

Chicanx “Monsters” and Chicanx/Latinx “Futures” in Film (Or, Searching for Latinxs in Sci-Fi Movies)

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“In James Whale’s [1931] studio production of *Frankenstein*, the monster ‘Frankenstein’ was shunned by society because he was visually repulsive... making *Frankenstein* studio cinema’s greatest essay in prejudice.”

– Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film*

“This affirms that Chicano is a science fiction state of being. Chicano identity is rooted in the strange and the sublime, evoking (science) fiction and its dystopian and utopian subgenres [...]”

– Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín, *Altermundos*

One could argue that repulsive monsters have been a part of cinematic history since its early days, although monsters such as “The Golem” and Dr. Frankenstein’s monster (or “the creature”) were initially characters representing capitalism, modernity, and fears about the rise of technology (and later, about “difference”) more so than simply scary stories or tales of “horror.” For Chicanx and Latinx scholars, Chicanx movie monsters are still about economic developments, socio-political trends and cultural difference, although maybe also about horror to contemporary mainstream audiences. Furthermore, in our own analysis of Chicanx representations in US movies and film, we demonstrate how Chicanx and Latinx experiences have always and will continue to be shaped by the ever-changing cultural and political tensions in the US. In previous research, we pointed out how for more than a century, various Chicanx and Latinx experiences have been represented in cinema to popular US-American audiences with both negative (*i.e.*, omission first, and then stereotypes, clichés, and caricatures) and positive results (*i.e.*, Chicanx characters, attention on issues

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facing Chicanx communities, and then the development of what scholars call a “Chicano cinema” and beyond). Also, as we have argued previously, today’s political issues like migration, gender equality, and rampant corporatization are all shaping the current cinematic expressions for, by, and about Chicanx/Latinx communities. In this research, we turn our attention to “the future” of Chicanxs and Latinxs in US film—through “science-fiction” Chicanxs. Of course, we cannot talk about films that will be made in the future, but we can talk about how today’s popular movies are depicting a science-fiction future for Chicanxs and Latinxs. So, why science-fiction? Or rather why does Chicanx science-fiction matter? Why should Chicanx or other Latinxs care about science-fiction, which for the most part does not include them? These are the questions that drive this research.

Of course, one response by Loza to why science fiction matters is that science-fiction film, television, and fandom are prolific purveyors of monsters and monstrosities, thus it should be seen as “vital that we scrutinize them carefully” (3). Or, as Calafell asserts, whether it is on television or in film, “monsters are all the rage” and “monsters are everywhere” (7, 118). On the other hand, it is worth noting here how scholars are actually arguing for the inclusion of horror, science-fiction, and fantasy works in our analyses of Chicanx and Latinx popular culture precisely because it fits with the Chicanx/Latinx experience. For example, Merla-Watson and Olgún recently noted:

... *horror* and related genres are apropos for interpreting Latin@ social life and subjectivity, not only because Latin@s have been continually figured as the *monstrous* other in US popular culture but also because *horror* and *terror* have been endemic to and have textured Latin@ lived experience and history [...] Indeed, the histories of Chican@s and Latin@s in the Americas have been punctuated by graphic forms of violence, both banal and apocalyptic—the very stuff of *horror*. (3; emphasis added)

Furthermore, they claim, while there is a fairly robust body of scholarship dedicated to the “African American gothic,” there remains “a dearth of culturally and ethnically specific theoretical lenses for understanding Latin@ horror, gothic, and fantasy cultural productions” (13). It only follows that scholars should push further into the analysis of popular culture that articulates Chicanx and Latinx

experiences in horror, science-fiction, and/or fantasy. These genres, and others, make up what is known as speculative fiction—a field where artists imagine radically different social relations, identities, and structures of control as a way to comment on the social relations, identities, and structures of control at hand. Thus, in the essay, we focus on a subset of speculative sci-fi that depicts the extremes that the militarized state will go to in order to safeguard from alien invasion.

To address the questions above that inspired our investigation, we begin with the assertion that science fiction depicting the future is a suggestive “glimpse” into our culture’s future. It is a way for filmmakers to create a universe that is advancing in technology and has its own set of cultural and political issues to deal with. We will discuss the question about what a science-fiction future means for Chicanx/Latinx filmmakers later in this essay, but first, we submit that it is rather difficult to think about a “sci-fi” film today that would be received positively by Chicanx or Latinx scholars.¹ We note how there are not many Chicanx or Latinx sci-fi films, especially not coming out of Hollywood. In most cases of sci-fi “futurism,” we see a grim science-fiction future where a stereotypical White male “hero” is saving “the world” from extinction, either from killer robots (*e.g.*, *Blade Runner*, 1982; *The Matrix*, 1999; and *Terminator*, 1984 film franchises), or from invading extraterrestrials (*i.e.*, *Alien*, 1979; *Men in Black*, 1997; or *Predator*, 1987 film franchises). For film scholars, like Charles Ramírez Berg and others, these nativist and hyper-paranoid films that portray the future for Caucasian US-Americans are a clear reflection of the lingering anxiety around non-white communities—including and perhaps especially growing Chicanxs and Latinxs communities. Therefore, in this examination of sci-fi “futures,” we will look a bit closer at the problem with having a one-sided view of the future that typically does not include the experiences of Chicanxs/Latinxs (or others), and instead, only includes distorted images of invasive, alien “monsters.” As Loza argues in the recent *Speculative Imperialisms*,

¹ Or that would score well in the “Chicanx Cinema Matrix” (*e.g.*, three stars or more)—our proposed ratings system for analyzing Chicanx representation(s) in movies; See Avant-Mier and Lechuga.

