Articles

Air deportations, audiovisual securitization and the sensory construction of the volatile borderscape

Deportaciones aéreas, securitización audiovisual y construcción sensorial del paisaje fronterizo volátil

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Abstract

Based on an analysis of a couple of videos disseminated on social media by the governments of the United States and El Salvador, this article reflects on the use of audiovisual strategies to present an iron fist approach to Venezuelan migrants deported to El Salvador as a third country. This raises the question of whether we are dealing with visual representations that articulate a multilateral assembly of air deportations. The text argues that the circulation of these images not only securitizes and criminalizes migrant populations by hegemonic powers, but also represents an effort to expand the scope of a borderscape of control beyond territorial space, extending it to a transnational air domain. This political order subsumes an aesthetic-sensory imaginary that spectacularizes the politics of cruelty with the circulation of these videos.

Keywords: deportation, securitization, borderscape, sensescape.

Resumen

A partir del análisis de un par de videos difundidos en redes sociodigitales por los gobiernos de Estados Unidos y El Salvador, este artículo reflexiona sobre el uso de estrategias audiovisuales para presentar la mano dura contra migrantes venezolanos deportados a El Salvador como tercer país. Con ello, surge la cuestión de si se está ante visualidades que articulan un ensamblaje multilateral de deportaciones aéreas. El texto argumenta que la circulación de estas imágenes no solo securitiza y criminaliza a las poblaciones migrantes por los poderes hegemónicos, sino que representa un esfuerzo por expandir los alcances de un paisaje fronterizo de control más allá del espacio territorial, extendiéndolo a un dominio aéreo-transnacional. Este orden político subsume un imaginario estético-sensorial que espectaculariza la política de la crueldad con la circulación de estos videos.

Palabras clave: deportación, securitización, paisaje fronterizo, paisajes sensoriales.

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Introduction

One of the main campaign promises of President Donald Trump's first administration was the construction of a huge wall along the entire border between Mexico and the United States of America (USA). Although this promise could not be fulfilled as originally proposed, the creation of a hard, fixed and impermeable border was intended as a territorial barrier to prevent migrants, who were perceived as a threat to U.S. public safety, from crossing.

This idea of a fixed, hardened border has been transformed at the beginning of his second term and expanded into other practices that complicate and broaden the scope of border control strategies beyond territorial limits. Of course, this is not a practice attributable to his administration. Under Joseph Biden's administration, the expansion of the border was articulated through a process known as border externalization: the displacement of immigration control and border surveillance practices to third countries beyond national borders. Nevertheless, there is a mechanism that, while not new, is drawing attention to aspects that are reconfiguring notions of the contemporary border landscape. These vary constantly in multiple dimensions: deportation flights and audiovisual sensorialities.

Based on a semiotic analysis of two videos posted on social media by the governments of the United States and El Salvador, in which they use audiovisual strategies to show an "iron fist" against Venezuelan migrants deported to El Salvador as a third country, this paper reflects on the formation of a multilateral regime of air deportations. This regime is sustained by the circulation of images that securitize and criminalize migrant populations, expanding the scope of a border landscape that is no longer limited to the "territorial imperative" (Brambilla, 2015), but extends along a line of aerial and transnational continuity. This political order is integrated with an aesthetic-sensory order that spectacularizes cruelty through the circulation of these videos.

As Balibar (2004) states, analysis should not be restricted to thinking about borders within the confines of the nation-state, but rather they should be conceived at the center of the political space. This study reflects on how the politicization of airspace, as an alternative form of border, is intensifying through deportation flights and how certain audiovisual mechanisms are favoring these border landscapes. This paper aims to interpret the meanings constructed around borders and deportation through the audiovisual strategies used in these two videos.

This study is situated within the perspective of border cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field that adopts a broad conception of borders to analyze a variety of border construction processes, whether political, administrative, social or symbolic. Its "analytical approach does not focus on the border as an ontological object, but rather on the practices, discourses, materialities and representations that constitute it" (Fellner & Wille, 2025, p. 48).[1] Border cultural studies incorporate the cultural turn in border studies and the border turn in cultural studies. According to these authors, this analytical perspective is interested in the configuration of various border formations,

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[1] All texts originally written in a language other than Spanish have been translated by the author.

understood as symbolic-discursive processes and sociopolitical practices that shape the inside from the outside and the heterogeneous differentiations between otherness and sameness.

In this regard, this text will analyze how audiovisual representation participates in the expansion of borders into other dimensions that constitute aerial and sensory borderscapes, based on security-related aerial imaginary and the exercise of control over the bodies of migrants who are classified as an invasive otherness that is dangerous to national security.

