FILM SUMMARY

Director Matthew Heineman is not a war reporter. He has never visited the battlefields of Afghanistan or served time on the frontlines of Iraq. Yet, after watching his ambitious documentary, CARTEL LAND, one could easily be convinced otherwise. He delivers the murky, dark world of drug cartels and self-appointed border patrols with access and style as bulletproof as any of the best wartime films.

Heineman’s interest in the U.S.–Mexican border war was sparked when he read about a group of vigilantes taking the law into their own hands in Arizona. Months after beginning filming their story he learned about the Autodefensas, Mexico’s answer to vigilantism in the heart of drug cartel territory, offering the parallel story south of the border. Rather than filling space with statistics and presenting a film based on failed politics, Heineman offers the human story. CARTEL LAND offers images of meth chefs cooking a batch, of Tim “Nailer” Foley and Dr. José “El Doctor” Mireles – the respective leaders of the Arizona and Mexican vigilantes – during their most intimate moments, and of the everyday Mexican people crying out at the persistent injustices carving out the shape of their existence.

Every which way you turn in, corruption reigns. Not even the people’s savior, El Doctor, is clean. His marriage crumbling under the weight of betrayal, leaving the Mexican people suspended in a state of endless suffering as the government remains in cahoots with the drug cartels, who rule the roost south of the border. North of the border, Nailer and his unregulated cohorts take matters into their own hands. As gunshots sound, as bodies fall, as the certainty of terror rules throughout Mexico, as the good(ish) guys serve time while the dirty ones rise through the ranks, CARTEL LAND shoots out of the raging, uninterrupted battlefield. The dark echo of one meth cook’s voice is all that remains: “We’re the lucky ones...for now.”
FILM THEMES

In the words of self-appointed border vigilante Tim Foley, “I believe what I am doing is good. I believe what I am standing up against is evil.” Once the immensely multi-layered scenario in the world of Mexican drug cartels unfolds, however, poverty and despair seem the only certainties.

THE BORDERLAND BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL
Along the U.S.-Mexican border, a stretch of desert offers an invisible line between two nations with much in common—and much in dispute. “This is the wild west. There’s nothing down here. There’s no law,” stated Arizona vigilante Foley. Taking border patrol into his own hands, he works to keep the cartel, and undocumented migrants, out—protecting his country from what he sees as an imminent threat. South of the US, the Mexican population lives in fear of omnipotent cartels, and in the moment that the Autodefensas begin to gain ground over the cartels, they begin the slow slide into corruption. The border between good and evil seems less geographical than philosophical, and while the cartel firmly rests on the side of evil, where vigilantism sits is not so clear.

POVERTY AS THE PURPOSE
The distribution of wealth is extremely unbalanced in Mexico, with poverty taking over as the driving force behind many citizens’ daily decisions and lifestyles. In the words of one meth cook, “We know we do harm with all the drugs, but what are we going to do? We come from poverty.” With little money and few opportunities to live a life clean and clear, people often reach for the available options, and drug cartels flourish where desperation abounds.

VIGILANTES
Many ask where the U.S. government in all of this, the border patrol in place to keep the American border safe? Rather than waiting around for something improbable to happen, Foley and associates slide into the role of on-site vigilantes, a position firmly rooted in the American psyche. When the system in place fails, some see no other option than to grab hold of the reins themselves, as in the case of the Arizona vigilantes and Mexican Autodefensas. In the words of Mireles, “When the government can’t provide basic security for its people, we can take up arms in legitimate defense of our lives, our families.”

WHERE’S THE GOOD GUY?
Hope seemed to peek out across the horizon with the arrival of the Autodefensas, a group by the people for the people. Around the time of their first anniversary as an organized group, however, corruption has rears its ugly head, exposing the dirt permeating each and every crevice in this continuing crisis. “Some of the leaders who make the rules are the first to break them,” stated an Autodefensa member. “It is just a neverending cycle,” one of the meth cooks declares. By the end of CARTEL LAND, the sensible conclusion is that dirt breeds dirt and good guys are scarce, as the Gandhi figure of reform in all of this—El Doctor—woos yet another mistress to his side.
FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. List five words that describe the impact CARTEL LAND had on you and the feeling you walked away with. How would you describe the film to someone who has yet to see it?

2. Before watching Cartel Land, how much did you know about Mexican drug cartels? Did you have any preconceptions which were affirmed or undermined by what the film presented? Do you feel motivated to learn more about the situation after watching the film?

