Interview – Alex Rivera

Alex Rivera is a New York based digital media artist and filmmaker. His first feature film, SLEEP DEALER, premiered at Sundance 2008, and won two awards, including the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award. Rivera is a Sundance Fellow and a Rockefeller Fellow. His work, which addresses concerns of the Latino community through a language of humor, satire, and metaphor, has also been screened at The Berlin International Film Festival, New Directors/New Films, The Guggenheim Museum, PBS, Telluride, and other international venues.


Crossed Genres:

In what ways does your mixed ethnic heritage inspire your filmmaking?

Alex Rivera:

I think everybody’s heritage profoundly impacts and inspires them. Every filmmaker is informed by their background, even the people behind Dumb & Dumber, Star Wars, Porky’s 6, and Police Academy. I think I’m no different in that sense.

I grew up in up-state New York in a house that was connected, primarily by technology, to Latin America. The connection that I had through my father to Peru was mediated largely by the television, the telephone, and home videos which were exchanged. I knew that I had Peruvian blood and Peruvian family, but my experience of that other place was very mediated.

That’s become something that I’ve explored in a lot of my work – the way in which immigrants who live transnational lives, in families divided between two countries and typically between the so-called first world and so-called third world – how immigrant families use technology to stitch their families back together and to create a lived experience that crosses borders. Looking at the way in which technology can destroy borders, from an emotional and experiential point of view, and the ways in which immigrants use technology specifically.

Crossed Genres:

You sound like a lifelong sci-fi fan. What examples from the genre most influence your work?

Alex Rivera:

There are some that I think viewers could probably see in Sleep Dealer pretty clearly. Not that Sleep Dealer hits this register or is the same quality as some of these films, but I think in terms of the spirit, it’s pretty clear that films like Terry Gilliam’s Brazil, the aesthetics of films like Bladerunner, and the social issue and the parable around class relationships in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis all influenced Sleep Dealer.
Another reference that I guess is pretty obvious is *Star Wars*, but I think my take on that might be a little unusual. I've only seen *Star Wars* as a story of migration. Luke Skywalker is a peasant farmer whose house is destroyed by an imperial army, and who then goes on the run. He has to go through border check-points and make deals with human smugglers. It's the story of someone who is, in many ways, a war refugee who's uprooted and tossed out into the galaxy. But at its core it has a lot in common with the cinema of migration. Films like Gregory Nava's *El Norte*, or John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Films about people who've had their livelihoods destroyed and have no option but to become uprooted and seek their dreams. Whether it's on the other side of the country, the other side of a border, or the other side of a galaxy, in terms of the underlying story elements, they're all kind of the same.

That was a part of making *Sleep Dealer* that was very exciting to me; the idea of fusing the sort of epic struggle of a migrant worker to survive with the language of the science fiction hero. This in movies like *Star Wars* is very familiar to audiences, but telling that story in a way that makes an actual migrant worker the hero is something sort of unfamiliar, and I hope, innovative.

Crossed Genres:

Generally, how has *Sleep Dealer* been received? Are there any appreciable differences between US reactions and responses abroad?

Alex Rivera:

The reception was different in each phase of its release. It had a festival release, a theatrical release, and then a DVD release and each stage had its own qualities. Most of the feedback I got came in the festival stage while I was going around with the film and talking to audiences face to face. The reaction was exciting; it won some awards and all of that, but more importantly, I think it caught a lot of people off guard. And I think it inspired conversations about the world we live in, and about the genre of science fiction. That was really fulfilling.

It was seen slightly differently in Latin America than in the USA. In Lima, Peru they connected the film to the tradition of neo-realism, which is an important part of Latin American cinema. There, they called *Sleep Dealer* a neo-realist science fiction, and I love that phrase. In Mexico, we had a free screening where 2000 people came out to see it, and at the end there was a long line of people who wanted to ask questions. We turned the mic over to the audience and, one after another, people got up and gave testimonials about their lives. They said, “I live here in Mexico, but my mother’s in Los Angeles. I haven’t seen her in ten years, and she’s raising me over Skype, essentially.” And that reflects very directly on a storyline in *Sleep Dealer*. Another person stood up and talked about a project building a hydro-electric dam up the river from where they live and that was diverting water that had been used traditionally for their subsistence farming. That’s also a storyline in *Sleep Dealer*. It was a really odd experience to have people getting up and giving testimony from their lives as if *Sleep Dealer* was a documentary. It’s science fiction with a lot of fantasy, but I think the politics in the film echoed really directly on people’s lives in Mexico.

Crossed Genres:

You talk like an optimist, even said “the WORLD has a future” and not just the US and other ‘first world’ countries. You describe *Sleep Dealer* as in part about that, yet the film is fairly dystopian. Are you pessimistic about the future, or just realistic?

Alex Rivera:
We don’t know yet who’s going to shape this future, or how.