Thus, first, the contextual conditions of the case of deportees to El Salvador will be presented, followed by a review of the processes of border externalization in direct discussion with debates surrounding border and sensory landscapes (borderscapes/ sensescapes). Subsequently, an argument will be constructed on how security-related aerial imaginary is used to tighten deportation policies and thereby institute a volatile or expanded border in the air. Then, a semiotic analysis of the aforementioned videos will be conducted, and the findings will be discussed, integrating discussions on visual securitization and the articulation of a sensory paradigm in the construction of migration policies and border landscapes. Finally, these visual representations will prompt reflection on the idea of witnessing a transnational assembly of deportations.

The U.S. deportation machine and two videos of air deportations

Adam Goodman (2020) points out that the U.S. political system has largely been shaped by the functioning of what the author calls the deportation machine: a system of migration, demographic and labor control. This machine has shaped the idea of U.S. citizenship by constructing migrants and foreigners as frightening and potentially threatening figures who must be expelled from the country. Although this author's book points out that deportation policies are part of a long-standing system in U.S. politics, the author agrees with other research that suggests that a shift toward punitive measures began in the 1990s. The security consequences of this shift at the border have become more acute in the current century. These would be the corollaries of the events of September 11, 2001, the fight against terrorism and the relentless defense of internal security (Macías-Rojas, 2018; Martínez & Slack, 2018; Nevins, 2002).

The media in Europe and many countries in the global north domesticated the idea that airplanes were the norm for deportation processes (Walters, 2018a). Nonetheless, the U.S. case would have operated differently, given that most deportations during most of the 20th and 21st centuries have been Mexicans deported by land (Del Monte Madrigal & Bautista León, 2021). This political and migratory scenario is beginning to change at the dawn of Donald Trump's second term.

The current U.S. administration's list of priorities is shaped by the rhetoric of the migrant invasion, spearheaded by its most conservative political circles (Redden, 2025). Of the twenty core promises in the Republican Party platform and Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign, the first two were: "*1*) seal the border and stop the migrant invasion; *2*) carry out the largest deportation operation in American history" (GOP Platform, 2024). Perhaps that is why, on February 18, 2025, just one month into Donald Trump's second term, the White House posted a video

showing and encouraging viewers to listen to the chains binding migrants about to be deported by plane, in a clear attempt to portray deportation as something pleasurable for the U.S. government. It was a media coup that would underpin his administration's priority: to deport as many migrants as possible. Moreover, although the evidence at the moment does not show that things have changed in numerical terms, but rather that the same number of people continue to be deported (Trac Immigration, 2025), the media and visibility effects of harsh treatment of the migrant population have been established.

In early February 2025, the governments of the United States and El Salvador reached an agreement under which El Salvador would take in migrants from other countries in exchange for USD 6 million. The terms of the agreement portrayed migrants as criminals and dangerous individuals, thus necessitating a punitive approach to the issue. On March 16, Nayib Bukele, president of El Salvador, posted a video showing a huge security apparatus in place to receive 238 Venezuelans deported from the United States, despite a federal judge ordering Donald Trump's administration not to do so. Both the Trump and Bukele administrations claimed that the deportees were members of a criminal organization. However, they never provided any evidence to support this claim. In fact, the U.S. government invoked an 18th-century wartime law to claim that the presence of migrants constituted an invasion and invoked state secrecy privileges to avoid providing information about the deportation of these Venezuelans.[2] On the contrary, human rights organizations pointed out that this law was invoked to justify racist and dehumanizing criteria for deporting these people (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Expanded borders: externalization, securitization and border-sense/scapes

The characteristics of the object of analysis in this work—which involves videos and complex sensorialities, deportation flights and migration and security policies—make it necessary to establish conceptual correlations between a perspective of expanded and expansive borders and one related to sensory environments or landscapes. The idea is to provide analytical tools in this text to interpret how security-based migration control is expanding not only through air infrastructure, but also through other expanded sensorialities.

In recent years, there have been attempts to reorganize migration management through multilateral efforts. These involve cooperation and coordination mechanisms between nations to manage and channel migration flows in an orderly, safe and regular manner, as agreed in the Marrakesh Compact. This approach emerges from the assumption that migration will not stop and, therefore, its management must be based on cooperation among the different States through which migrants transit in a safe and orderly manner (Castro Franco, 2016; Ghosh, 2000; Lavenex, 2024; Mármora, 2002). Nonetheless, the protection referred to in the global migration governance

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[2] The issue was widely discussed not only in the media, but was also part of negotiations amid government decisions, court rulings and presidential contempt for the law. The problem became more complex given that once these people arrived in El Salvador, they were under the jurisdiction of that country. In other words, when deportees are transferred to third countries, in addition to the transfer of migrants, there is also a transfer of responsibility for the care of the deportees.

regime has also been interpreted as a form of control and governance of unwanted populations that takes the form of a humane regime of governance and population control (Domenech, 2013, 2017; Estévez, 2020; Geiger & Pecoud, 2010; Mezzadra, 2005; Overbeek, 2002; Varela Huerta, 2020).