3. Have you ever been to Mexico? If so, describe your impressions. If not, what image do you have of Mexico, and how was that idea formulated?

4. What type of drug abuse is prevalent in your community? How informed are you on the type of drugs available in your community and their origin?

5. Discuss your thoughts on Mexican immigrants in the United States. Should the U.S.–Mexico border be further fortified or should Mexicans be allowed to enter the U.S. more freely? Are immigrants an essential part of the American society and economy?

6. Is a tendency towards corruption a basic human trait? Can anyone be corrupted or tempted to cross the line between right and wrong? Have you ever been “corrupted” and led to go against your better judgment?

7. Although Director Heineman doesn’t delve too deeply into the underlying beliefs of the Arizona vigilantes, what are your thoughts about the assertion that racism fuels their actions? What other possible motivating factors could inspire an individual to join the Arizona vigilantes?

8. Discuss the notion of vigilantism. What is your definition of a vigilante? Does the word carry a negative connotation? Are there any ways in which vigilantism is a positive force?

9. Do you trust the authorities where you live? Do you feel safe and protected? If yes, can you be specific about what they have done to build your trust? If no, have you ever considered taking matters into your own hands, or witnessed community members who have? What have been the effects of this?

10. What do you believe Director Heineman wished to communicate with CARTEL LAND? Was there an underlying message to the film? Was this a tale of good vs. bad guy, and if so, who is the good guy?
FILM FACTS:

• Following its 2015 premiere at the U.S. Documentary Competition at Sundance, CARTEL LAND captured numerous awards, including both a Cinematography and Directing Award at Sundance and Best Film of the Documentary Competition at the Moscow International Film Festival. The film was also nominated for such prestigious accolades as the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and Best American Feature Film at the Champs-Élysées Film Festival.

• Director Heineman had just completed his previous film, “Escape Fire,” about the U.S. healthcare system, when he read an article in “Rolling Stone” about the Arizona vigilantes. After speaking with Nailer for a few months, he began filming him in the summer of 2013. After five months with Nailer, Heineman’s father sent him an article about the Autodefensas, which gave him the idea of the parallel story of vigilantism in the U.S.-Mexico War on Drugs.

• Director Heineman spent a total of 9 months in Mexico filming CARTEL LAND, during which time he never carried a weapon and formed a great deal of trust with his subjects to be granted intimate access. When he went to Mexico for the film’s release, he had a bodyguard with him.

• Heineman has a basic knowledge of Spanish, but needed an interpreter for most negotiations.

• The footage from the meth lab was shot on Heineman’s last day in Mexico.

• Poverty in Mexico continues to be a major force behind the drug trade, which offers quick access to money. As of 2013, 44% of the Mexican population lived beneath the national poverty line. Wealth is very unevenly distributed in the country, with 10% of the wealthiest having 42% of all income, and 10% of the poorest with 1%.

• As of 2015, The United States spends approximately $51 billion annually in the War on Drugs.

• Methamphetamine was first developed in Japan in 1919, and was widely used in WWII to keep troops awake. In 1970, it was classified as an illegal drug by the U.S. government. In 2012, 1.2 million Americans reported using it over the course of that year. The manufacture of meth produces substantial environmental waste.

• Between 2007 and 2014, more than 100,000 Mexicans were killed in the war against drug cartels in the country, and over 26,000 have gone missing. Between 2008 and 2014, 47,000 migrants were killed in organized crime as they attempted to cross the border into the U.S. Guns feature greatly in the Mexican drug war, although there is only one legal firearms retailer in the country, as compared to 6,700 licensed firearms dealers in the U.S. along the border with Mexico.

• “Vigilante” is Spanish for “watchman” or “guard.” Vigilantism is deeply rooted in U.S. society, as the first settlers were not protected by a criminal justice system and had to fend for themselves.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. The Drug Policy Alliance is an organization actively working to reform U.S. drug policy. Find out how to get involved, and educate yourself up on the legislation behind the violence: www.drugpolicy.org

2. For another perspective on life in Mexico and the long and perilous journey many economic migrants make to the United States, watch “Who is Dayani Cristal?” (2013), featuring Gael García Bernal.

3. Students for Liberty are actively campaigning to make a positive impact in the U.S. War on Drugs. Find out more at EndtheDrugWar.org.

4. What causes the violence and bloodshed in the Mexican Drug War? Stop the Drug War believe that drug reforms and legalization should be explored. Learn more: https://stopthedrugwar.org/about
We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It’s as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.