

# Cultural Daily

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## Cartel Land — To Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, July 15th, 2015

In December 2010, my mother-in-law organized a trip for our family through the state of Michoacán, México, to visit crafts workshops that are so plentiful throughout the region. The capital city of Morelia has been declared a World Heritage Site for its beautiful and historic colonial center, which plays host to the significant Festival Internacional de Cine each fall. While checking into our hotel in the nearby town of Uruapan, we couldn't help but notice an enormous blockade that had been erected in the middle of the street. We were a little bit intimidated to learn that the Chief of the Military was holed up in the neighboring hotel, just half a block away, as part of an ongoing, aggressive offensive in the war on drugs being waged by the Mexican federal government under the leadership of former President Felipe Calderón at that time.

Michoacán, México – enclave to the notorious Knights Templar drug cartel, along with Arizona's Alter Valley (Cocaine Valley) – a 52-mile desert corridor along the U.S. border with México, form the backdrop for the gripping and complex documentary ***Cartel Land*** from filmmaker Matthew Heineman. Heineman won awards for both Best Director and Best Cinematography, US Documentary at Sundance Film Festival this past January. That he won, moreover, the endorsement of Kathryn Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*) as Executive Producer of his documentary film, is an indication of the intensity of the true-life suspense thriller he has so heroically captured. It is one thing to read about the situation on the ground in the *Wall Street Journal* or *Rolling Stone* magazine, it is entirely another, to vicariously experience that reality as Heineman leads us to explore in his film.

Heineman tracks the efforts by small town physician Dr. Jose Manuel Mireles, “El Doctor,” who has organized a citizen infantry, the Autodefensas, to rise up against the Knights Templar Cartel that is menacing the peaceful existence of his community of Tepalcatepec. Heineman counterpoints this campaign of the Autodefensas in México with the campaign to defeat this same enemy on the U.S. side of the border led by Tim “Nailer” Foley and his paramilitary unit, Arizona Border Recon. Both Mireles and Nailer are fifty-five years old, both feel their government has failed them, and both men have taken the law into their own hands to fight evil in the name of good.

Nailer, perhaps unwittingly, echoes Hillel to defend his home-brewed vigilantism: “If not me, who? ...” You cannot help but consider what you might do in his shoes. (The Jews might make an exodus, I posit; after all, isn't that the lesson of Passover?) Heineman forces you to consider the moral quagmire of such unceasing violence and victimization in the absence of leadership that can be trusted to respond to protect its citizenry. Never overtly, mind you, but to the degree that the

Mexican government has never announced their intention to disarm the Knights Templar, *Cartel Land* leaves you with the subtle impression that current President Enrique Peña Nieto may well serve at the pleasure of the Cartel. Throughout the film, we grow in our appreciation for the critical role that discerning and ethical leaders may provide in such inflammable circumstances.

*Cartel Land* spins a tale with many surprising and unnerving twists. As Heineman explained when we had a chance to speak by phone: “Ultimately, we ended up with a much different story than we started with, and I think the film is much better off for it. If you end up with the story you started with, you weren’t listening along the way.”



*Director Mathew Heineman, CARTEL LAND, accepts the Special Jury Award for US Documentary, Sundance Film Festival 2015. Photo by Calvin Knight, courtesy of Sundance Institute.*

**Sophia Stein:** You have said, “The central question that I am trying to answer with this film is whether it is just for citizens to take the law into their own hands – what would you do if violence came to your front door?” What did you conclude in your own mind about that question?

**Matthew Heineman:** We’ve seen this story play out throughout history – armed groups of men and women rising up to protect their towns, their people, their communities against evil forces. We see it playing out throughout the world today, and we will continue to see it play out for the foreseeable future. This idea of what provokes men and women to do that was fascinating to me. Obviously, as you see in our film, it’s not an easy thing to sort of wrap up in a bow.

It started out, from my perspective, as this sort of hero-villain story – guys in white shirts fighting against guys in black hats, the classic Western. But in the end, the lines between good and evil became ever-more blurry. Some people want me to put like nice, neat, little boxes around our main characters – this is who they are, paint this simplistic portrait – but that didn’t interest me. I think the complexity of the situation and of the decisions that each person is making is what fascinated me. I wanted to examine that complexity. I wanted to revel in it and explore it.



*Autodefensa member standing guard in Michoacán, Mexico, from CARTEL LAND, a film by Matthew Heineman.*

**Sophia:** Such an interesting part of the experience for me watching the documentary is how my point of view is constantly shifting while I am watching it. When I first see Tim “Nailer” Foley and the Arizona Border Recon, I think, what kind of deranged lunatic is this? – this self-appointed enforcer, a middle aged man in military fatigues playing war games. And I think, vigilantism is not O.K., by any means in the United States. Then, the story moves to México where, given the absence of a police force beyond corruption and a government that is committed to enforcing the law, I find myself considering that maybe this type of vigilantism is O.K. in México. And I feel shocked by the hypocrisy of my own response.

