Reimaging Alex Rivera's "*Sleep Dealer*" – Conference Paper

University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley

MASC 6390 – 90L Dr. Merla Watson

August 18, 2024

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Since the 1600's, immigrant workers have played an essential role in shaping the fabric of society, with their contributions spanning various industries such as agriculture, construction, and hospitality. These immigrant workers often leave their home countries in search for better opportunities, fueling economic growth and cultural diversity in their adopted nations. Despite facing challenges such as language barriers and discrimination, they continue to make invaluable contributions to the workforce, enriching the social tapestry of the communities they reside in.

“Historically, most Mexicans have been economic immigrants seeking to improve their lives. In moments of civil strife, such as the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917) and the Cristero Revolt (1926–1929), many fled to the United States to escape religious and political persecution.” (Gutierrez, 2019) It has been no secret that cheap labor was and has been the drive behind the motivation to exploit other human beings for the wealthy’s personal gain. (Collin, 1996)

Despite the prevailing beliefs among many, it is important to note that the passage of time into the future will not change certain underlying realities. Specifically, the demand for inexpensive labor will persist even as technology advances. This means that immigrants, who are often vulnerable to exploitation and outsourcing, will unfortunately continue to face these challenges. Alex Rivera, a talented filmmaker known for seamlessly weaving together Latinxfuturism elements through cultural lens his film incorporates realism, science-fiction, horror, and fantasy. His works explore into the complex and timely issue of cheap labor outsourcing to immigrants through his thought-provoking filmography. By creatively blending

these genres, Alex Rivera sheds light on the dark underbelly of society and explores how these societal issues persist across time and space, even in futuristic settings.

Through his provocative and captivating narratives, Rivera challenges viewers to consider the lasting impact of historical injustices on the present and future, reminding us that the past will always exert a powerful influence on the trajectory of humanity, even in the face of rapid technological advancement. By analyzing this film through the lens of Latinxfuturism, we gain valuable insights into how Rivera uses speculative fiction as a tool for examining the intricacies of Latinx identity in an ever-evolving global landscape (Taylor, 263).

My argument in this presentation will assert that no matter how advanced technology becomes, the underlying societal structures and historical foundations will always play a crucial role in shaping our future trajectory, our past is very much present in the future.

The dystopian future portrayed in Alex Rivera's "Sleep Dealer" unfolds in a small border village, Santa Ana del Rio, located near the region of Oaxaca, Mexico. It is a dry dessert with no running water, with makeshift homes. The people of this town are hardworking, simple people with the ideals of maintaining their cultural ways despite the evolving world around them. Thus, they not only battle with the changes in the times, but also battle with the harsh reality of water scarcity, an extreme situation that has been heightened by the damming of their once-lifegiving river. As a result, the people are now forced to undertake treacherous journeys to purchase water, a precious resource now strictly controlled by an oppressive government, that is ready to use all force necessary to protect the water at all costs. Alex Rivera, carefully portrays a surreal world where age-old traditions clash with modern tyranny, his characters though set in the

future setting seem to still connect and explore the horror behind the present-day social issues. Though presently the government does not hold control over the ability to obtain water through various sources, as occupants of a home, establishment, and/or business there is a fee that must be paid to get the water source connected and received on a monthly basis. “Along with concern about protecting individual rights to a clean safe water supply, there is concern about the ability of national water resources to meet all our community’s needs, without unacceptable environmental damage.” (Middleton, 1997) The setting serves as a powerful platform for the film's societal commentary, prompting viewers to reflect and feel the delicate balance between survival and autonomy in a society where the basic necessities of life are ruthlessly regulated.

Though taking place in the future, our present, which is their past, is very much part of the future. Notably, in "Sleep Dealer," the elements of realism with sci-fi, horror, and fantasy are intricately detailed in the film's setting. Locals of the land are exploited as cheap labor in the construction of a massive virtual reality network. With the intention of making things right after tragedy strikes home, Rivera’s main character ventures out his comfort zone near the border to face the realities of the futuristic world that he had longed to explore. Rivera seamlessly weaves fantastical elements throughout the storyline, challenging the conventional boundaries of realism. In his relentless pursuit of discovery and innovation, Rivera’s character embarks on a journey of exploration that eventually leads him to uncover a groundbreaking technology that had already begun the exploitation of labor workers. This newfound technological advancement holds the potential to not only revolutionize industries but also serve as an impulse for realizing the American Dream, a concept rooted in the belief that anyone can achieve success and

prosperity through hard work and determination, which is often seen as a beacon of hope for many individuals especially those wanting to cross the border into the United States in search of a better life. In search of the connection to entertaining the technology that has overtaken those around him, he sets out to find a way to integrate himself into the technology. The core basis of the movie surrounds the intriguing concept of "sleep dealers," individuals who intricately link their nervous systems to a worldwide network. He himself enters a factory of some sorts, beginning his part of being one with the machinery as many around him already connected. Here, surrounded by the constant hum of technology, he connects his body to the Internet through a series of intricate wires and sensors, a process that allows him to send his labor far away, all the way to a robot in America.