These multilateral migration control strategies with a human face (Domenech, 2013) become remote migration control strategies (FitzGerald, 2019) when they transfer the mechanisms for managing, administering and restricting migration beyond national borders. Multilateral cooperation mechanisms constitute a form of border externalization when migration controls operate beyond a country's territorial limits, as in the case of the United States. The literature on the externalization of borders has pointed out that border violence is "outsourced" to other countries as part of the neoliberal regime of mobility governance (Bigo, 2008; FitzGerald, 2019) and that it is part of a transnationalization approach to security (Salter, 2010; Zaiotti, 2016). Thus, as can be deduced, this involves a reconfiguration and dispersion of the border space toward transnational assemblages for the management of migration flows.

This strategy was implemented by Donald Trump's first administration with the Remain in Mexico program and safe third-country agreements, and by Joseph Biden's administration with the implementation of Title 42 and, especially, cbp One (Customs and Border Protection One) (Del Monte Madrigal, 2023; Kocher, 2023). This externalization of the U.S. border underwent a transformation in Donald Trump's second administration with the cancellation of the cbp program, the revocation of humanitarian parole and the removal of protection for many of the people who entered through cbp One (Odgers-Ortiz et al., 2024). The priority of Donald Trump's second administration has been to deal with what it describes as a threat on its own doorstep, promising the largest deportation program in U.S. history, driven by rhetoric about a migration invasion (Redden, 2025).

One of the conclusions of this paper is that media coverage of deportation flights should be interpreted as multilateral migration management efforts, similar to those established under the Marrakesh Pact. This is analyzed based on cooperation mechanisms between two countries, as was the case with the deportation of 238 Venezuelans from the United States to El Salvador.

Border securitization

The articulation of the extended border scenarios in the videos goes hand in hand with the expansion of security logic into the air. As Bigo (2002) pointed out, the externalization of borders and remote migration control should in fact be seen as part of transnational government strategies of (in)security, where migration control and punitive and surveillance policies are part of maintaining a political order based on the exclusion of undesirable and feared migrants who are categorized as criminals and a threat to the country's security.

The criminalization of migration in the United States is a long story that has been told in other spaces (Ábrego et al., 2017; Fussell, 2011; Hauptman, 2013; Martínez & Slack, 2018; Stumpf, 2006), and refers to the broad process in which different discursive and/or rhetorical aspects construct migrants as criminals through laws, programs, operations or devices of representation, among others. It is claimed that behind the

efforts to tighten deportation policies and expand borders there is a security logic that is expressed in visual and discursive formations, which consequently fabricate threats from outside—drug traffickers, terrorists, migrants, viruses—(Del Monte Madrigal, 2021). The Donald Trump administration has currently sought to place openly anti-immigrant visual rhetoric in the public sphere, a strategy evident in political discourse and media coverage of these efforts, as seen in the related videos.

What is important to note is that, as the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998) states, when something is declared a security issue, it is implemented accordingly. The securitization of migration and borders is, therefore, the process by which migrants are declared (and thereby turned into) a threat to a country's national security. In fact, as Walia points out, the profiling of migrants is not separate from a border regime sustained by a racist state and a capitalist system (Walia, 2021). During Donald Trump's second term in office, there has been a considerable push not only to criminalize the presence of migration but also to expand racist security logic based on the rhetoric of invasion (Redden, 2025). The impetus behind this rhetoric stems from the desire to suspend procedural guarantees and protection of human rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. It should be remembered that the Constitution specifies guarantees that may be suspended in the event of invasion. However, these efforts have also been instrumentalized with the revival of obsolete laws to expel migrants, as was the case with the Alien Enemies Act of 1798.[3]

In any case, what has been observed is an expansion of the security logic that had already been in operation—including in multiple national aerial security mechanisms such as drones and radars—and a continuation of the global deportation regime. This expansion of security logic into the air has created a kind of volatile border, that is, a border that moves through the air. The geographies of power are also articulated in transit and in the means and infrastructures of transport, not only at national borders. Aerial infrastructure thus takes shape as part of the security border assembly.

Related to the biopolitical and necropolitical perspectives on controlling migrants' bodies and the possible fatal consequences, Walters, Heller and Pezzani (2022) point out, through their concept of *viapolitics,* that the means and technologies of displacement also participate in the politics of migration control. This concept observes the bordering process beyond national boundaries and locates travel and transport infrastructures as spaces of power and control. William Walters (2018a) has warned of the need to recognize aviation as one of the infrastructures of deportation that complicates migration control scenarios and extends the border landscape into the air by intertwining a diversity of technologies, institutions and actors in the forced movement of people.