Filmic and televisual representations of racial otherness are key to the social construction of reality and the negotiations of the future. The colorblind images of others that dominate Hollywood must be seen as a form of cultural polemics. (13)

In other words, “science fiction is not about the future,” science fiction “is about the problems of the present” (11).

We will begin our analysis with a necessarily brief review of the relevant literature on monsters and monstrosity in US popular culture. Moving forward, we will engage in another brief review of the history of “aliens” in popular films from the perspective of how cinematic aliens can be articulated to Chicanxs, Mexican Americans, and perhaps, other Latinxs in the US. Unfortunately, not a lot of research exists on Chicanx Science-Fiction, so we will rely on the work of Ramírez Berg a lot here.

Finally, we examine a handful of films that in one way or another capture the Chicanx/Latinx experience. We analyze *Children of Men* (2006), *Elysium* (2013), and *Sleep Dealer* (2008).² In spite of the fact that they would not pass the Chicano Cinema “test” (since they are not made *by* Chicanos, *for* Chicanos, and hardly *about* Chicanos in particular), these films challenge the status quo sci-fi future by undermining the typical alien narrative dominating Hollywood today through depictions of a future where migrants (mostly Latinx) challenge the White-state apparatus. These films are unique because the filmmakers of each makes a monster out of the White-state apparatus. To conclude, we discuss of how important it is to continue a legacy of Chicanx filmmaking, especially science fiction futurism, so that we won’t get left out of the US-American future.

² Of the three films, *Elysium* saw the most mainstream success, grossing nearly \$286 million in international sales and more than \$93 million in the US. In addition, the film was nominated for multiple international awards for its cinematography, its visual effects, and its director, Neill Blomkamp. *Children of Men* had relatively quieter success, grossing around \$70 million internationally and \$35 million in the US. *Children of Men*, though, was nominated for three Academy Awards for its screenplay, cinematography, and editing. Finally, *Sleep Dealer* was released only in the US and saw little mainstream success. The film grossed only \$75,000. This information was retrieved from the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com).

Monsters in Popular Culture

From vampires, werewolves, zombies, and other earth-bound creatures, to science-fiction aliens and alien monsters, the "monster" has played a central role in folklore, literature, film, and even bedtime stories. Monsters create an allure within their audiences, and unlike other types of entertainment, "we are very much curious about the monsters we fear." As Castillo notes, "We may be utterly repulsed by them, but we are also fascinated by their extraordinary nature, their perverted views, and their deviant behaviors" (41). Unlike fairytales and stories of enchantment, monsters captivate people in a much darker way. "An intense curiosity and awe for the different, morbid, and monstrous - omnipresent in child tales throughout history - have always permeated Western culture" (do Vale 194) essentially providing the most important description of monsters: different. In *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen describes the idea of the monster as a form of the Other, and as an "incorporation of the Outside, or the Beyond" (7).

Monsters represent something that is outside of the normal, outside of the realms of what is known to people. According to Cohen:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threaten to smash distinctions. (28)

In other words, monsters are created to be something outside of the systematic representation of what a person, or thing should be or look like, or as Cohen refers to them, "difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" (7). They represent an anomaly to the types of characters to which people are accustomed. Cohen continues to say that each monster tells two tales, the first is the origin of the monster, its storyline, and the second, lies in the "cultural use the monster serves" (13). When it comes to cultural use, we can refer to the prior idea of the monster serving as a representation of the Other, something outside the norm, thus "the abnormality of the monster would come to be widely interpreted in European cultures as defiance of law, be it the natural law or the established political and moral orders" (Castillo 40). While monsters serve as a representation of the obstruction of order, they can also, as Cohen states, become "cultural, political,

racial, economic, sexual” (7). Thus, while monsters form part of the Other, the obscure, and the different, they still serve as a representation of the real-life horrors outside of lore and storytelling.

Monsters are symbols of deviance and cultural taboos, or images of erotic desire and thus symbolize “fears about sex, gender, desire, and death” (Geczy and Karaminas 714). Aside from this, it is worth reiterating a point that we began with at the outset, that monsters and horror also have deeper meaning beyond fears of difference. As scholars note:

The concepts of horror and monstrosity share a long fruitful history together that predates early modernity. Monsters are cultural constructions that function to highlight difference *and* have appeared during times of political and social crises. (Geczy & Karaminas 714; emphasis added)

For our research here, we are interested in the articulations of monsters and monstrosity to social and political crises. For analysis of cinematic representations, it is increasingly obvious that Mexican, Latinx, and “hispanic” migrants are being symbolized by sci-fi aliens and the social crises that those aliens produce.

