

## Don't Step Across This Line: Crossing Borders in *Little Men*

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This article explores the role of borders in contemporary cities and their implications in social stratification in Ira Sachs' *Little Men* (2016). Drawing on border theory and its application to film studies, it first situates the movie within the category of the "border film", insofar as it focuses on New York urban borders and borderlands as a thematic element; and it uses borders narratively in order to explore the social and racial dynamics between an Anglo family—the Jardines—and their Latino tenants—the Calvellis. From this approach, it then explores the narrative and aesthetic strategies by which the film represents the conflict between the families in terms of a simultaneous process of border building—in the case of the adults—and border crossing—in the case of the children. It ultimately contends that the film, by reaffirming the border between the children in the epilogue, questions the notion of equality that underlies the essentially neoliberal myth of the American Dream.

**Keywords:** border film; borderland; Little Men; Ira Sachs; cosmopolitanism

Premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, *Little Men* (Ira Sachs, 2016) explores the relationship between two families, the Jardines and the Calvellis, during a summer in Brooklyn. After the death of his father, Brian Jardine (Greg Kinnear) moves with his wife Kathy (Jennifer Ehle) and his thirteen-year-old son Jake (Theo Taplitz) into his father's apartment in Brooklyn. The ground floor is occupied by a dress shop run by Leonor Calvelli (Paulina García), a Latino immigrant who has a son of Jake's age, Tony (Michael Barbieri). Jake aspires to become an artist while Tony wants to be an actor. As they play videogames, skate around the neighbourhood, and discuss their futures, the two children become friends. Yet, a conflict arises between the two families. Since the neighbourhood is becoming more fashionable, Brian wants to raise the store's lease. Unable to afford the increase, Leonor refuses to accept the new conditions. The economic conflict between the adults will also affect the relationship between the children.

In his review for *Variety*, Peter Debruge defined the film as “a little movie brimming with little truths about modern life.” It may be “little” in length (85 minutes), budget (around 2 million dollars) or impact (it did not make it into the awards season, nor had a huge box office success) but it is big in its approach to crucial issues of “modern life” such as the role of borders in contemporary cities and their implications in social stratification. The purpose of this article is to analyse how the film addresses these two issues through the use of borders and space. Drawing on border theory and its application to the study of film, it first resituates the category of *border film* as both thematic and aesthetically determined. Then, it explores the narrative and aesthetic strategies by which the film represents the conflict between the families in terms of a simultaneous process of border building—in the case of the adults—and border crossing—in the case of the children. It ultimately contends that the film, by reaffirming the border between the children in the epilogue, questions the notion of equality that underlies contemporary neoliberal versions of the American Dream. In the filmmaker's own words, *Little Men* is a film about “the discovery of difference” (Elliott 2016, 36). This discovery, I argue, can be traced through an exploration of the film's use of borders and bordering processes.

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## 1. border theory and the border film

In a conference delivered at Yale in 2002 and later published under the title “Step Across This Line”, British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie explores what he considers a distinguishing element of our times: borders and their increasing relevance within a globalised world. “In the age of mass migration, mass displacement, globalised finances and industries”, he declares, borders and border crossings have become a defining feature of our identities as individuals and as societies (Rushdie 2003, 425). Twenty years later, even the most cursory look at the news confirms the on-going relevance of his words: from the Gaza Strip to the U.S.-Mexico border, the migrants killed at the Melilla border fence to the recent refugee crisis in Europe resulting from the Russia-Ukraine War, it seems that we still live in what Rushdie called “a frontier time”, one in which borders hold a central role (2003, 441).

