

Across the border: American and Mexican Identities through cinema

The importance of portrayal and perspective in International Relations

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Année académique 2017-2018
Relations Internationales, résolution de conflits et diplomatie

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« Code de déontologie pour les étudiants en matière d'emprunts, de citations et d'exploitation de sources diverses

Le problème

La prolifération des sources d'information, en particulier celles proposant des travaux "personnels " sur le réseau informatique, renouvelle avec acuité le problème de la bonne utilisation de ces sources.

Des aspects positifs à encourager ...

En un premier temps, il faut souligner les aspects positifs de l'accès à l'information :

- Les progrès que nous pouvons apporter à la connaissance puisent leurs racines dans les connaissances antérieures forgées par d'autres. Il serait vain de " réinventer la roue " et la collecte d'informations est un travail non seulement permis, utile, mais aussi indispensable, car il nous permet d'utiliser dans nos travaux les résultats et les idées d'autres auteurs pour élaborer notre propre réflexion et nous insérer dans le mouvement de la recherche intellectuelle. Il est donc indispensable que l'étudiant réalise très tôt dans sa formation universitaire combien il importe de rechercher toutes les sources pertinentes d'information : les premiers travaux personnels, qu'il convient d'encourager, en constituent un premier exercice ; pour le mémoire de master, la démarche est essentielle.

- Par ailleurs, la qualité du travail réalisé dépendra de la qualité et de la variété de l'information recueillie. Dans sa recherche d'informations, l'étudiant peut s'appuyer sur les ressources mises à sa disposition par l'Université : accès aux bibliothèques, au réseau Internet, aux cours, conférences, colloques, laboratoires, etc. Dans ces divers domaines, l'étudiant doit pouvoir compter sur l'aide du personnel enseignant pour chercher, trier, vérifier les informations

mais aussi des règles de bonne conduite

L'utilisation de l'information doit respecter des règles éthiques simples mais strictes : le respect de la propriété intellectuelle et de la vérité interdit que l'on fasse passer pour sien, fût-ce par omission, un travail que l'on n'a pas accompli.

Il importe donc de citer clairement ses sources, ce qui permet aussi de soumettre le travail au contrôle critique du lecteur qui peut ainsi apprécier par lui-même la qualité de l'information.

En particulier, l'étudiant veillera à toujours bien distinguer ce qui revient à d'autres et ce qui lui est personnel : les citations d'auteurs sont signalées par des guillemets ou par les règles en usage dans la discipline; si elles sont modifiées légèrement, fût-ce par la mise en évidence de certains mots, on le signalera (par exemple au moyen des mots " souligné par nous "); les commentaires qui suivent de près un texte ou les travaux qui sont de simples adaptations doivent être signalés comme tels (" ici, nous suivons les idées de X, en les adaptant à notre contexte "); les traductions mentionneront leur auteur, qui peut être l'étudiant lui-même; les apports personnels peuvent bien entendu être signalés comme tels et sont à encourager.

La bibliographie doit être précise et permettre de toujours retrouver la source (livres, articles, etc.). La courtoisie recommande de signaler les informations non écrites importantes recueillies oralement. L'usage n'a pas encore codifié l'utilisation des informations recueillies sur site Internet, mais l'éthique veut ici aussi que les sources d'un travail scientifique soient signalées; ici comme ailleurs, il n'est en tout cas pas admissible que l'étudiant fasse passer pour sien des travaux tout faits qu'il aurait recueillis sur un site ou l'autre. Le plagiat, la fabrication et la falsification des résultats sont unanimement considérés comme des fautes graves. »

I have read this code and agree to its terms

Laura Victoria Salamanca Acosta

Acknowledgements

*To my Father, who has always proven to be the best role model
a daughter could hope for,*

*To my mother, who has taught me not to give up even in the
most difficult of times,*

To my loved ones, who have believed in me,

*And to the wisdom and kindness of my teachers, who have
taught us our limits are not set in stone.*

A warm thank you to all.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Chapter 1: Scientific Interest, Conceptualization, Method	8
1.1 <i>Scientific interest:</i>	8
a) <i>Why is Popular Culture relevant to International Relations?</i>	8
b) <i>Why is the US-Mexico border in films interesting to study?</i>	12
1.2 <i>Conceptualization</i>	16
1.3 <i>Methodology</i>	20
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework.....	23
2.1 <i>Choosing Theories</i>	23
2.2 <i>Poststructuralism</i>	24
2.3 <i>The importance of language and discourse</i>	30
Chapter 3: A brief history of the border.....	32
3.1 <i>Border history and evolution</i>	33
3.2 <i>Border Crossings</i>	35
3.3 <i>Border Identity</i>	40
3.4 <i>The Role of NAFTA</i>	42
Chapter 4: Film Analysis	46
4.1 <i>Discourse perpetuating identities: the role of stereotypes</i>	47
4.2 <i>The metaphor of the American Empire</i>	55
4.3 <i>The metaphor of the Mexican Lawless land</i>	57
Conclusion.....	59
Annexes	61
<i>Annex 1,2 & 3</i>	61
<i>Annex 4</i>	63
<i>Annex 5</i>	63
<i>Annex 6</i>	64
References	64
<i>Articles</i>	64
<i>Books</i>	67
<i>Other Sources</i>	69

Introduction:

The 16th of June 2015, Donald Trump announced that he would be running for the Presidency. In this speech he stated: “*I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I’ll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great wall on our southern border and I’ll have Mexico pay for that wall*”¹. The border that separates Mexico and the United States has long been a source of polemics, and nowadays the debate concerning immigration and drug trafficking across this region has sparked up new political tendencies.

Indeed, Michel Foucher (whose work was heavily based on the concept of borders and frontiers) defines borders as a “geographical discontinuity” that has a real, symbolic and imaginary purpose², an interaction that is heavily influenced by multiple functions: a classical one (which is both the politics and strategies over border matters in inter-state relations), an ideological one (linked to the political discontinuities that exist on either side of the boundary) and an oppressive one (in the sense that non-state actors may perceive it as the point that differentiates individuals based on ethnic, linguistic and religious criteria)³.

The case of US-Mexico border is a useful example to illustrate this point. As the authors of the State of the Border Report mentioned in their publication: “*Managing the US-Mexico border is extremely difficult and made more so by its intense mix of international and domestic policy issues*”⁴. The border between the two North American countries is a relevant subject not only in World Politics, but it is also recurrent in several forms of popular culture (cinema, music, art, literature, etc.)⁵.

This study will focus on analyzing the role of the Mexican border in the distinction of American and Mexican identities through cinema. With all the recent

¹ Politifact, 2015, “Build a wall and make Mexico pay for it”: <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/trumpometer/promise/1397/build-wall-and-make-mexico-pay-it/> (accessed on 09/08/2018)

² FOUCHER Michel, 1988, « Fronts et frontières, un tour du monde géopolitique », Paris, Fayard, p. 38

³ *Ibidem*

⁴ LEE Erik, WILSON Christopher, LARA-VALENCIA Francisco, DE LA PARRA Carlos, VAN SCHOIK Rick, PATRON-SOBERANO Kristofer, OLSON Eric L., SELEE Andrew, 2013, “The State of the border report: A comprehensive analysis of the US-Mexico border”, *The Wilson Center*, p.4.

⁵ Migrations in history, “Cultural Identities on the Mexico United States Border” (José Manuel Valenzuela Arce), 2018: <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/bord/cultid.html> (accessed on 1/07/2018)

focus on the issue of Mexican undocumented immigration towards the United States, and the ongoing War on Drugs, the representation of the border and its issues is a recurrent theme in both the Mexican and American film industries. This leads us to the research question: *How is the “other” represented through films, and what is the importance of understanding representation in World Politics?*

Having been exposed to an important amount of films from both countries (although most of them not addressing the issue of the border directly), two hypotheses have been determined. The first one would be that Mexicans, especially those who cross the border, are represented in a negative way in American cinema, and are often linked to a criminal stereotype. The second one would establish that Americans are negatively represented in Mexican cinema and are often linked to an imperialist and egocentric stereotype. Both of these assumptions shall be present during the whole research and will be addressed once the analysis of the films has concluded.

Given that the scope of this research focuses strongly on the notion of ‘identity’, representation and popular culture, one of the most fitting approaches is poststructuralism. For this reason, the majority of the sources dedicated to this approach stem from poststructuralist authors, or researchers of said discipline.

The research shall be divided into four chapters. In the first one we will give an overview of the interest of Popular Culture in the realm of International Relations, the pertinence of the subject we are choosing, a brief presentation of the concepts and the method that will be applied. Following this chapter, the theories through which the analysis of the films will be done are presented. Chapter three serves as a historical explanation of the border: how it came to be, the issue of immigration and the role of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement. Finally, our analysis of the films shall be provided.

Chapter 1: Scientific interest, conceptualization and method

To understand why this subject is of vast importance to the field of International Relations, a thorough explanation of the scientific interest of Popular Culture for World Politics shall be provided; after which the important concepts of this study will be clearly defined. Finally, after describing the method of our research, we shall sketch out the theoretical framework appropriate to this investigation.

1.1 Scientific Interest:

a) Why is Popular Culture relevant to International Relations?

For a long time, the link between Popular Culture and the field of IR was not immediately apparent. If one browses a book of introduction to International Relations, Geopolitics, Security or any of the major subjects that are englobed by the term “World Politics”, one will be able to admit that even if culture is an important dimension of politics in general, it is hard to find it as a field of study within the former. In their book entitled “*Popular Culture and World Politics: theories, methods and pedagogies*”, Caso and Hamilton establish that the interest in Popular Culture has helped the field of World Politics to move away from a strictly macro-political analysis based mainly on the systemic level, and to think about the new dynamics of power⁶. In fact, they affirm that seeing them as part of a PCWP⁷ continuum, permits a more holistic understanding of politics⁸. Indeed, many traditional approaches to International Relations fail to take into account all aspects of society, although society in its whole is an essential key to politics in general.

Another main argument for studying the effect of Popular Culture on World Affairs, is the fact that, as Jason Dittmer describes in his contribution to the previously mentioned work, Popular Culture is a “doing”⁹. What he means by this is that it is through the “*interaction between people, politics and artefacts*”¹⁰, that the political

⁶ CASO Federica & HAMILTON Caitlin, 2015, “Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods and Pedagogies”, *E-International Relations*, p.2.

⁷ PCWP stands for Popular Culture World Politics, an abbreviation that is heavily used in their work, and that (for the purpose of brevity), shall also be employed in this study.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*

scene is constructed. This is extremely interesting because it highlights the previous idea and adds that it is the interaction of these elements that constitute a social and political reality.

Other authors, such as those cited in the work of Grayson, Davies and Philpott, establish that it is within popular culture that “*power, ideology and identity are constituted*”¹¹. This affirmation is particularly relevant to the nature of this study, as it points out that ideology and identity are potentially shaped by the exposure of one society to the popular culture that is produced by the same country. It is the aim of this paper to try and elucidate how this may apply to the case of border films¹².

A very important aspect of the relevance of PCWP would be the representational. In almost all the literature that focuses on the link between politics and popular culture, there is at the very least a mention, of how popular culture acts on politics through the representation of it. It may seem like there is a legitimizing effect of the latter on the former, but as Grayson, Davies and Philpott put it accurately: “*visual and representational imaginaries are sites where politics and political subjectivity are constituted and where the politics of affect, emotion, feeling and reaction challenge cozy assumptions about rationality, rational political actors and the decisions said to flow from them*”¹³. This assumption alone should make studying the importance of PCWP a priority of the IR field, if not to prove it, at least to discard it.

PCWP is also interesting to study because of how intertextuality may influence the perspectives that the world can be interpreted through¹⁴. According to Klaus Dodds, it is with the help of “critical geopolitics” (“*a discipline of Geography and beyond*”¹⁵) that a new light is shed on the relationship between Popular Culture and International Relations. The term “popular geopolitics” was coined to define the current of geopolitics that chose to study the phenomenon without neglecting Popular Culture. As a result, several studies were published, showing that: “*an interest in speeches and textual sources, with an abiding concern for how popular geopolitical*

¹¹ GRAYSON K., DAVIES M., PHILPOTT S., 2009, “Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture- World politics continuum.” *Political Studies Association*, Vol 29(3), p. 156.

¹² This term shall be further explained in the “conceptualization” part of this chapter.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

¹⁴ CASO Federica & HAMILTON Caitlin, 2015, “Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods and Pedagogies”, *E-International Relations*, p.12

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

sources ended up naturalizing and legitimizing the practical geopolitical narratives and identities of Governments such as the United States”¹⁶. In other words, Popular Culture gives a comprehensible perception of political actions, narratives and identities. This is particularly relevant to the purpose of this paper, especially due to the attention drawn to the discursive dimension of geopolitics.

Up until this point we have attempted to demonstrate that, although it is not an easy task, there is in fact a relationship between Popular Culture and International Relations that is worth studying. Of course, this attempt to show the importance of PCWP studies would not be complete if we did not mention the concept which highlights the importance of culture in the traditional currents of IR: Soft Power. In his understanding of one of traditional IR’s most critical components, power, Joseph Nye witnesses a “*great power shift*”¹⁷. Indeed, during the Cold War era, it was noticed that “*hard power (‘the use of a country’ military power to persuade other countries to do something, rather than the use of the cultural or economic influence*”¹⁸)”, was no longer the only factor in the determination of who was more powerful. Other factors started determining the importance and influence of a country, such as their economy, their culture, their diplomacy, etc. Nye stated: “*The ability to affect what other countries want tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology and institutions*”¹⁹. Evidently, this fits perfectly into our research as it is a proof of the clear link between culture and world politics.

Of course, culture is a broad term, and we shall be focusing on popular culture, nonetheless, the latter as we have discussed, has been studied as a conveyer of ideology and a legitimizer of institutions. In their work, Caso and Hamilton explain that “*To develop soft power states engage in cultural diplomacy practices that actively deploy popular culture*”²⁰. In today’s world, where sources of information are multiplying, where technology is revolutionizing the way we see the world, now more than ever, popular culture has become an unavoidable subject that needs to be paid attention.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

¹⁷ NYE Joseph, 1990, « Soft Power », *Foreign Policy*, No. 80, p. 155.

