



DENIS VILLENEUVE: THE PATH TO DUNE

Sicario

Denis Villeneuve's drugs-war thriller *Sicario* opens in heart-stopping fashion with a raid on a house near Phoenix, Arizona. What FBI agent Kate Macer (an excellent Emily Blunt) and her SWAT team find there recalls the horrific revelations of serial killer movies – including the behind-closed-doors horrors of *Prisoners* (2013), Villeneuve's last collaboration with ace cinematographer Roger Deakins. Like that flim, *Sicario* (which takes its title from the Mexican word for 'hitman') induces a sense of cold-sweat anxiety as it asks moral questions about the extent to which tactics beyond the limits of the law can be justified.

Kate soon finds herself enlisted into a task force devoted to bringing to justice drug lord Diaz, head of the cartel behind these and many other killings. It's a mission that takes them over the Tex-Mex border and back again – by private plane, through tunnel or via road crossing – as often as it finds them vacillating between zones of legality and lawlessness. Our questioning point of identification, Kate is an unusually passive protagonist: a sceptical back-seat passenger on a turbulently immoral thrill ride. Her flip-flop-wearing senior Matt (Josh Brolin) takes evident pleasure in keeping her in the dark as he repeatedly pulls the rug from under her feet.

Sicario ramps up early on with a clandestine foray into the dangerous border city of Juárez, where drugs-war casualties can be seen hanging from an overpass as Kate peers wide-eyed through a car window. In a blisteringly taut sequence that doubles as a smash-and-grab on Michael Mann's dominion of electrifying action, the crack team careers through the city's dusty streets, busts a guy out of prison for extradition, then gets stuck in a huge traffic jam crossing back through passport control to El Paso.

It's thrillingly shot, but something lingers after the tension of the ensuing shootout with a carload of Mexicans: a sense that this tour through south-of-the-border otherness has been glibly fine-tuned to frighten. Though we're saved the yellowed desert-vision tinting that denotes Mexico in US dramas even of the order of *Traffic* (2000) and TV's *Breaking Bad*, Villeneuve's film will not be the one to temper America's paranoia about its Hispanic neighbour.

Sicario offers neither the scope nor the depth to give more than a broad-brush picture of the war on drugs and how the violence and corruption have spread upwards beyond the Rio Grande. There's nothing to balance out its vision of Mexico as a no-go zone where drugs wars rage and fire must be fought with fire.

Central to this nihilistic thrust is Benicio Del Toro's wolfish operative Alejandro, a key on-the-ground adviser in Matt's team who has his own vengeful motivation for bringing Diaz to ground. It's Alejandro who shuts down Kate's protests at their above-the-law tactics by likening ending the cartels' reign of terror to discovering a vaccine – voicing the troubling thesis of this ambiguous film that certain lengths are worth going to. By making Alejandro's ultimate act of retribution its climax and leaving Kate on the sidelines, Villeneuve's movie arguably squanders its final act with a moment that has little of the hard-earned cathartic energy found in similarly Jacobean scenes in *Breaking Bad*.

Regardless, in common with the director's other films, including *Incendies* (2010) and *Enemy* (2013), there's an energy and visual panache to *Sicario* that make for compulsive viewing. Special credit must go to Deakins's cinematography, with its sharp framing and fattening aerial compositions of the parched desert landscapes, while the clamorous, dark-ambient rumbles of Jóhann Jóhannsson's score are brutally effective.

Samuel Wigley, *Sight & Sound*, November 2015

Denis Villeneuve's violent drug cartel drama *Sicario* is the latest in a long line of films to exploit the mythic potential of the lawless US-Mexico borderlands – an ethnocentric tradition which plants its feet firmly on American soil and looks south in despair

Inevitably, the US-Mexico borderlands have become a 'zone', one of those cultural arenas where vectors of violence, greed, innocence and power meet, in a perfectly resonant landscape, and attain a dizzying existential torque. The 1,900-mile border, surrounded by thousands of square miles of desert (some densely inhabited, some uninhabitable), is no longer just a geopolitical fact, but a text of modern crisis.

Drenched in anxiety and secrecy, Denis Villeneuve's *Sicario* may be the region's *12 Years a Slave*, the movie that articulates to the world what's at stake in southern North America, and how it articulates deeper cataclysms for all of us. Its title means 'hitman' in Mexican slang, but though the film does show such killers, and the grim evidence their work leaves behind – swinging from bridges or left to decompose behind walls – its focus is really on those agencies north of the border tasked with holding the sicarios' paymasters to account. Emily Blunt plays an FBI agent enlisted by a task force led by Josh Brolin to assist in bringing cartel kingpin Manuel Diaz to justice – even if it means the mission trampling over the fine line of legality while 'shaking the tree' in the middle of the drug trade's turf war in order to out him. As Benicio del Toro's special adviser tells Blunt, finding Diaz would be like discovering a 'vaccine' to prevent further murders – ends justifying means as all sides slide toward a violent abyss.

