



FILM REVIEW

Sleep Dealer: Re-appropriating Migrant Labour Power

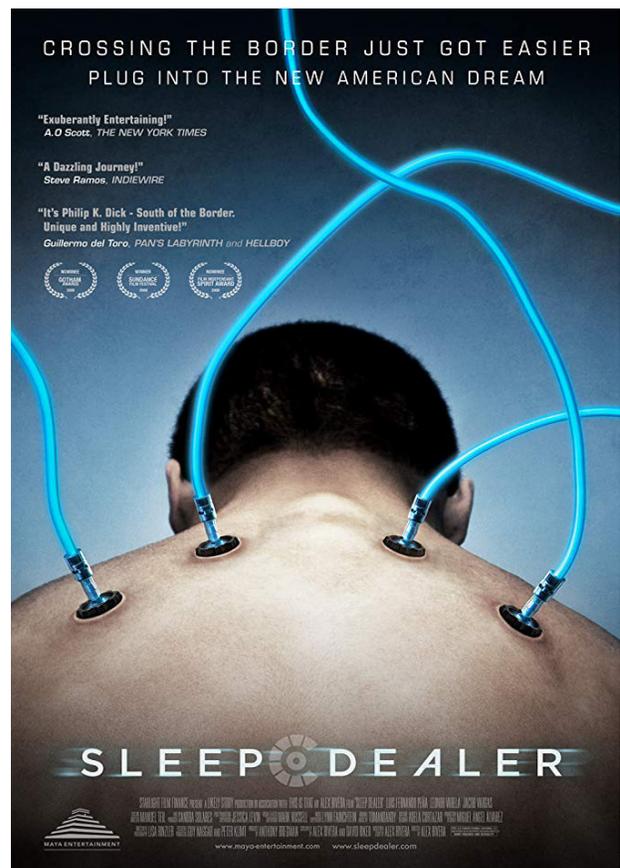
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Sleep Dealer (2009)

Director: Alex Rivera

Nicholas de Genova (2002; 2005) coined the term “border spectacle” to refer to the dramatic, redundant visibility of border enforcements, including apprehension, detention, deportation: concrete state performances to ensure the discursive difference of Latino bodies. All the while, the law produces the racialized illegality of Latino immigrants in the U.S., which goes conveniently unnoticed. Illegality is perceived as an unquestioned equation for all that is Latino, while the subtraction of labor off of Latino immigrant bodies takes a humanitarian toll that remains in the shadows. Alex Rivera in *Sleep Dealer* (2009) poses an important question about the future of border sovereignty in a present when capital and labor become intangible. This futuristic science fiction film resembles a present-time border crisis, and one that is all too predictable: capital will always expand to pervade new spaces, and so will border security. In a cinematic future when dispossessed populations have found a way to migrate to the North without having to cross any borders, border spectacles will migrate south-wards, to extend the reach of sovereignty to laboring bodies and foreign landscapes.

The film tells the story of a migrant worker, Memo, who takes off in search for work after his father dies in a drone attack. The father works as an archetype to represent Memo’s connection with the past and the link to a tradition. At the same time, he is the scapegoat of border spectacle. Back in Santa Ana del Rio, Memo’s rural hometown in Mexico,



their community is being sold the water that once belonged to them. The American-controlled reservoir, now “Water Corp,” has intervened the landscape with daily surveillance, targeting the members of the community as a threat to the integrity of the U.S. firm. At home, Memo learned rustic techniques to hack a connection to the global network, but

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unwittingly intercepts the firm's security signal. The U.S. government, seeing this as a terrorist act, sends out a predatory drone to bombard their rural home, killing Memo's father in front of his eyes. The televised attack makes the division of reality and the virtual world a cruder event to digest, at the time it poses border spectacle as a strategic governmental politics to desensitize the population on violence against Latinos.

Accordingly, the film sheds a light on a core contradiction of advanced capitalism: virtual reality, as the terrain of the future, fails to fully cover material reality, the terrain of the past. Memo embodies the link between these two levels of meaning, as he must navigate the demands of virtual employment while maintaining his memories and his roots. The migrant worker story of Memo leads the viewer out of the countryside landscape of his childhood to enter a digital landscape at the Mexican border city of Tijuana, announced as "the city of the future." To survive, he must work at what they call the *infomaquilas* (or high-tech factories) where his body is connected to machinery through nodes that access his nervous system for remote kinetic energy. His voiceover explains: "we call the factories 'sleep dealers,' because if you work long enough, you collapse." In time a worker suffers from sleep deprivation, can lose the sense of reality or become blind, and in a worst-case scenario, die from a short circuit. This serves as a metaphor for an ideological labor system that only keeps count of the materiality of labor extraction while making casualties invisible and losing sight of the humanity behind the work performed. The film presents this issue in a literal sense: the American dream of the future means owning the labor without the laborers.

Memo's trauma is met with a two-folded chance for denouement: the pilot who killed his father has made a comeback in search for forgiveness; and he has developed a new relationship with a woman who, significantly, had saved his memories as a blog writer. The film presents the former as a reconciliatory proposal of the two characters as innocent participants of the same border spectacle, while the latter is connected to a deeper vindication of his origin. Most significantly, in the end he has found a middle ground for the restoration of his psychological order, as he starts a new life, far from the sleep dealers, and waters the new seeds for a woken future. He has returned to his roots without having to physically return home. The film poses an alternative representation of the digital-era subjectivity. As the characters come together to make reparation of the damage, their cooperation towards the end suggests a possible vision for the re-appropriation of their labor, against the continuation of border spectacle.

Works Cited

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