¹⁸ Cambridge Dictionary, “Hard Power”, 2018: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hard-power> (accessed on 05/07/2018)

¹⁹ NYE Joseph, 1990, « Soft Power », *Foreign Policy*, No. 80, p. 166-167.

²⁰ CASO Federica & HAMILTON Caitlin, 2015, “Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods and Pedagogies”, *E-International Relations* p. 14

Continuing with our pursuit of justifying the relevance of PCWP, there is also another dimension that must be taken into account. Here, the link between both can become a bit more obscure, as it has to do with perception. More precisely, as was briefly mentioned, popular culture often gives a representation of what happens on the international political scene²¹. This is important in the sense that it legitimizes an act, as we have already stated, but it leaves it for future generations to consume (through film, literature, music, etc.). The example given in the handbook by Caso and Hamilton is those of films portraying the Arab-Israeli conflict. Depending on which side is creating the cultural good, we can appreciate the building of a narrative, often one-sided²². This will also be interesting for this paper, as we are opposing two different countries over a very sensitive issue for both: border crossing. Here, it is imperative to try and deconstruct how the narratives are impacting the imaginary of both populations. For this reason, this may be one of the most salient interests of this field; in the frame of this particular research.

Last but not least, and in relation with the previous idea, in the same handbook the author establishes that: “*While popular cultural constructions are not the only sites in which identities, practices, institutions and objectives are discursively constituted, they are some of the most important. Popular culture is especially significant because we are all immersed in these discourses in our daily lives; they constitute our everyday common sense*”²³. This is highly relevant to our objectives, and for that matter to the whole realm of International Relations, for two reasons. First, it points out the obvious: popular culture is within the reach of practically any human being, and furthermore, in their interest. It is not uncommon for people to dismiss a political discussion for the mere reason that they are “not interested in politics”. But to what regards popular culture, basically everyone can consume it, and with it, certain messages and narratives that are of political interest. Second, this statement points to the most important element to study when analyzing Popular Culture: discourse. This is particularly interesting as our analysis of border films will be under the scope of post-structuralism, a current that bases its theory around discourse. But this shall be further explained in our section dedicated to the theoretical framework

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18

²² *Ibidem*

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 19

b) Why is the US-Mexico border in films interesting to study?

It goes without saying: borders are a wildly studied phenomenon in the field of International Relations, whether it is because of them being sources of conflict, or simply because they are a geographical delimitation of power, among several other reasons. Some perceive borders as the “opportunity of interaction” between two countries²⁴. In the case of the US-Mexico border, it is without a doubt that their vicinity was a strong incentive that led to the ambitious trade agreement that would create a free-trade zone that also included Canada.

Aside from this commercial partnership, the contemporary relationship between both countries has been heavily marked by an important number of illegal immigrants crossing Mexico’s northern border to enter the United States²⁵. Naturally, this phenomenon has had an impact on both American and Mexican Popular Culture. Indeed, the subject is brought up or at least referenced in any kind of media and literature; from films to television series, blogs, music, books, and much more.

In her article, Kathleen Staudt says that: *“in figurative ways, films also narrate themes and images of diverse border people and the multiple borderlands to mainstream audiences. As such, the films may reproduce (or undermine) dominant hegemonic narratives of the borderlands which have long been portrayed as wild, chaotic, sexualized, violent places with actors who perform those themes. Films may reproduce (or undermine) stereotypes about border people, Mexican and “Americans” ...”*²⁶. In this paragraph, she admits the importance of the subject in the film industries of both countries, which serve as reproductions of a narrative. Aside from this, she mentions a point that we have not yet discussed: border people. As we shall see further on, the border issues between these two countries have had a cultural effect: the creation of a border culture.

As Vilanova puts it: *“the border has basically been perceived as a space in between cultures that creates its own cultural, artistic and literary dynamics”*²⁷. This

²⁴ STARR Harvey & MOST Benjamin, 1976, “The substance and study of borders in International Relations”, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4, p. 588.

²⁵ This issue will be further discussed in section 2.3 (Border Crossings).

²⁶ STAUDT Kathleen, 2014, “The border, performed in films: Produced in both Mexico and the US to “Bring out the worst in a country”, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No.4, pp. 465-466.

²⁷ VILANOVA Núria, 2002, “Another Textual Frontier: Contemporary Fiction on the Northern Mexican Border.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* Vol. 21, No. 1 p. 77.

is due to the evolution of the border (as shall be explained in section 2.1) along with the illegal immigration that often leads these people to become alienated from the system that does not accept them and from the one they are leaving, hence the referring to them as “aliens”. Their need to assimilate has lead them to create a sort of hybrid culture that depicts the lives of the Chicano²⁸ (defined as a person of Mexican descent born in the United States)²⁹. This starts to be beside the point this paper seeks to understand, but this proves the cultural importance of the Mexican-American frontier. In addition, she mentions how films also help imagine a community, which is also interesting to our purpose of analyzing films to understand the border conditions of our geographical point of interest.

In the literature, it seems that many authors agree that the representation of the border and its people through cinema has only contributed to the animosity between the two countries. One example of this kind of thought is the article written by Wood, where he also gives us a brief history of the films that have been made regarding the frontier. According to him, there have been “*historical misrepresentations*” that “*only added to the bad blood between the two countries through continued stereotypic portrayals and skewed ideological constructs*”³⁰.

Although there is not much research done on the subject, several authors have attempted to analyze the role that Popular Culture plays when speaking about this particular subject. Then again, the ones who focus on films specifically are even harder to find. One thing that comes up in each one of their researches, is that films that portray the border in one way or another are extremely abundant, and for this simple reason it is highly interesting to try and understand how it may be linked to the greater realm of International Relations.

The fact is that there are films dating all the way back to the 1930’s³¹, from both sides. Some authors, such as Dell’agnese, dare to say that the American-Mexican border has been a “*common setting since the foundation of the film industry*”³². This

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 78

²⁹ English Oxford Living Dictionaries, “Chicano”: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/chicano> (accessed on 03/04/2018)

³⁰ WOOD Andrew G, 2001, “How Would You like an El Camino? U.S. Perceptions of Mexico in Two Recent Hollywood Films.” *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol.43, No. 4, pp.755-64.

³¹ STAUDT Kathleen, 2014, “The border, performed in films: Produced in both Mexico and the US to “Bring out the worst in a country”, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No.4, pp. 469.

³² DELL’AGNESE Elena, 2006, “The US-Mexico Border in American Movies: A political Geography

statement in itself proves the relevance of the border in the Mexican and American film industry and given the importance of Hollywood in the entire world, it proves to be relevant to International Relations. Her work is very pertinent to our research as she also explores the impact of discourse (although in her case it may be with a geopolitical focus) and representations of the other. To close the section dedicated to the scientific interest, it is pertinent to quote an entire paragraph of her article, which will explain clearly why it is interesting to study this particular kind of films:

“Since then, the border has been a leading or secondary character in dozens of movies, ranging from the obvious westerns to the less obvious horror, science fiction and film-noir categories. As with any other ‘real landscape’, the US-Mexico border has been invented and re-invented by the camera, which has selected certain clichés and developed its own topoi. Through the century, the border was depicted as a racialized space, as a gendered area where masculine and feminine stereotypes can be portrayed against a backdrop of colonial fantasies, as a place of contested historical encounter. Because of these many race and gender implications, its narratives and imagined geographies have been the object of research in a wide range of academic fields, from American and Chicana/o studies to literature, film, gender and cultural studies, and cultural geography. (..) However, the border is, above all, a politically charged place, and its portrayal in popular culture also deserves to be analyzed with the instruments of political geography.”³³

The idea given by Dell’agnese fully supports the objectives of our research and supports itself on notions that this paper will also use, and further explain (imaginary, popular culture, etc.). Furthermore, she shows the wide range of genres that use the border as a setting, reinforcing the importance of this analysis.

As we have discussed in the past section, popular culture portrays society in one way or another, for this reason films can’t be ignored. In fact, American films portraying Mexican society have already gotten a lot of reactions from the represented. According to *The New York Times*, even in the earliest form of films, Mexicans were

perspective”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 205.

³³ *Ibidem*

often represented in a negative way, they “*robbed, pillaged, raped, cheated, gambled, lied and displayed virtually every vice that could be shown on the screen*”³⁴.

Understanding this, it may seem that President Trump’s defining of the Mexican people as rapists as an excuse to build his controversial border wall, has been legitimized by Hollywood in some way. Of course, it is important to understand why Mexicans were perceived as a violent race back then; it was 1910, year of the Mexican Revolution. Interestingly, Pancho Villa (the better known of the revolutionaries) signed a contract with Mutual Film Corporation, allowing them to film parts of their combats, in order to finance the upheaval³⁵. So, it is perhaps reasonable that Mexicans shown in the films of that time were portrayed as revolutionaries, but it received an unpleasant response by the Mexican government, who found it distasteful to generalize and condemn a whole population of being “bandits and sneaks”³⁶. Again, this seems to mirror our present and, as back then, Mexico faces the uncertainty of life under Cartel’s rule. Nevertheless, in films it is difficult to find those that try to shed light on the vast majority of Mexicans that are not in the drug business, and vice versa, on the American citizen who has more humanity than greed.

To finish this section, it is important that we point out why this particular study is relevant and in what way it may contribute to the papers that have already been written on the subject. Although the work of Staudt is quite similar, the purpose pursued is different. First of all, in her work and in the literature of the kind, there were no studies written through a post-structuralist scope, which shall be the major theory our analysis will be based upon. Second of all, although a lot of the research has dealt with concepts that will come up in this investigation, our goal is to try and elucidate how each population (be it Mexican or American) is portrayed in cinema, and how these representations contribute to the imaginary of each one. Then again, the list of films that have been selected are not films that have already been studied, much less with the approach we have chosen, but this shall be explained a bit more in the section dedicated to the methodology of this paper.

³⁴ The New York Times, 1981, “How Hollywood Has Portrayed Hispanics”: <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/01/movies/how-hollywood-has-portrayed-hispanics.html> (accessed on 04/05/2018)

³⁵ *Ibidem*

³⁶ *Ibidem*

1.2 Conceptualization

To understand clearly every aspect of this study, it is imperative that we give the precise definitions of the concepts that will be appearing repetitively throughout the analysis. It is important to point out that the definitions given for each concept are those that best define the concept within the frame of this study.

a) Border films:

In this research, the term “border film” will refer to any motion picture that uses the border as a landscape, scenario, or where the border plays a role in itself (as the theme, as a crucial turning point, etc.). This term does not appear as is in the literature, only Fuller uses it a couple of times in her book without clearly defining it, thus there is no scientific definition; but for the sake of brevity, this study will employ it extensively, reason why we chose to give an idea of what meaning it will carry.

b) Imaginary:

Defining the imaginary and its purpose in politics is not an easy task. This term is often used in other social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology, gender studies, history and so on. But there is no doubt that it is a relevant notion in ancient as well as modern politics, especially when studying popular culture.

The definition by Boia states that: “*the history of the imaginary can be read as a history of archetypes which are core, basic tendencies of the human spirit, organization and interpretation schemes for the social and historical reality whose truth value transcend historical epochs*”³⁷. This is very important in understanding that the imaginary is essential in the construction of collective and/or political identities.

Castoriadis states that the imaginary: “... *does not signify the ‘fictive’, the ‘illusory’, the ‘specular,’ but rather the positing of new forms. This positing is not determined but rather determining; it is an unmotivated positing that no casual, functional or even rational explanation can account for. Each society creates its own forms. These forms in turn bring into being a world in which this society inscribes itself and gives itself a place. It is by means of them that society constitutes a system*

³⁷ Diacronia, “The political imaginary – a key element in the construction of political identities”, 2018: <http://www.diacronia.ro/ro/indexing/details/A6131/pdf> (accessed on 15/07/2018)

*of norms, institutions (...), values, orientations and goals of collective life, as well as of individual life*³⁸”.

Of course, when discussing the relevance and power of the imaginary, it would be sinful to continue without considering the works of the great academics who have studied it in other centuries. Martin Saar wrote a delightful summary about how Spinoza conceived this abstract concept, which is very pertinent to mention within the frame of this study. Spinoza is an interesting perspective to take, as most of his contemporaries studied the relationship between politics and religion, he believed that the human capacity of creating images was an “anthropological given” and that it was irrefutable that this was one imperative dimension of both human actions and interactions³⁹. For him, the political is where the imaginary becomes effective, and this idea is particularly interesting for this paper’s objectives as it justifies how analyzing films as a way of creating a community’s imaginary may be important to the political sphere. Of course, it would be irresponsible not to clarify that his thought is complex: as the imaginary proves relevant to the political, the opposite is also true, yet the analysis of how they may interact is not always clear. According to Saar’s interpretation of Spinoza’s theory: “...in the field of politics, no image, no representation, no object is neutral.”⁴⁰

Thus, the definition of the imaginary that most interests us is in the sense of the political. It determines how one community may position itself in comparison to another, therefore how they may perceive the ‘other’, how it is inherent to the human nature and why we can understand an identity through a better comprehension of the people’s imaginary.

c) Identity:

When dealing with a subject that studies the relationship between cultures, it is essential to define identity. Given that this study attempts to study popular culture and

³⁸ CASTORIADIS Cornelius, 1993, “The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary”, *Salmagundi*, No. 100, p. 102.

³⁹ SAAR Martin (translated by CALLISON William & GRÄFE Anne), 2015, “Spinoza and the Political Imaginary”, *Qui Parle*, Vol. 23, No. 2, p. 115.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

how it may influence the imaginary of two different populations, this concept will be appearing repeatedly.

In its most basic definition, identity translates to who an individual is, and what makes him or her who they are. Nonetheless, there are endless types of identity (group, individual, sexual, national, professional, etc.). When taking a cultural approach, identity is best understood at a national level.