Consequently, these approaches reveal the analytical ineffectiveness of viewing the border apparatus as constrained by a fixed, material and static line located at national boundaries. Rather than a static place, the border, its operation and its effects should be viewed as processes of control, filtration and classification that are

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[3] The Alien Enemies Act is a wartime regulation that empowers the president to deport those considered enemies or invaders of the nation. The Alien Enemies Act was used to deport the 238 Venezuelans featured in one of the videos analyzed in this article. The use of this law raised serious doubts about the risk of human rights violations in times of peace (Yon Ebright, 2025).

dynamic, mobile, volatile and dispersed across multiple practices, programs, infrastructures and regions. With the visibility of deportation flights, discursive and material productions of dispersed borders appear and, therefore, the expansion of the border landscape (borderscape).

Borderscapes and sensescapes

The perspective of borderscapes calls for not taking borders for granted as fixed geopolitical entities. It encourages analytical imagination to visualize them in a diversity of practices, spatial connections, functions and processes in flux and constant transformation, not necessarily defined by territorial imperatives (Brambilla, 2015). Brambilla, the main promoter of the concept, has attempted to deterritorialize the word "landscape", which in English incorporates the idea of land, in the same way that Appadurai (1996) has used this suffix to account for the fluidity and unevenness of globalization scenarios. Nonetheless, the author draws on an earlier meaning of the suffix -scape, which concerns shaping or forming. Thus, the notion is that landscape is not something given, but rather something formed by a complex network of practices and power relations. In this context, borderscapes refer to expanded borders in a variety of practices, scenarios and dimensions. Specifically, the concept of *viapolitics* focuses on mobility (air, sea, land) as a means of expanding the scenarios and practices of border generation within the discussion of borderscapes.

From this perspective, the border expands into multiple interactions that become visible through a kaleidoscopic lens. It reflects not static border lines but mobile and relational spaces of power. Border scenarios that transform in space and time, but are involved in controlling the movement of people. "Borders themselves also travel and are not fixed, but are designed to be as mobile as the subjects and objects 'in motion' that they seek to control" (Brambilla, 2015, p. 25).

From this point of view, the border is displaced or delocalized. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it ceases to be important; quite the opposite, in fact, as the border is placed at the center of the political space by expanding into other dimensions beyond those of the terrain.[4] In addition to the aerial dimension that this paper seeks to highlight, another dimension made explicit in these videos is the sensory dimension. The sensory realm plays a key role in reorganizing migration control and visual securitization, as seen in this sensory-discursive assemblage.

The term sensescape has been used to expand the range of sensory interactions within a specific environment, thereby critiquing the conception of landscape as visual consumption or as the representation of an external setting from a perspective centered on sight. The notion of sensescape has been proposed to evaluate the multisensory nature of the human experience of a specific space or environment (Buzova et al., 2021). This concept, like that of borderscapes, does not refer directly to physical environments, but rather to sensory experiences that are socially, materially and culturally configured.

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[4] Although these discussions of territorial landscapes attempt to go beyond what is known as the "territorial imperative", from a historical, social and political point of view, territory is not only the physical dimension, but also the aerial and subsoil dimensions. Special thanks to the reviewer for pointing this out.

One important debate surrounding this concept worth highlighting here concerns the fact that the sensescape, as a socioculturally shaped experience, is also shaped by power dynamics and relationships. From the perspectives of anthropology and geography, for example, the discussion has focused on the interaction between the anthropology of the senses and material culture to understand sensory perceptions intertwined with the cultural, spatial and power dynamics of a specific society (Howes & Classen, 2014; Rodaway, 1994). In this regard, the sensory landscape can also be co-opted or regulated by powerful entities. This argument is important for the analysis of this case, as it is the highest levels of government in the United States and El Salvador that are appropriating sensory practices from the digital world and redirecting them toward the pleasurable dimension of immigration control and expulsion practices.

Border-sensory landscapes are articulated through security. In this context, it is possible to account for security aerial imaginary as those symbolic aspects that sustain and institute border-sense/scapes.

Securit-aerial imaginary and the volatile border: the dome as defense and remote control in the air

On May 20, 2025, Donald Trump announced the creation of the Golden Dome, a missile defense shield designed to act as a protective blanket over the entire United States. The Golden Dome is a program to create a multi-layered air defense system spanning the sky, sea and even outer space that will protect the United States from drones, ballistic missiles, hypersonic missiles and advanced cruise missiles, as well as attacks launched from the other side of the world or even from outer space. It is inspired by the Iron Dome that protects Israel, but with even more advanced technology. The Golden Dome, of course, is not a new idea. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan had already launched a similar program during the Cold War, but it was canceled due to rising costs and technological problems (Powell, 2025). The implementation of this program and its results will be evaluated over time.[5] The truth is that aerial imaginary articulated in terms of national security has been around for at least forty years in the highest circles of U.S. politics[6] and continues to be a primary reference point for establishing a defense and remote-control system.

