

Terminal City
Immaterial migrations, virtual detachments
and the North–South divide
(Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*, 2008)

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A myriad of laborers flees the poorest areas of each country: the cities attract and cheat whole families with hopes of work, of a chance to better their condition, of a place in the magic circle of urban civilization. But hallucinations do not fill stomachs. . . . *The international system of domination suffered by each country is reproduced within each.* —Eduardo Galeano (1940–2015), *The Open Veins of Latin America* (1997, 248–9)

Spinoza says that we do not know what the body is capable of. The foundation of needs and desire, of representations and concepts, the philosophical subject and object, and what is more (and better), the basis of all praxis and all reproduction: this human body resists the reproduction of oppressive relations – if not frontally, then obliquely. . . . It is the body which is the point of return, the redress – not the Logos, nor “the human”. —Henri Lefebvre (1976, 89)

The border between Mexico and the United States, perhaps more than any other frontier situated within the North American subcontinent, has given rise to a wide variety of imaginary projections, from fantasies of racial otherness and sexual proclivity bound up with the thrill of transgression, to illicit flows of substances, money and migrant bodies figured as invasion and threat (in both directions). The border has been geopolitically contentious since at least Mexican Independence from Spain, but it was with the Mexican-American war of 1846–48, pursuant to the US annexation of Texas, that the border began to accrue powerful symbolic meaning and became the guarantor of nationalist identitarian affiliations (“Manifest Destiny”) or of fantasies of loss and dissolution. Mexico lost over half of its national territory to the United States as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, otherwise known as

the "Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement between the United States of America and the Mexican Republic", including the current states of California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah and parts of others. The treaty left a large "misplaced" Spanish-speaking population living on the north side of the border. Even today, Mexico, situated geographically in the North American subcontinent, is more often than not imagined from the Global North as belonging in the Global South, or at the very least as the South-of-the-North or as the North-of-the-South. In Carlos Fuentes' novel *Gringo Viejo* (1985), a metahistorical summation of the long genre of novels of the Mexican Revolution, the Old Gringo who has crossed the border "in order to die" in Mexico, declares that "there is no frontier for gringos, not to the East, not to the West, not to the North. Only to the South, always to the South. . . . What a shame. This is not a frontier: it's a scar" (1985, 174–5, my translation).

Of course, borders rarely prevent crossings: in many ways they incite them. There is also, both in Mexico and the United States, a long history of border genres, based on the confused identities, languages and habits caused by the churning of populations between south and north, as well as by a massive migration which has left some thirty-six million US inhabitants identifying as Mexican-American. Most significant, in the United States, is the "Chicano" movement which developed in the 1960s and has given rise to a whole genre of Chicano music, art, literature and film, exploring hybrid identities and languages, and often privileging the theme of symbolic border-crossing. Hollywood had also been fascinated by the border and its "frontier" urban zones, signalling allure and danger, libidinal entanglements and detachments, "racial" and other identitarian confusions, profit and corruption, violence and flows of illicit substances. This was perhaps summed up most masterfully in the late *noir* film *Touch of Evil* (1958), directed by Orson Welles and set mostly at night in the fictional seedy Mexican border town of "Los Robles". Here, as in the later, neo-*noir* *Chinatown* (dir. Polanski 1974, discussed below), the openly racist US police and justice systems seem to have fully taken on the attributes and methods of the gangsters they are purportedly combatting, while notions of "truth",

"justice", "equality" and "rights" appear to have sought refuge in the still idealistic legal system of Mexico as personified in the upstanding Mexican anti-narcotics official "Mike" Vargas and his young American bride Susan. The hybrid Mexican-American identity that this couple herald, treated contemptuously by the US cops, is mirrored in the incessant, disorientating border-crossing throughout the film: a confusion of identities that seems compelled by powerful economic and libidinal forces that transcend individual agency. Such frontier outposts, predicated on the various forms of "libidinal economy", from tourism, nightlife entertainment, gambling and drugs, to the phantasmatic machinery of oil extraction and energy transmission that provides the backdrop to many of the film's most iconic sequences, would eventually grow into today's major border cities such as Tijuana, currently home to over fifty million border crossings per year.¹

The end of the *Bracero* Programme (Farm Labour agreement between Mexico and the United States) in 1964 led to the instigation by the Mexican government of the *Maquiladora* or Border Industrialization Programme in 1965, which established the conditions for US investment in factories and assembly plants, powered by cheap Mexican labour, in and around the major cities along the Mexican side of the border (principally Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez and Reynosa). The *maquilas* or *maquiladoras* grew rapidly, along with their urban and para-urban zones, becoming the major source of foreign exchange for the country from 1985 (Louie 2001, 69). The "globalization" of the US–Mexican border from the 1990s onwards, after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, accelerated these processes, injecting powerful economic forces into the frontier lands on either side of the border, with further expansion of tax-free manufacturing zones and the offer of myriad low-paid medium-skilled *maquiladora* jobs for which female labour was often preferred, partly