Rushdie’s essay also provides an entry point to contemporary debates around the concept of border. For him, borders are not only lines marking the division between two countries, as he also acknowledges the existence of borders in cases of linguistic or cultural differences within a nation. Against a “narrow understanding of borders as singular dividing lines between nations” (Schimanski and Nyman 2021, 5), Rushdie’s words reflect a shift within the discipline of border studies towards a broader conceptualization of the term. For Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, “national borders are no longer the only or necessarily the most relevant ones” (2013, 2). Cultural, racial or class differences can generate borders, always taking into account the need of a spatial dimension—that is, that those differences are placed side by side in the same territory. This move away from the national redefines further concepts associated to the notion of border—as it is the case of the borderland. In a seminal piece within Chicana studies, Gloria Alzaldúa defines the borderland as the space where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (1987, 19). For her, while the term *border* emphasises the idea of division, of conflict, the *borderland* is associated with the chance of interaction and cross-cultural exchange. This way, the dual, contradictory nature of borders—as sites of “conjunction and disjunction” (Manzanas Calvo 2007b, 22), lines of separation and encounter (Cooper and Rumford 2013, 108), spaces that connect as much as they divide (Mezzadra and Nielson 2013, 4)—is articulated by Anzaldúa through the conceptual difference between border and borderland. Aware that these are two dimensions of a single, multifaceted phenomenon—as encapsulated by the notion of “borderscape”, borders are fluid, dynamic spaces in which relational

processes of division and encounter co-exist and intersect (Brambilla 2015)—this article draws on Anzaldúa’s theorization as it helps to most accurately unpack the bordering processes depicted in the film.

In the context of globalization, the city becomes the quintessential space to look at when dealing with contemporary borders. The dominant form of social organisation since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in recent times cities have grown more ethnically diverse than ever, and also more socially polarised and divided (Anderson 2004, 15). In that sense, they have emerged as places in which different nationalities, cultures or languages coexist side by side. This coexistence fosters the emergence of new borders within the city; but it also offers the chance for cross-cultural exchanges between its inhabitants, thus turning the city into a borderland. Ultimately, then, cities are crucial as both borders and borderlands of the contemporary globalised world.

The current centrality of borders has led to an emergence of the border as a thematic and aesthetic concern in 21st century films, from different generic and geographic perspectives. The western genre, traditionally associated to the idea of frontier, remains central to contemporary approaches to the border in films like *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) (Fojas 2011). In other titles—from *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) to *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016)—science fiction has emerged as an equally fruitful terrain for the exploration of contemporary border dynamics. If looked from the perspective of specific borders and borderlands, further tendencies arise. U.S. cinema has focused, for obvious reasons, on the border with Mexico in films like *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) or *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve, 2015); but it has also approached the borderlands within its own territory—as is the case of Indian reservations—in *Frozen River* (Courtney Hunt, 2008) or *Wind River* (Taylor Sheridan, 2017). As for European film, notable titles expose an emphasis on the Mediterranean Sea as a borderland—*Mediterranea* (Jonas Carpignano, 2015), *Fire at Sea* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2016)—and on the border between the UK and France—*Welcome* (Philippe Lioret, 2009) or *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismäki, 2011). Of course, other borders—beyond the U.S. and Europe—have also been the subject of filmic attention, as in the case of the Gaza Strip in Hany Abu-Assad’s *Paradise Now* (2005) and *Omar* (2013).

Yet, *Little Men* belongs to a different category within the *border film* sub-genre, one which focuses on urban borders as the thematic subject of the film. Set in an urban environment, some films deploy the encounter of characters from different cultural or national backgrounds as the grounds for an exploration of the social and individual consequences of urban borders. They approach, ultimately, the city as a borderland. Examples abound: Clint Eastwood’s *Gran Torino* (2008), a movie in which urban borders are linked to the construction

and re-examination of the main character's American identity (Azcona 2013); *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004), whose multi-protagonist narrative explores the racial and cultural hybridity of the city of Los Angeles; *The Visitor* (Tom McCarthy, 2007), which depicts the cross-cultural encounter between a university teacher and two immigrants living in his New York City apartment; *A Better Life* (Chris Weitz, 2011), dealing with the life of a Mexican illegal immigrant in Los Angeles; or *Learning to Drive* (Isabel Coixet, 2014), in which the borderland is epitomised by the NY city taxi where the encounter between an Indian driving instructor and a Manhattan writer takes place.

Either through stories located in a specific borderland—the city included—or through generic models such as the western or the science fiction film, the movies mentioned above show the relevance of the border as an important thematic trend in twenty-first century U.S. cinema—one, also, which has gathered both popular and critical acclaim in the form of Academy Awards nominations. This has led critics to use the generic label of *border film* in order to refer to the group of movies that share this thematic interest. Markus Heide defines border films as “fictional feature films as well as documentaries with an explicit thematic focus on representations of experiences of border crossing”, and he highlights that they tend to address the relation between borders and globalisation (2013, 89). His approach is more encompassing than that of Sandra Navarro, who reduces the phenomenon to a variation of the traditional Hollywood western genre focused on the border areas of the American Southwest—thus ignoring any film that is not a western or is not set in the U.S.-Mexico border (2017, 310).

