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An Analysis on *Borderland: The Line Within* and Its Impact On Viewers

Introduction

Documentary films can accomplish many things. They share stories of people, provide insights on complex issues, and move viewers to see something that is *real*. The documentary that I am focusing on, *Borderland: The Line Within*, produced by Pamela Yates and Paco de Onis, is a combination of stories and analyses. I will explain how this creative choice from the filmmakers is intentional to help viewers understand a complex issue that is grappling with the lives of many today: immigration injustice. The film is a social issue documentary. *Borderland: The Line Within* is a powerful documentary that intertwines stories of people, tied together with an analysis of the border industrial complex. The film director, Pamela Yates, and the film producer, Paco de Onis, came to speak at Davidson about the impact that they want to have on people with their films. The combination of personal narrative and analysis of the border industrial complex makes *Borderland* an effective film for social commentary because it relies on emotional and reasonable claims to exhibit the inequities of immigration in the United States. First, I will share the context of the film, including discussing Skylight, the media organization that produced the film. Then, I will discuss the concept of a social issue documentary and how *Borderland* fits into this definition. Finally, I will discuss the framing of the film and the creative choice of the filmmakers and how those choices create an impact on viewers.

Context of the film

The film was created to highlight the stories of two migrants who face obstacles unfairly imposed on them as a result of their migrant status, exposing the injustices of immigration within the United States. Skylight is the media organization that Yates created to share stories of advocacy and resiliency by filming revolutions, movements, and stories in Central and South America. The media organization has expanded to two other aspects: Labs, that “create networks of solidarity between artists, media makers, and activists” as well as Outreach, “using our work as tools to effect social change worldwide”.

Borderland focuses on the stories of two people, who will be referred to as protagonists, since that is how Yates references them when speaking about them. Gabi, a woman from Mexico who is a DACA recipient, and Kaxh, a man who is an environmental activist from Guatemala who is seeking asylum because he was being targeted for speaking up against drilling companies. Throughout the documentary, digital humanists are researching the complex systems that Gabi and Kaxh are living firsthand. A statement by Pamela Yates explains why she decided to include them in the film, and why they are so fundamental to the understanding of the film. “These digital humanists—immigrants themselves—are PhD scholars who actively use their high level research skills and delve into digital technologies like artful data visualization to break down how the border industrial complex operates; how both Democrats and Republicans agree to fund its multi-billion dollar existence; what it means for immigrants who are being captured, incarcerated, deported, their families separated”. Their role in the film is important, as they are explaining through a more technical, academic, and political lens what Gabi and Kaxh are narrating as a lived experience. The digital humanists provide an angle that has more context and explanation for Gabi’s and Kaxh’s experiences.

Social Issue Documentary

Borderland is a social issue documentary, in which the content, the timing, and the purpose of the film create an impact on an audience and combat the negative rhetoric of immigration. A social issue documentary has been defined by Belinda Smaill, in an article she wrote titled “Understanding Environmentalism as a Feminist Media Concern: Documentary Filmmaking, Argumentation, Advocacy and Industry”: “Over the last decade or more the production of documentaries with a social change focus, often referred to as “social issue” documentary, has become steeped in the tactics and vocabulary of “impact”. Changes brought by the impact paradigm include a more nuanced consideration of a film’s target audience (who they are and how they will be engaged and motivated” (Smaill). The film is a social issue documentary because it raises awareness of the border industrial complex and how politicians and companies support it and fund it. The filmmakers were also very intentional about the timing of the film’s release, because it was released between the two Trump administrations. The filmmakers wanted the documentary to raise questions about our national ideas of immigration today, and reveal the deep injustices and complexities of individual stories through personal narration. This intentionality of the filmmakers through their creative choices creates an impact on the viewer.

The border industrial complex is analyzed throughout the film by digital humanists in films that have been personally affected by borders and use data to analyze how the border industrial complex is harming families. The border industrial complex is defined by Cristina Jo Pérez in her article, “Performing the State's Desire: The Border Industrial Complex and the Murder of Anastasio Hernández Rojas”: “the increasingly privatized and militarized policing

behemoth that targets racialized migrant threats for violence while increasing profits for US-owned corporations” (Perez). Gabi and Kaxh both experience the harsh impacts of the border industrial complex in their lives through different ways. Kaxh, when he is detained and treated inhumanely at the detention center, and Gabi, when her husband is detained and her DACA status is suddenly revoked. A statement by Pamela Yates explains why she decided to include the digital humanists in the film, and why they are so foundational to the understanding of the film. “These digital humanists—immigrants themselves—are PhD scholars who actively use their high level research skills and delve into digital technologies like artful data visualization to break down how the border industrial complex operates; how both Democrats and Republicans agree to fund its multi-billion dollar existence; what it means for immigrants who are being captured, incarcerated, deported, their families separated”.

An article about film studies discusses how documentaries are an important influence on what people’s ideas are about the nation. In *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation*, Jeffrey Geiger explains, “...documentary films have been important to forming ideas of the US nation, both as an imagined space and as a real place. Yet it is worth considering what makes up the idea of the nation, and whose interests it serves. Concepts of the nation and of national identity are rooted in cultural practices and beliefs, so much so that they might seem beyond questioning” (Geiger). The place of the film is an important one in political conversations in our country today. Immigration is a highly politicized and controversial topic, and it can turn into a conversation about facts and figures and the humanity of the people can be easily lost in those discourses. “Films, with the discourses that surround them and the institutions that support them, are central means through which the idea of the nation is articulated and

culturally determined.” (Geiger). The film analyzes a system that is deeply rooted in our country and that most people do not know about.