Noting this, another significant theoretical formulation on monsters comes from Loza who argues that scholars should see and understand cinematic monsters as a “technology” itself. As Loza informs us,

Seeing monstrosity as a technology, a vehicle by which race is made, helps us understand why the West is so consumed with this liminal figure... Like monstrosity, [science-fiction] is a primary technology through which race is produced and white supremacy maintained. (2-3)

Adding to critical scholarship on media and monsters, Calafell theorizes “monster-making” and monstrosity as a “space of activation and possibility” – citing how Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa identified with the mother alien in the *Alien* film franchise (3). Here, we interpret this to mean that monstrosity in popular culture can be understood through ambivalence or bifurcation. If, historically speaking, Mexicanxs (or “Mexicans”) and Latinxs have been portrayed as marginal, animalistic, beastly, scary, and fear-inducing, it is also important to note how monstrous or “alien” characters also provide an identification point for Chicanxs, Latinxs and others from those very margins.

As Calafell avers, there are instances in which we (Chicanxs or Latinxs) are represented through monstrosity, but also times when we call attention to the monstrous actions of the dominant culture (118). Our analysis that will follow below supports the latter; science-fiction/fantasy aliens and monsters in cinema result from a potentially productive site, one that allows Chicanx/Latinx representations to contest sci-fi/fantasy “futures” by including Chicanxs/Latinxs but also through questioning the logic of techno-military and/or corporate-state control. As Calafell argues, monsters “ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression” (7).

Invasive Aliens and Scared White People

As film scholar Ramírez Berg notes in his research, Mexicans and Latinxs in Hollywood films are overwhelmingly portrayed through a very limited range of representations, essentially six major character types (or stereotypes): ugly bandidos/villains, Latin lovers, hot Latinas or “hot tamales,” etc. (159). As Merla-Watson and Olguín affirm in *Altermundos*:

We frequently are figured as monstrous, threatening, or beastly through stereotypes of the bandido, drug dealer, or gang member, and as actual *monsters*. These vexed filmic representations can be found as early as 1915... (14-15; emphasis in the original)

Yet, another “hispanic” character in contemporary cinema is visible through invading, monstrous, extraterrestrial aliens.³ As Ramírez Berg notes, extraterrestrial aliens can be understood as symbols for other aliens because of how cinematic aliens invoke the nation, hyper-nationalism, and patriotism. As he puts it:

³ We use the word “hispanic” here, because this is the term that Ramírez Berg uses in the original text of his analysis of sci-fi aliens. Likewise, he uses “Alien” (with a capital A) to distinguish the monstrous cinematic extra-terrestrials (citizen aliens are in lower case).

The new immigrant “invasion” calls into question the very identity of the nation itself, and the rejection of the Alien in [sci-fi] is projected, mass-mediated nativism. [...] Today’s [sci-fi] film provides an arena for the negotiation of the pluralist-nativist tension; in order for this to occur, the immigrant takes the symbolic shape of the Alien. (162)

Furthermore, science-fiction aliens are remarkable because of how they have transformed in recent decades.

On the social/political front, it is worth noting that ever since President Ronald Reagan declared a “War on Drugs” in the US in the 1980s, the use of military technology to patrol the US border also increased dramatically. Scholars point out that by making immigration and drug smuggling synonymous with one another, the US was able to declare immigrants a threat to national safety, justifying the use of the military.⁴ In film, it is worth noting that this is the point in cinematic history when movie “aliens” become much less friendly and begin to appear much more menacing. This explains how film scholars began to understand cinematic aliens (and/or “monsters”) as a mediated metaphor for citizenship “aliens.” It is worth noting here how monster theory, such as Yair and Soyer, tells us that:

“[Monsters] can serve the community [...] Yet, at the same time [...] the Golem [or monster] can become bigger than his creator intended him to be, and confine his master’s individuality and destroy his independence.” (61)

Of course, this all leads back to more recent cinematic narratives of alien invasion. In *Independence Day* (1997), *Men in Black* (1997), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011), Hollywood is using extremely distorted images of aliens to create large, menacing, hyper-violent, extraterrestrial invaders. In most cases, the aliens in these films are the furthest distorted from humans (think about

⁴ Today, US Customs and Border Protection are part of The Department of Homeland Defense (for more on this, see T. Dunn, 1996).

the giant lizard in *Cloverfield*, or the alien in *Independence Day* that has arms, tentacles, and *cucaracha* legs).⁵

In response, the “earthlings” in the films deploy the US military to fight off the alien invasion. Naturally then, patriotism ensues. Then, hyper-nationalist, violent patriotism ensues (And ’Murica wins. Yeah!). These films are most telling in how the current popular sentiment of US-Americans is imagining a future without Chicanx/Latinx bodies, where they are fighting off a wave of dehumanized others that are trying to rob, rape, and kill them.⁶ Moreover, as Ramírez Berg reminds us the immigrant is transformed into the Hollywood extraterrestrial invader through a process of “distortion,” and of course, distortion is evident in the sympathetic aliens as well as the more monstrous aliens. Distortion (difference from, but also twisting, deforming, perverting, and misrepresenting) is dangerous, because it allows the filmmaker to imagine a non-human creature that is host to all the fears of white nationalism: invading hordes, stealing resources, threatening the White-European majority, and others. He also points out that there may be some left-over guilt from when Europeans colonized the Americas through colonization (*i.e.*, robbery, rape, and murder). Either way, dehumanizing the alien “Other” means that audiences are usually fine with eliminating the alien threat by any means necessary.