The influence of borders in contemporary films is not restricted to the thematic concerns of these films; it also extends to the aesthetic approaches they display. Following Celestino Deleyto, the centrality of borders in society in general, and in cinema in particular, materialises into the fact that many filmic narratives are structured around them (2017, 100). This way, borders are not only crucial because certain films engage with them as a prominent theme, but also because they infiltrate in the formal approach of those films—as is the case of *Little Men*. In line with the growing development of “border aesthetics” as a line of research within border studies (Schimanski 2006; Schimanski and Wolfe 2017; Schimanski and Nyman 2021), the category *border film* should be reframed so as to include the formal use of borders as an aesthetic strategy of the film. Same as the idea of border has been reshaped to incorporate realities beyond the national domain, the concept of border film also calls for a reconsideration: to transcend a national approach, but also to put the aesthetic role of borders at its centre. In its focus on New York urban borders and borderlands as a thematic element, together with its narrative use of borders in order to explore the relationship between an Anglo family and their Latino tenant, *Little Men* is a border film—both thematically and formally. It is, in fact, a prominent example

of the category, as it fulfils another feature included by Heide in his definition of the genre: the articulation of a “critique of economic globalization” (2013, 96). Through the use of borders and space, the film addresses a key aspect of contemporary neoliberal society: the persistence and relevance of socioeconomic inequality. This article explores how the film deals with this issue through two different approaches to border dynamics: a reaffirmation of the border in the case of the adults’ storyline, and a permeability but eventual reinforcement of it in the case of the children.

## 2. little men as a border film

The Jardines and the Calvellis first meet on the day of Max’s—Brian Jardine’s father—funeral. Leonor and Tony wait outside the shop when the Jardines arrive and park their car in front of them. Leonor approaches Brian to give her condolences, and to show her sadness for the loss of “such a wonderful man”. Brian thanks these words, but does not think of inviting her to the “little reception for some friends and family” they are having—from the start, she is thought of as a tenant rather than as a friend of Max. As this dialogue takes place, Tony moves away from his mother, goes near Jake, and helps him carry some bags from the car’s trunk. The conversation the children have is devoid of the stiff politeness displayed by the adults: they talk about fantasy novels and videogames, and Tony offers to show Jake around in case the Jardines move to Brooklyn.

FIGURE 1. The border between the store and the apartment



This first encounter anticipates the structural division of the film into two different storylines—one focused on the children's growing friendship, the other on the conflicts between the adults. Yet, the most interesting aspect of this scene is how it defines the border dynamics in the film. The spatial disposition of the shop and the house—one next to the other—draws, from the beginning, a border between the two families (see Figure 1). The Calvellis are repeatedly framed with the dress shop behind them (the shop becomes “their space”) while the Jardines are associated with the house—which they enter at the end of the scene. From an awareness of the “social and cultural constructedness of borders” (Schimanski and Nyman 2021, 4), this spatial division stands for all the borders—social, cultural, economic, racial—that separate the two families. When Jake asks his parents who Leonor is, she is referred to as “the woman that rents the shop downstairs”; above all, she is identified as their tenant. Thus, despite the politeness displayed by Brian, the relationship between the families is from the start shaped by a certain power dynamic—it is not one between equals, but between landlord and tenant. This class imbalance cannot be separated from the racial condition of the characters: the Calvellis are Latinos while the Jardines are Anglos. Race and social class—in the same way as race and gender in Kimberlé Crenshaw's analysis of the violence against women of colour (1991, 1244)—are two separated categories that nevertheless intersect with each other. Even if the economic conflict takes centre stage in the film, then, the relational dynamics of the film are also implicitly racialized.