¹ I should like to thank Andrew Webber for suggesting the relevance of *Touch of Evil* for an analysis of the Mexican–US border in *noir* and *neo-noir* cinematography.

due to women's lack of unionization and acceptance of low wages. In his novel *2666* (2004 (see also Chapter 7 in this volume)), the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño charts the attendant violence, and infamous femicides of *maquiladora* workers and other women, including prostitutes, that occurred in and around Ciudad Juárez (Santa Teresa in the novel), as well as in other urbanized border zones.

In this chapter, I shall examine the techno-*noir* science fiction film *Sleep Dealer* (2008), written and directed by a US national, Alex Rivera, but shot in Spanish in Tijuana, Mexico City and Querétaro. It is mostly set in Tijuana, described in the film's dystopian future as "The largest frontier city in the world". As befits its themes, the film is therefore a hybrid production, speaking to a geopolitical terrain of migrations and border crossings, both real and electronic or virtual. The city of Tijuana, which can be considered along with San Diego as forming an integrated part of the "Southern California" megapolitan area, is becoming a dominant manufacturing centre of North America, and is beginning to take on some of the functions of a "global city" in Saskia Sassen's sense of the term (1991), which is to say that it is a node in the financial, assembly-production and migrational networks of the global economic system. In this film, Tijuana – virtually connected to, but physically disconnected from, its megapolitan area – becomes a "terminal city" in part because the city itself and the labouring bodies of the many workers who flock to its assembly lines in the futuristic *infomaquilas* are re-imagined as a vast set of "terminals" in a computer network. The workers in this dystopian future plug their bodies directly into a global network of remotely operated machines, becoming the virtual end-points of an even wider array of extractive informational networks than those that currently converge on Tijuana. These range from vast natural resource monopolies to virtual labour, from remote drone fighter-pilot operatives to aquaterrorists, and from immaterial or informational migration to the commodification of affect in future "biosocial" networks.

However, as we shall see, Tijuana is a terminal city also in the sense that the (virtual) attachments for which it is a locus and magnet in the film paradoxically generate and proliferate new forms of *detachment*, whether from locality, identity or corporeality. I shall use the obsolete English word “tachment”, shorn of its prefixes, to designate this new paradoxical state of *simultaneous* connection and disconnection, which proliferates throughout the entire logic of the network. Tachment is defined both as “something attached; an appurtenance”, and as “a judicial seizure or apprehension of one’s person or goods” (OED); it thus designates that which appertains to a person, body, or system, and at the same time, that which can be seized, apprehended or alienated as property. I shall also use it to designate the *potential* for attachment and detachment, a potential which, offered or withdrawn, becomes the privileged mode in which power now functions in the network society.

Conspiracy film and techno-noir

Sleep Dealer can broadly be understood as connecting to the twin genres of the conspiracy film and techno-noir. Both of these are, evidently, imported filmic genres in Latin America, and along with the temporal displacement which renders all neo-*noir* cinematography “citational”, the geographical displacement that occurs when such genres are deployed in Latin America adds a sense of estrangement or a double set of quotation marks around the generic elements. This is not unlike the status of cinematic Sci-Fi in Latin America – a genre that is closely related to *noir* insofar as it evokes “dark” or dystopian futures in which present political conflicts or unresolved past ones are intensified and fused with unsettling sexual relationships. But can we isolate any properly political function of the Latin American translation of *noir* tropes, which is to say the function of opening up a gap in the biopolitical deployment of cinema as a technology for the production of modern subjectivity, especially in Mexico?

As is well known, classic cinematic *noir* in the 1940s and 1950s, in the United States, corresponded to the twin phenomena of the persistence of organized crime

networks in the aftermath of prohibition and the postwar disturbance of gender power relations due to women's slow but steady entry into the workforce and attendant economic and sexual autonomy. Films of this period thus respond to and project perceptions and fears of increased urban insecurity allegorized in disturbed or predatory sexuality, that is, behaviour disruptive to the patriarchal capture and reproduction of femininity. The classic Mexican use of these generic tropes, while focusing rather intensely on the conflicts surrounding feminine sexuality and the "sins" of urban dwelling, tended to hybridize them with a range of other generic formulae. We see this obviously in the *arrabal* and *cabaretera*/ prostitute movies which combined prurient national melodrama, the musical, crime and gangster movies, a stylized and voyeuristic "neorealism", as well as the contemporary Hollywood *noir* format.