First off, it is imperative to understand the concept of nation and how it differs from that of the State. David Miller writes that a nation comes to be one, when certain criteria is met: it is a community that shares belief and commitment, with a same historic background, active in character, possessing a specific territory and differentiated to other communities by a particular public culture⁴¹. These elements, although they may seem a bit mythical, will in turn constitute the national identity. Nonetheless, it is important to point out, that in the modern world, and specially in cases like the one of the US-Mexico Border; public culture can find a hybrid space due to the historic flow of immigration from one country to another, blurring the clarity of national identity. Despite this being true, this notion is important to understand, for it is this national identity, or the sentiment of it, that is going to help us understand the representations of the populations through cinema.

Added to this, the findings of Walsh are extremely insightful to our objectives, he focuses on the link between the national imaginary and the national cinema, which he states cannot be studied if the national identity is not considered. In his perception, national identity cannot be established without the recognition of an ‘other’⁴². This is also argued by Staudt, who claims that: “*Nationalisms territorialize identity and create ‘others’ who occupy different space and exhibit different cultures, with positive or negative portrayals of people and places*”⁴³.

⁴¹Oxford Scholarship online, “On Nationality (David Miller)”, 2003, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0198293569.001.0001/acprof-9780198293569-chapter-2> (accessed on 04/07/2018).

⁴² WALSH Michael, 1996, “National Cinema, National Imaginary”, Indiana University Press, Vol. 8, No.1, p. 8.

⁴³ STAUDT Kathleen, 2014, “The border, performed in films: Produced in both Mexico and the US to “Bring out the worst in a country”, Journal of Borderlands Studies, Vol. 29, No.4, p. 466.

To sum it up, the national dimension of identity is fundamental to this research. The idea that a population has of their identity as a community is shaped by several factors and is more clearly defined by the presence of the “other”.

d) *Popular culture:*

The term popular culture is one that is often heard in this day and age, even more so since the development of technology. Yet, even if the word seems to be more present then ever before, the concept can be traced back, as far as the 17th century⁴⁴, if not before. Strinati focuses on the definition of it through its purpose, its history and the effect of it on society. In his work, he remarks that there has been a shift in the definition; in the past popular was understood in the two ways: either as inferior work or as something seeking recognition from the general public⁴⁵.

Nowadays, the term is so current that it is hard to find a precise definition in the literature that was covered in this research. The simple cultural component of this concept is enough to guess its complexity and amplitude. In their paper, Grayson, Davies and Philpott state that there is a whole “*range of signifying and lived practices such as poetry, film, sculpture, music, television, leisure activities and fashion that constitute popular culture*”⁴⁶. This attempt on elucidating the evasive character of pop culture is interesting because it sheds light on elements not all people would be quick to consider: popular culture includes activities and fashion, and for that matter, a whole range of consumer goods. This is also considered in the book of Caso and Hamilton, where they explain how a population’s way of consuming is also definitive of the country’s culture.

In his article in the magazine *Philosophy Now*, Tom Delaney gives an asserted attempt at defining this concept in modern times: “...it involves the aspects of social life most actively involved in by the public. As the ‘culture of the people’, popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities: styles of dress, the use of slang, greeting rituals and the foods that people eat are examples of popular culture. Popular culture is also informed by the mass media”⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ STRINATI Dominic, 2004, “An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture”, Routledge, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*

⁴⁶ GRAYSON K., DAVIES M., PHILPOTT S., 2009, “Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture- World politics continuum.” Political Studies Association, Vol 29(3), p. 156.

⁴⁷ Philosophy Now, 2007, “Pop Culture: An Overview (by Tom Delaney)”,

This understanding of popular culture is a first step towards the direction of this paper. Although we will not be discussing these particular forms of Pop Culture, this first explanation puts into perspective how much a society can be influenced by what they see or hear. This is because for a word to be slang, it has to be heard on the lips of someone else, for another to repeat it. Thus, society is heavily influenced by these habits and customs.

More specifically, Delaney defines Pop Culture as: “*the products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or wildly accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time*”⁴⁸. It is this definition that best fits the content of this paper, as it refers to “forms of expression”, which is what film is all about. Through film we are put in the perspective of the director, whose representation of any given theme can become the general understanding of it.

1.3 Methodology:

As has been mentioned before, there are few researches dedicated to studying the Mexican-American relationship through film, particularly in regard to the border. Nonetheless, it is possible to find a few, carefully selected articles, that describe the complexity and hybridity of the people living in and around the border, and how their culture is represented through cinema. In this section, the methodology of this article will be briefly described, a list of the films that will be studied shall be provided, as for the motives behind this particular selection.

This research is aimed at studying both the Mexican film industry’s representation of the American population, and the American film industry’s representation of the Mexican people. As we have discussed in the section dedicated to the conceptualization of this paper, the identity of the population comes through the recognition of the ‘other’, and the representation of the ‘other’ in popular culture can contribute to the imaginary of a community, which in turn legitimizes or encourages certain political stands and actions. For this reason, it is relevant to our goal, to study both sides. Added to this, this analysis will focus primarily on recent productions for

https://philosophynow.org/issues/64/Pop_Culture_An_Overview (accessed on 04/08/2018)

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

two reasons: first, because there has already been some research dedicated to movies of the mid-twentieth century (which we have taken into consideration already) but there is not much on contemporary cinematography. And second, because although illegal immigration has always been a diplomatic issue for these countries, in recent years this issue has drawn worldwide attention.

This idea being clear, here is the list of the films, and their respective directors, that will be considered and why:

American films:

- The three burials of Melquíades Estrada (2005), Tommy Lee Jones
- The Mexican Dream (2003), Gustavo Hernández Pérez
- Sicario (2015), Denis Villeneuve

Mexican films:

- Babel (2006), Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritú
- A day without a Mexican (2004), Sergio Arau
- Desierto (2016), Jonas Cuarón

These six films are border films in the sense that they really use the border as a theme, and there is at least one passage where the physical boundary is shown. The *Three Burials of Melquíades Estrada* takes place in a border town and narrates the story of an immigrant and his assassination. The border here plays a fundamental role, particularly in distinguishing the ‘other’ that defines American identity. *The Mexican Dream* (a short film which was chosen to cover another form of cinematography), exhibits the purposes of crossing the border. *Sicario* shows the violence of the region, specially regarding the Mexican territory. *Babel*, although composed of different stories, shows the difficulties that the stereotype of the immigrant has brought to Mexicans. Sergio Arau’s film points out the importance of Mexican labor (especially the one provided by illegal immigrants) in American life. Finally, *Desierto* depicts the harsh conditions of crossing the border as an illegal immigrant.

The first thing that might pop out when revising this list, is the fact that in the list of American films, is a Hispanic name. This is due to the generations of immigrants that have flowed from Mexico into the United States. Nonetheless, this portion of

American citizens is not considered Mexican, at best they identify as Chicanos, which makes their representation of the border an American point of view. Of course, it would be foolish not to admit that their vision might be a bit more sensitized than that of an American with no Mexican or Latino background. This is something that will be in the analysis, as we will consider the background of the directors, their potential hybridity into attempting an explanation on why they represent the border and immigration in the way that they do. This hybridization has also resulted in films directed by Mexicans being in English, or bilingual.

Aside from this, one might notice the time-frame that inspires the list. As we have mentioned, studies on border films are no exception in academic literature, rare as they may be. Before it was stated that border films have been around for as long as cinematography has, the earliest being silent films. Of course, it is only natural that they have also seen their plots change, adapting to the socio-political context of each epoch. Since the early 1970's, president Nixon declared a "War on Drugs" aimed at stopping the illegal traffic of drugs coming from the south of the continent. Evidently, this refreshed the violent nature of the border⁴⁹. Consecutively, this would continue and would become even more problematic with Mexican President Felipe Calderon's war on the Cartels declared in 2006.⁵⁰ All of this is without mentioning the post-9/11 situation and its impact on the USA's international strategy, closing up its borders due to the war on terror⁵¹. Thus, the 21st century is interesting to study.

The manner in which the research is conducted is that of an exhaustive revision of the literature; from where concepts, theory, history and another list of facts are obtained to sustain the academical aspect of this paper. With the help of the theory⁵², the list of films will be analyzed to determine whether our starting hypotheses (presented in the introduction) are verified or not.

⁴⁹CORREA-CABRERA Guadalupe, TERENCE Garrett, and KECK Michelle, 2014, "Administrative Surveillance and Fear: Implications for U.S.-Mexico Border Relations and Governance." *Revista Europea De Estudios Latinoamericanos Y Del Caribe / European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, No. 96 pp. 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*

⁵¹ The details of how these policies against drugs had an impact on the border shall be further discussed in Chapter 2.

⁵² In its majority it is the poststructuralist theory and theories that focus on discourse, but this shall be further explained in the section entitled "Theoretical Framework".

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework:

2.1 Choosing theories:

The analysis of cinematography for political purposes has never been an easy or determining mission, this is even truer when trying to adopt an international stand. Since the subject we wish to study relies heavily on identity, and even more, on representation of the 'other', it is the post-structuralist current that shall be guiding this study.

It is important to point out that, although there are other more pertinent perspectives of International Relations (such as realism, liberalism, idealism and constructivism) they seem to lack the elements that are needed to test the hypotheses of this particular research. Although constructivism and critical theory tend to revise the components of a system, they do not address the element of discourse as much as poststructuralism does.

Poststructuralism, although not a theory of International Relations in all the sense of the term, seems highly appropriate when decrypting this research question. As is put by Bleiker and Campbell, understanding international politics from the perspective of traditional IR theories is useful but not enough. It is vital for scholars, and the people in general, to understand the importance of abstraction, representation and interpretation in world affairs. For them, the representations are linked directly to identity which in turn establishes a political discourse of what they call "identity politics" as a reference for world politics⁵³. Strictly speaking, at the center of poststructuralist theory are the notions of interpretation, representation, power and knowledge and the politics of identity. These notions seem extremely helpful when trying to analyze the role of films in International Relations. As MC Marrow states: "*...poststructuralism allows you to become carefully attuned to- and interrogate- the many ways power is exercised*"⁵⁴, and who says power, says politics.

⁵³ BLEIKER Roland & CAMPBELL David, 2016, "Poststructuralism", International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Introduction.

⁵⁴ E-International Relations, 2018, "Introducing Poststructuralism in International Relations Theory (Aishling MC Marrow): <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/13/introducing-poststructuralism-in-international-relations-theory/> (accessed on 02/08/2018).

Since poststructuralism relies heavily on the use of language, it is also quite gripping to apply theories about the analysis of language and discourse. Not only will this help us de-code the messages encrypted in the dialogues of each film, but to link the films to the political discourse of which they are contemporary. With this in mind, Grondin provides the theoretical framework to understand and study the weight of discourse and language through the example of American Foreign Policy. The concept of national identity appears once again, it influences the elaboration of a discourse in a direct manner⁵⁵. When studying the relationship between Mexico and the United States, it is of extreme importance to highlight that their identities are fundamentally different, especially when Mexico is a geographic mark of the limit of Latin American culture. Hence, national identity and the way it is constructed shall be examined.

2.2 Poststructuralism:

Similar to the critical school of International Relations, poststructuralism's aim is also the denaturalization of the social order that is perceived as the norm. The difference between these two currents lies in their origin and the way they may envisage a possible solution. In a sense, poststructuralism may seem more pessimistic about finding a way to create a completely objective society. Although often confused with postmodernism, poststructuralism is more of a social theory, while the first seems to be linked more to literature⁵⁶. Nevertheless, both are a response to structuralism, where authors like; Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan, expressed that there was an underlying structure where language not only refers to objects in the world, but it is a system of elements that refer to one another and close a way of being⁵⁷.

Although maintaining the importance of language, poststructuralism surges in an attempt to breakaway with structuralism's determinism. Where structuralism explains everything through the importance of language, poststructuralism agrees but not without the acceptance that reality (as interpreted through texts and discourses creating

⁵⁵ GRONDIN David, 2012, "Le poids du discours et du langage", *Théories de la politique étrangère américaine*, pp. 117-120.

⁵⁶ Youtube, 2014, "Postructuralism" (Lecture by Professor Gerard Van Der Ree, University Utrecht), uploaded April 3rd, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IVSA2mETqM> (accessed on 06/06/2018). Min: 1-3.

⁵⁷ HWO Wen-song, 1993, "Toward Understanding Post-structuralism and Curriculum", *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, p. 11.

a meaningful narrated world that we can work with) is textual, and these narrations always come with an element of power: it engenders a winner-loser dynamic⁵⁸. In other words, poststructuralists of the likes of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault believed that there was no truthful and objective reality, only a fabricated reality⁵⁹.

Frankly speaking, and as many of the literature can point out, defining poststructuralism leads to an abstract and often confusing way of theorizing. Merely asking the question “What is poststructuralism?” can shed some light on the paradoxical nature of this particular school, as it is deconstruction in its best form. In Jacques Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy* (1972), deconstruction is one recurring element of thought. Later, he would also establish that meaning is endless, which is to say that interpretation being subjective (to the structures of knowledge in power of one’s particular context), one word, one image, even a question can have different meanings to different individuals⁶⁰.

There are three major orientations through which we can get a better understanding of poststructuralism, clearing the blurred image the previous explanation might have left. The first one would be subjectivity; where structuralists found the subject as the function of the whole structure, poststructuralists like Michel Foucault found that the subject had no individuality and was rather “split” and its “*function was ceaselessly modified*”⁶¹. In other words, his reasoning was that there was nothing as a free agent as our mind has been shaped into thinking and choosing the things we do. Furthermore, others like Lacan added that there was no subject per se, aside from the representation of a subject which is then dependent on another party’s interpretation⁶². Derrida supports this idea and calls it “the death of the subject”⁶³. This is very interesting because what it means is that subjectivity is nothing but a consequence of the socio-political context one is educated in. This means that any representation one individual may portray (of its own identity or of that of someone else) might not be interpreted

⁵⁸ Youtube, 2014, “Postructuralism” (Lecture by Professor Gerard Van Der Ree, University Utrecht), uploaded April 3rd, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IVSA2mETqM> (accessed on 06/06/2018). Min: 4:00- 5:30

⁵⁹ HWO Wen-song, 1993, “Toward Understanding Post-structuralism and Curriculum”, *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, p. 48-49.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 54-55.