The characters display two different attitudes towards this bordered situation. The adults show their awareness of the borders that divide the two families, and they choose not to cross them. That is why the Jardines do not invite “their tenant” to the reception. As for Leonor, it also explains her behaviour. She does not move—immobility, in fact, is going to define her role in the film—from her position at the shop's entrance; she does not help the Jardines to carry any bags; and at the end of the scene, she stays outside while the rest of the characters go into the apartment. In the next scene, when she brings a cake for the reception, she will refuse again to go inside—the border being visually present, this time, through the door frame. Both she and the Jardines, in the rest of the film, will stick to this border dynamic: they will avoid border-crossing except for economic reasons. The attitude of the children is exactly the opposite: they approach the border as a “site of constant crossing” (Manzanas Calvo 2007b, 22). Tony moves to the car and helps Jake—he is dynamic instead of immobile—therefore not staying in what should be his space. At the end of the scene, pushed by his nascent friendship with Jake, he goes into the Jardines' apartment: he crosses the border that his mother has refused to step across. Jake, even if it is not shown in this specific scene, will have a similar behaviour in relation to the Calvellis shop.

Through contrasting patterns of border crossing, the adults and the children will negotiate the differences that divide the two families.

### *2.1. The Grown-Ups Build the Border*

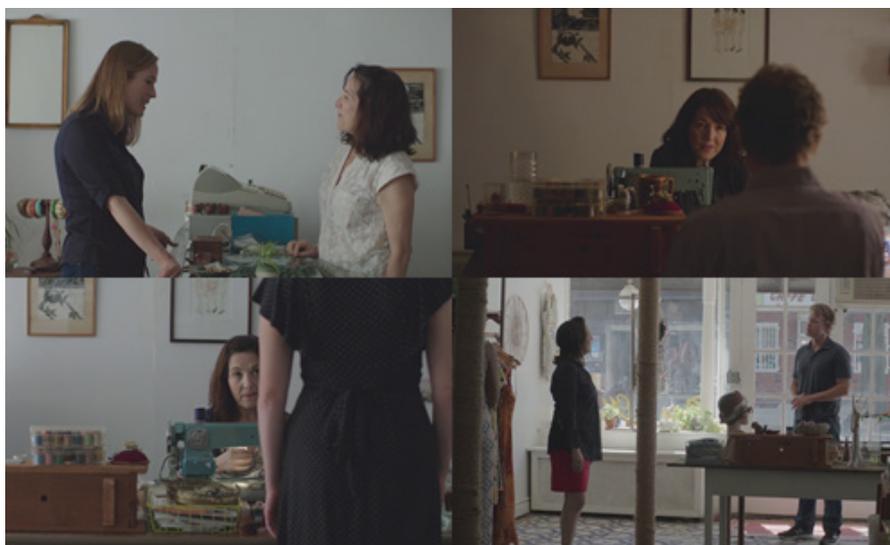
In the first scene after the funeral, Kathy finds Leonor's plate still at their place, and goes to the shop to give it back. The camera follows her as she goes down the stairs, leaves the house, and enters the store. In this quick succession of shots, she crosses the border for the first time. It is the first instance of a pattern of border crossing which will be one-sided: while Kathy and Brian will repeatedly visit Leonor at the store—up to four times—she will only go into their apartment once, in her last scene in the film. Borders, as argued above, can work as “sites of intense connectivity, cultural mix and negotiations of difference” (Rovisco 2013, 151). Yet, in the case of Leonor and the Jardines, the border only works as the space for the negotiation of their economic differences. Their socioeconomic gap underlies their encounters. Although the initial reason for this first visit is to give the plate back, Kathy finds a dress that she likes and decides to try it on. Their conversation is friendly—their children, after all, have already become good friends—but their interaction is that between a customer and a shop assistant. Their relationship is tinged with economic inequality from the start. This inequality is gradually brought to the fore in the three meetings that follow: Brian informing Leonor of the new terms of the store's lease; Kathy telling her that she should accept the new conditions; and, finally, Brian giving her an ultimatum. In all these cases, the one and only motivation for their encounters in the border is economic.