Despite being physically present in Mexico, his actions and efforts are now being carried out in a different country, a surreal disconnection between his body and his work. In this peculiar arrangement, he becomes embroiled in a new kind of privatization, one where his own physical self is commodified and controlled by the digital realm, blurring the boundaries between man and machine. There is a common form of exploitation that takes place within the framework of our current economic system. Specifically, within the labor dynamics of capitalism, and more prominently within the experiences of undocumented individuals working within this system, there exists a parallel process of exploitation that centers around the control and manipulation of their labor and physical well-being. And this is not a new concept, historically this has been happening for ages. Additionally, Alex Rivera enhances the sci-fi and fantasy elements in his work by illustrating a futuristic society where individuals participate in the lucrative trade of selling their memories and life experiences to interested buyers. This

concept of commercializing personal memories adds depth to the exploration of themes related to identity, privacy, and the impact of technology on human relationships. Often depicted in horror narratives, the loss of identity emphasizes the characters' powerlessness and vulnerability as they are confronted with the sinister consequences of advanced technology. Continuing his thought-provoking storytelling and creative world-building, Rivera presents a vivid and engaging depiction of a world where memories have become a commodity. This innovative concept blurs the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary, as characters gain the ability to immerse themselves in the recollections of others as if they were their own. Through this revolutionary technology, Rivera explores into profound themes of self-identity, the power of memory, and the profound repercussions of existing in a society where every facet of our existence is interconnected within a sprawling digital realm. However, the threat behind advanced technology is grim and is very much present in the movie as the dangers of being connected are brought forth in getting lost in the connective space where the transfer of energy is given but also in means of the possibility of other dangers within the internet. “Awareness, cultural shifts, technological advancements, inter-continental collaboration, and a steadfast commitment to ethical considerations are the pillars upon which a more secure future rest. This comprehensive exploration serves as a compass, guiding everyone through the complex maze of cybersecurity in a world where yesterday’s solutions may not suffice for tomorrow’s threats.” (Bhortake) Though taking place in the future, our present, which is their past, is very much part of the future, as the events and decisions made in our current time will have a significant impact. They set the stage for the opportunities and challenges that will inevitably arise along the way.

In addition to blending genres and realism, Alex Rivera also intertwines the human element throughout the entirety of the movie. The film resonates with various audiences on an emotional level due to its portrayal of a heartfelt story that addresses genuine societal issues. These themes are exemplified by the main character's father reflecting on past struggles while also shedding light on present challenges and those that may arise in the future that ends up unfolding as the story progresses. Dealing with the emotional weight of grief, fear, and loneliness, Alex Rivera's main character learns valuable lessons about the importance of family, forgiveness, and the healing power of reconciliation. As the plot unfolds, the audience is completely captivated by the unexpected romantic developments between the main characters. With each scene, they become further invested in the budding relationship and contemplate the potential future of this newfound love interest. The subtle gestures and meaningful conversations between the characters draw the audience in, leaving them eagerly anticipating what lies ahead for this blossoming romance. It is through these elements that Alex Rivera does not shy from the norms of society but embraces the here and now while exploring the future. Through this approach, Rivera creates a complex narrative that makes the audience connect with the characters deeper and more profound level. With pressing concerns of the present day and potentially grim realities for the future - adding depth and complexity to the narrative truly allows the audience to view how the past can reflect the future.

In "Sleep Dealer," Alex Rivera skillfully navigates through various genres and styles, effectively blending elements of realism, sci-fi horror, and fantasy to craft a richly layered and thought-provoking narrative. By examining themes of globalization, technology, and human experiences, Rivera forces viewers to confront the implications of our growing

interconnectedness in a globalized world. With meticulous attention to detail and a keen eye for storytelling, Rivera creates a cinematic experience that not only entertains but also challenges the audience to reflect on the impact of technology on society and the nature of human connection. Through his masterful direction and innovative storytelling techniques, Rivera establishes himself as a visionary filmmaker pushing the boundaries of traditional cinema. The decisions made by past generations, whether in politics, economics, or culture, continue to exert influence on the path we are on today and will affect the choices we make in the years to come. Understanding these structures and foundations is key to navigating the complexities of our present and charting the course for a more equitable and sustainable future. This depiction of a world plagued by environmental degradation and economic inequality is a stark reflection of our own society's struggles with these issues. By grounding the film in a familiar reality, Rivera is able to draw viewers in and make them confront uncomfortable truths about the world we live in.

Reference

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