⁶¹ FOUCAULT Michel, 1980, “Power/Knowledge”, *New York: Pantheon books*, p. 61.

⁶² HWO Wen-song, 1993, “Toward Understanding Post-structuralism and Curriculum”, *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, p. 56

⁶³ *Ibidem*

the way he or she wishes it to be. This notion of subjectivity will be particularly relevant to this study, as it is by taking into account that the directors and writers of the studied films have no subjectivity, that we might understand how they are influenced by the macroscopic context into representing the ‘other’ in the way they do. The very limited characteristics of language are what binds universalism to impossibility. Adding to this, the discourses of power, which do not function at the level of opinion, are not as important as the terms that people think in, that exert any form of power: it is the underlying terms of speech that create the position and individual can think in. Thus, power is intersubjective⁶⁴.

In Campbell and Bleiker’s research on subjectivity’s role in poststructuralism, they successfully link this approach to political events on the international stage. According to them, Deleuze’s work entitled “*Empiricism and subjectivity*” (1988) states that struggles against imperial blocks (such as the Algerian and Vietnam wars, the Prague Spring, etc.), “*linked the emergence of new forms of struggle to the production of a new subjectivity*”. Thus, poststructuralism and the concept of identity in politics are closely linked⁶⁵.

The second orientation of his philosophical school revolves around what Hwo entitles the “identity and self”. As we have already discussed, identity comes from distinguishing oneself from what is different, it is the recognition of the ‘other’ that conduces to know who and what we are. Contrary to structuralists who treat the self as the object of study, Foucault is rather interested in which mechanisms lead the self towards its own recognition as subject⁶⁶. American scholar Mark Poster, who specialized in bringing French critical thought into the United States studied Foucault’s line of thinking extensively, and regarding this subject he summarized the French thinker’s reasoning as follows:

“*A critique of the self as rationalist by a strategy of reversal through madness vs. reason; (2) a critique of the self as centered consciousness by a strategy of*

⁶⁴ Youtube, 2014, “Poststructuralism” (Lecture by Professor Gerard Van Der Ree, University Utrecht), uploaded April 3rd, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IVSA2mETqM> (accessed on 06/06/2018). Min: 13.

⁶⁵ BLEIKER Roland & CAMPBELL David, 2016, “Poststructuralism”, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 205.

⁶⁶ HWO Wen-song, 1993, “Toward Understanding Post-structuralism and Curriculum”, *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, p. 59.

*displacement. The locus of intelligibility shifted from subject to structure; (3) hermeneutics of the self-using a strategy of historicism. The emphasis fell to the activity of self-constitution in discursive practices”.*⁶⁷

In other, and far simpler, words, discourse is everything, as dependent of the context and the interpretation as it may be. An individual would not be able to establish his or her identity if it were not through language and all of the implicit notions within. The difference of this discovery from structuralism, is that we depart with the idea that discourse does not come without some underlying structure of power, that inevitably affects the interpretation a subject may have of any given representation.

The final orientation of this theory that Hwo identifies is the “totalization and structure”. One of the things that determines poststructuralism, is that it opposes meta-narratives, hence the importance of deconstruction. This means that all the great storylines that give meaning to our reality (such as myths, religion, ideals, etc.) are to be thought of as something constructed and not one hundred percent objective. Poststructuralists strongly oppose to the idea that something can be universal, every meta-narrative must be deconstructed and denaturalized, to see beyond the “veil of language”⁶⁸. In Derrida’s words: “if totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because of the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field -that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization”⁶⁹.

Among poststructuralist authors, the one that is most appealing to the purpose of this research paper is Michel Foucault. French philosopher born in Poitiers in 1926, Foucault is among the most studied thinkers of poststructuralism, especially since he left his work incomplete due to his sudden death⁷⁰. So numerous are the authors that have lead researches based on his thinking that it is no wonder he is wildly known throughout different sciences.

⁶⁷ POSTER Mark, 1989, “Critical Theory and poststructuralism”, *Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press*, p. 54.

⁶⁸ Youtube, 2014, “Postructuralism” (Lecture by Professor Gerard Van Der Ree, University Utrecht), uploaded April 3rd, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IVSA2mETqM> (accessed on 06/06/2018). Min: 6:00-7:00.

⁶⁹ DERRIDA Jacques, 1978, “Writing and difference”, *Chicago: The University of Chicago Press*, p.289.

⁷⁰ HWO Wen-song, 1993, “Toward Understanding Post-structuralism and Curriculum”, *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, p.63.

One first and important clarification of the French philosopher is that poststructuralism is not precisely a theory, but more of an approach. In his view, it is more of an “ethos” or a philosophical way of life. Of course, it is undoubtedly a critical attitude to the great narratives that have consolidated our identity, it is about closely analyzing the assumptions and limits of what a normal life is supposed to be, in such a way that what appears to be natural is reconsidered⁷¹.

Foucault discusses discourse in his 1972 book, “The Archaeology of Knowledge and the discourse on language”, where he defines discourse as “*another way of attacking verbal performances, of dissociating their complexity, of isolating the terms that are entangled in its web, and of locating the various regularities they obey*”⁷². In his understanding, this is what eventually forms communities, because the individual can determine his own discontinuity⁷³. He identifies discourses as being composed of statements, and these are all subject to an empirical referential which will lead the subject to interpret a discourse in a specific way.

The dynamic that is created by power and relations are present within statements, which in turn constitute a set of discursive practices. Further in his other works, he continues to think about discourse and how they legitimize a certain perspective fixating new norms, concepts and theories⁷⁴. It is through the understanding of dominant discourses, and the realization that knowledge may be subjective of power, that one analyzes through poststructuralist eyes. Indeed, there is the common belief that knowledge (academic, scientific) is completely free from power dynamics, but Foucault points out that knowledge is dependent of the structure in which it was obtained, and therefore cannot be categorized as completely objective.

As he puts it in the conclusion to his book:

“... my aim was to show what the differences consisted of, how it was possible for men, within the same discursive practice, to speak of different objects, to have contrary opinions, and to make contradictory choices (...) in short, I wanted not to exclude the

⁷¹ BLEIKER Roland & CAMPBELL David, 2016, “Poststructuralism”, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 206.

⁷² FOUCAULT Michel, 1972, “The Archaeology of Knowledge and the discourse on language”, *New York: Pantheon Books*, p. 118.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

⁷⁴ HWO Wen-song, 1993, “Toward Understanding Post-structuralism and Curriculum”, *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, p. 79

*problem of the subject, but to define the positions and functions that the subject could occupy in the diversity of discourse (...) I reject a uniform model of temporalization, in order to describe, for each discursive practice, its rules of accumulation, exclusion, reactivation, its own forms of derivation, and its specific modes of connection over various successions.*⁷⁵”

To finalize this overview of Foucault’s philosophical thinking, there is one other book he published in 1979, by the title of *“Discipline and punishment: the birth of prison”*. In it, he interests himself on the treatment of those who deviate from society. He dedicates a whole section to what he calls *“panopticism”*, inspired by Bentham’s Panopticon, an architectural composition which served as the “perfect prison” and an *“intensifier of power”*⁷⁶. Although Bentham employs it as a “project of perfect disciplinary institution”, Foucault notices that its application can successfully spread to other sectors of society: *“one may ‘unlock’ the disciplines and get them to function in a diffused, multiple, polyvalent way throughout the whole social body. These disciplines, which the classical age had elaborated in specific, relatively enclosed spaces – barracks, schools, workshops...”*⁷⁷. In simpler words, he tried to establish that there is no such thing as free will in human beings, individuals have been shaped to comply with the norm up to the point where surveillance has become internalized; we have become “self-surveillant”, through what he calls a *“disciplinary power”*⁷⁸.

To conclude this part on poststructuralism, it would be interesting to point out that there is a strong inclination to analyze Popular Culture within the realm of this school of thought. It is possible to land on the international by arguing that collective imagination is constitutive of World Politics⁷⁹. Aside from this, it is essential for this approach to be applied to cultural practices that perpetuate “inside/outside” dualisms⁸⁰. This is precisely one of the aims of the research in this paper, so it seems that

⁷⁵ FOUCAULT Michel, 1972, *“The Archaeology of Knowledge and the discourse on language”*, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 200.

⁷⁶ FOUCAULT Michel, 1979, *“Discipline and punish: the birth of prison”*, New York: Vintage books, p. 207-208.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 209.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ Youtube, 2014, *“Poststructuralism”* (Lecture by Professor Gerard Van Der Ree, University Utrecht), uploaded April 3rd, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0IVSA2mETqM> (accessed on 06/06/2018). Min: 38:00-42:00.

⁸⁰ BLEIKER Roland & CAMPBELL David, 2016, *“Poststructuralism”*, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 208.

poststructuralism is a fit approach to apply to the analysis. For this reason, we will present a bit of history of the border, the crossings and the role of commercial cooperation between countries; this will give us a better idea of the potential power discourses that may hide behind the film's dialogues. Dialogues will be de-crypted with the help of the following approach.

2.3 The importance of discourse and language:

Before plunging into the theory provided by Grondin, perhaps we can further clarify the importance of linking this theory with the previous approach. Bleiker and Campbell establish that: "*Discourse refers to a specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made more possible*⁸¹". In other words, discourse constitutes reality in a way that it determines both the object and the subject. Within the previous explanation on poststructuralism this had been established, but now that the bond is clear, we can proceed to the approach that will help us analyze discourse, in this case through the dialogues in films. It is just important to keep in mind, that to understand discourse through poststructuralism, we cannot ignore the political structure within which it is pronounced.

Much like a lot of what was stated in the previous section, Grondin points out that discourse is dependent on the general structure and shared beliefs, and that the cultural approach is often based on the use of language and discourse⁸². This is of course subject to interpretation that recognizes the impossibility of cataloguing, calculating and specifying the real causes of such a speech, but rather identifying the political consequences of adopting a certain mode of representation⁸³.

The cultural approach to discourse is divided into the sociological (or sociopolitical) and the anthropologic; both of them considering culture creating meaning that gives both structure and agents a role. In other words, by interpreting culture through discourse, one can understand the power structures shaping identities, narratives, representations and so on. In his effort to study American Foreign Policy

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² GRONDIN David, 2012, "Le poids du discours et du langage", *Théories de la politique étrangère américaine*, p. 118.

⁸³ *Ibidem*

through discourse, he names three dimensions through which it can be analyzed: the ideal dimension, the semiotic dimension, and the material dimension. The last one is what will interest us as it points out the institutions (being the agents of production and diffusion of culture in the entertainment industry) and practices employed to represent culture, namely cinema⁸⁴.

When analyzing discourse in films, it is critical to understand that these are representations, and with time and repetition, these representations can be institutionalized. So, discourse in turn must also be repetitive to be considered, and signs and images, specially when recurrent, can be taken into analysis as a form of discourse⁸⁵. A project of analysis of discourse must contain an intellectual model (official speech, political debate, cultural representations or marginal political speeches), a number of “selves” to analyze (one ‘self’, or the comparison between ‘self’ and ‘other’), a temporal perspective (one specific moment in history, two different periods, or historical development) and a number of events⁸⁶.

According to Grondin, the way to analyze cultural representations depends on the consideration of different elements. First, images and stories can be considered different elements of discourse, these include powerful metaphors and myths⁸⁷. Myths are particularly important in the sense that they often contribute to the foundation of a community, or aid in the establishment of a particular identity. In this field, it appears that the “*myth of the border*” (as studied by Frederick Jackson Turner) is one of the cornerstones of American identity⁸⁸, for this reason it is constantly reproduced by the Hollywood film industry. According to Grondin’s interpretation of Ayse Ceyhan:

“The border myth is invoked in political and cultural discourses to justify that the function of controlling and securing the State has been affirmed, but also and above all, it has an impact on the definition of national identity, as it does on the relationship between nationality and citizenship... this is often in association with threat discourse, put into place to form a national identity by practices of inclusion and exclusion based

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 132.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

⁸⁸ JACKSON TURNER Frederick, 1893, “The significance of the Frontier in American History”, *Communication to the American Historical Association*.

*on the enemy to exclude (the Indian, the communist, the Chinese, the fundamentalist Muslim Terrorist, the Mexican illegal immigrant) and the protection of Self*⁸⁹⁹⁰”.

As we can appreciate from the above citation, the importance of myth will be essential to a study focused on the Border between the United States and Mexico. Accompanying the importance of these myths is that of the metaphor. All like myths, they serve to consolidate discourses, but they are rather used to establish connections without experience. Thus, during the analytical part of this research, it is relevant to be on the look-out for reproductions of founding myths and the elaboration of metaphors of these.

Continuing with this train of thought, there exists a metaphor known as the metaphor of the American Empire. According to Amy Kaplan, the American empire has long followed a double logic of edification of borders, by patrolling every movement at the borders themselves, and by disrupting these borders in to satisfy a relentless expansionist desire⁹¹. Throughout the analysis we will also adopt a metaphor of Mexico as the Lawless land, given that both of our hypotheses seek to affirm that the representations of both populations are rather negative than positive.

Chapter 3: A brief history of the border

Before jumping directly into the analytical section of this thesis, it is of the utmost importance to clarify the past and present of the border between the United States and Mexico. Since we are using poststructuralism as the approach of analysis, we must not forget that the historical, social and political context have a way of explaining the representations seen in cinema. With this purpose in mind, this section has been included to put into perspective all of the important elements that might be shown in the films, and that are a guide to understanding the political importance of the border today.

⁸⁹ Personally translated from French to English.

⁹⁰ GRONDIN David, 2012, “Le poids du discours et du langage”, *Théories de la politique étrangère américaine*, p.142.