Luis Buñuel's 1950s parodies of these bastardized generic formats, particularly of the crime-*noir* genres in *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955), for example, allow us to see the extent to which the currents captured by Mexican film of the 1940s and 1950s mediate the contradictions inherent in the production of modern, urban subjectivity at a time of burgeoning urban growth through mass migration. It is important to stress "mediation", because Mexican film of this period does not "express" the axiomatics of capitalist urban modernity in some naïve representational sense: rather, it *is* that axiomatic in a very real sense, for the machinery of Golden Age cinema subjects all of the "customs" and habits, which the new urban migrants went to the cinema to "learn" (Martín Barbero 1987, 180), to the logic of the *spectacle as commodity*, and hence to the central axiom of capitalist modernity: that of quantitative equivalence and exchange. To use a Deleuzian vocabulary, cinema is the very face of technological modernity for the working classes of the 1950s, a desiring, deterritorializing machine which operates through and on the commodification of bodies and passions, connecting the flows of urban migrants to the transnational flows of images, fashions and wants.

Yet it has to be acknowledged that *Sleep Dealer*, as a film made in Mexico by a non-Mexican, albeit of Hispanic heritage, does not consciously connect to this cinematic history. Its influences are drawn more directly from US sources, with the director citing, in his DVD commentary, *Strange Days* (1995), *The Final Cut* (2004), *Minority Report* (2002) and, of course, *Blade Runner* (1982). He omits mention of what is one of the most obvious non-Sci-Fi neo-*noir* sources, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* of 1974. I shall briefly examine the echoes of this film in *Sleep Dealer* to chart some of the transformations of *conspiracy* tropes and their potential political valency, by which I mean the ability of these tropes, through their mutations, to capture the contradictions at work in the transformation of systems of social power and control.

Chinatown operates as a series of concentric emplotments in which each deception or conspiracy unfolds at the obscure boundary of a larger conspiracy. The detective, Jake, stumbles across each of these, as an apparently simple private-eye job investigating an extra-marital affair unfolds into an intrigue of political discreditation, which leads to a murder, which leads to the discovery of fraud at the water company, which leads to the revelation that water is being syphoned away in massive quantities, which leads to an Oedipal incest plot, unfolding into a conspiracy to devalue farmland, leading to fraudulent speculation on land futures, and so on potentially *ad infinitum*. The central economic plot is a vast conspiracy to devalue the agricultural land around Los Angeles by stealing enormous quantities of fresh water and dumping it in the ocean, thus creating an artificial drought. At one point, the sleazy tycoon, Noah Cross, who will later turn out to be at the centre of the conspiracy, tells the hapless detective "you may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me you don't."

My point here is Fredric Jameson's idea (and oddly he does not discuss *Chinatown*) that twenty years on from classic *noir*, in the 1970s, the political fantasies represented by *noir* tropes have radically extended their scope. In, say, *The Big Sleep* (1946), extrapolated and parodied in Buñuel's *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la*

Cruz, the local or municipal disruptions to the social, economic and libidinal order are restored along with the final taming or internment of the *femme fatale*, with the help of the police and magistrates who act as agents of a moral order. In *Chinatown*, the conspiracies proliferate and extend outwards indefinitely, so that we suspect them to be coterminous only with the crisis-ridden, expanding envelope of the capitalist system itself. Just before she is deliberately shot through her head and eye by a policeman at the end of the movie while attempting to escape over the border to Mexico – figured intriguingly as a space beyond the reach of the corrupt financial webs of US capitalism and its legal agents – the fleeing Evelyn screams at the detective who is always one step behind unfolding events, that there is no point letting the police handle the situation, because her millionaire father “owns the police”.

Such films, then, as Jameson signals, attempt haplessly, in the crumbling black holes of the detective’s reflective reason, to provide an allegorical figure of the unimaginable totality of the global financial system itself (1992, 5, 9). *Sleep Dealer* also concerns a vast conspiracy to enclose and privatize the one resource that is perhaps most symbolic of the idea of the “commons”: water. The film opens in the deep rural south of Mexico, in Oaxaca, where a US military–industrial corporation has dammed up the rivers in order to monopolize the supply and sale of water, causing a drought that threatens the future of the land-holding peasants. In a sequence near the beginning of the film, the protagonist, Memo Cruz, and his father go to a dam in search of a ridiculously inadequate quantity of water for their family. As they approach the high-security perimeter, a voice emerges in English from a metal box mounted on the wire fence sporting an automatic machine-gun protrusion and a fish-eye lens: “Alright, don’t make any sudden moves/Quietos, no se muevan”. Memo’s father asks for 35 litres of water, to which the box replies “That’s 85 dollars . . . The price went up/El precio subió, desde hoy”. He feeds some money into a slot in the gate, and the box acknowledges, “Hey, thanks for your business/Gracias por su preferencia”, as the gate springs open. Memo and his father then proceed to fill their

water sacks from the dam, which is patrolled by heavily armed security guards, airborne drones, and more disembodied machine-gun posts.