As Ramírez Berg observes, dehumanizing people is dangerous. He discusses how in the recent past, patriotic/nationalistic groups like the Nazis used distortion and dehumanization to influence the public attitude toward Jewish people and other minority groups (*e.g.*, LGBTQ communities), which eventually lead to nationalistic (*i.e.*, “patriotic”) eradication of those groups (all in the name of fervent nationalism and/or zealous “patriotism”). We use this discussion of aliens in Hollywood to draw attention to facts such as, (a.) there are still very few

⁵ Interestingly enough, Mexicans are sometimes depicted in US movies through scenes that include a traditional Spanish folk song called “La Cucaracha.” For example, see *Despicable Me 2* (2013).

⁶ For more on the relationships between alien invasion film, immigration rhetoric, and the US military, see Lechuga “Battling”.

representations of Chicanxs/Latinxs in today's popular science-fiction future cinema, (b.) the popular science-fiction industry is full of distorted images of alien invaders that are rooted in nativist and xenophobic attitudes towards cultural Others, and (c.) imagining a future through film is a way to express current tensions in communities and cultural-wide anxieties or zeitgeist. If, in fact, zeitgeist refers to a general thought or trend that defines a specific era or period of time, it is worth noting how zeitgeist can sometimes be constructed through or at the very least reflected in media—the popular press, literature, music, and even film. Therefore, we will now shift our focus to discuss some films that are actually bringing some rare Chicanx/Latinx “futures” to the screen for popular audiences.

Chicanx/Latinx Futurism in Film: Monster-Making

As we alluded to above (and elsewhere), contemporary social issues and political pressures that are being felt by Chicanx communities are making their way into today's Chicanx films about race, gender equality, sexual orientation, and migration. Filmmakers cannot necessarily predict what the political landscape in the US will be in the future; however, we often see today's political themes in films about tomorrow. For example, if we think about *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015) film franchise for a moment, the film's basic narrative is set in a dystopian future where characters struggle with income inequality, racial prejudice (although the films do not address this as much as the novels do), and media sensationalism. Further, the *Hunger Games* franchise, like most dystopian science-fiction cinema, imagines the ways that technology magnifies the political struggles of its usually white characters. One only needs to consider all the advanced military and communication technology that is used to create the dystopia that Katniss (played by Jennifer Lawrence) must endure to bring social change in her world. As we consider the next few films, it is important to keep these two major science-fiction themes in mind: (1.) today's problems are happening in tomorrow's world, and (2.) technology magnifies those problems.

The extraterrestrial invasion narrative is one such dystopia that, according to Charles Ramírez Berg, is pervasive in the US-American imaginary specifically because it distorts the current national conversation on migration into a sci-fi production of grotesque alien invasion. He writes: “The [science fiction] Alien as

immigrant Hispanic reveals a significant amount of stress within the dominant ideology. Cultural tension about immigrants, coupled with psychological guilt and fear, together with doubts about national identity combine to produce, as they have done in other times of our history, xenophobia, isolationism, and nativism” (182). The filmic production of distorted alien/migrant Other is typically as monstrous. Today’s aliens in film, as Ramírez Berg points out, are frightful, anxiety-producing, dehumanized, and incommunicable Others that are representations of the perceived threats that migrants pose to the white, nativist, and colonial US paradigm. We would also like to add that based on Ramírez Berg’s characterization of alien narratives, we have extracted three types of alien that will be productive for this essay: the robot (like *The Terminator* from the 1984 *Terminator* movie or “Roy Batty” from *Blade Runner* (1982)); the insect invader like those in *Independence Day* (1996); and the mother, like the Queen from the *Aliens* (1985) film sequel.

Beyond just the representational, though, the process of making monstrous aliens is a material one. Early production of frightening, invasive aliens relied on camera and lighting techniques, visual effects like costume and make-up, and eventually, computer-generated imagery (CGI) graphics (Dirks; Lechuga, “Coding”). Interestingly, Ridley Scott’s Xenomorph from the *Alien* franchise utilizes all three of these monster-making techniques at various points. Some of the most memorable scenes in the franchise, like the first time a face-hugger jumps out of an alien egg onto the face of a crewmember of the *USCSS Nostromo*, rely on a combination of blue-screen technology along with lighting and camera techniques to depict horrifying encounters with extraterrestrials. In the more recent films in the franchise, the Xenomorph alien and face-huggers are entirely CGI-generated, allowing filmmakers to create detailed renderings of scary aliens (Lechuga “Coding”). Therefore, monster-making is a process that allows filmmakers to imagine the menacing and frightful bodies that threaten humankind. This process, as we see in the case studies below, most certainly applies to the powerful, insidious, and violent non-human entity that already torments people of color in our communities today—the US corporate techno-state (Thomas).

To begin our own analysis, the three films discussed here—*Children of Men* (2007), *Elysium* (2013), and *Sleep Dealer* (2006)—are all traditional dystopias and each fits into one of the types of alien narratives discussed above, but with a twist. Each of the films is set in the near future in which technology has advanced

beyond its current capacity, but humans have not advanced much beyond the current sets of social ills facing them today—segregation, vast wealth accumulation, environmental decay, and others. More specifically, these films revolve around migration narratives that are set in highly militarized worlds where ecological disarray has motivated the wealthy and powerful elite to hoard access to things like water, health care, and shelter. However, these are not your traditional futuristic, sci-fi thrillers about invasive alien migrants; each film uniquely depicts a world where people of color are being terrorized by the techno-corporate government (although the films are all overlaid on a heteronormative love interest that at times, can be a driving factor for the otherwise resistive actions taken by the protagonists). In other words, the three films take the alien-monster narrative and flip the script, making the alien-migrant character the protagonist while rendering the authoritarian state system of control the antagonist—or in other words, the terrorizing monster.