⁹¹ KAPLAN Amy, 2002, “The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of US Culture”, *Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press*, p. 15

3.1 Border history and evolution

Historically, the border between the United States and Mexico has existed since the colonization of the American continent, fluctuant as it were. It was during the independence movements in the late 18th century and early 19th century that the limit of each country started to resemble the boundary we know today. In fact, during the mid-19th century, the Northern part of Mexico was yet transformed over the course of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848); from a buffer zone aimed to stop American invasion, to a disputed territory that would eventually be sold to the United States at the end of the War, as some sort of capitulation.⁹² Losing the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada (among other parcels of territory), the new borders of Mexican territory were established through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed in 1848, and the Gadsden Purchase that formalized the sale of these former Mexican territories⁹³. It is possible to appreciate the transformation of the borderline in Annexes 1 (before the conflict), 2 (shortly before the war but during the first altercations over territory) and 3 (after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe)⁹⁴.

Albeit, this border and its evolution can be traced more elaborately in the past, the spaces that compose this limit have been inhabited by different indigenous groups for over 10 000 years⁹⁵. These communities adapted to the boundaries imposed by the different governing powers (Spain, Great Britain, Mexico and the United States after the Independence movements). As it is possible to infer, the evolution of said border did not come without the necessary violence that border transformations often bring. Indeed, in the worlds of Alvarez, it resulted from an “*expansionist war that was only one in a long line of geographical reorganizations of power*”⁹⁶. The simple mention of war is enough to understand that the challenges that both countries face concerning their frontier are undoubtably within the realm of our studies. Granted, today there is no war per se, but there is for example, a coordinated effort of both governments to

⁹² Migrations in history, “United States- Mexico, Borderlands/Frontera”, 2018: <http://smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/bord/intro.html> (accessed on 05/05/2018).

⁹³ STAUDT Kathleen, 2014, “The border, performed in films: Produced in both Mexico and the US to “Bring out the worst in a country”, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No.4, pp. 466.

⁹⁴ See the section dedicated to Annexes

⁹⁵ ALVAREZ CJ, 2017, “The United States-Mexico Border”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, p. 2.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

stop illegal human and drug smuggling, and that is another reason why this is an IR issue, but we will get to that soon enough.

The century most characterized by animosity between the two countries was the nineteenth, right when both stopped being colonies. As was briefly mentioned in the introductory portion of this section, the declaration of Texas' independence would be a source of problems in 1935 (until its annexation to the United States in 1945).⁹⁷ This short-lived republic was formed by Americans who had come to live in Mexico, but then decided to separate themselves from the country using violent tactics, such as their Frontier Battalion the "Texas Rangers"⁹⁸. Short after this, the aforementioned Mexican-American war broke out and ended with the loss of Mexican territory, establishing the limits we know today⁹⁹. On an interesting and pertinent note, at this time, the concerns around the border were about immigration as they are today, although the immigrants were slaves trying to escape to Mexico (where slavery had been abolished early in the century), and Chinese citizens that sought to enter the United States through Mexico.

By the time the Mexican Revolution of 1910 flared up, the incorporated states of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had an effect on American demographics: there was a whole new generation of Mexican-Americans, descendants of the Mexicans who had not been considered American citizens after the adhesion and were treated poorly¹⁰⁰. The insurrection in the South had American authorities worried of a spillover effect which lead to the reinforcing of the border and a new target: Mexican immigrants¹⁰¹. In 1924, the Border Patrol we hear about today was established, and with it initiated a strategy of keeping people from entering the USA through its southern borders.

Finally, it is important to consider the impact of Nixon's War on drugs, declared at a moment of great concern for the drugs coming from Latin America, and

⁹⁷ See Annex 1 for a map of the boundary in 1935, shortly before Texan independence. Notice the shift in delimitation after the same territory is proclaimed an independent republic in Annex 2.

⁹⁸ History, "The Violent History of the US-Mexico Border (Becky Little), April 2018: <https://www.history.com/news/mexico-border-wall-military-facts> (accessed on 06/05/2018)

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰⁰ ALVAREZ CJ, 2017, "The United States-Mexico Border", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, p. 6.

¹⁰¹ History, "The Violent History of the US-Mexico Border (Becky Little), April 2018: <https://www.history.com/news/mexico-border-wall-military-facts> (accessed on 06/05/2018)

the context of the War on Terror. Both of these have had an impact on policies regarding the increase in security mechanisms at the border.

Thus, it is possible to observe that the past of the boundary between the two Northern countries was as violent as its present. Of course, with the signing of the NAFTA agreements in 1994, the border would also be seen as somewhat of an opportunity: the checkpoint of trade between the US and Mexico¹⁰². Nevertheless, this quick overview of the history of the border allows us to enter the analysis of popular culture with an informed mind, essential to the understanding of many of the problems of stereotyping and portrayal.

3.2 Border Crossings

Attempting to understand the issues around the border would be futile if we did not explain, in a detailed matter, border crossings. Indeed, as we have already established, illegal immigration is most probably the number one issue between the two countries, and although our study is not focused on border crossings per se, it will be an important factor to understand the perception each population has of the other.

The border separating American and Mexican territories stretches over 3145 kilometers from the Gulf of Mexico all the way out to the Pacific Ocean. Contrary to popular belief, the limit has some physical incarnations, through signs, fences and a partial wall¹⁰³. Aside from these, there are two major natural barriers in this region: the Sonora Desert and the Rio Grande river, which act as a major deterrent for illegal immigrants who cross the border by foot.

For a long time, border crossings have been among the most important issues that both the Mexican and American governments have had to deal with. In the section dedicated to the historical aspect of the border, it was shown that the United States has long been fixated with illegal immigration. Today, although the targets seem to have changed, immigration is still one of the biggest problems for the US administration, their VISA requirements are a strong proof of it¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰² This will be further discussed in section 2.4 of this chapter.

¹⁰³ National Geographic Society, "US-Mexico Border, fences and deaths", 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/tijuana-border-fence/> (accessed on 05/08/2018)

¹⁰⁴ For almost all non-European countries, especially developing and third world countries, the VISA requirements are very hard to gather. As a result, there is an alarmingly high rate of VISA refusals for

Mexican immigration towards the United States initiated in the times of Porfirio Diaz (who served as Mexico's president for over thirty years), when rural people found it oppressively difficult to find any economic opportunity¹⁰⁵. This coupled with the inauguration of new train stations in El Paso, Texas and the agricultural sector rapidly developing in the South of the US, motivated the poor Mexican peasants to go out and search of better living and working conditions¹⁰⁶. Impressive though it may seem, Mexican labor migration was an important element of the economic growth of the American territory; and for this reason, the government did not implement any regulations such as the ones they had put in place against the Chinese and the Japanese (The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Gentleman's Agreement of 1907 respectively)¹⁰⁷. All of this despite their past animosities regarding territory.

Although, this took a turn when the American economy started slowing down in what later would be known as the Great Depression. Of course, this led to a protectionist policy which ultimately resulted in repatriating the Mexican laborers, in order to give those jobs to the Americans suffering the financial crisis¹⁰⁸. Even though all this repatriation process went on with much more cordiality than the work done sending immigrants home today, this was the beginning of the immigration phenomenon we know today. It is not by coincidence that we can link the speeches of President Trump to this era without double thinking it. After all, his campaign slogan "*Make America Great Again*" and "*America First*", have been the cornerstone to his tenacious immigration policies.

After the Great Depression, in the times of the Second World War, a new program was put in place through the collaboration of both administrations. The Bracero program allowed Mexican laborers to migrate to the US and fill the positions left behind by the American soldiers. Yet, their contract was quite detailed and methodical, which would make this program be highly criticized and thought of as a

countries such as Cuba or Afghanistan, this is shown in Annex 5. Mexico is not within the list because every year the people who apply for VISA decrease, their best shot being to walk through the desert in order to get access to new opportunities.

¹⁰⁵ HERNANDEZ Kelly Lytle, 2009, "Mexican Immigration to the United States", *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 23, No. 4, p. 25

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*

system of “*colonial labor exploitation*”¹⁰⁹. The reasons behind the USA’s intentions are pretty clear; they needed workers to keep the factories running while their boys were busy fighting for the righteous cause, but as for the Mexican government; they simply wanted the knowledge, experience and technology that allowed their lucky neighbor to keep developing. The impact of this program on the life of these people was enormous, and it has left its print in history: it contributed to the hybridity that started after the Mexican-American War, the new sense of identity being created near and around the border.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite all the legal efforts to allow migratory flows for labor purposes, it was during this period, that a new record high was set for illegal immigration. According to Hernandez, “*between 1942 and 1964, more Mexican nationals were apprehended for unsanctioned entry into the United States than there were participants in the Bracero program*”¹¹¹. In fact, entering the US illegally was within reason considering several factors: the corruption that made paying bribery difficult for the participants of the program, the INS (Immigration Naturalization Service) would offer *bracero* contracts to those that had entered the country by unconventional means, and the Texan agribusinessmen who simply preferred undocumented workers¹¹².

Following this failure of the *bracero* program, *Operation Wetback* was put in place to identify and return all illegal immigrants. Their purpose was to massively return all immigrants to their places of origin, in the most shocking and aggressive way possible to dissuade others to follow the same path¹¹³. But to the luck of the American government, Mexico would begin one of its most economically fruitful phases, known as the “Mexican Miracle”. This period brought more opportunities within the Mexican territory, thus being an incentive for potential migrants to rather stay in the country¹¹⁴. Unfortunately, the lucky streak of Mexican finances would soon come to a halt, affected by the global recessions of the early 1970’s. Mexico’s less fortunate class suffered this shock severely, and as a consequence migration started flaring up again,

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 26

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 27

¹¹² *Ibidem*

¹¹³ *Ibidem*

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*

and for the same reasons as it had in the past. This would continue to be the situation for Mexican workers despite the short breather that Mexican oil could provide the economy with, yet, the economy would continue to stagnate until the early 1990's¹¹⁵. The last decade of the twentieth century proved to be difficult for several other central-American countries too. Citizens from these political unstable countries would escape into Mexico to cross it and attempt to make it into the United States¹¹⁶. This is stated only to understand that not only Mexicans seek to enter American territory, but this will not be the focus of this analysis.

With the signing of the NAFTA, there was a new migration flow, this time within the countries. Mexicans started moving up North in search for the opportunities that the agreement would bring (delocalizing companies and setting up manufacture near the border), the same happened with the southern United States¹¹⁷. As a matter of fact, one of the objectives of the trade agreement was to create job opportunities in Mexico to avoid implementing expensive repatriation programs back in the USA. One of the many lessons learned of the past, was that if immigration continued to flow up North , it was because of the poor economic situation of the southern neighbor.

Sadly, the goal that was pursued was not quite achieved. Wages in Mexico were very low, which was the only comparative advantage that Mexico could offer to join two developed countries in creating a trade zone. Eventually, the hard-working conditions of the *maquilas* were no longer sustainable, especially when compared to the salaries in the United States; border crossing was once again the only chance a lot of people had to be able to pay the bills. In 1998, Maciel and Herrera-Sobek stated in the opening of their book about culture across the border that: "*Mexican emigration to the United States is currently the most complex and difficult issue facing the two countries. (...) The controversy and debate on the issue of Mexican immigration include economic, political, social, legal, cultural and human right considerations*"¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 27

¹¹⁶ BHIMJI Fazila, 2009, "Contesting/negotiating power and domination on the US-Mexico Border", *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 108.

¹¹⁷ Environmental Protection Agency USA Government, "US-Mexico Border Program 2020", 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/border2020> (accessed on 09/08/2018)

¹¹⁸ MACIEL David R. & HERRERA-SOBEK María, 1998, "Culture across borders, Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture", The University of Arizona Press, p. 1.

Further aggravating this situation, another crucial moment in US foreign policy had an impact on the link with Mexico, and the rest of the world: September 11th, 2001. After the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the United States government was in an extremely delicate position, consequently declaring the War on Terror; President Bush implemented harsh safety measures, among which securitizing the border was a high priority. As Gallegos puts it: *“After September 11, efforts to secure the southern and northern US borders have been subjected to scrutiny... now also understood as a barrier against terrorists... The perceived value of increased paramilitary (and military) policing along the border increased (...) and the perceived threat by outsiders justified the policy choice”*¹¹⁹. In other words, in this period, American wariness of the intentions of external actors intensified, and with reason. To top this off, Felipe Calderon would soon declare his War on Drugs¹²⁰, which would further worsen the perception of the threat the United States could face south of the border.

Nowadays, the concern over border crossings is still very present. According to statistic on the US Customs and Border Protection’s webpage, 2018 shows that the *“overall numbers are up nearly 57 percent with the largest increase being Family Unit which increased 142 percent year over year”*¹²¹. This is alarming due to the effort of past administrations to put a halt on illegal immigration. It is no wonder that Donald Trump’s campaign promising to build a wall got so much attention.

There is probably one more thing to add concerning these border crossings, and it hails from a Mexican perspective: the challenges of crossing the border. After reading the whole history of Mexicans emigrating to the US in search of opportunities, one might think it was an easy task, but in fact it becomes a whole new dilemma for any Mexican wishing to do so. The journey required to leave Mexican territory and enter American soil illegally is a perilous one, filled with natural and human threats. Only last year, 412 immigrant deaths were recorded at the border, compared to 398

¹¹⁹ GALLEGOS G., 2004, “Border Matters: Redefining the National Interest in U.S.-Mexico Immigration and Trade Policy.” *California Law Review*, Vol.92, No.6, p. 1769.

¹²⁰ BENITEZ MANAUT Raúl, 2015, “México: la trampa diplomática entre Estados Unidos y América Latina: Soft Power sin Hard Power”, *Pensamiento Propio*, No. 42, p. 80.

¹²¹ US Customs and Border Protection, 2018, “Southwestern Border Migration FY2018”: <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration> (accessed on 09/08/2018)

the year before, despite the number of crossings having decreased¹²². As Bhimji puts it so well, immigrants have to face the realities of being smuggled in by Coyotes (human smugglers who charge a serious amount of money for leading people through the desert or the river), jump illegally on trains, hide from the Mexican and American border authorities (both on the ground and in the air)¹²³. In brief, these people have to choose between risking their lives for a slightly better paid job, or economic suffering. This is important to understand, especially when attempting to decrypt the representations of people in and around the border.