**Matthew:** (he laughs) Well, then I succeeded. That was the goal. That was the goal in cutting this film. I didn’t go into this film with any pre-conceived notions. I just wanted to go into it with an open mind. I really wanted to challenge my own beliefs and perceptions. I went on this sort of insane journey over a year as I was embedded with these vigilante groups on each side of the border. There were many moments out in the field while making this film in which I was surprised,

in which I felt like the rug was pulled out from under me, in which something was revealed to me that changed my opinions about the situation in general or about one of our main characters. I wanted to recreate those moments in the editing process. I want the audience when they watch the film to go on that same journey that I went on – to feel those same moments that I felt. That is precisely how we conceived of the film in the edit room.



*Dr. Jose Mireles, in CARTEL LAND, a film by Matthew Heineman.*

**Sophia: Tell me a little bit about Dr. José Manuel Mireles – “El Doctor” – Leader of Autodefensas. Members of his family had been murdered and at one time, he was kidnapped and held hostage by the Knights Templar drug cartel?**

**Matthew:** That’s not totally substantiated, but like everybody else in Michoacán, México, he was affected by the violence and saw the violence first-hand.

I was filming in Arizona first, for about four or five months, when my father actually sent me an article about the Autodefensas. “Hey, it’s kind of similar, to what is happening,” he pointed out. Little did he know that right when I read it, I immediately wanted to create this parallel reality, with vigilantes on both sides of the border. I did some more research, found a profile piece on the doctor, reached out to this journalist, called her and asked, “Hey, what’s he like, Mireles, as a character, as a person?” And she said, “You know, he’s the most interesting man I’ve ever been around.”

As a doc filmmaker, that’s something you like hearing. So I asked her if she would introduce me, and the next day I was on the phone with him. Two weeks later, I was down in México filming. “El Doctor,” as he’s known, or José Manuel Mireles, is a small-town physician, from Tepalcatepec in Michoacán, México, who was leading this citizen uprising against the Knights Templar Cartel — after years of rape, murder, and extortion at the hands of the Cartel.

**Sophia: The group led by Mireles, the Autodenfas, were invited to be sanctioned by the government. In your film, we see Mireles protest on the grounds that: “The federal government has yet to comply with any agreements in the past, not one.” I was curious, what agreements was he referencing?**

**Matthew:** There have been a number of times previous to that in which the government had tried to co-opt, legalize, and reign in the movement. For a while there, the Autodefensas were operating sort of on their own. They were successfully beating back the Cartel. They were basically doing the dirty work that the government has been unable to do for many years. So the government allowed them to expand, to take over town after town, until at one point they grew so big that the government realized that they were becoming a problem. It was rumored that the Autodefensas had roughly twenty thousand men and women with assault rifles patrolling the towns at one point. The government thought this wasn’t necessarily a good thing anymore and tried to reign them in – unsuccessfully, at first. Then, eventually, as the movement started to splinter and break apart, partially due to the government’s intervention, the government eventually co-opted part of the movement and legalized them into the Rural Defense Force.

**Sophia: What is the reaction of our government to the Arizona Border Recon? Are they sanctioned at all by the U.S. government?**

**Matthew:** So the essential answer on the U.S. side is that they don't necessarily condone citizen vigilante groups, or whatever name you want to put on them, but the reality on the ground is that they welcome them. They work hand in hand – at least with the groups that I was with. They share information. As you see in the film, they collaborate. I think that if you talk to U.S. Border Patrol, they feel like they are understaffed, undermanned, and that they need all the help they can get. Like Nailer and like his guys, they feel like they are fighting a David and Goliath battle – with Goliath obviously being the Cartel.

**Sophia:** You have commented that you think the film will have “a massive impact in México.” In what ways, do you expect that it will change things?

**Matthew:** The film is being released right now concurrently in México and the U.S. I was down there a couple of weeks ago to do press and screenings, and it was extraordinarily emotional for me to be there. It was the first time that I've been back since filming there and the first time that I watched the film with a Mexican audience. Obviously, this story on México is reported in the newspapers everyday, but what I think we were able to do is to get into dark corners of this world to paint a picture that people had never really seen before. It shows the very blurry lines between those fighting for good, those operating on behalf of the Cartel and the government, and how in the end, those [factions] all intersect in the film. So I think, it provides a really stark, visceral, personal reality that I hope will prompt an important conversation. We've seen pretty massive response to the film already in the press. As people go out and see the film in theatres, hopefully that dialogue will continue.

**Sophia:** What kind of results would you like to see from that dialogue?

**Matthew:** I'm not a policy expert; there is not like one specific policy change that I would like to see. I think the most you can ask for with a documentary is to get people speaking, to get people's hearts moving – to get people to begin conversations and hopefully those conversations continue beyond just the evening of viewing the film. If we can do that, I think we've succeeded.

**Sophia:** I hear you. You know who really needs to see your film is Donald Trump! How did Kathryn Bigelow become involved as your Executive Producer?