The imaginaries of an air defense system contribute to and establish U.S. national security. Beyond being held up as representations of an objective or concrete reality, imaginaries can be thought of, according to Castoriadis (2013), as creative elements that shape and form social reality. As such, the imaginary is an instituting principle of the social, whose effectiveness lies in its ability to create and recreate new forms of meaning and significance to organize reality. In this case, it refers to aspects of the U.S.'s security measures against external threats. Social imaginaries, then, are

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[5] At the time of writing, there is fierce criticism of the costs of this program and the potential returns at the expense of public spending that could result from the participation of tech moguls who have closely supported the president during his campaign and presidency. Likewise, the Pentagon has accepted that it is possible that this Golden Dome will not be completed before the end of Donald Trump's second term (Lowell, 2025).

[6] One pending issue is the tracing of these imaginaries in various historical, literary and political narratives.

understood as a set of shared meanings, created historically and socially, that constitute social reality. They are human creations of a symbolic nature that give meaning to social life. They are not fixed but, being part of a creative process, can create new meanings and establish new forms of social organization. According to Castoriadis, it is impossible to understand social realities

> without a unifying factor that provides meaningful content and weaves it together with symbolic structures (...) [which is] of the order of meaning, and which is the imaginary creation proper to history, that in and through which history is constituted in the first place. (Castoriadis, 2013, p. 258)

Imaginaries, of course, are not individual creative forces but rather collective and historical ones. Thinking about the aero-imaginaries that underlie certain security actions, the issue is not what a president or an administration bureaucrat thinks on their own, but rather the historical and social symbols and meanings that feed into these security discourses, which are, by definition, collective. As Castoriadis points out,

> meanings *are* obviously not *what* individuals consciously or unconsciously represent, nor *what* they think. They are that through which, and from which, individuals are formed as social individuals, with the capacity to participate in social action and representation or speech. (Castoriadis, 2013, p. 566)

The image of migrants as a threat has long been part of the Manichean media debate (Chávez, 2017). Likewise, the idea of invasion as part of the rhetoric of threat construction is a long-standing construct of conservative American groups with extensive political influence (Redden, 2025).

This construct has relied heavily on audiovisual media. A series of studies have shown that these are tools of propaganda and cultural warfare, which greatly influence people's behavior and respond to the ideological interests of political and economic elites (Althusser, 1974; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Zuboff, 2019). Similarly, numerous studies have shown that the criminalization of migration has played a central role in the articulation and reinforcement of security-based migration policy (Del Monte Madrigal, 2021; Vigneau, 2019), which extends beyond written discourses and is also visually articulated through imaginaries (Hansen, 2011).

When considering security-related aerial imaginary in the context of migration, it is important to remember that FitzGerald had already used the dome metaphor to discuss remote migration control mechanisms (FitzGerald, 2019). FitzGerald's dome metaphor is used to explain how certain nations in the global north implement migration policies that position airspace and its infrastructure as a setting for migration control. Although FitzGerald's metaphor is used in asylum analysis to examine how these policies seek to prevent asylum seekers from reaching their territories—a necessary condition for applying for asylum—it can also be considered within the strategies that amplify, extend and externalize border controls to countries in the global south. Although this idea of the dome is framed in the literature on border externalization, it is clear that airspace is conceived from a security perspective. Thus, other countries, through control of their air infrastructure, act as border guards, keeping out all those considered undesirable or threatening by countries in the north, such as the United States or European countries.

The construction of the border-sense/scape
through audiovisual mechanisms

Walters (2018b) warns of the analytical dangers of viewing deportation linearly as a process of expelling a person, since forced movement involves infrastructure, material resources, institutional arrangements, connections between places, distribution of resources, relations between governments and so on. It is necessary to understand how these infrastructures and relationships shape deportations. Nevertheless, accessing information on this subject is complicated, as no open data is available. To this end, Walters and the authors of the *viapolitics* idea have promoted the diversification of methodological approaches. They highlight an approach to the visual aspects of deportation in which intensive analysis of images, maps and other visual and audiovisual materials can reveal the structures of control. That is, the visual is not merely an illustration but information with its own epistemological status. In this way, the analysis of videos uploaded to social media is proposed as a means of constructing data and as an alternative to accessing information about air deportations, which is largely restricted.

To delve deeper into the videos, a semiotic analysis was carried out, which involves breaking down and recomposing their formal elements and aims to understand the videos as a system of signs that were organized to convey a specific meaning (Metz, 2002). Here, it is interesting to interpret, through the analysis of their formal elements, the meaning of deportation evoked by these videos. This analysis aims to understand how the audiovisual medium synthesizes a diversity of semiotic codes (images, sounds, editing, etcetera) to offer a unified narrative of a complex set of elements. In this way, the analysis helped unravel both the denotative level (what the image shows) and the connotative level (the symbolic aspects evoked) (Barthes, 1971), which together create meaning in these audiovisual productions. It is important to note that an analysis of this type allows for the generation of an interpretive distance from an academic perspective; however, this approach does not provide an understanding of the videos' reception, nor does it fully exhaust the intentionality of the person who broadcasts them.