The timing of the film’s release was very intentional according to Yates. She explained during her Master Class that she made the documentary as a “cautionary tale” between the two Trump administrations. She felt like she had a role in sharing Gabi’s and Kaxh’s stories, and explaining the border industrial complex to audiences that might have not been knowledgeable about people’s stories and a system that is harmful for thousands of people.

Framing and Creative Choice of Filmmakers

The filmmakers execute the purpose of the film through the mixed methodology of personal stories and analyses of the border industrial complex. The purpose of the film was to create a social commentary on the unjust immigration system in the US. The filmmakers execute this purpose through a mixed methods approach for viewers to gain both a personal and analytical perspective on the topic. A more academic/political aspect of immigration injustice (through the incorporation of the digital humanists and their analysis on the border industrial complex) with the combination of personal stories of people was a creative choice that implied the importance of the situation by aiming for an empathetic and logical response from the audience.

A key aspect of the documentary was the filmmakers’ choice to have the protagonists have agency over what was shared. During her Master Class, Yates talked about how intentional she was about letting Gabi and Kaxh choose the direction in which they wanted their stories to go. Gabi and Kaxh directed the flow of the documentary because they chose the stories that they wanted to exhibit. This was an important choice that Yates and de Onis made, because it could

have been easier for them to neatly fit Gabi and Kaxh's stories into an agenda, but instead, Yates and de Onis let them choose what was shared with the audience.

The way that the stories are presented and told in the documentary are very intentional. Although Gabi and Kaxh were going through extremely hard circumstances, they are showcased as resilient through their advocacy for themselves and their community— Gabi with her neighbors and town, and Kaxh for his people back in Guatemala through his environmental activism.

Gabi had protected status as a resident in the US because she was a DACA recipient, but it was suddenly lifted, and she believes it was due to her advocacy for immigrant rights. Gabi's husband was deported, and she began questioning many things in her community, and knew that she wanted to advocate for herself and others. Gabi talks about how everyone in her neighborhood has had a father and a husband that has been deported, and how the separation of families began with the inception of the country, with enslaved Africans being torn apart from their families. "This is America," she says. When asked about her passion for advocacy, she explains, "'I want my kids to live in a society where they are accepted with dignity and respected simply as human beings'". She works with the Border Network for Human Lives, an organization whose mission statement is: "Building community capacity and leadership, expanding abuse documenting strategies, building a border community-oriented narrative, and elevating the advocacy efforts across the Texas Southern border. The Border Network for Human Lives organized an event where families that had been separated due to deportations could see each for a few minutes. In an emotional scene, a daughter is reunited with her father for three minutes. Gabi is reunited with her husband and father for a few minutes as well. She explains, speaking about others but also herself, "This event allows families to close cycles..they're able to channel that sadness and make it into strength so that they're able to go on, knowing that there is hope.."

(Borderland: The Line Within). The filmmakers highlight Gabi's advocacy to showcase her resiliency in turning an unfortunate situation into an opportunity for fighting for her rights and her community's rights. The filmmakers focus on her work with the organization and how she rallies her community together to provide a meaningful experience for families that have been separated from each other. This exemplifies her resiliency.

The other protagonist in the story is Kaxh, the environmental activist from Guatemala who was seeking asylum. The filmmakers bring context into Kaxh's background, which is his environmental activism in Guatemala, and the history of companies coming into indigenous land to drill for oil. Kaxh fights back for his land and is met with dangerous life-threatening responses from the oil company, so he ultimately decides to escape to the United States for safety. A lot of his story is focused on the journey on foot from Guatemala to the US, and the hardships that migrants face when crossing the border. The documentary's focus on Kaxh's story is to highlight how one's individual fight for justice for the environment can be brave and life threatening, and how a person fighting for what is right can be met with more life threatening situations due to unjust immigration laws and the treatment of migrants as if they aren't valuable. While making the dangerous journey to the US, he is caught by ICE, and explains the conditions of the detention center. "“They keep us here like criminals..ICE is trained in one way or another to cause psychological harm, they make us feel like we are worthless in this country, it's a horrible place where even the strongest cry” (Borderland: The Line Within). Throughout the documentary, Kaxh's journey is told through voice notes to Yates that were exchanged through WhatsApp. They are communicating about his experience, and it is evident how dangerous an event Kaxh is going through in that narration. The creative choice to show that story through voice notes brings the viewer along with Kaxh as he makes the dangerous journey to the United

States. It makes the situation very proximate and stress inducing, causing empathy for the hardships he is going through.

Evergreen Films

The film brings immigration injustice into proximity to audiences, acting as a social commentary through personal narration and analysis. When Pamela Yates, the film director came to speak at Davidson about her motivation to make the film, she discussed how their topics were focused on how to channel anger into an artistic expression, having big themes throughout their documentaries, like courage, and making films “evergreen” so that they can be applied to many movements and revolutions. “Documentary reality... is a cinematic experience of reality that indexes – and points towards – real people, places and events. It is socially produced, and experienced through cognitive and bodily processes. At times this reality is marked by extreme differences from the familiar and everyday, at others by powerful impressions of recognition and closeness” (Geiger). The combination of personal narratives and a more analytical perspective of systems helps the documentary cover different grounds for an overall look of how the immigration system affects people every day.

Works Cited

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