Borders have always been where the shit goes down. Many borders ache with cultural meaning, but for Americans, the southern border and the badlands on either side of it have always vibrated with a particularly mythic, even Old Testament tension – the sense that here lies the nethermost edge of civilisation, such as it is, and beyond there be tygers, or at least bandidos, crumbling social structures, shallow graves, primitive religiosity and endless wasteland. Mexico was also where Americans looking to escape America, or merely the law, would drain out, for centuries, enabling outlaw sociopathy to ferment in the wilderness like corn liquor, creating a wild frontier region equal parts doom and opportunity, as much a product of America, and its need for a primal 'there' to backlight the ideological 'here', as it was of old colonialism, poverty and lunar terrain.

It's a myth, of course, as millions of happy American tourists could tell you, but it's also somewhat true, and it's been rampagingly true since 2006, when for a matrix of circumstantial reasons – predominantly, new Mexican *presidente* Felipe Calderón deciding to send troops against the drug cartel battalions – the carnage and lawlessness ramped up exponentially, and the rough beast of the plains began to hold sway. Here's how CNN.com evoked the scene: 'Thirty-five bodies left on the freeway during rush-hour in a major

tourist city. A person's face sewn onto a soccer ball. Bodies found stuffed in barrels of acid. Heads sent rolling onto busy nightclub dance floors.'

An academic theory-discipline – border studies – has even emerged from the fraught North American horse latitudes, more concerned with immigrant rights and identity than whatever mysterious, nefarious quality we sense on *la línea* from the north. Of course, even to consider the nine-year-old Mexican Drug War as a 'border' issue, with its body count now ranging around 160,000 Mexicans, is very ethnocentric, even neo-colonial – as are the movies that take it on, *Sicario* included, almost always standing on American sand and looking south.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight & Sound*, November 2015

SICARIO

Directed by: Denis Villeneuve
©: LLC Black Label Media
Production Company: Thunder Road
Presented by: Lionsgate, Black Label Media
Executive Producers: John H. Starke, Erica Lee, Ellen H. Schwartz
Produced by: Basil Iwanyk, Edward L. McDonnell, Molly Smith, Thad Luckinbill, Trent Luckinbill
Unit Production Managers: Susan McNamara, John H. Starke
Supervising Location Manager: S. Todd Christensen
Post-production Supervisor: Brad Arensman
Script Supervisor: Judi Townsend
Casting: Francine Maisler
Written by: Taylor Sheridan
Director of Photography: Roger Deakins
A Camera Operator: Roger Deakins
Steadicam Operator: Bela Trutz
Visual Effects Supervisor: Louis Morin
Visual Effects: Oblique FX, Fly Studio, Cinesite
Special Effects Supervisor: Stan Blackwell
Editor: Joe Walker
Production Designer: Patrice Vermette
Supervising Art Director: Paul Kelly
Costume Designer: Renée April
Make-up Department Head: Donald Mowat
Hair Department Head: Jennifer Bell
Main and End Titles: Scarlet Letters

Music: Jóhann Jóhannsson
Conductor: Anthony Weeden
Orchestrators: Jóhann Jóhannsson, Anthony Weeden
Sound Mixer: William Sarokin
Sound Re-recording Mixer: John Reitz
Supervising Sound Editor: Alan Robert Murray
Stunt Co-ordinator: Keith Woulard

Cast

Emily Blunt (*Kate Macer*)
Benicio del Toro (*Alejandro*)
Josh Brolin (*Matt Graver*)
Victor Garber (*Dave Jennings*)
Jon Bernthal (*Ted*)
Daniel Kaluuya (*Reggie Wayne*)
Jeffrey Donovan (*Steve Forsing*)
Raoul Trujillo (*Rafael*)
Julio César Cedillo (*Fausto Alarcon*)
Hank Rogerson (*Phil Coopers*)
Bernardo Saracino (*Manuel Diaz*)
Maxmiliano Hernandez (*Silvio*)
Kevin Wiggins (*Burnett*)
Edgar Arreola (*Guillermo*)

USA/Mexico/Hong Kong 2015
121 mins

DENIS VILLENEUVE: THE PATH TO DUNE

Enemy

Wed 1 Sep 14:30; Sun 12 Sep 12:20; Tue 21 Sep 20:55

Prisoners

Wed 1 Sep 20:00; Tue 14 Sep 14:15; Sat 25 Sep 17:00

August 32nd on Earth (Un 32 août sur terre)

Thu 2 Sep 20:50; Thu 16 Sep 18:20

Blade Runner 2049

Sat 4 Sep 20:00; Sat 18 Sep 17:15; Fri 24 Sep 14:15; Sun 3 Oct 17:30

Maelström

Mon 6 Sep 18:15; Fri 17 Sep 20:55

Polytechnique

Fri 10 Sep 21:20; Sun 19 Sep 12:15; Thu 30 Sep 20:50

Incendies

Sat 11 Sep 20:30; Fri 17 Sep 17:50; Sun 19 Sep 14:45

Sicario

Sun 12 Sep 18:10; Wed 22 Sep 20:40; Sat 25 Sep 20:40

Arrival

Thu 16 Sep 20:45; Tue 28 Sep 14:15; Sat 2 Oct 17:30

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