The Monster in *Children of Men*

The first film that we would like to discuss more deeply is *Children of Men* (2006). *Children of Men* is a post-apocalyptic dystopia that is set in 2027, where its characters are faced with a world-wide infertility crisis; there have been no children born for more than twenty years. The film was written and directed by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón and released in the US. And while the film is set in England, the underlying tension at the center of the film is that the government is closing its borders and rounding up immigrants and refugees. There are violent scenes that depict highly-militarized immigration agents capturing and removing refugees. Even though the film is not set in the US, it was written and directed by a Mexican filmmaker in the US, about political struggles facing Latinx communities embedded in the US, and thus, we suggest it warrants attention of critical scholars. On one hand, this movie depicts the brutal treatment of migrants in the future. Furthermore, this film fits Ramírez Berg's mothering alien narrative, in that one protagonist of the film, "Kee" (played by Clare-Hope Ashitey), is a pregnant refugee who is navigating a foreign terrain. Director Cuarón does not represent her as a monster, however, but the militarized techno-state as the monster that is tormenting her.

Children of Men utilizes the four strategies to monster-making discussed above to depict the state as violent, frightening, predatory, and latent. First, Cuarón creates a world where fear and violence are omnipresent; state violence is indistinguishable from "terrorist" violence. For example, Julia Echeverría Domingo borrows Zygmunt Bauman's term "liquid fears" to describe how *Children of Men* depicts a state where fear and anxiety spread throughout a surface finding spaces to fill violence. This tone is set from the opening scene, where the male protagonist, "Theo" (played by Clive Owen), enters into a coffee shop where onlookers watch the blaring televised news of the death of "Baby Diego" (who is actually 18-years-old), marking the passing of the world's youngest person. Just as Theo leaves the café with his coffee in hand, an explosion rips apart the scene; scattered body parts, rubble, and smoke are set to the sound of ears ringing and sirens. This scene, like many others in the film, depict widespread chaos and fear in otherwise mundane places. Echeverría Domingo observes:

In *Children of Men* this liquid cinematography serves to introduce the dangers and threats that spread easily and circulate boundlessly within such a fluid environment. One of the most distinguishing features of the constant threats presented in the film is that they usually seem to have neither a cause nor a traceable executor. In a conversation with his friend Jasper after the opening explosion, Theo wonders who may have planted the bomb in the coffee shop... "Fuck knows," to which Jasper replies, "I'll bet it was the government. Every time one of our politicians is in trouble, a bomb explodes." (146)

As we see in the remainder of the film, this invisible state violence is directed squarely at refugees who are the primary victims of the UK's violent regime.

Another element of the film that depicts the predatory and violent nature of the dystopia that Cuarón creates is in the character of "Syd" (played by Peter Mullan). He is an immigration officer who drives a heavily armored vehicle that is used to hunt down refugees. Toward the film's climax, Syd escorts Theo, Kee, and "Miriam" (Kee's midwife played by Pam Ferris) to the Brexhill refugee encampment—a concentration camp for refugees depicted as overcrowded, dark, and filthy—a grotesque appendage of the state obscured from the view of citizenry. Once Syd has violently placed the three in the custody of the soldiers

operating the camp, they are placed on a bus and driven past the gates of the encampment. It is in these scenes that we see the monstrosity of the state. Soldiers strip refugees of their possessions (including their clothes) and line them on the ground. Many are blindfolded with black hoods and trapped in open-air jail cells.

In the final scenes of the film, after Kee has given birth to the first world's first child in nearly two decades, the military moves into the refugee camp to kill a rebel force of refugees, all the while leaving destruction and death in their wake. Soldiers are indiscriminately killing women and children in the streets of Brexhill, while many others hide and cower in fear. Kee and Theo, in trying to outrun the group of rebels and the military, stumble over the bodies of the dead while seeking shelter. They eventually reach a small boat where they are able to escape the violence. In the film's closing scenes, we see the monstrous state finally slay its victim: obscured behind an overcast sky, fighter jets drop several bombs on the encampment, silencing the migrants. Cuarón's strategic cinematic choices portray a future state that spreads violence, fear, and anxiety as it hunts refugees. These choices realign the alien/migrant narrative to elicit hope in refugees and to vilify the white, xenophobic military state apparatus. It is also a comment on the hypermasculinity of the state, embodied by Syd that violently preys on migrant women of color even if it means the end of the world.