At the denotative level, a non-innocuous strategy is immediately evident: both videos are filmed and edited in a vertical format. This means that they are designed from the outset to be played on mobile devices and shared via social media, the most widely used platforms in the contemporary era. In other words, from their conception, these videos are understood as tools for the mass dissemination of deportation security strategies that aim to shape the understanding and imaginary configurations of large sectors of the population.

On the same denotative level, the first video, posted on social network X (The White House, 2025) on February 18 by the White House, consists of seven shots that make up a 41-second linear narrative about the moment when a person is being prepared for deportation until they board a plane with their hands and feet chained. It is an ordinary sequence whose jumps in space and time, although small, are hidden

by the continuity editing. Most shots last between four and five seconds, giving the video a fast pace, except for two that last nine and ten seconds, respectively; these are two close-ups of the chains, first placed on the floor and then around the bodies of the deportees.

In a sequence alternating between wide and medium shots, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ice) agents from Enforcement and Removal Operations (ero) are seen preparing the chains that will later be placed on the deportees, a situation later shown in close-up to emphasize the chaining. The effort to climb the stairs of an airplane in chains on a sunny day goes from a slightly low-angle close-up to a full low-angle shot as they enter the plane. The audio in the video is ambient, highlighting the sounds of the scene portrayed. The chains creak as they are dragged across the floor, and when they are tightened, the airplane engines also emit a loud noise. These sounds, as noted in the following paragraph, have an important security purpose.

The post uploaded to the White House's social media accounts is titled "ASMR: Illegal Alien Deportation Flight 🔊". Beyond labeling these individuals as illegal, rather than undocumented—which already hints at the criminalization of migration—the key connotation of this video lies in the letters ASMR and its speaker icon, which stand for autonomous sensory meridian response, a neologism that refers to a sensory and synesthetic experience in response to visual and auditory stimuli (Barratt & Davis, 2015). On social media, however, ASMR has become a digital entertainment trend focused on relaxation and pleasure through high-fidelity images and sounds. In this video, the White House not only showed how chained immigrants were being deported—which in the social imaginary is associated with the idea of punishing a criminal—but also claimed that doing so is pleasurable, enjoyable and relaxing. With this video, the White House is letting people know that seeing and hearing the chains of deportation is something that can be perceived as pleasurable, so criminalizing migrants has now become a sensory delight.

On March 16, 2025, El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, uploaded a video on X (Bukele, 2025) in which he wrote a long message stating that 238 members of what he called "the Venezuelan criminal organization Tren de Aragua" had been transferred to the Cecot (Spanish acronym for *Centro de Confinamiento para Terroristas*, Confinement Center for Terrorists) for one year and that the United Satates had paid for it, making this prison more self-sustainable. He also noted that 23 members of MS-13 had been sent to it. He concluded by noting that, as a step forward in the fight against organized crime, he is also helping his allies and he offered blessings to both countries.

The three-minute video narrates the reception of the deportation planes by a large police force and their transfer by road to the detention center, where they are escorted at all times by a large security force. This video is a more technically elaborate audiovisual narrative, with multiple shots, music and sounds that reflect the use of greater cinematic resources. Technically, it is an episodic sequence that compresses time by organizing a linear narrative into episodes, summarizing in just three minutes the different stages of the deportees' reception until they enter the detention center, actions that could have taken place over perhaps a couple of hours.

On a denotative level, the video features background music throughout, composed mainly of percussion and occasionally emulating police sirens with a synthesizer. The video also uses wide drone shots to establish the dimensions of the security force. In the first section of the video, at the airport at night, wide shots and high-angle shots with a moving camera are used to show the plane surrounded by dozens of armed police officers. They are interspersed with medium shots at ground level showing how the police officers take one arm with one hand and bend the heads of the deportees with the other. They are then chained and loaded into armored trucks waiting on the runway, escorted by a corridor of armed men.

There are medium shots showing details inside the truck, such as dragging a deportee inside or lifting their shirt to show the tattoo on their back. One of them has their hair forcibly pulled to expose their face. In the transfer section, most shots are wide, aerial or overhead, following the huge convoy of patrol cars with their emergency lights on along dark roads. In addition, the music and sound accompany this section with helicopter propellers that stop, giving way to the sound of the trucks arriving at the prison compound. The lights in this section are mostly blue and red from the patrol cars.

Inside the Cecot, full shots show the order in which the deportees are placed in trucks and transported on foot, with their arms held and heads bowed, to a sterile space where, in medium shots, they are forced to kneel, and hooded figures shave their heads and beards. Here, the only close-up in the video is inserted, showing the resigned faces of two deported men. There, kneeling, the ambient sound begins, they are asked their names, and the deportees answer in a medium shot. After repeating this dynamic, an open shot of the prison galleries is now shown, along with the forced transfer of people with shaved heads and in chains, dressed in shorts and white shirts. The video ends with an almost overhead shot next to the cells where some of these shaven-headed people are sitting in the lotus position, while others are being taken into the cells by a group of hooded agents.