**Matthew:** *The Hurt Locker* is one of my favorite movies of all time. After *Cartel Land* premiered at Sundance, Kathryn Bigelow got a copy of the film, and I think she was really moved by it. So we were connected, and through a number of conversations and meetings, we decided to bring her on board as an executive producer to help raise the visibility of the film, to help promote the film and the dialogue around it, as well.



Director Matthew Heineman, *CARTEL LAND*.

**Sophia:** You have said that you had no experience filming in risky situations previously. Obviously the film put you into some pretty precarious positions – in shootouts, in meth labs in the middle of the desert. What kind of precautions did you take to protect yourself and your crew?

**Matthew:** First, we spent a couple of weeks talking to journalists and other people about the ramifications of filming in Michoacán. We did as much due diligence as we could. I was then connected to an amazing local producer, a local fixer, Daniel Fernández, and a security firm. They

knew the area and helped keep us safe while we were down there. Every morning, we would call a series of journalists and let them know what roads we were driving on and what towns we were going to in case we got kidnapped. We wore bullet-proof vests. We did whatever we could to stay safe. At the end of the day, when you're in a shoot out and bullets are flying, there is not much that you can do, besides run the other way. And I was there to capture that, to be there for those moments – so that's what we did.

**Sophia: Do you speak Spanish fluently?**

**Matthew:** I could understand about fifty to seventy percent of what was being said. I knew enough Spanish to understand the essence of a conversation. The interviews were translated live. But a lot of it was just [reading] basic human emotions, situations in which you don't need to speak a language to understand what is happening. When I was jammed in the back of a car with a guy a foot away from me holding a gun to another guy's head, trying to get information out of him – they could have been speaking Russian, they could have been speaking Vietnamese, it wouldn't have mattered, you could still understand what was happening.

**Sophia: A scene in the film that really haunts me is the scene where the Autodefensas are taking one of the drug lords into custody at gunpoint and the daughter of the drug lord – a young girl who I imagine is around maybe ten years old – she is shivering with fear and then she begins shrieking, “I’m going to get a knife. I want to kill myself.” It is heart-wrenching to contemplate the toll that the violence takes upon the children. How did you deal with the emotional toll of making the film, on a daily basis?**

**Matthew:** First, that guy was not a drug lord. It was very unclear who he was. The one thing that was clear was that that day, he was driving the wrong colored car. He happened to be driving a white Cherokee, they were looking for a white Jetta, and so they thought that might have been him who had been shooting at them. As the film plays out, there are things that maybe imply that he might have been connected to organized crime at some point, but we really don't know. That was what was so frightening about being there, especially as the film progressed – is you really didn't know if you were with the good guys or the bad guys. And that was really scary.

There are hundreds and thousands of journalists all across the world telling very difficult stories. My crew, we are just one of many, who are telling difficult stories in difficult places. There have been dozens of people killed in México covering these narco wars. It definitely took a toll on me personally, and as a filmmaker. There are things that I experienced that I will never forget. But through the process of making the film, I fell in love with México. I fell in love with the people of Michoacán, and I felt this great duty and a great obligation to tell this story.

**Sophia: Now that you have made this kind of film. Would you do it again? Would you risk putting yourself in harm's way to tell another story like this?**

**Matthew:** I love my family, and I love my girlfriend, and I don't think I want to do something like this again. For now, I'm focused on getting this film out there.



*Meth Lab in Michoacán, Mexico from CARTEL LAND, a film by Matthew Heineman.*

**Sophia: In the end of the film, you return us to the meth cooks for a shocking reveal. The masked meth cook claims, “You can't stop the cartels, no matter what you do, it's a never**

ending story.” “We’re the lucky ones, for now,” he acknowledges. Surprisingly enough, Nailer expresses a more optimistic point of view, claiming, “The cycles do stop, you just got to want to change them,” and he cites the example of his having escaped the physical and mental abuse of his father. Where do you think the situation will go from here?

**Matthew:** I think it is important to remember when you look back on this film at the Autodefensas, this movement was born out of a place of trying to bring basic safety and security to their towns, their families, and their communities where the government had failed to do so. They were living in a society where the very institutions that were there to protect them were either not there or were in collusion with the Cartel. They live in Cartel Land, under the rule of the Knights Templar, which rules through terror and extortion. There is certainly evidence of the Cartel’s presence from the local tortilla makers to multinational corporations. The idea of citizens banding together to rise up to not only speak out against the horrors of the Cartel but to combat them, I think is an important legacy to remember.

You know, forty-three students were killed in the state of Guerrero, just south of Michoacán, where we filmed. They were student activists who were basically arrested by the police, handed over by the [local] government to the [Guerreros Unidos] Cartel, and all burned to death. Incinerated – to nothing. It was awful. This is a story that grabbed both national and international headlines. But what we saw happen was that hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets of México City [in protest to this atrocity]. I don’t know if it will provoke change, but I do find hope that people are standing up and speaking out.

*Top Image: Tim “Nailer” foley in CARTEL LAND, a film by Matthew Heineman.*

### ***CARTEL LAND – Official Website***

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