The Monster in *Elysium*

The film *Elysium* (2013) takes a slightly more direct approach to portraying today's issues facing Chicanxs/Latinxs in the US than *Children of Men*. This story is set in 2159, and the earth is a scorched wasteland. The world's white elite have moved to a space station orbiting earth called "Elysium," while everyone else is left to scrape together a living on a barren planet. Not only do the residents of Elysium enjoy fresh air, ample food, clean water, and lavish housing, those on Elysium also have the technology to heal from any illness or injury instantly; those on earth do not. The scenes on earth take place in what is now Southern California, which is not the US anymore, but a Mexican/American hybridized civilization. The film centers on the premise that earthlings (basically, the future "Chicanxs") are suffering from extreme global warming and deep poverty. The main character, "Max" (Matt Damon as a "Chicano" hero of sorts, presumably... or at least a "halfie"...) becomes ill after exposure to high doses of radiation.

With only days to live, he makes a deal with a notorious *space coyote* named “Spider” (played by Wagner Moura) to fulfill Max’s lifelong dream of visiting Elysium. He leaves his (hetero) love interest, Frey (played by Alice Braga) in an emotional goodbye and sets off on a perilous journey to the satellite. The information Max steals in exchange for passage to Elysium, however, raises the ire of Elysium’s president “Delacourt” (Jodie Foster) who wants to see Max killed. In the end, though, Max reaches Elysium and uploads a hack that gives all Earthlings access and safe passage onto Elysium.

This film is notable for several reasons. First, like *Children of Men*, this film realigns the traditional future science-fiction alien/migrant narrative to portray the migrant as heroic and the techno-militarized state as monstrous. Interestingly, this film also fits the insect-invader typology from Ramírez Berg. After his radiation exposure, Spider surgically implants Max with a robotic exoskeleton which makes Max stronger, faster, and able to communicate with the others on Earth. He transforms into the insect invader with the help of those who wish to create an equal society where citizens of Elysium and Earth are able to benefit from state; not suffer at its hands. The film was directed and written by Neill Blomkamp, the South African director known for the “socially conscious” alien drama *District 9* (2009), and although he is not Chicanx or Latinx, *Elysium* is a film for popular US audiences starring many Latinx characters, that also illuminates political issues facing Chicanxs/Latinxs today.

Secondly, Blomkamp is able to make a filmic statement on the conditions facing Latinx migrants in the US today through monster-making. Like Alfonso Cuarón in *Children of Men*, Blomkamp portrays the monstrosity of the state apparatus that violently controls people of color, preys on their bodies, and promotes fear and panic in spaces where communities of color are struggling to survive the stark inequality imposed by the all-powerful state. For example, when “Kruger” (Sharlto Copely) is sent to hunt down Max because he now possesses the power to open access to Elysium, he is given free rein to kill Max and destroy all that stand in the way. This hyper-violent, masculine military force is able to single-handedly threaten Max, his family, friends, and community without reservation. Moreover, Kruger’s ability move through the terrains allows him to appear and disappear quickly, demonstrating the visible/invisible dynamic that is often attributed to filmic monstrosity.

In other words, “by depicting the Elysian state as one that relies on brute force to maintain social order, *Elysium* addresses real fears that state coercion, not

persuasion, is the norm for maintaining law and order on behalf of the power of the few to exploit people, and nature” (Mirrlees and Pederson 312). The monstrous state is one that is able to reproduce itself through the predator’s capitalist exploitation of Latinx communities stuck in Los Angeles, never reaping the benefits enjoyed by the elites on Elysium. Max’s efforts show how the alien/migrant figure is able to conquer the monstrous militarized techno-state in order to bring safety and security to the vulnerable communities also terrorized by government of Elysium. Blomkamp’s film also places the hope of humanity (namely people of color) in the (male) migrant body and vilifies the white, xenophobic military state apparatus.

The Monster in *Sleep Dealer*

In a similar vein, the final film that we would like to discuss here is a 2006 production that we feel most closely speaks to the issues facing Latinx migrants in the US today. *Sleep Dealer* was produced, written, and directed by Alex Rivera who is a US-born, New York American and child of Latinx migrants (from Peru). Everything about *Sleep Dealer* suggests that this might be our greatest example of Latinx sci-fi futurism. First, all of its main characters are either Mexican or Chicano, it takes place on both sides of the México/US border, and the film is almost entirely in Spanish with some US-American English here and there.

The film begins in Oaxáca, México where “Memo” (played by Luis Fernando Peña) farms with his father by day and tinkers as an amateur radio hacker by night. The Del Rio Water Company, which owns the rights to the water used to sustain the family farm, finds out that Memo is a hacker, accuses him of “water terrorism,” and uses a drone attack to destroy the family’s house, killing Memo’s father in the attack. This leads Memo to leave Oaxaca and journey to the northern border to find work. On his way, he meets a journalist (and love interest) “Luz” (Leonor Valera), who records his story using an internet memory technology that allows people to record and sell memories online, which will be important later.

Once he arrives in Tijuana, he gets a job at a factory called a “Cybracero,” or a cyber-bracero (harkening to the real-life Bracero Program of decades past). In these factories, workers like Memo plug into virtual reality computers that operate machines in the US, doing jobs that are typically associated with migrant labor—like farm work and construction. This fulfills the final typology of Ramírez

Berg’s alien narratives; Memo is the robot alien/migrant that appears in the US as a cybernetic immigrant. *Sleep Dealer*, while not quite as popular as *Children of Men* and/or *Elysium*, continues a tradition of Chicanx independent filmmaking (see Avant-Mier and Lechuga, 18). Specifically, *Sleep Dealer* depicts how Chicanx and Mexican characters navigate the treacherous terrain of modern US capitalism, describes the ways that technology is making it easier to exploit Chicanxs/Latinxs in the labor force, and demonstrates how Latinx filmmakers are tackling issues of migration and transnational globalization in their own films (Villazaña, 2013). Rivera accomplishes this feat by portraying the US industrialized, military tech-state as a movie monster.