At the connotative level, what is found is an articulation of multilateral efforts in the management of the deportation of third-country nationals. This video addresses the case of the 238 Venezuelans and 23 Salvadorans who were widely reported in the media because the United States did not show legal evidence to deport some of these people. The case of Kilmar Ábrego was perhaps the best known of all.[7] The truth is that these multilateral efforts articulate an extended border landscape where, first, there is an extension of immigration controls and expulsion processes to third countries; second, there is a criminalizing and dehumanizing treatment of deportees from a punitive perspective; and, finally, the logic of audiovisual securitization plays a key role in its construction.

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[7] Kilmar Ábrego was deported despite a 2019 court order prohibiting his deportation to that country for fear of persecution. The Donald Trump administration claimed that he was one of 23 members of MS-13, a claim that his family denied, but the U.S. government invoked state secrecy to avoid providing further information. After a complex legal battle, a disagreement between the two governments over responsibility, and intense media focus on the case, the United States allowed him to return, but he was immediately detained to face charges of alleged conspiracy to transport migrants. At the time of writing, Ábrego remains in detention and has stated that he was tortured at the Terrorism Confinement Center (Cecot) in El Salvador.

Although it is the culmination of decades of anti-immigrant and punitive efforts, this video clearly consolidates the link between immigration control and the fight against crime. The deployment of security measures by the Salvadoran authorities, which seeks to demonstrate the police-military force of the state, therefore implies punitive treatment of deportees. They are no longer classified as criminals but as terrorists and are transferred to the Cecot. This mistreatment is made possible by the application of security logic, which, instead of considering them a threat to the country's security, presents, in both videos, the idea that they pose a continental threat. Thus, it is implied that they deserve to be treated with the same rigor and force with which terrorism is punished.

This video contains a connotative element that is a corollary of the enormous security apparatus: the dehumanizing treatment of deportees is a way of turning cruelty into a spectacle. As Bordwell and Thompson (2015) point out, based on certain visual conventions, the elements of cinematic composition interact to have a narrative, empathetic and emotional impact on the viewer. The montage of long and medium shots, where what becomes evident are bodies subjugated by police forces—faces lowered or raised depending on the police officer's hand, shaved heads of bodies on their knees, or bodies thrown into a van—are elements of heavy-handedness and cruel treatment that, in addition to homogenizing migrants as threatening figures of terror, are presented in a sensationalist manner, prioritizing the impact of emotional revulsion over any empathy or due process.

One difference that can be seen in the videos is that, although both treat deportees like criminals with unusual violence by showing them in chains, El Salvador's treatment is much more aggressive. Not only because of the security measures deployed, but also because of the dehumanizing treatment of these people, who have their heads pulled, are thrown into cars, have their hair shaved, and so on. The use of more complex cinematographic resources than just a cell phone and dramatic percussion music contributes to the spectacularization of these actions, a kind of 'marketing' of deportation.

Audiovisual securitization and the volatile border

As noted, the border is not a fixed, immovable line; on the contrary, it is an expansive process involving multiple practices, interactions and infrastructures that is also constantly changing and evolving. Here, there is a volatile border, that is, a border landscape that extends through the air and whose punitive and migration control logics have been transforming and can move through its means of transport and air infrastructures. To that end, these videos show the security-oriented aerial imaginary used to construct the volatile border landscape.[8]

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[8] The word volatile refers to the idea that something flies or can move through the air, but it also implies that something is changeable or mutable. The use of the term *volatile border* here refers to both meanings of the word: that the border is also in the air and that one of its characteristics is its constant transformation.

By analyzing these two videos, it is possible to understand the borderscape that extends toward aerial infrastructure from the security- and punishment-oriented logic of chaining these people, both in expulsion and reception. It also resizes sensorially, creating a border-sense/scape. The border dome, solidified by security-conscious aerial imaginary, is being put into operation by deporting by air people who are perceived as criminals, invaders and even terrorists. Thus, a borderscape is articulated, extending into aviation infrastructure in such a way that "air deportation is more widely recognized as a central axis in the border landscapes of migration policies" (Walters, Lecadet & Parizot, 2022, p. 4).

The sensory experiences depicted in the first video are presented from the position of power held by the U.S. government. In this case, when articulated as part of an ASMR video, the practices of expulsion are equated with pleasurable sensations: for this U.S. government, deportation is a matter of pleasure. What the video is pointing out is that, for viewers aligned with anti-immigrant rhetoric, there is joy and delight in feeling the textures of deportation. These sensory textures, therefore, connect with the dynamics of control to add a sensory component to the border landscape and extend it not only in spatial terms but also in bodily terms. The security logic that deals punitively with these migrants by expelling them from the territory by air not only promotes dehumanizing treatment by chaining them up, but also evades any trace of solidarity by transferring empathy to the pleasurable action of those who watch and listen to the video.