We get a sense here of the interaction between virtual networks of control and the subjection of the human and physical environment to what German Marxist economist Alfred Sohn-Rethel calls “the exchange abstraction” (1977, 21ff). Here, and for Sohn-Rethel, the commodification of resources and the appropriation of manual labour are the ultimate foundation of vast systems of intellectual and social abstraction, capable of collapsing the very categories of time and space, for as Sohn-Rethel puts it, “the form of commodity is abstract, and abstraction governs its whole orbit” (19). The enclosure and commodification of the commons in this film proliferates forms of abstraction, collapsing space, temporality and genealogy. Later, when tending to their *milpa* (cropping field), Memo asks his father, “Hey, pa, one question: Why are we still here?” The paradoxical intuition in his father’s reply, “Do you want our future to belong to the past?”, renders rather precisely the ability of commodity exchange to collapse human temporality, past and future, in the same way that in *Chinatown*, human genealogy itself is collapsed when Evelyn reveals to the detective that Katherine is both her daughter *and* her sister.

Memo unwittingly also disrupts generational genealogy due to his interest in ham radio and hacking. Having set up a directional aerial on the top of his family shack, he spends his evenings listening in to global social networks, to the world of teleworkers, and to the interactions of distant drone pilots undertaking bombing raids against global bands of “aquaterrorists”. His unwitting interception of a drone network is what brings about the calamity, as his “terrorist” intercept aerial becomes a target for a drone bombing. He and his brother are out of the house, in a neighbouring property, watching a globally streamed reality TV show called *Drones*, where the presenter promises to show video-game style live-action streams of drone pilots “blowing the hell out of the bad guys”. Upon seeing their own shack identified as the target of the next bombing raid, the brothers desperately run back to the

shack to try to save their father, who is inside, but arrive too late. While we do see a futuristic drone, with accompanying flying cameras, blowing up the family home,² the interpolated aerial imagery of drone bombings is real footage released by the US military of drone attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the use of drones in warfare and surveillance is rapidly catching up with the depiction of it in this film. Memo, in great distress that his hacking activities have destroyed his family's meagre subsistence, and feeling responsible for the death of his father, sets off for Tijuana to look for work in the *infomaquila* factories, popularly referred to as "sleep dealers", so that he can send money home to provide for his now destitute family.

If the representation of visual technology and warfare seems somewhat over-determined in this film, it is because the director is an admirer of Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema* (1984), as he tells us in the DVD commentary. As a critic it can be sobering when your subject pulls the theoretical rug from under your feet, such that a text or film turns out to be an allegory generated by the theoretical instruments that you might have been tempted to use in order to decode it in the first place; or, in more extreme fashion, that the film explicitly references those instruments, as when we discover that Neo at the beginning of *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowsky 1999) has been reading *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994) by Baudrillard. This is as if to warn us that we cannot escape from the Matrix quite so easily: no sublation of fiction into speculative reason, no final, Hegelian *Aufhebung*, will provide us with release from the abyssal reflectivity of reality in virtuality and vice-versa. One of the displacements this produces is that the theoretical system itself becomes an effect of the wider processes the film engages, which is to say not just another description of those processes, but an intrinsic part of the web of abstractions with which the film is bound up. As we shall see, *Sleep Dealer* explicitly signals its own involvement, as a

² Rivera comments that for the film the film crew actually blew up a *campesino's* property, with his permission, and rebuilt it for him again afterwards.

powerful intellectual and affective technology, with the vertiginous collapse of abstraction and virtuality *into* the material and even bodily reality of the world it is recounting. It will do this by placing an analogue of filmic narration at the very core of the biopolitical networks that proliferate throughout its intradiegetic universe.

Biosocial networks and immaterial labour

On his way to Tijuana, Memo meets Luz Martínez, a former student of “biomedia” studies, and now a writer from Mexico City, who gets on the same bus he is travelling in at an intermediate stop. Memo notices the plugs, or nodes she has inserted into her forearms, and asks her where she obtained them. These are needed for the teleworking he wishes to undertake in the *infomaquillas*, as the nodes are used to provide a direct interface between the nervous systems of the so-called *cybraceros* and the computer interface which remotely operates machines, such as construction robots, on the other side of the border in the United States. It emerges that the border between Mexico and the United States is sealed for migration northward, but that since the developed economies still require the labour of would-be migrants, it can be provided by these virtual means. Memo will later be offered work as a taxi driver in London, as a fruit picker in Florida, or as a construction worker in San Diego. Luz explains to him that he will need to find and pay a *coyotek*,³ in order to insert the nodes for him and secure him a job with the “sleep dealers”, and tells him where he can find a cheap one in the backstreets of Tijuana.

