



CARTEL LAND

(USA, 2015)

As themselves, by order of appearance:

TIM "NAILER" FOLEY, Leader of Arizona Border Recon

DR. JOSE MIRELES, Leader of the Autodefensas

ESTANISLAO "PAPA SMURF" BELTRAN, Bodyguard of Dr. Mireles

Produced by MATTHEW HEINEMAN AND KATHRYN BIGELOW. Cinematography by MATTHEW HEINEMAN AND MATT PORWOLL. Edited by MATTHEW HAMACHEK, MATTHEW HEINEMAN, BRADLEY J. ROSS, AND PAX WASSERMANN. Music by JACKSON GREENBERG AND H. SCOTT SALINAS. Directed by MATTHEW HEINEMAN. **(100 minutes)**

Forget it, Jake; it's Chinatown.

-- **Joe Mantell as Walsh in CHINATOWN**

Recent discussions in politics have drawn the eye of the American public to our southern border and to our neighbor just beyond: Mexico. For some time the stream of immigrants into the United States across the border has been cause for political contention, and now, with another election in the not too distant future, it has become all the more relevant. Cartel violence in particular, which has cost the lives of more than 80,000 people, has gained attention in the United States and in international news. Mexican cartels are fueled in large part by business done in the United States, making the issue one that inextricably links the two countries. As such, the border has become a land of many narratives; some of fear, of hope, of hate, and of struggle. It has become a zone of turmoil and questions, and few answers. It is here that we find ourselves in CARTEL LAND, and it is in this zone that we are forced to confront some difficult truths; truths not just about the situation in which we have found ourselves as two nations, but also about humanity.

Director Matthew Heineman originally intended CARTEL LAND to focus on the ambiguities of vigilante activity through a single subject; Arizona Border Recon leader Tim "Nailer" Foley. Heineman learned of the group, which ferrets out cartel scouts on the American side of the border, through a Rolling Stones article. After a few months of correspondence, Heineman and his small crew began filming in Arizona. During this time, Heineman learned of vigilantes fighting the cartels in Mexico, and jumped at the chance to branch into a potentially parallel story. After a brief time in Mexico with the vigilante group, called the Autodefensas, Heineman chose to expand the film's focus to include the Michoacán based group. Heineman was only able to gain access to the necessary groups after seven to eight months of correspondence, but his patience and persistence granted him an unprecedented view of cartel and vigilante activity.

However, with increased access came increased danger. Heineman and crew found themselves at the site of meth lab raids and shootouts. The crew was small, often consisting of only Heineman, a translator, and a driver. As precautions, the crew wore bullet proof vests and were tracked by a security firm. They stayed in contact with journalists to determine safe travel routes, and always worked with a getaway car nearby in case danger escalated quickly.

The scenes of violence and drug related activity have led to comparisons between CARTEL LAND and the AMC crime drama BREAKING BAD, seemingly encouraged by the director. In a moment that seems to reference the show almost directly, the film opens with cartel members producing methamphetamine in the desert night, their leader claiming to have learned his cooking techniques from an American father and

son who studied chemistry. This moment is just a hint of the narrative style used throughout the film, which suggests the too perfect nature of the story constructed in its beginning and in the minds of the people involved.

Heineman is fairly new on the directorial stage, with his first feature length project, *OUR TIME*, being released in 2009. He later worked on HBO's *THE ALZHEIMER'S PROJECT*, under famous documentary filmmaker Susan Froemke, best known for her work on *GREY GARDENS* (1975). Heineman worked with Froemke again on, *ESCAPE FIRE: THE FIGHT TO RESCUE AMERICAN HEALTHCARE*, which premiered at Sundance in 2012. *ESCAPE FIRE* used an essay/verité style, as appears in films like *CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER* (1960) and *HOOP DREAMS* (1994).

Heineman chose to diverge from this style with *CARTEL LAND*. Taking inspiration from Jehane Noujaim's *THE SQUARE* (2013) and Bart Layton's *THE IMPOSTER* (2012), Heineman wanted to approach *CARTEL LAND* with an active, observational style that felt like it was always "in the right place at the right time."

The appearance of Kathryn Bigelow's name as a producer may lead one to draw connections between movies like *THE HURT LOCKER* (2008) and *ZERO DARK THIRTY* (2012). These connections would not be without merit. While Bigelow has directed action films that feel like documentaries, *CARTEL LAND* is a documentary that feels like an action film. This resonance as action drama seems even more apparent when considering the films affinity with the Western genre.

Heineman has described his time in Mexico as feeling like the Wild West, lawless and devoid of governmental institution. That Wild West comes through in the cartel land, the zone of exception, removed from time, where the vigilante is hero and violence is justified. The fantasy of justified violence is persistent in the minds of the men and women involved in the struggle against the cartels. Heineman was hopeful for the Autodefensas in their fight against both the Knights Templar cartel and their own government, and that hopefulness comes through in some of the early moments of the film. These opening narratives seem straight out of a Sergio Leone film; the evil gang harassing the townspeople, the corrupt government officials who ignore pleas for aid, the heroes who take matters into their own hands to save the day.

But the real world comes crashing through. Flawed men face the futility of fighting a vastly more powerful, often faceless, evil. Heineman found that the battle between the Autodefensas and the cartels, which at first seemed stark in its moral divisions, became much more nuanced. *CARTEL LAND*, becomes a film not just about combatting the evils that exist beyond the reach of justice, but the evils we create ourselves.

-- Kevin Warstadt, GR '16
10/18/2015

<http://nofilmschool.com/2015/02/sundance-award-winner-cartel-land-matthew-heineman>
<http://www.scpr.org/programs/the-frame/2015/07/07/41389/matthew-heineman-enters-no-man-s-land-in-cartel-la/>
<http://www.indiewire.com/article/meet-the-2015-sundance-filmmakers-62-matthew-heineman-braves-mexican-drug-cartels-in-cartel-land-20150129>

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