3.3 Border Identities

Having already considered the history and issue of immigration, the border still has one salient aspect: border identities. As it is possible to appreciate, the history of the current border is a rich one, full of transformation and conflict, and it is because of this reason that in the region we find a certain identity different to Mexican and American. Furthermore, contrary to what we just stated and what is more relevant to us, it is precisely because of the border that there is an American and Mexican identity as we know them today.

The literature dedicated to studying the hybridity of the populations living near the border is extensive. But because this will influence our research in very little, we shall give the briefest explanation of what it is and why it has become important. In Bhimji's understanding of Gloria Anzaldúa's opinion, she explains that her and performance artist Gomez-Pena "*have described the border in metaphorical terms where they discuss the notions of hybridity, border crossing, third country, ambiguous cultural/linguistic zones, etc.*"¹²⁴ The hybridity refers to the fact that people can no longer claim to have an American or Mexican identity, but more a combination of both, what Anzaldúa refers to as *Mestiza*. This is perfectly understandable knowing the history of that border: a Texan person certainly might find out that he has a Mexican great grandparent when tracing back his genealogic tree.

¹²² The Guardian , 2018, "US-Mexico border migrant deaths rose in 2017 even as crossings fell, UN says": <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/06/us-mexico-border-migrant-deaths-rose-2017> (accessed on 03/04/2018)

¹²³ BHIMJI Fazila, 2009, "Contesting/negotiating power and domination on the US-Mexico Border", *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 108-110.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*

Maciel and Herrera-Sobek notice this hybridity is due to the immigration that managed to preserve the culture that once belonged to Mexico, as a matter of fact, many artists were part of this emigration that kept alive the cultural and linguistic traditions all throughout the nineteen hundreds¹²⁵. Spanish is the second most spoken language in the United States, also due to the heavy Latino immigration. Yet in spite of their strong and “*enduring ethnic identity*”¹²⁶, they no longer identify with the citizens from their country of origin. This is why, these people and their culture are often known as the Chicano. Yes, they have Mexican roots, but they were born in the USA, and this makes them different.

Interestingly, Bhimji summarizes Pablo Vila’s opinion of this hybridization in a simple way: “*Vila describes the ways in which border people view their identities in relation to groups they come to define as ‘others’, often setting boundaries among Anglos, Mexicans and African Americans living on the border. (...) US-Mexico region as one that consisted of several borders where the border cannot be simply explained as a process of hybridization*”¹²⁷. Thus, there seems to be an argument that points to the importance of defining one’s identity in contradiction to that of someone else. And if we take a minute to remember what was discussed in the section dedicated to explaining our concepts, we find the importance of designating another in order to constitute an identity of our own.

During the Bush administration, there was a reinforcement of the national identity through exalting the threat of the ‘other’. This, although specifically aimed at Islamic terrorism, had negative effects on the perception of any foreign people. More specifically, to threats to “*US culture and institutions, in addition to perceived attacks on the US economy and American way of life*”¹²⁸. Naturally, this had an impact on Mexican immigrants as they were perceived as crossing the border to “steal jobs” (which would have a negative impact on the American way of life). Their institutions and culture would also be threatened because often, they do not speak the language, and the mere fact that they are there illegally is a proof of failing institutions. Thus,

¹²⁵ MACIEL David R. & HERRERA-SOBEK María, 1998, “Culture across borders, Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture”, *The University of Arizona Press*, p. 6.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 7

¹²⁷ BHIMJI Fazila, 2009, “Contesting/negotiating power and domination on the US-Mexico Border”, *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 108-110.

¹²⁸ GALLEGOS G., 2004, “Border Matters: Redefining the National Interest in U.S.-Mexico Immigration and Trade Policy.” *California Law Review*, Vol.92, No.6, p. 1769.

the southern border started to be perceived as a porous boundary from where terrorists could enter the country.

Concerning this ‘otherness’ that is crucial when defining identity, Gallegos exhibits her concept of ‘nativistic racism’ as a crucial part of the determination of American national identity and interest. She states that “*the conception of the national interest focuses on economic well-being but does not account for the impact on border communities*”¹²⁹. She states that Mexicans are viewed as foreigners and a potential threat to American identity, as was already established, but not if they are wealthy businessmen that will contribute to an increase in the economy¹³⁰. Thus, a wealthy Mexican can be easily accepted by the rest of society whereas a poor immigrant is the “other”, the element that does not belong within this community. This will be pertinent to our analysis further on.

Regarding identities within the Mexican territory, of course there is also the ‘otherness’ that plays in the definition of the culture south of the border. Much as the hybridization going on in the southern part of the US, Mexico also sees a similar phenomenon near its northern border.

3.4 The importance of NAFTA

For a paper aimed at understanding the cultural importance of the border, we sure have mentioned NAFTA a few times. That is mainly because it is one of the key factors to understanding what the contemporary issues regarding this region are today. It is thus essential to understand what it is about and how it has an impact on the region.

Signed in 1992, ratified and taking effect in 1994, the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement is a document of over 2000 pages that contains the results of 14 months of arduous negotiation. The principal incentive for creating this agreement was the elimination of barriers on trade and investment between Canada, the United States and Mexico, this follows the “most-favored nation” principle¹³¹.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1733.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 1741.

¹³¹ Historica Canada (Laura Macdonald), “North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)”, March 2017 : <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/north-american-free-trade-agreement-nafta/> (accessed 24/02/2018)

The objectives of the deal were listed in the first chapter and were the following: “a) eliminate barriers to trade in, and facilitate the cross-border movement of, goods and services between the territories of the Parties; b) promote conditions of fair competition in the free trade area; c) increase substantially investment opportunities in the territories of the Parties; d) provide adequate and effective protection and enforcement of intellectual property rights in each Party’s territory; e) create effective procedures for the implementation and application of this Agreement, for its joint administration and for the resolution of disputes; and f) establish a framework for further trilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation to expand and enhance the benefits of this Agreement.”¹³²

It was signed by former Presidents Bill Clinton (USA), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (Mexico) and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (Canada), all taking into consideration their national interest and how they could obtain the best results for each country¹³³. Given that our paper focuses mainly on the relationship between the US and Mexico, the interpretation of NAFTA’s role shall exclude the Canadian position.

The objectives pursued by both countries were different yet complementary. For the Mexican government, Salinas de Gortari had initiated a period of deep liberalization, and trade partnerships with wealthy foreign countries was the way to go. In other words, the Mexican objective was to be integrated in the globalized economy and thus upgrade their position on the international scene (from a developing country into a developed country). On the American side, after the end of the Cold War, they wished to further consolidate their power in the region, and what better way to do it than establishing one of the world’s largest free trade zones¹³⁴. Additionally, they would gain access to a significant market (as there was already a previous trade agreement with Canada). While one side offered cheap labor (Mexico), the other offered prestige and economic growth (USA).

Twenty-four years after, it is a source of polemics; today the debate has reached a critical point, to the extent that there are discussions of the possibility of a hiatus or a

¹³² *Ibidem*

¹³³ *Ibidem*

¹³⁴ CHAPMAN Antony, “North American Free Trade Agreement: Rationales and Issues”, Government of Canada Publications (Economics division), January 1993.

complete rupture of the agreement. Indeed, the controversial campaign lead by president Donald Trump has shed light on the unfairness of NAFTA, regarding the share of the United States in the agreement. Of course, the discussion around this possibility is often coupled with the dialogue on immigration, and how the treaty failed to control illegal border crossings. So, it interesting to wonder if the Treaty was really successful and if both countries profited from cooperation. Despite Trump's declarations of it being an unfair deal (and the people who concur with this idea), there are a lot of others who think that NAFTA was the great opportunity it was sold out to be.

By specializing in the production of their most competitive goods and eliminating tariffs from imports and exports within the trilateral relation, the three countries were supposed to raise their productions and therefore their Gross Domestic Product (or GDP). Indeed, exportations from both countries (from the United States to Mexico and vice-versa) rose significantly and have continued to do so since the passing of the agreement¹³⁵. And as this commercial cooperation between the two countries kept growing, so did the merchandise crossing the border, and new forms of border control were put into place to deter any undocumented crossing. Ironically, this did not work all that well, it just gave the impression of a more secure and orderly border¹³⁶. As a consequence, in the words of Peter Andreas: *"the apparent paradox of US-Mexico integration is that a barricaded border and a borderless economy are being simultaneously created"*¹³⁷. Hence, even if the economy showed growing numbers, the immigrational dimension of NAFTA was not really being covered.

Alvarez gives a very fitting and objective interpretation of the immediate results of NAFTA and how they affected the populations living near the border:

"As usual, the borderland was the membrane across which the majority of this commerce flowed, though more than ever before, the effects of NAFTA on labor, agribusiness, and manufacturing reverberated widely throughout US and Mexican

¹³⁵ Statista, 2018, "North American Free Trade Agreement: statistics and facts": <https://www.statista.com/topics/3464/north-american-free-trade-agreement/> (accessed on 09/07/2018)

¹³⁶ ANDREAS Peter, 1998, "The escalation of US immigration control in the post-NAFTA era", *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 113, No. 4, p. 593.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*

*territory, influencing agricultural growing patterns, dietary customs, and wages. All capitalist systems predictably and inevitably generate black markets that accompany, and in some ways, complement them. Both legitimate trade and contraband markets share the same transportation infrastructure and communications technology, and both tend to accumulate profits at the top of a corporate structure, whether multinational corporations like Wal-Mart or Coca-Cola or criminal syndicates that produce and distribute illicit psychoactive substance, such as Joaquín “el Chapo” Guzmán’s organization. The acceleration of Trade between the United States and Mexico helped create greater demand for casual labor, partially supplied by undocumented non-citizens who typically work in “formal” industries like service and construction even as free trade helped camouflage smuggled goods (...)*¹³⁸

In other words, with the opening of the border for commercial goods, it was also open to activities proper to the black market, unintentionally as it may have happened. In turn, this puts borderlands at risk because they have to share the region with groups of organized crime, and this is much the case for Mexican border towns which are heavily under control of cartels. But, these cartels existed long before NAFTA, it was just easier for them to counterfeit their product through the disguise of NAFTA tradable goods. Another interesting point Alvarez makes, is the disproportionate way in which both the Mexican and American economies grew. The outsourcing of manual labor to Mexico took away countless jobs from American breadwinners, and while this did in fact give Mexican families an opportunity to earn some money, the wages in *maquilas* were alarmingly low. Thus, the wealth came to a selected few.

Even if NAFTA did have some negative effects, not all was bad. As a matter of fact, Mexico is among the G20 group because of how its economy grew, even if not all poverty was eradicated, and immigration is still an issue. In his article for Council of Foreign Relations, the ex-Minister of Foreign Relations, Jorge Castaneda mentions how Mexico’s exportations grew exponentially, from around \$60 billion in 1994 to nearly \$400 billion in 2013. Mexico’s population suddenly had access to a whole new range of consumer goods, and Mexican firms could start businesses abroad. The middle class we see in Mexico today is a result of this deal, and the important and solid

¹³⁸ ALVAREZ CJ, 2017, “The United States-Mexico Border”, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, p. 8-9.

American economy may owe some of its merit to it too¹³⁹. In fact, US commercial giants such as Coca-Cola and Walmart receive a good portion of their revenues from Mexican consumers. Unfortunately, despite all the positive effects this deal may have brought, it did not seem to address the important issues back then, which still are of relevance today.

NAFTA seems to have inspired President Trump during his campaign too. Of course, there is the immigration issue that the deal was supposed to address and solve, but there is also one more argument that can be exploited: the loss of American jobs. It is important to understand that these jobs are, in their majority, posts where no important qualification is needed. The United States was a developed country where education was reaching a historical high, it was only logic that the job market evolved in tune with society. But hundreds of thousands of workers were laid off of manufacturing plants (specially in the automobile industry), and paradoxically automobile exports continued to increase¹⁴⁰. But this left a certain trauma in the mind of the population: that they had been deprived over their livelihood, and that their jobs had gone to those “down south”. This mentality was the vein that Trump’s campaign tapped into, eventually winning the 2016 elections. Evidently, we see that there is a major role played by NAFTA in the way the American population perceives the Mexican, and vice-versa.

Chapter 4: Analysis of the films based on the theoretical framework

The history of the relationship between the United States and Mexico has been a long and complex one, where the border seems to bare all the scars of their battles and their desire to cooperate with each other. Cinema, both Mexican and American, has attempted to document the perceptions of this relationship, the different identities and the border. It is rare to find any contemporary cultural production that doesn’t at least reference the other, this is because their history and present are so intertwined. The following analysis will try to interpret the representations of each side through the scope of poststructuralism.

¹³⁹ CASTANEDA Jorge G., 2014, “NAFTA’s Mixed Record: The View from Mexico”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 1, p. 135.

¹⁴⁰ GREEN Russel & PAYAN Tony, 2017, “Was NAFTA good for the United States?” *International Economics (Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy)*, p. 17.

The importance of portrayal in this particular subject was noted by authors like Andrew Wood: *“For two hundred years, Mexico and the United States have viewed each other with suspicion. Following the Mexican War, gringos were generally thought to be aggressive, land-hungry agents of imperialism. On the other side, many in the United States acted on the belief that Mexicans were mustachioed machos if not bandido- a people in other words, not to be trusted. Accordingly, media forces- initially newspapers and now cinema- have generally only added to the bad blood between the two countries through continued stereotypic portrayals and skewed ideological constructs”*¹⁴¹.

This idea proves the relevance of perception and stereotypes as a way of feeding a population’s imaginary. Cinema contributes to the sowing of the imaginary and the fact that these elements were perpetuated by it is a matter of importance in politics. To what concerns the analysis of film, in the SAGE Handbook of Film Studies, the authors acknowledge the relevance of poststructuralism in this field. The authors state that the important concepts to consider for this kind of analysis are those of: *“imaginary/symbolic/real, phallocentrism, identification, the gaze, masochism, the mirror stage and scopophilia as well as discourse, intertextuality, deconstruction, pleasure, subjectivity, patriarchy and the centrality of power relations”*¹⁴².

Thus, it is pertinent to study how the discourse of cinema today is representing the identities of both Americans and Mexicans, how it conveys metaphors such as that of the American Empire and a Mexican Lawless land.