Although Luz describes herself as a writer, we subsequently see that her storytelling also involves interfacing her body directly with a large social network

³ The film plays with many current words associated with the border, often by adding “tek/tech” to the end. In this case, a *coyote* is a popular name for a people smuggler who will help would-be migrants to cross into the United States for a fee. In the film, a *coyotek* does this virtually by installing nodes that allow workers to supply their virtual labour in the North without physically crossing the border.

called "TruNode" in order to authenticate biologically the reality of her experiences, and also to record her somatic responses and affective states while experiencing the adventures she recounts. Paradigmatic of the state and process I am designating "tachment", TruNode resembles our current social networks, but the plug-in node technology has enabled the abstraction of affect from the body in the form of complete somatic engrams that include emotional states verified by the technological interface that the computer network makes with the body's own neural networks. The Spinozan term "affect", in the interpretation of it given by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980, 256ff), is a detachable, pre-personal intensity that flows between bodies and does not belong to any one body, although it is subject to seizure, capture or abstraction. The "memories" which the characters in *Sleep Dealer* upload to TruNode, for sale, can be understood as abstracted and captured affective states, "a seizure or apprehension of one's person", which have been rendered as "goods" or commodities for sale on the biosocial network.

Luz begins to compose a new memory based on her encounter with Memo, titling it "A migrant from Santa Ana del Río". As she dictates the story, visual engrams are activated and displayed on a fully transparent screen, like a series of video frames surrounded by a blurred haze of what is not fully recorded at the edge of consciousness. Luz attempts to hide her burgeoning romantic interest in Memo, but the TruNode software, acting as a lie detector, immediately perceives the inauthenticity in her narrative, and interrupts the story, instructing her to "tell the truth". It is undoubtedly the case that the more disembodied, or detached, our interpersonal relationships and networked attachments become, the more we need to compensate, haplessly finding ways to reinsert the very thing that vanishes in those virtual networks: the body itself, or more precisely, embodiment. This anxiety of tachment perhaps accounts for the widespread contemporary use of social messaging networks for transmitting explicit, intimate bodily photographs or videos: besides any obvious sexual intent, might not this strange imperative be an attempt

to rematerialize the corporeal, to reattach it to the flesh, at the moment of its full detachment and dematerialization?

In this film's dystopian future (or, increasingly, its parallel present), the attempt to ground truth and authenticity in the affective is the flipside of the full capture and commodification of affect, and indeed of the "immateriality" that, according to Antonio Negri, is characteristic of post-Fordist labour (Negri 2008, 20), and of what Michael Hardt has termed "affective labour" (2004). For the Italian *operaista* thinkers, such as Negri and Paolo Virno (2004), immaterial labour is thus the full technological development of what Karl Marx, referring to an earlier stage of industrial manufacture, called "the general intellect":

[Machines, locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules, etc.,] are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process. (Marx 1993, 706)

Direct technological extensions of the body (here literalized in the nodes inserted directly into the arms and upper back, and through them to the nervous system) make it possible for the powers of social production to become "immediate organs" of "the real life process" in an intensification of the mode of production foreseen by Marx.

The term "biomedia", employed in the film, captures concisely this conflation: Luz's student debt to the Institute of Biomedica Studies is in arrears, and she is compelled to sell memories relating to her cultural experiences, friendships and intimate feelings to service her obligations, overriding any ethical concerns that arise. Social media have thus become fully commodified as "immediate organs" of the body, simultaneously attached and detached, through the technology which appears

to make immaterial labour into a direct extension of the body's nervous system, but in fact turns the body and its "life process" into a node servicing a global marketing network: "TruNode, the world's number one memory market". This applies as much to those, like Luz, who undertake immaterial and affective labour, as to those who undertake physical labour through a cybernetic interface, as will be the case with Memo.

On arriving in Tijuana, Memo goes to a central alley overlooked by a red neon star (reminiscent, for Rivera, of an "incredible *Blade Runner* façade" [DVD commentary]), which is where Luz had told him he could get nodes installed cheaply with the help of a *coyotek*. Fortunately, Luz's story about Memo has a buyer, who asks her for more episodes, forcing her to go out looking for him on the streets. This is where the inevitable *femme fatale* elements of the plot come in, for Luz, who turns out to be a *coyotek* herself, having learnt from a former boyfriend how to insert the nodes, is in her own way exploiting Memo, "seizing" his life experiences, commodifying them and offering them up for sale on TruNode, without his permission. Incidentally, she also falls in love with him. Her ambiguous entrapment of him, as portrayed in the film, is perhaps best indicated by one of the bar sequences, where as the director himself points out, the careful choreography of Luz and Memo on one side of a wall mirror allows a simple twoshot to multiply into a four-shot, heavily suggesting that Memo is caught between not one Luz, but two, closing him in on either side in her attempt to extract his life story.