What the Jardines want, ultimately, is to get Leonor to pay a higher lease for the store. Leonor's strategy to face this unequal relationship is to turn the lease problem into a personal matter; that is, to bring the conflict to a terrain in which they can be equal. While the couple insist on the fact that it is “nothing personal”, she constantly refers to her relationship with Max, the grandfather. She claims that “they were very good friends and spent a lot of time together” and that he wanted her to stay in the store because he thought of her “as part of the house.” She means to imply that when Max was the one living in the apartment, the relationship between him and his Latino neighbours was one of intense connectivity and cultural mix—one allowed by the borderland in Anzaldúa's use of the term (1987, 20). Yet, as Cooper and Rumford argue, borders have a changing nature (2013, 108), and the arrival of the Jardines reshapes the social configuration of the border. While the physical division remains unaltered, the performance of it turns the border into a line of disjunction rather than connection. Leonor's reaction to this change—hostile and verbally aggressive at

points—is far from dissolving her differences with Brian and Kathy; instead, it intensifies the conflict between the families.

The Jardines' attitude might seem more polite or hospitable than Leonor's—they remain calm and insist on the fact that it is nothing personal—but it still plays a crucial role in the reaffirmation of the border between the two families. Above all, they are the ones who choose to change the terms of the relationship by raising the lease. They justify their decision as coming from a moment of financial hardship in which they also need money; and yet, they expect things to remain the same. This contradictory behaviour can be unpacked from a look at the intersection between borders and the idea of hospitality. Drawing from the work of Jacques Derrida, Ben Amara claims that “it is through borders that hospitality exists; through a notion of bordered space such as ‘home’ and ‘away’; embodied borders such as ‘self’ and ‘other’” (2011, 5). This way, it is only from the acknowledgement of difference, of the borders that divide you from the other, that someone can be hospitable. In other words, any act of hospitality implies a reification of difference. In the film, the hospitable attitude of Brian and Kathy works to repeatedly situate Leonor in the position of *the other*—a different nationality, a different race, a different socioeconomic class—and this way emphasise what makes them different from her. Although their hospitality might be well-meaning, and it might be thought to diminish inequality, it instead “work[s] to fossilise if not increase it” (Still 2010, 20). That is exactly what happens in the film: the Jardines' attitude only contributes to the widening of the socioeconomic gap between them and Leonor.

FIGURE 2. Framing divides Leonor and the Jardines



As a result of these attitudes, the different border crossings of the Jardines in the film lead to the building-up of a border on what had been, until their arrival, the space of the borderlands. The way this border is created can be traced visually through the workings of framing and *mise-en-scène*. There is always a physical border between Leonor and Kathy/Brian: the counter, the sewing machine, a column or the yard's table. When Leonor and one of the Jardines are shot together, these barriers are used to highlight the distance between them: each is placed in one side of the frame with the barrier in between (see Figure 2). This strategy is central to the first three encounters, but it changes in the fourth one. This time, the intensification of the distance between Leonor and Brian is not conveyed by separating them within the same frame, but by not framing them together. Throughout the scene, they barely share the same shot, thus emphasising the idea that their differences are at this point unsolvable. Through these different aesthetic strategies, the opposition between Leonor and the Jardines—the fact that they are not being able to overcome their differences—is made visible for the spectator.

Once she knows that she is being evicted from the store, Leonor visits the Jardines' apartment for the first time. It is also a crossing motivated by economic reasons, as it is a desperate attempt on the part of Leonor to keep her shop. Framing, again, shows the distance between the characters: Leonor, sat on a chair, is placed at the front of the frame, and refuses to look at the Jardines, placed at the back. The scene displays a visible lack of agency from the three of them: they already know that their conflict is unsolvable; and they let Jake and Tony take the initiative of the conversation. By both their position in the frame and their attitude, they acknowledge the definite building-up of the border between them.

The scene, finished abruptly, is followed by a shot of the store: all the dresses and furniture are gone, and all we see is a “For Rent” sign stuck in the window. The space where the border encounters between the Jardines and Leonor had taken place is now empty: the border has widened; as a “space that is [...] fluid and shifting” (Brambilla 2015, 19) it has now become a gap. Unable to solve their conflict, their border-crossing pattern has ended up with the expulsion of Leonor and Tony from what had been their space. Instead of dissolving by the convergence of both sides, the border has been reinforced through the exclusion of one of those sides, from the place and also from the film—Leonor will no longer reappear; we will not get to know what happens to her. The reaffirmation of the border that defines the adults' storyline ultimately encapsulates the unbridgeable difference between the two families.