Alice Massari has studied how seemingly neutral images of migration published by humanitarian organizations end up reinforcing a security-based discourse. The image of refugees is constructed to portray them as threatening or as passive victims, which in any case requires control over these people's bodies (Massari, 2021). Here, the opposite is true: governments in power actively seek to advance narratives that reinforce a discourse of security through images and sound. Lene Hansen (2011), from the Copenhagen School, recommends approaching the visual not as a variable, but as an ontological-political condition for the construction of security logics. To that end, she emphasizes the importance of recognizing the political role that images and audiovisual media play in constructing threats to a country's security.

This author, therefore, offers a theoretical alternative for observing this process. In the analysis, she explains how sensory immediacy (which allows anyone to witness and read it), circulability (rapid audience reach), and ambiguity (which can take variable courses of action) are components that make visual material suitable for use in security logic. "The visual, in short, leads to greater density in security communication among an increasing number of actors" (Hansen, 2011, p. 59). The expansion of agencies and media to securitize through the visual accelerates, in this sense, security interaction.

Within the strategies of visual representation of security proposed by Hansen, there is no doubt that these videos address the construction of migrants as demonic, barbaric and threatening others in such a way that "through demonization, a threat is created that must be conquered" (Hansen, 2011, p. 59). In these videos, this leads to the need to generate violent practices of intervention by state power to punish migrants who are being deported. In these videos, deportees are chained and treated harshly by the police, showing that force must be used to control these dangerous beings.

Visual securitization, according to Hansen, should be understood in interaction with, rather than subordination to, other symbolic and communication systems such as text, sound, media or digital platforms. Here, then, it is a question of audiovisual securitization. Hansen also points out that the modalities or genres through which visual securitization is constituted point, to a greater or lesser degree, to three things: the connection to reality or the realm of truth, explicit political expression and the response of the intended audiences. This exercise does not analyze the reception of these statements; however, by expressing themselves on the social media accounts of the executive branches of both governments, they are laying the groundwork for the political truth that their administrations uphold: deportees are criminals who must be punished through dehumanizing treatment and confined to a center for terrorists in a third country where they have no civil rights.

In this regard, it is important to note that both videos were filmed in vertical format, which means that everything was prepared for publication on social media. The difference perhaps lies in the production's sophistication: while Bukele's video was filmed with multiple cameras and complex resources, the White House video was likely shot with a cell phone. In any case, these were videos prepared to sensationalize the violent treatment of the deported population and to effectively communicate security concerns immediately, with wide circulation and sufficient ambiguity so that a deported migrant could be interpreted as an invader, criminal and terrorist who deserves to be punished.

Conclusions: toward a multilateral deportation regime? The spectacle of a transnational deportation assembly

The analysis of these videos reveals an aesthetic treatment of aerosecurity imaginary that has become a central component in the construction of the volatile borderscape. As Brambilla points out, when "border experiences are critically connected with border representations by rethinking borders through the relationship between politics and aesthetics, this is where the border landscape (borderscape) emerges" (Brambilla, 2015, p. 27). The aestheticization of deportation and the volatile borderscape are directly linked to the idea of the border's spectacularization. As Cuttitta (2012) and De Genova (2013) point out, migration policy also becomes a spectacle that the mass media can report on. Therefore, the language of politics fuels processes of symbolic construction of society and borders.

From this perspective, there is a very important point to consider in the notion of spectacle: observing means doing so from a distance. In other words, visual and media representations are also contributing, especially when exercised from a position of hegemonic power, to the construction of migrants as criminals who deserve to be punished beyond the provision of evidence. As Binimelis-Adell and Varela Huerta say

> The dominant narratives about crossing borders and spaces or processes of borderization, in addition to highlighting human mobility between countries, operate as a border spectacle (...) that helps to produce social imaginaries about migration, refuge, asylum and, in general, contemporary human displacement. (Binimelis-Adell & Varela Huerta, 2021, p. 5)

The visual construction of the spectacle of deportation by air is part of the normalization of a sensibility that is gradually becoming accustomed to the punitive treatment of migrants, paradoxically rendering their experience invisible.

After analyzing these videos, it is possible to conclude that, when viewed together in the context of stricter immigration policies, they are mediatizing and sensationalizing a transnational assembly of deportation that paves the way for a multilateral deportation regime. To this end, it is essential not only to criminalize and classify the presence of migrants as a danger to a country's society, but also, when viewed together, to construct these migrants as a danger to the region who deserve to be punished with the same punitive and dehumanizing strategies used to punish so-called terrorists. Therefore, the construction of a volatile border-sense/scape, based on punitive operations against migration, enables the articulation of a transnational assembly of deportations to third countries.

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