The rather persistent survival of this *noir* trope, with the added conventional dimension that the man here undertakes the manual labour, while the woman engages in affective labour in a way that is somehow predatory on the man's vitality or even his masculinity, speaks to the persistence and evolution of gendered power relationships even in the midst of our supposedly disembodied, gender-agnostic or gender-simulated online identities. There is no Utopian democratic power of self-

organizing equality unleashed by immaterial labour in this dystopian projection.⁴ On the contrary, just as in this film the body returns, insistently, in the wake of its supposed (at)tachment to the immaterial, decorporealized network, so the inherence of gender in power and power in gender seems to return more insistently, in full *noir* fashion, the more the existing libidinal order is disturbed. Memo's story is, after all, about the attempted recovery of a perhaps Oedipally murdered father, and the monstrous panther women and spider women that emerged from Hollywood *noir*, cannot be killed off, in our culture, quite as easily as we might imagine, despite its much-vaunted post-feminism. In fact, a high proportion of the low-paid, unregulated, no-benefits jobs in the *maquiladoras* of the Mexican border cities are undertaken by women, and the high murder rates of women, not just in Ciudad Juárez, suggest that the rise of medium-skilled, sometimes immaterial, globally connected labour has only increased violence against women, whether motivated by envy or by opportunity, in many of Mexico's so-called free economic zones.

Needless to say, a clear parallel is drawn between Luz's vampiresque tachment or extraction of Memo's life history, in order to sell it to pay off her student debt, and the work Memo manages to land as a *cybracero* on a construction site in San Diego (he thinks), though of course he never visits San Diego, but operates the construction robot from the *infomaquila* in Tijuana. He gains the nodes that allow him to work in the *infomaquila* thanks to Luz, who arranges for him to visit a *coyotek* who turns out to be herself. In a sequence which is reminiscent of the bioport insertion sequence in

⁴ In the second book of their "Empire" trilogy, *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri argue that since "the newly hegemonic forms of 'immaterial' labor . . . rely on communicative and collaborative networks that we share in common, and that . . . produce new networks of intellectual, affective, and social relationships', then increasingly it becomes the case that "biopolitical social organization begins to appear absolutely immanent, where all the elements interact on the same plane[;] instead of an external authority imposing order on society from above, the various elements present in society are able collaboratively to organize society themselves" (2004, 336–7).

David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999), where the bio-game designer Allegra Geller engages in heavy innuendo regarding the anus-like orifice inserted in the male protagonist's lower spine, Luz uses a gun-like projectile to penetrate Memo's arms and back with nodes that attach directly to his nervous system. A similar mechanic's garage setting is used for both films, and the node/bioport inserter is adapted from a bolt extractor or rivet gun in both cases. The extra bodily orifices being created become sexually charged both in *eXistenZ* and in *Sleep Dealer*, especially as they allow for new kinds of technologically mediated attachments between people. They also allow for the direct plugging of workers' bodies and nervous systems into the global economy, as Memo says in a rather too obvious voiceover commentary: "At last I was able to connect my nervous system to that other system: the global economy." As a metaphor, it is a literalization of Marx's linking of the social and economic powers of production to the immediate organs of the real-life process discussed above, and hence a perfect example of this paradoxical form of attachment. It is, in fact, an intensification of the self-same financial networks that produce advanced technological communications devices at the expense of overworked Chinese or Mexican factory workers, who sometimes pay with their health, or even with their lives.

Memo tells us that the *infomaquilas* themselves are located on the outskirts of Tijuana, in the same para-urban space that is occupied by shanty districts of informal housing used by a largely squatter population of migrant workers, injured ex workers and vagrants. Shortly after his arrival in Tijuana, Memo had been forced to find makeshift housing in one of these squatter settlements, in an abandoned ramshackle tin-roofed shack in the shadow of the barbed-wire-topped border wall, periodically illuminated by the searchlights of the automated machine-gun posts mounting the wall. One daytime and two nighttime sequences are set in this district, and together they establish a tight relationship between urban space and the new, paradoxical spatialities produced by the condition of simultaneous physical detachment and virtual attachment in this terminal city. As the camera tracks the ascension of Memo

out of the central urban backstreets of Tijuana, where he has just been mugged, up to the wall that violently cuts the para-urban sprawl, the city behind him seems to dematerialize into a constellation of lights. Suddenly the point of view cuts to that of a hidden camera on the northern side of the wall, peeping over the barbed wire at Memo who is staring up at it. The spatial disorientation produced by this sudden jump, whereby we cross, virtually, a border that Memo will never be able to cross physically, condenses, at the level of the camera work, the new spatial trajectories at work here. The juxtaposition in this sequence of the nightlights of Tijuana, the wall with its searchlights, the shanty housing, the *infomaquillas* and the dilapidated bodies of the node workers, produces a layered spatiality that spreads outwards from nodes in the human terminals, through the wall that physically detaches the northern and southern zones of this paradoxically fractured, “globally connected and locally disconnected” urban form (Castells 1996, 404), to the new, fractal topographies of the vast global financial, social and information networks.