4.1 Discourse perpetuating identity: the role of stereotypes

Michel Foucault focused on tracing the genealogy of the ‘self’ and how it constituted itself as a subject, thus the relationship between identity and subjectivity is highly important. As a reminder, we have stated beforehand that the construction of the self, or the process of creating one’s identity passes by the ‘othering’ of a community. In the case between Mexico and the United States, given the history they share, their identities have seen such a transformation that in the regions of the border

¹⁴¹ WOOD Andrew G, 2001, "How Would You like an El Camino? U.S. Perceptions of Mexico in Two Recent Hollywood Films." *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol.43, No. 4, p.755.

¹⁴² DONALD James & RENOV Michael, 2008, *“The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies”*, SAGE Publications Ltd., p. 43.

there is a sort of hybridization, and their identities have somewhat merged. Hence, it is no surprise that both industries of cinema have tried to portray their own identity in comparison to the perceived identity they have of the 'other'. In this part, stereotypes of the 'other' will be of high importance, since they are quite abundant in the films that were selected.

Perceptions of American identity

In the film *A day without a Mexican*, Sergio Arau attempts a representation of the worth of Mexican labor in the United States. In his movie, the two identities are confronted to one another, but there is a very Mexican perspective of the American, especially by using stereotypes. Americans are represented as ungrateful, self-centered, greedy, careless, borderline ignorant people. The way the senator of California talks about immigrants stating that “*they are illegal Mexicans from Guatemala and Honduras*”¹⁴³, points to a perception of Americans as condescending and ignorant, because clearly, central-Americans are not the same thing as Mexicans. This idea is again shown while, during a manifestation in the 49th minute, there is a sign that contains the phrase: “*America is a continent stupid*”¹⁴⁴, which is also proof of the perceived self-centeredness of the nation whose citizens are referred to as “Americans”. The whole film is based upon the somewhat magical disappearance of the Hispanic population of California, leaving jobs unattended and families shockingly shattered. The plot in itself is a way of shedding light on the how Americans do not recognize that Mexican labor is vital to the economy, especially in states such as California. It is not until they have disappeared, and the State cannot function as it normally does, that they start to acknowledge how much more grateful they should be toward the work of immigrants.

Poststructuralism would argue that no representation is built out of free will; which would translate into Arau not representing American society in such a manner if it were not because of the weight of history and politics. When taking into account these two, it is possible to understand why this representation is not objective, and how it was constructed. With the precedent of the American-Mexican war, there is a

¹⁴³ Arau Sergio (2004), *A day without a Mexican*, min: 20

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem , min: 49.

generalized feeling among Mexicans, that their land was stolen¹⁴⁵. This social discourse can partially explain the ill faith of American representation in Mexican productions. Regarding the dialogue about the Mexicans coming from Guatemala or Honduras, it signals to a political discourse that has changed the subjectivity of Americans, in so that the problem is not their nationality, it is that they are illegal immigrants, and all of them are the same. Hence, we can understand the impact of the winner/loser dynamic, in which the winner (in this case the rich country where desperate immigrants wish to arrive) has the power to shape the discourse into generalizing tens of nationalities into one category: immigrant.

In practically every film, at one point in the motion picture there is the use of the word *gringo*. According to the poststructuralist approach by Weiss, this term is often used to clearly distinguished the American as the ‘other’ that the Mexican identity builds itself against¹⁴⁶. In her opinion, this term was coined as a result of the hegemonic dynamic that characterized the relationship between the two Northern countries. In her own words: *“At first the fieldworker, labelled “gringo” is an inept, at times ungrammatical, representative of one of the richest countries in the world, a country that has periodically demonstrated more military might (...) than they, or their governments, could ever dream of. (...) Suspensions about our political motives, or worse, our political alliances, prompt some resistance and some confrontations (...) Their perceptions and shared descriptions of us encoded more complex issues*¹⁴⁷”

Her interpretation is so accurate that we would barely have to analyze it further. Perhaps it is interesting to add how the use of this word and other expressions have perpetuated the negative perception of the identity of the other. Indeed, when we contextualize the wording within the film, it is always in situations of anger or mockery that Mexicans use it to refer to US citizens. An example of this is in Gonzalez Inarritu’s film, *Babel*. This film puts some effort into representing the complexity of human communication, hence the biblical reference as a title. In it, we find four stories which wind up being linked through the most impressive form “domino effect” in cinema. One of these stories talks about an illegal Mexican immigrant who works as a

¹⁴⁵ Forbes, 2017, “Mexicans didn’t immigrate to America—We’ve always been here (Pedro Garza)”: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/04/11/mexicans-didnt-immigrate-to-america-weve-always-been-here/#4d57058b245d>, accessed on 04/08/2018.

¹⁴⁶ WEISS Wendy A., 1993, “Gringo...Gringita”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 190.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 190-191.

housekeeper for an American family. Due to extenuating circumstances, she finds herself passing through the border with the kids she takes care of, driven by her Mexican nephew. When the border agent demands they pull over for further inspection the nephew runs away, all while screaming “*Pinches gringos!*”¹⁴⁸ (Damned gringos¹⁴⁹). This expression is also found in the other films during other types of situations.

In Lee Jones’ film, the use of the word *Gringo* witnesses the process of ‘othering’ that words can be used for. In the scene where Pete (Tommy Lee Jones) encounters a group of immigrants attempting to cross the border under the guidance of Coyote (smuggler), they use the word repeatedly to show how different they are from them. This takes a classist turn when one of the Mexicans in the groups says upon finding the dying body of the border agent: “*Se ve muy jodido para ser gringo*” (He looks too screwed up to be American). This implies that Americans are perceived by Mexicans to be all of a better status¹⁵⁰. This is mentioned in Weiss’ research on the hidden meanings of the word. This can also be traced back to a political context where in international economical hierarchy, the United States are among the strongest. Aside from this, the NAFTA agreements that enabled more mobility (of capital and of people) allowed Americans to migrate to Mexico and occupy high-paying positions, which inevitably contributes to a discourse in which power generates a rich/poor dynamic. Thus, the Gringo is also a referral to an identity that is wealthier.

In the same line of thought, in *Babel*, while Amelia (the Housekeeper) looks desperately for someone who can keep an eye on the kids, she tells a friend that she can say the kids are her nephews, so her boss would not have a problem with it. To this she answers: “*Como son iguales a mi, con este ‘look’ de gringa que tengo*” (Yeah, they are so like me and my gringa look¹⁵¹). This shows the importance that physical traits can have in the process of constructing (or de-constructing) identity. The fact is, there is some stereotypical idea that Americans are all blond, blue-eyed and white. The kids are portrayed by blond, white, blue-eyed actors. This is also based on a dominant discourse that Americans are the descendants of English immigrants, of Europeans in

¹⁴⁸ Gonzalez Inarritu Alejandro (2006), *Babel*, min : 88.

¹⁴⁹ Personally translated.

¹⁵⁰ WEISS Wendy A., 1993, “Gringo...Gringita”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4, p. 190.

¹⁵¹ Personally translated from Spanish to English.

general, and they are white. But with all the immigrational flows throughout history, it would seem that this perception is based on this historical discourse and not the facts.

In Cuarón's depiction of the border and crossing it, he represents the American based on recent discourses of intolerance towards migrants. The film tells the story of a group of migrants that are hunted down while crossing the border by an unstable man who hunts migrants as a way of defending his country. As he shoots the migrants he states: "*Welcome to the land of the free, this is my home*". Obviously, there is much contained in that phrase. First and foremost it is possible to find that the discourse on immigration has affected the mentalities of Americans into believing that the life of an immigrant is not equal to the life of an American citizen, that they constitute a threat even, hence the effortless killing spree that he has taken upon himself, with a sense of defending his country. Aside from this, we once again have the mentioning of freedom, while he holds a rifle. It could be a subtle hint toward the freedom to acquire guns, the freedom to do with it what they want. It is a phrase full of irony, the freedom migrants were pursuing, the security (as some of them are fleeing the instability of their own country), was never met. The impact of political discourse in this representation is all over.

Perceptions of Mexican identity:

Regarding the perceptions of Mexican identity, it is vital to point out something that seems to be recurring in border films. Often, this identity is confused with that of the illegal immigrant. That being said, since we are focusing on Mexican identity in the US-Mexico relationship, they are often the same. For this reason, when we talk about the Mexican identity we will mainly be referring to Americans perception of immigrants.

In at least half of the selected films, the term *wetback* is employed by Americans to define a Mexican who they believe is an immigrant, but do not know this for sure (as they have had no particular conversation with these people, yet the term is employed). In *A day without a Mexican*, Sergio Arau plays with the term by giving Eduardo Palomo's character's band the name "*Perros Mojados*". *Mojado* is the term that is used in Mexico to talk about those who cross the border illegally, it is a translation of *wetback*. This has a historical connotation as we can presume from the information on the border crossings the we provided in Chapter 2. This term is a

reference to the Rio Grande river that some immigrants must cross in order to get into the United States, which as a consequence, and like any river, leaves them dripping wet¹⁵². Regarding the importance of political discourse, this term gained a pejorative connotation because of the anti-immigration policy that implied *Operation Wetback*,¹⁵³ the people who crossed the border were the new targets of America's border patrols, merging the image of immigrants with a serious threat to national security. In the *Three Burials of Melquiádes Estrada*, the employment of the term is used to justify why Melquiádes' assassination is of no importance: "*I suggest you find what the little fucker was involved in. He was a wetback*"¹⁵⁴. Much critical as the film is (because it does portray the immigration issue in a refreshing way), there is an acceptance of the impact of political discourse on the thinking of people around the border.

In the same film, filled with all of the carefully hidden criticism, there are some representations of the way some Americans perceive Mexicans. While Pete is suffering the loss of his friend and asking questions, one of the police officers offers his condolences: "*Sorry about Mel, he was a good Mexican*"¹⁵⁵. This phrase has a heavy underlying supposition that in general Mexicans are not good people. It is as if he was the exception to a rule, otherwise the officer would probably have chosen to use 'person' instead of 'Mexican'. It is no doubt that in this case the political discourse of the War on drugs has had an effect as well. Mass media has done a good job showing the images of what Felipe Calderon's War on Drugs has resulted in: indiscriminate violence lead by the drug cartels. This coupled with warnings by the US government of Mexico being a dangerous place has undoubtedly had an impact on how some Americans (who are heavily exposed to these kind of discourses) see their southern neighbors. This idea could even explain why in the movie, the border patrol officer accidentally kills Mel; as if the discourse of how violent migrants are had rendered him paranoid. It's the "*Shoot first, ask questions later*" that is often heard throughout American popular culture.

¹⁵² Personal knowledge of my experience as a Mexican, this term comes up in numerous conversations. I have personally known people who have crossed the border and it is common for them to say "*Me fui de mojado* (I crossed as a wetback)", as a way of saying they did not have all the legal papers.

¹⁵³ Previously explained in p. 51 of this thesis.

¹⁵⁴ Lee Jones Tommy, *The Three Burials of Melquiádes Estrada* (2005), Min: 27.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, min: 12

Babel reinforces the idea of how immigrants are perceived as a dangerous force to be reckoned with. During the 31st minute of the film, when Amelia is crossing the border with the kids, we are shown a wanted sign like the one shown in Annex 6. Much like the typical “Wanted” signs of the Old Westerns, this one is surprising due to the familial dimension of the picture. The political and social discourse has made it seem that even the little ones can be a potential threat to national security. While watching this image, it is inevitable to make links with the recent scandal the Trump administration faced regarding the states of immigration children.

In *The Mexican Dream*, we have a refreshing portrayal of Mexican identity through an immigrant who crosses the border in order to achieve his dream of becoming a famous actor. Through the main character, the director portrays the importance of family and superstition in Mexicans, especially those migrating into the United States. The character is always thinking about his family and calling them, the calls are full of sentiment and nostalgia. It is possible to find this idea in other films like *The Three Burials of Melquiádes Estrada*, *Babel* and *Desierto*. Aside from this, it appears that superstition is an element often represented in Mexican identity. In this film it has to do with the ghost story of “La Llorona”. It is about a woman who died and now wanders the world in sorrow. Once the character is attempting to cross the border, which he does in a woman’s costume (thinking that they will be easier on him if the police catches him), the border patrol crosses his path. He just walks and thanks them and continues his path, the Agent of seemingly Hispanic origins states that it is La Llorona, to what his partner is a bit incredulous at first. Finally, they just stand there and see him walk away. These two portrayals of Mexican identity come from a more historical and cultural discourse. As a culture who celebrates death, superstition is the “norm”, or in any case not unnatural, and the importance of family is one major component of the social discourse.

Breaking stereotypes: representation of their own identity:

Inevitably, when representing identities, it is difficult that there be no representation of one’s own identity, and in this case, films seem to attempt to break some existing stereotypes of their culture.

One clear example is shown in Sergio Arau’s movie. Contrary to the belief that the American political discourse has about immigrants entering the US to steal jobs

and dedicate their time to criminal activity, there is a representation of how they contribute immensely to the American economy. Historically speaking, we have already shown that Mexican migrants were, during a certain period, allowed to come and fill the positions by the soldiers who had gone to war. They had a utility to the American economy and were therefore important. Today, they continue to be so, but they go unnoticed. The whole message of this movie is how their work is “invisible”, important but taken for granted. There is one scene, towards the end of the film, where one of the main characters, Lila, asks “*How do you make the invisible visible?*”. The whole movie in itself is a statement of how immigrants do not need to disappear because by the books, they simply aren’t there. It breaks stereotypes in the sense that it elucidates how important these illegal workers are, despite their status of a pariah, which is in itself the generalized idea of the group.

