have used the same wires. A cut to a wide shot clarifies the eerie nature of this cybracero factory and its overused machinery. We see three more laborers attached to their nodes as they sway and move in a rather slow and robotic nature similar to Memo. This is in reference to Memo's later comment about how these cybracero factories have earned themselves the nickname, "sleep dealers", due to the fact that their workers literally look as if they are sleep walking and sometimes actually do fall asleep at the job, forcing them to head to the nearest "node bar" for a shot of awakening "tika".

The opening sequence introduces the cybracero factory in this way in order to distance us from Memo's rather idealistic introduction to the factory. The duality of the nature of the node technology and virtual labor is hinted at before Memo's first day at work. At this point, Luz has ultimately agreed to become his coyotek. When she finishes installing his nodes, she explains to him that when someone "plugs in", they are in fact in a two-way connection with the machine

they are plugging into. She warns: “sometimes you control the machine, and sometimes the machine controls you”. Memo’s first look at a cybracero factory is through hopeful eyes, that regard the factory as the answer to all of Memo’s problems, “the real American Dream” as his new boss refers, and therefore distorts the reality of what he is seeing. The film’s introduction already showed us the reality Memo chooses to ignore here. The fluorescent lights are now a more white-balanced color, and every metal surface has a lovely polished sheen to it. The wires connecting into the workers’ nodes are all in use, in great condition, and work independently of a machine above their heads that looks like it gives workers leeway whenever they pull their arms downward or across; thus, the workers seem as if they are controlling the machines. The soundtrack that plays during this sequence sounds like a technological lullaby much more uplifting than that of the opening, although still establishing a kind of dreamy environment, as the workers still move as robotically as the opening. Here, we have a closer look at the structure over their heads holding their wires up and are reminded of two very familiar things. One, the way the arms spread and dangle the wires is reminiscent of an infant’s mobile that is used to entrance a child until they eventually fall sleep. Secondly, the way the arms’ hanging wires connect to the workers’ own arms and back of their necks looks very much like the controls for a marionette puppet. The suspicious *mise-en-scène* of this sequence leaves us to wonder if the workers control the machine, while the opening sequence and Memo’s later experiences as a cybracero operator lead us to believe it is actually quite the opposite.

Dual perspectives of globalization and labor are familiar to Mexico or to Mexican cinema. Saul Landau and Sonia Angulo’s documentary *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos* (2000) tackles just such a subject in the age of “maquiladoras”. The term “maquiladoras” can be translated to “factories” in English, although it is notorious for specifically referring to “sweatshops”. One “Mexico” they document is an “overly compliant client-state” of American-hosting maquiladoras that mostly reside in the border towns. The other “Mexico” documented is a rebellious one greatly influenced by the “Zapatistas”, or members of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN). These Zapatistas have seized land in towns such as Chiapas as protest against the maquiladoras, famously crying the mantra of the Mexican Revolution, “Tierra y Libertad” (“Land and Liberty”). Nevertheless, those that support the maquiladoras argue that although they realize the conditions they work in are less than dignifying, “[here in the sweatshops] we earn more and live better” (Zaniello). In *Sleep Dealer*, Memo shares a similar tension between disagreement and compliance in regards to his experience in the cybracero factory. He realizes that if he were to fall asleep or suffer an electric surge, the company would do nothing but adjust his pay to make up for their loss of virtual labor. He is also aware that the robot he “plugs” into is used and abused just as much as he is. After he fully connects for the first time, the film cuts to his cybracero’s slowly focusing point of view. It

soon becomes clear that the machinery of his cybracero in San Diego is downright poor. The cybracero's robot claws, core, wheels, and head are rusty and battered, obviously as a result of not having a protective metal skin that would shield the essential skeletal parts from the elements. After a long day of work, he makes a video call to his family and sends them his earnings of the day- 270 dollars - through an instant wire transfer on the screen. Although his family actually receives 180 of the 270, this is certainly more money than he or his family have ever earned in a single day, not since before Del Río Water bought his father's land. At this point, the reward of providing for his family is enough to tolerate the conditions he works in. Nonetheless, the problem still stands that Memo struggles with the lack of control he has over his "machine". When considering the film's political and social contexts, the term "machine" takes on a broader meaning. Luz, Memo, and Rudy's struggle to not give up their control to the "machine" acts as a metaphor for the hyper-exploitative global economy whose progress is facilitated by technology.

While technology may be enabling the worsened conditions of the world in *Sleep Dealer*, the film also proposes technology as a way of assisting the improvement of the world. Like Luz says earlier, nodes are the key to breaking barriers in this world, which must be broken in order to share hidden perspectives with the rest of the world. Yet in order for her to survive, she sells her memories of previous encounters with people who share their own stories with her. She sells her memories of other people's stories without the other person's permission as her own creation. She is essentially yielding her control of her morals to the "machine" in her desperate position to pay back outrageous student loans, an education system manufactured by the "machine". Similarly, Memo struggles with his loss of control under the "machine", but continues to maintain a positive outlook of the potential of border-crossing technology. Back in Santa Ana, Memo used his makeshift radio to listen to various phone conversations: "At first, all I could hear were voices from around the village [...] [then] I started to pick up voices from further away, the big cities [...]" Memo already recognized the potential of technology to help expand his knowledge of the outside world long before being connected via nodes. Rudy is also in a situation where he struggles with his own control under the "machine". He purchases Luz's memories of Memo after recognizing his father as the person he killed with his drone. When he tracks Memo down in Tijuana, he laments giving up his control to the "machine", admitting to Memo, "I was just following orders". Faced with this terrible situation, Memo again finds a positive use for the technology at hand. He executes a plan in which he and Luz help sneak Rudy into the factory Memo works for in order to connect him to his drone and fly it into the Del Río Water company dam. The audience is not given the satisfaction of an explosive impact. Instead, the film cuts to a video call between Memo and his family, who proclaim what a miracle it is that their natural resource is no longer for sale. Once again, technology breaks a literal barrier,

leaving the film to end in the open conclusion that technology has the potential to improve control between man and “machine”.

Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer* is most certainly one of few science fiction films to shatter the genre’s common trope of either man or machine in the fight between the two. In their essay on “technophobia”, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner make plain the dichotomy of the representation of technology in science-fiction film. On the one hand, “for the conservative individualist critique, [technology] represents modernity, the triumph of radical change over traditional social institutions” (58), and on the other, “the rhetorical strategy of many technophobic films [...] is to establish a strong opposition between terms [...] that does not permit any intermediation” (59). What *Sleep Dealer* does is cross the border that separates the two aforementioned trains of thought, and thus does for science-fiction film’s depiction of technology what Guillermo Gómez-Peña proposes to be done about borders and border culture:

A border tends to be a wall we can only cross if we have the necessary documents; it is a filter that is supposed to purify the passing flux. We can also approach a border wanting to transgress it, to cross it illegally, and to violate its rules (162).

Though *Sleep Dealer* foresees a world in the not-too-distant future where technology is used to “connect [their] nervous system to... the global economy” which consequently yields inhumane results, the film does not cite the technology as the direct cause of the workers’ plight. The film therefore comes to the conclusion that it is those who wield the technology, or the right “machine” that does so, that determines how they shape the world and affect other people.

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