A key sequence in the film shows Memo’s first connection to the network in the *infomaquilla*, to begin his job as a construction worker. The film highlights Memo’s spatial disorientation as he is transported virtually into the world of the construction robot: an urban construction site that is part cityscape and part CGI virtual simulation. This robot becomes an extension of his body, since he sees what it can see through its cameras, and its arms, equipped with various construction tools, become his arms (see Figure 8.1). As spectators, we are initially given P.O.V. shots as the virtual reality resolves to show a cityscape of half-constructed skyscrapers from the perspective of Memo’s robot high up in the scaffolding near the top of the building.

Together with Memo, who has to steady himself by clutching onto an iron beam with his robotic arms, I think we as spectators experience here something of the vertigo of the network, that total disorientation of our cognitive maps, of which Jameson writes, as we enter these new, virtual hyperspaces, simultaneously attached

to the network and detached from physical location. Here is the well-known passage from *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*:

this latest mutation in space – postmodern hyperspace – has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world. It may now be suggested that this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment – which is to the initial bewilderment of the older modernism as the velocities of spacecraft to those of the automobile – can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (Jameson 1991, 44)



Figure 8.1 The cityscape from the perspective of the construction robot

Source: Screen Capture by Author

Disorientation would thus appear to be a powerful effect of the “becoming virtual” of the urban, tracing a convoluted line from the frontier confusions of *Touch of Evil* (rendered virtual through cinematic mediation) and the digital virtualizations of the terminal city in *Sleep Dealer*.

Tachment, crime and the biopolitics of affect

For a while, Memo’s fortunes seem to look up. He gets paid for his job and manages to start sending money back regularly to his family at home, although the money-transmitting booth charges a huge percentage in fees and taxes. His love life is also

looking up, as Luz and Memo strike up an intimate relationship, which is genuine on her part, though she continues to sell his stories without telling him. There is, however, a downside to the work in the *maquilas*, for the longer a person remains connected to the teleworking machines, the more their bioenergy is depleted. Temporary measures such as a shot of *teki*, a high-tech tequila energy-based concoction injected straight into a person's nodes, can help, but it becomes clear that the classic extraction of surplus value from the body of the labourer is now rendered literal, as, beyond extracting surplus value from their labour, the *infomaquilas* are directly draining the workers' veins of energy and vitality and piping it off elsewhere. Rivera cites Eduardo Galeano's famous metaphor of the "open veins of Latin America" (Galeano 1997), and the image also brings to mind Marx's comparison of capital to a sucking vampire: "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx 1976, 342). Memo sums this up in voiceover, linking the appropriation of water to the seizure and capture of the workers' vital forces: "How could I tell [my mother] the truth, if I was only just working it out for myself? They were draining away my energy and sending it faraway. What happened to the river was happening to me."

The appropriation of the commons, as a paradigmatic form of tachment, thus extends from water to the human body itself, its intimate biology and energy transmission networks, which capitalism is now commodifying in its desperate need to expand its frontiers into different spaces and open up new, previously untapped markets even as it manically reterritorializes its internal borders and frontiers. Of course, no *noir* or conspiracy aesthetic is complete without a crime or, better, an expanding chain of criminal networks. The initial crime in this film is the murder of Memo's father by a newly trained drone pilot, Rudy Ramírez (a second-generation Latino). And in many ways the entire film is a slow unfolding of the networks of complicity that lead from the impoverished farmers of Latin America, Africa and China – whose subsistence labour, cheapened by the global race to the bottom in agriculture and commodity extraction, lies at the bottom of a chain of criminal/global

financial networks – through disembodied forms of remote warfare with the proliferation of aerial drone surveillance and bombing raids that maintain the unequal division of labour, to the massive expansion of our much-vaunted immaterial and affective social networks. The fact that the drones are piloted using the same node technology as the *infomaquillas*, and that the drone pilot who killed Memo's father turns out to be the initially anonymous buyer of Luz's stories about Memo, explicitly links the "war on terror" to the global extractive economy, the proliferation of market logic throughout our contemporary "social" networks, and the manufacturing base that provides the communications infrastructure and hardware on which these networks proliferate.