With *Sleep Dealer*, I was very interested in the idea that technology destroys distance. Obviously with simple technologies like the telephone, you can hear a voice around the world. With newer technologies, we can see live video streaming from around the world. We can transmit that video from devices that we carry in our pockets. As technology advances, it destroys distance in all of these ways. In *Sleep Dealer*, I created characters that were all involved with technology, but who were very alienated at the beginning of the film, even though they’re connected to each other. I think that’s an experience we can all relate to. Then as the narrative progresses, all three of them come face to face with each other and ultimately engage in this act of liberation. The technologies that in the beginning were forces of alienation become converted into tools that serve the characters in a deep and hopeful way, even if it’s just for a few moments.

All of this is to say that I hope *Sleep Dealer* doesn’t come across as an optimistic or a pessimistic film. I hope it’s a film that, at the end, leaves the audience with a feeling of wonder. As technology advances all around us, who will gain advantage from it? Will it be corporations or the Pentagon? Will there be new social movements that we can’t imagine, new solidarities that we’ve never seen before, or maybe a new labor movement that we never envisioned?

**Crossed Genres:**

Arizona law SB 1070 certainly seems to support the world you built for *Sleep Dealer* (and protests of the situation in Arizona have even inspired another movie – *Machete*). What do you think of the situation in Arizona with SB 1070 right now?

**Alex Rivera:**

I’ve been following it really closely, and I could get into the legal twists and turns of what’s been happening to the law, but I think it’s more interesting to think about what it represents. We’ve always lived in a kind of contradiction around our identity as a nation of immigrants, which is core to our myth system, and how that mashes up against our present reality, which is that we’re seeing the most massive migration since the founding of this country. It’s a migration from south to north in which most of the people moving are brown-skinned, and coincidentally, they have the color that they do because they are mostly people with some degree of indigenous blood.

Arizona’s law is sort of the sharpest attack on contemporary immigrants, but it’s just a symptom of this nation trying to figure itself out. You know, ‘who are we?’ Who belongs, who doesn’t and why? How do we decide that? And how do we reconcile that with this wave of people who are coming here, who in some ways are newcomers, but who in a different sense have been here for a very long time?

Because our immigration system is so tightly controlled and punitive, there’re all these people here who haven’t been able to go through the system along proper procedures. So we have a situation where there are almost 15 million people living in this country as a kind of shadow nation (that’s like half the population of Canada). And so we have a huge population inside the United States that can’t vote and that lives in fear of being thrown into jail for working. Arizona’s law, to me, is one symptom of the identity crisis that the United States is going through.

To me, there’s ultimately only one future. If you look at the western hemisphere, it’s very simple. This is a Spanish speaking hemisphere in which most people, to one degree or another, have
indigenous blood. All the way from Argentina, up to here. If you look at it from that point of view, in the future, the demographics of United States become more and more like the rest of this hemisphere. That's what's happening, and I don't think that's a process that can stop. But it's a process that can lead to violence and attacks like Arizona's law, or lead us to consider how to treat that change— which is structural and formative — and that flow of people with dignity and justice.

We haven't really figured that out yet.

Crossed Genres:

Why make 'trans-border fantasies', in particular?

Alex Rivera:

Everybody who's ever written a fantasy – even if it's just meant to be a fantastic children's book about goblins in the forest – wrote from their knowledge of reality. When we talk about fantasies, we're talking about reality.

I've been interested in the idea of trans-border narratives and fantasy because I know we live in a fundamentally trans-border reality. Anyone is reading this on a computer can lift the computer up and see where was it made. Halfway around the world. Take a look at their clothing and see where that was made. Halfway around the world. The food on our plates was made halfway around the world and is typically served to us by people who've moved across borders. The beds we sleep in at hotels are made by people who traveled thousands of miles to do that work.

We feel like we live in a place – New York or Chicago or Dallas or Los Angeles – and we feel like we live in the United States of America, but in terms of what we touch and what we use and what we consume? Almost everything that we actually live with and through comes to us through a trans-national system. And on the other end of that system are people with grandmothers and hobbies, and who tell jokes and have dreams at night. So to me, telling stories or using the genre of science fiction to look at the fact that we're all connected across borders is crucial work. We're all in these very complicated, interdependent relationships across thousands of miles. To me, the trans-national perspective is the only way to understand the world we live in.

Crossed Genres:

What do you have coming out next?

Alex Rivera:

I've been writing, and I'm looking for support to make more projects. I'm working on a concept for a TV series. It involves biological implantable optics and a conspiracy around military robotics. I've also been working on a film based on a true story – actually set in Arizona – that's a comedy-underdog story around immigration and robots. Google 'La Vida Robot' and read the true story, which was first published in Wired magazine.

It took a lot of labor and love to get Sleep Dealer out into the world, and it's taking time to get new projects off the ground. If there are people out there who are interested in the work at all, I'm easy to find.
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