After Memo and Luz begin a (hetero) relationship, she tells him that she has sold the memory of meeting him to a man in the US. In many ways, this aspect of the film plays into a longstanding stereotype in Chicano Cinema, where Latinas are often portrayed as manipulative seductresses (see Avant-Mier and Lechuga). This man who buys Memo’s dreams, “Rudy” (Jacob Vargas), is a drone operator for the Del Rio Water Co. Rudy is a Chicano (or, Mexican-American) and a drone operator for Del Rio who begins to feel immense guilt over his role in destroying Memo’s home. The drone represents the invisible state force that can torment communities of color without having to share a landscape with them. Like Kruger in *Elysium*, the drones and their operators unleash violent state power from the skies and are able to disappear quickly. They are violent, as demonstrated in the scene where Rudy destroys Memo’s Oaxaca home with a missile fired from the drone, killing Memo’s father and leaving the home in flames. The drone is predatory; it hunts for “eco-terrorists” that threaten the industrial, militarized state’s hold on water rights with increased surveillance and weaponry. It is a representation of the power of the state to strike fear into communities of color under the guise of national organization (or *i.e.*, nationalism/patriotism). Rivera uses a specific strategy to show Memo as the victim of state violence by making the US militarism into the monster.

The film ends when Rudy is able to access Memo’s memories through Luz, and realizes the harm that he has brought to Memo. This guilt eventually drives Rudy to cross the border into Tijuana from San Diego, California where he tries to locate Memo and Luz. We see in these scenes that there is a tense interaction between Rudy and Memo that symbolizes of a history of tense and conflicted relationships between Chicanxs (Mexican-Americans) and Mexican nationals that lingers even today. Once Rudy can apologize for his actions, the three characters

work together to hack into Del Rio's drone system, hijack a drone, and use it to destroy a dam controlled by the Del Rio Water Co (reminiscent of the final scenes in the original *Star Wars* (1977) in which the lowly rebels are attacking the evil empire's Death Star). This releases water back to Memo's family farm and prosperity back to rural México. Like the other films, the monster in *Sleep Dealer* is not killed, only injured, which creates a temporary space of liberation for the migrant/alien protagonist.

Sleep Dealer depicts how Chicanx and Mexican characters navigate the treacherous terrain of modern US capitalism. The film describes the ways that technology is making it easier to exploit Chicanxs/Latinxs in the labor force, demonstrates how Latinx filmmakers are tackling issues of migration and transnational globalization in their films (Villazana), and exposes audiences to a science-fiction narrative that does not imagine a future of just white people, but a future for Mexicans, Chicanxs, and even others (although the film lacks a nuanced depiction of gender, often relying in heteronormative tropes to develop the storyline). As Villazana puts it, the film:

“...happens to be situated in the border between Mexico and the United States [...] the representation of Mexicans as perilous aliens is prominent throughout the film; they are portrayed as terrorists to be eliminated without giving them any possibility of defense [...] and] there are strong references to the so-called ‘assimilation process’ that has been at the heart of the research into transnational and migration studies.”

In sum, while the narratives of *Children of Men*, *Elysium*, and *Sleep Dealer* reverse the conventions of the monstrous alien trope, audiences are still left with the violent, predatory, and often invisible terror-state of control that is tormenting people of color both on screen and in our day-to-day lives (in the recent past and present). As Merla-Watson and Olguín argue,

Perhaps most saliently, the Latin@ speculative arts remind us that we cannot imagine our collective futures without reckoning with the hoary *ghosts* of colonialism and modernity that continue to exert force through globalization and neoliberal capitalism. (4)

As we established above, Chicanx/Latinx science fiction representations are statements about the present as much as they are about the future. The monster-

makers that we analyzed here—Cuarón, Blomkamp, and Rivera (respectively)—have only shown us a slight glimpse of the true nature of such real-life monsters, and what they are showing us is rather frightening.

Conclusion: Creating a Chicanx/Latinx “Future” through Film

At the outset of this research project, we established a rationale for investigating Chicanx/Latinx representations in popular science-fiction and fantasy films in which Latinxs are mostly absent, or can only be understood as horrifying and monstrous. We further investigated a theory of monstrosity in which various scholars have established how filmic monsters symbolize characters on the margins and in hidden sectors of society. An important theoretical assumption in recent scholarship on monstrosity, and that informs our research, is the nature of monstrosity in that it can be both negative (through omission or through stereotypical images of Others as monstrous) but also positive (at least potentially, through recognizing how people of color actively identify with aliens and monsters... specifically as a response to images of militarized state domination). Moving forward, we noted how our analysis relies on several filmic tropes established by Chicano film scholar Ramírez Berg—the robot, the insect invader, and the alien mother.