Tachment is, then, the most intimate property of these social and technical networks, *for they effect detachment through the very process of attachment*, and in so doing, they create a new and intimate form of power which is common to urban, economic and social networks. The traditional model of interpellation was always the policeman's hail, even when transposed (within the hegemonic process) onto Ideological State Apparatuses: "Hey, you there!" was merely a synecdoche of "Big Brother is watching you" (Althusser, 1971, 174; Orwell, 1949, 7). But now Big Brother, Facebook and Twitter clearly do not operate in this disciplinary mode even as they address, track, modulate and profiteer from the shifting affects of the multitude. Our fear is no longer the guilt which subjects us as we turn to see if the policeman was hailing us; what controls us now, the new Great Terror, is the prospect of being *detached* from our (social) networks, being thrown from Big Brother's embrace *by our peers*. Yet attachment mobilizes detachment as its most intimate power, draining the body through the very promise of infinite connectivity.

This crime subplot in *Sleep Dealer* involves a chase through the nighttime streets of Tijuana once Rudy has caught up with Memo, followed by a reversal which leads to the creation of an alliance between Rudy, Luz and Memo in an attempt to right the wrongs caused by the appropriation of water resources in Santa Ana del Río. This

instance of “network struggle” involves a combination of Rudy’s drone piloting skills, Luz’s ability to interface between bodies and networks, and Memo’s hacking skills; and it would seem on the face of it to be a vindication of Hardt and Negri’s summoning of Spinoza’s “ingenium multitudinis” to fight the Empire’s biopower on the terrain of biopolitical production (2004, 336): an affirmation of the power of attachment to overcome the alienation of detachment which is its very logic. Yet for all its dramatism in the film, this remains a minor skirmish, which succeeds only in making a hole at the top of the dam which can at best be a temporary incursion into the commodification of the commons. In fact, far from producing new forms of empowerment, it appears, oddly, to lead to the subsequent separation and dispersal of the three “co-workers”.

Predictably, perhaps, the director has his “Emma Bovary c’est moi” moment, and tells us in the commentary track that Luz’s activity and moral dilemmas are his own (and some of her uploaded memories are in fact taken from Rivera’s own documentary film work). The framing of the film, and the frequent use of Memo’s voiceover commentary, makes it clear that the entire film we are watching is one more memory that has been uploaded for sale on TruNode. It seems, from the voiceover, that this one has been written by Memo, and it is left up to us to decide whether Memo has commodified his story to extract surplus value from this labour of affect, or whether this detached fragment can act virally within the network to destabilize its logic and organize new communities of resistance.

It is this biopolitics of affect, whether understood as an attribute of Empire or as an autopoietic logic of biopolitical production, which brings together the various strands raised by this film and discussed in this chapter. From the urban melodramas of the 1940s in Hollywood and Mexico onwards, the most fundamental characteristic of cinema is that it very quickly became a powerful capitalist technology for the capture and commodification of affect. What the commodification and transmission of affect provides, for the price of a cinema ticket, is not only the opening up of a

new market of mass entertainment, but more fundamentally, the raw material which that market most needs, the lifeblood without which it cannot function: the creation of consumers, the intimate fashioning of their wants and desires, their orientation towards consumption. The fascination of *film noir* lies in the fact that its cameras focus almost self-reflexively on the biopolitics of affect, and in particular, the release of feminine sexuality and desire from its traditional reproductive anchoring, and its subsequent recapture by the desiring machine of cinema. The urban setting of most of these films is not coincidental, for the *noir* city is at the obscure interface of the becoming-virtual of the urban. In the subsequent evolution of *noir* into conspiracy film, and later in techno-*noir*, the manipulation of affect is obscurely revealed to be a fundamentally economic matter, linked to ever widening chains of financial corruption and political intrigue. It is the economic charge of its tropes of attachment and detachment, then, that allows *Sleep Dealer* to link together the extraction of surplus value from virtual migrant labour, the commodification of the commons along with the human body and its vital forces, the paradoxical attachment generated in the terminal city, and cinema itself – for which Luz’s visual and affective, yet ultimately commercial storytelling, is clearly an analogue.

The technological administration of affect has of course now spilt over far beyond the confines of cinema and television, reaching into those social networks that are commodifying our most intimate, private, interpersonal relationships, communications and feelings. Vertiginous tendrils of attachment link together the cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, the violently fractured urban spaces of Mexico’s borderlands, the privatization of water, the patenting of DNA, drone bombings of populations who refuse to supply oil to the global economy, the mass migration of impoverished workers, the murder of women in the backstreets around the *maquiladoras*, and the sale of memories on our affective, immaterial and increasingly biosocial networks. And it is this *noir* plot of immaterial attachments and virtual detachments which perhaps provides a glimpse of the mutating imaginaries that populate today’s dangerously widening North–South divide

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