Contrary to the image of Americans that was portrayed by Sergio Arau, the film of Tommy Lee Jones depicts the complexity of the myriad of characters within the American identity. We find the merciless patrol officer, the unfaithful wife, the loyal cowboy, the repented border patrol officer. Of course, the star of this film represents an important form of the national identity: the loyal and honest cowboy. As Staudt points out in her study of Hollywood westerns, the Cowboy was a brave and fearless man that embodied American identity. In some way, Tommy Lee Jones portrays this man, who just as cowboys in old Westerns, is not afraid to go above the law for a righteous cause. Where the stereotype is broke is regarding the relationship he had with Melquíades, the immigrant from Coahuila. Pete is terribly sad of his friend’s death and honors his promise to take him back home. As much as cowboys were proud of their origins, Lee Jones’ character has no problem in speaking Spanish and even referring to other Americans as “*gringo*”¹⁵⁶.

Sicario, although very representative of Mexico’s criminality, is a more nuanced film than the average spectator might think. As a matter of fact, it breaks with the Hollywood stereotype of an American hero that is “all good and nothing evil”. This tendency to nuance characters a bit more is not a new thing in the American film industry, quite to the contrary, this may stem from the trend set by films such as *Star Wars*. In Villeneuve’s film, the major role goes to moral ambiguity: doing bad things

¹⁵⁶ Lee Jones Tommy, *The Three Burials of Melquíades Estrada* (2005), Min: 49.

for a good cause. This is interesting because it actually questions the eternal discourse of what is good and what is bad, who is the villain and who is the hero. This idea resonates in *Tommy Lee Jones'* film as well, where the one who murdered Melquiádes is not actually the evil man Pete thought he was, and Pete, the good quiet Cowboy, shows some violence as well. Everything is becoming more nuanced in film.

4.2 The Metaphor of the American Empire

In political discourse, studying metaphors is important because they constitute a powerful method of communicating abstract ideas, issues that are not easily understood or “consumed” by the public, in other words they make the language more comprehensible and prepare the public for persuasion and action¹⁵⁷. So, when studying discourse from a poststructuralist standpoint, it is interesting to localize these metaphors and interpret them within the frame of structural power, that is, acknowledging the great meta-narratives that may have shaped the metaphor.

As we discussed in the section dedicated to explaining the theories that will support this analysis, the Metaphor most often used for America is that of an Empire, in films, both Mexican and American, we find this metaphor represented through the dialogues, the images that are shown, and the situations the characters are in.

The film that probably sends the most insinuations of the similarity of the United States to an Empire is *A day without a Mexican*. This is only logical as it criticizes the treatment of migrants, their invisibility to a system that much needs them. At the beginning of the film, the border is captured by the camera, and a protest is being held against the crossing of immigrants, claiming that they are simply using their freedom of speech. If we can interpret history, it would be possible to perceive that Empires always grew by thinking they had a purpose: bringing civilization, expanding knowledge, etc. It would seem that in this case, the insistence of freedom of speech is an indicator of an important cornerstone of American identity: freedom. Throughout the film we are able to appreciate how this is not necessarily a universal value applying to all, but more of a double standard to apply when it is best suited.

¹⁵⁷ WILLIAMS Debbie J. & PRINCE Kalyn L., 2018, “The monstrous discourse in the Donald Trump campaign, implications for national discourse”, *London: Lexington books*, p. 7.

A little further in the movie one particular song of the soundtrack catches the attention of the audience, especially because it is re-played towards the ending of the movie. It is the song “*Frijolero* (beaner)” of the Mexican band *Molotov*. The song melodically narrates, from a highly critical standpoint, the issues of the Mexican-American relationship with much reference to the border and border crossing. What is important here, and the precise moment where the song blasts is when the words “*Just to let you know that where your feet are planted would be Mexico*”, are pronounced by the musician. This is a direct reference to the history of the border and the states that Mexico sold through the Gadsden purchase. Here the metaphor of the Empire is clear in the sense that even after the declaration of independence, the United States continued to acquire land, to expand such as the ancient Empires had done before. In the Mexican way of seeing things, and this part of the song proves it, this land was stolen rather than bought, and this has contributed to the animosity of the relationship. Again, the historical discourse has had an impact on the representations of this film, once again in a winner/loser dynamic.

Right after the first half hour of Arau’s film, there is a scene where the US military gets involved in the case of the immigrants’ mysterious disappearance. In this part, we witness the power of the military and the officer talks of top-secret experiments that had been done in Area 51 with a special bomb that could kill an entire culture selectively. Of course, this borders on the ridiculous and it is with great sarcasm that it is portrayed in the film, but it does point out to the reality that the American military is on of enormous power, and this too, is very characteristic of any great Empire.

Based on Kaplan’s explanation of this metaphor, all the other films support this idea by the fact that they all show a heavy-guarded border. There is not one single film in which there is not at least one image of the border (often of the fence and the wall that have already been there for decades¹⁵⁸). And out of the six films, five of them put into context the job of the border patrol agents and how aggressive they can be in order to get their job done. In fact, the dialogues of the films often contain the word ‘*migra*’ in them (which is the Mexican slang word for the border patrol). In its respective

¹⁵⁸ Contrary to what one might believe based on current political discourses, there is already a sort of wall that separates part of the territories. There are also some fences. That being clarified, there is a continuous wall throughout the whole border.

contexts it is frequently used as a menace (an American threatening to call the immigrational authorities) or as a sign of fear (the Mexican that does not want to cross the *migra's* path). The term is a proof of how important the role of these officers is, how much power they have, a power that has been bestowed on them by the historical and political discourse.

In *Sicario*, there is a moment where the audience understands the power of American institutions. The operation lead by the special forces suddenly seems threatened while they are crossing the border, needless to say it becomes a blood bath. After this, the American side states that this event won't even see the papers, this is to say they have complete control over it. To clarify, if any event like that were to happen (where 5 guys and a cop end up dead), it would immediately have reporters crawling all over. This witnesses the power of the American government, specially to decide what is right, what is wrong, what is published and what is kept a secret. This bases itself of the American political discourse of bringing peace and stability to the world.

4.3. The Metaphor of a Mexican Lawless Land

Much like the case of the representation of the United States through the Empire metaphor, it seems that in a vast quantity of Popular Culture productions, Mexico has also a metaphor that repeats itself: the lawless land. By this it is to be understood that often in American movies, among other forms of popular culture, there is the idea that Mexico is a place full of criminals and where criminals of the US often escape to. Of course, this is also based on the fact that it is a country facing major issues with drug cartels and corruption, but it is also a generalization that contributes to the imaginary of the American (and other) population.

While analyzing the films, contrary to our initial belief, it was noticed that not much of the films elaborate on this lawlessness. It is particularly interesting because in other films and other forms of popular culture, it is not unusual to refer to Mexico as the place of chaos and criminality. If someone commits a crime in a drama they usually think of escaping to Mexico. Nonetheless, border films appear to have evolved into a more nuanced way of representing realities.

Nevertheless, there are still some light suggestions of this metaphor in the films that were studied, but the majority of them in *Sicario*. This film is practically a

description of how dangerous Mexico has become because of the ongoing Drug War between cartels. The film begins with the explosion of a house owned by Mexican criminals in Arizona, the house full of dead human bodies hidden within the walls. This explosion on US soil is said to have been perpetrated by Mexican cartels. At first, the police directly assumes it may be illegal immigrants but after they learn that the person responsible is a man by the name of Manuel Diaz. The political discourse of this war enables such suppositions to be legitimate, because there is after all an important problem of violence in Mexico. These immediate conclusions point to a perception of Mexico as a country that practically harbors criminals.

After twenty minutes, there is a first differentiation between the Mexican way of doing things and the American. Alejandro, the Mexican agent counseling the special forces tells agent Maser that nothing will make sense to her “American ears”. He is referring to the immoral actions that must be taken in order to stop the vicious cartels and their violent rule. The fact that he points out the nationality of his colleague seems to indicate that in Mexico this is not so. Again, identity comes and plays a central role of differentiation. The discourse of political instability and physical violence is accompanied by the political discourse that in the United States everything is done by the book.

Three minutes after this scene, they arrive in Ciudad Juarez, a border city, and one of the cities with the highest criminality rates in the world. Upon their arrival, the agent introduces it as “The Beast”, they pass three dead and mutilated corpses hanging from a bridge, a bunch of “Missing” girl signs all accompanied by a symphony of gunshots in broad daylight. Within three minutes, Mexico was indeed portrayed as a land where there is no use for law. Adding to this, the enforcers of Mexican law are portrayed by this film as corrupt and colluded with the Cartels. This is not a senseless representation as it so happens to be that Mexico is indeed struggling with impressive corruption issues. The agent spices the scenery up by telling an anecdote of President Taft’s visit to President Díaz: he was escorted by 4000 troops¹⁵⁹. This illustration is a proof that this discourse of the violent nature of Mexico has been around for almost a century, at the least.

¹⁵⁹ VILLENEUVE Denis, *Sicario* (2015), min: 25.

Finally, Denis Villeneuve's film sheds light on a recent problem of the border: the subterranean tunnels used to carry drugs from Mexico to the US. The mentioning of this problem points out the relentlessness of Cartels despite the conjoint effort of both Mexican and American authorities to put an end to it. The fact that the police officer is the one helping to send the drug through would suggest that it is the Mexican side that is not doing their job, and Americans continue risking their lives to catch the heads of the Cartels. The mediatic discourse that exists today often conveys these messages, which could explain this representation of things. Since the times of Pablo Escobar, and even the capture of Joaquín El Chapo Guzmán, the United States has played a role in the War on Drugs namely through the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration).

Conclusion:

The border between Mexico and the United States is a complicated region, and given the history between these two countries, it is no surprise that it is a fountain of reference for the film industries of both countries.

Throughout this research we have attempted to understand how the representations of the 'other' are portrayed through the scope of the border, or in other words how both communities imagine the other, it is as if the border were a lens through which these perceive each other. This may be the reason why this region has always caught the eye of filmmakers and has been the scenario of films since the very beginning.

The portrayals of Mexican and American identity in cinema are evolving. The current motion pictures differ strongly from the old Westerns or the films from Mexico's cinematic golden age. Although we were able to find a vast number of stereotypes, the movies that were analyzed proved to be extremely nuanced. This is undoubtedly a result of the hybridization process that was discussed in Chapter 3. All of the films had dialogues both in English and in Spanish. This is an interesting feature as one important element defining identity is often language, there was often characters that were bilingual, Spanish words used while speaking English, and English words

while speaking Spanish. The portrayal of this hybrid culture is much more present than ever before.

For this reason, our hypotheses must be rejected. As a matter of fact, there was no sufficient negative representation in films to be able to affirm that both film industries portray each other in a negative way. Even though there are some stereotypes in each film, as we have mentioned the majority of them offers a critical perspective of the issue at hand.

Both Tommy Lee Jones and Denis Villeneuve's work have a poststructuralist approach of their own, in the sense that critical moments of their film defy ongoing discourses, and most of all, they defy determinism. Both of them show the ambiguity of reality: what seems bad or evil to some, seems necessary or even normal to others. There is no strong accentuation of the difference in their identity, both of the main characters are bilingual and switch easily from one to another.

Desierto, *Babel*, and *The Mexican Dream* all denounce the conditions Mexicans have to endure to cross the border, thus humanizing and contesting the political discourse that portrays undocumented immigrants as criminals seeking to continue their activities in the US. *Desierto* highlights the issues that conduce to the decision of crossing the border, and the perilous journey that immigrants must endure; exposed to heat, dangerous animals, the border patrol, the trat of human and drug smugglers.

It would appear that Wood's final words in his article proved to be right: the portrayals of each other are changing, into a more accepting tone. Films have gotten more critical overtime. This may also have to do with the hybridization of cultures, conducing to the need to reconcile both of them, to understand each other's identity with more objective eyes. This idea comes from the fact that all these films were often made through collaboration, or by someone who was a Mexican living in Los Angeles, or an American with Mexican roots. For example, Tommy Lee Jones' script was actually written by Guillermo Arriaga, who is Mexican. The director of *The Mexican Dream* is of Mexican origin.

As Campbell and Bleiker put in their research: "*a post-structural approach works with a logic of interpretation that acknowledges the improbability of*

cataloguing, calculating, and specifying the ‘real causes’, and concerns itself instead with considering the manifest political consequences of adopting one mode of representation over another”¹⁶⁰. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that the new representations of the ‘other’ will have an impact on the populations imaginary. This is relevant to World Politics for the reasons we have stated in the first chapter, namely because it is in popular culture that power, identity and ideology are shaped.

It would be interesting to contemplate an exploration of the films impact on the populations imaginary, how the current films are potentially shaping new perceptions of each population.

Annexes:

Annex 1,2 & 3:



¹⁶⁰ BLEIKER Roland & CAMPBELL David, 2016, “Poststructuralism”, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 212.

¹⁶¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, “How the Border between Mexico and the United States was established (Jeff Wallenfelt)”, 2018: <https://www.britannica.com/story/how-the-border-between-the-united-states-and-mexico-was-established> (accessed on 04/16/2018)



162



163

¹⁶² *Ibidem*

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*

Annex 4:



164

Annex 5:

The Top Countries For U.S. Visa Refusals

Visa refusal rate for U.S. visas by country in fiscal year 2016 (in %)*



* Rates are for B visas (tourist and business visitors)
Source: U.S. Department Of State

Forbes statista 165

¹⁶⁴ Environmental Protection Agency USA Government, "US-Mexico Border Program 2020", 2018, <https://www.epa.gov/border2020> (accessed on 09/08/2018)

¹⁶⁵ Forbes, "The countries with the highest refusal rates for US Visa (Niall McCarthy)", 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2017/03/24/the-countries-with-the-highest-refusal-rates-for-u-s-visas-infographic/#37d6bffc13d1> (accessed on 04/06/2018)

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¹⁶⁶ Gonzalez Inarritu Alejandro (2006), Babel, min :31.

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Résumé:

This research focuses on the portrayal of Mexican and American identities in regard to the border, through cinema. It adopts a poststructuralist approach in the analysis of six films: *Desierto*, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *A Day Without a Mexican*, *Sicario*, *The Mexican Dream* and *Babel*. Throughout the study, the importance of popular culture reproductions for the domain of International Relations is highlighted. It focuses on immigration in the post-9/11 period and tries to understand in what sense the identities are represented in each other's imaginary.

Key words: immigration, US-Mexico border, identity, representation, popular culture