In our analysis in the previous section, we investigated three films (*Children of Men*, *Elysium*, and *Sleep Dealer*) and demonstrated how these films advance Chicanx/Latinx representation(s) in film through fairly accurate depictions of Chicanxs/Latinxs. These cinematic Chicanxs/Latinxs are mostly absent from the power centers of the narratives, and Chicanxs/Latinxs are mostly portrayed as being subjugated by a techno-military-industrial state complex. As we argue above, if cinematic Latinxs are almost always a sort of “monster” or typically symbolize some horrifying image for the implied mainstream U.S. audience, the three films analyzed here are significant because of how they invert cinematic conventions and subvert cultural assumptions. The films take the position of the Chicanx/Latinx subject who is actively resisting military-industrial terror and/or techno-state control. Admittedly, while these films subverted attitudes towards migrants, they also fall short of opening an intersectional speculative imaginary inclusive to gender and sexual fluidity.

Furthermore, we offer this interpretation as a contribution to critical scholarship through how (1) film-making Others are actually constructing a sci-fi/fantasy “future” in which Chicanxs and Latinxs actually exist, (2) cinematic Others are actively resisting being relegated to the margins of “the future,” (3) these recent films reject convenient tropes of Hispanics, Latinxs, Chicanx, other people of color, immigrants, and refugees as alien and monstrous, in order to project more enlightened visions of humanity, and perhaps most important, (4) these recent films dare to reverse the cinematic gaze by calling attention to how military-industrial might and state-induced terror are the actual monsters that terrorize humans.

Moreover, our contribution here is significant because it confirms and contributes to existing theoretical formulations (*e.g.*, Loza) that assert how we should actively “reimagine ourselves, to dis-identify with empire” and how we should “embrace affinity with those that refuse to be colonized (148). As Loza observes,

We need fabulist fictions that decolonize our imaginations, [science-fiction] that gives us the tools to combat prejudice and the courage to craft new and freer worlds [...] The power to imagine is the first step toward decolonizing our future, past, and present. (149)

We submit that the three films analyzed here are evidence for popular films contributing to those ends.

To end, we take up the questions that we posed at the outset: Why is science-fiction important for Chicanxs (or Latinxs), or as a possible extension of Chicano movement politics? Why should we care about Chicanxs in sci-fi movies? Two reasons: first, Alex Rivera, director of *Sleep Dealer*, suggests that the cinematic future is where a culture can imagine itself. If only European-American/White US filmmakers are the privileged ones with access to making science-fiction images, then it’s highly likely that those images will continue to exclude Black/African-American, Chicanx, LGBTQ, and immigrant images, essentially erasing these Others from the future. According to Rivera, *Sleep Dealer* might be the first popular US film where people from the developing world imagined themselves in the future (Rivera). Films like *Sleep Dealer* are a way for Latinx filmmakers to carve out a space for Latinxs in the future, because we can’t wait around for Hollywood to do it. Films such as these demonstrate the need to continue to fight

for equal and positive representations in popular cinema that not only describe our history as a culture, but our culture’s “future” as well.

Second, as many have already suggested (like Merla-Watson and Olguín, and Thomas), many people of color in the US are already living in a dystopia. Many Black and Latinx communities already are being surveilled closely by the state’s advanced technologies (such as drones, police databases, and others). Many Black and Latinx communities are living in poverty, vulnerable to the violent changes in the global climate, and unable to shelter themselves from the effects of the capitalist, White-settler colonial projects. Many Black and Latinx communities are exposed to the brutal force of US state-sanctioned violence in the form of police brutality, incarceration, deportation, a lack of access to healthcare, lead-poisoned water, or murder: everything from the death penalty to being left to die unsheltered and starving after a natural disaster.

Interestingly, the recent Academy Awards ceremony in March 2018 concluded with Mexican director Guillermo del Toro winning multiple Oscars for “Best Picture” and “Best Director” (and other awards) for the sci-fi/fantasy film *The Shape of Water* (2018)—a film about a not so human creature and the monstrous White, military state trying to kill it. The director closed his acceptance speech by commenting on how sci-fi/fantasy films can be used for social commentary.⁷ As the speech ended, del Toro called for a celebration of sci-fi films for such ends and also implored others to follow. With that in mind, we conclude this examination of cinematic Chicanxs/Latinxs by asking a few questions to consider for the future of Chicanx/Latinx “futures” in film: How can we continue to use science-fiction narratives to fight the distortion and stereotypes that persist about Chicanxs and Latinxs in general? How can filmmakers continue to represent Chicanx and/or Latinx experiences in the science-fiction future while being allies to other groups that are also being oppressed? How can filmmakers draw more attention to gender and possibly use speculative science fiction to create more inclusive spaces for non-binary gender identification? How can Chicanxs use technology to better express their experiences in today’s media-rich

⁷ For example, see B. Bishop (2018, March 4), <https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/4/17078958/guillermo-del-toro-wins-best-director-best-picture-oscars-2018>.

society? What challenges do Latinxs and Chicanxs face in a future of strict (and even militarized) immigration control?⁸ While we cannot offer any specific answers to these questions at this point, we do hope and expect that future film and media scholars will take up such questions in the (Chicanx?/Latinx?) future(s). Likewise, we hope and expect that future filmmakers will do so as well, so we look forward to “future” Chicanx/Latinx representation(s) in popular films.

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⁸ For more about the relationship between film and the militarization of the México/US border, see Lechuga “Coding”.

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