## 2.2. *The Discovery of Difference*

“You’re gonna like this neighbourhood; it’s become a very bohemian area. If you move in, I can show you around.” This is Tony’s offer to Jake on the day they meet. In their next appearance in the film—when Kathy visits Leonor and tries on a dress—it seems that the child has kept his promise: Tony and Jake have become good friends and they are playing videogames at the store’s backroom. The fact that Jake is already there is very revealing: by the time one of the adults has decided to cross the border for the first time, Jake and Tony seem to be used to spending time at each other’s place. The border, for them, works as a “permeable membrane” (Manzanas Calvo 2007b, 14) in which they move freely from one side to the other. This defines the pattern they are going to follow throughout the first half of the film: while a border is being erected between their parents, Jake and Tony will be active citizens of the borderlands.

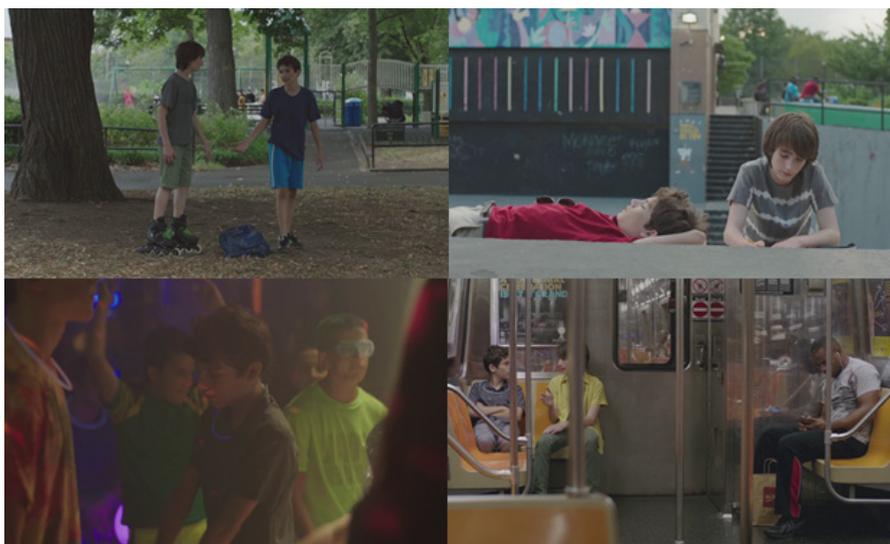
The space of the borderlands is associated with the different places where Jake and Tony spend time together: the store’s backroom, the Jardines’ backyard, and the Calvellis’ apartment. Yet, the scenes that best illustrate their dynamic rambling around the border are those in which they skate around the neighbourhood. They go from the Jardines’ to drama class, or from the Jardines’ to the Calvellis’ apartment (a distance of only “twelve minutes and twenty-three seconds”, in Tony’s words). Through several tracking shots, these two scenes follow the children skating together in different areas of Brooklyn. This visual approach stands out in a film mostly built upon static frames, with very few camera movements; and the dynamism of the *mise-en-scène* is emphasised by the use of a lively soundtrack, which also contrasts with the film’s tendency towards the absence of music. These stylistic choices highlight what is a very significant moment in relation to borders: Tony and Jake literally and metaphorically bridge the gap between their families—the distance between one house and the other—and they enjoy it. While Leonor and the Jardines only find conflict and difference in the border, their children find fun and mutual understanding in the territory of the borderland.

This free movement from one side to the other is only possible because they ignore, at that point, the mere existence of a border between them. “Children are much less aware of differences than adults”, the filmmaker acknowledges in an interview (Elliott 2016, 36). From this sense of innocence, they cross the border once and again, but just because they are not even aware of it. They ignore, also, the economic conflict around the store’s lease, even if it is slowly emerging around them: in a conversation with her lawyer, Leonor refers to Brian Jardine as “del que te hablé antes” in front of Tony, and Jake’s aunt Audrey complains about the low store’s lease in front of him. These clues about the conflict are easily

perceived by the spectator, but the children are completely ignorant of them. Even as the border is being reassembled right in front of them, they are still able to navigate through the borderlands.

The encounter between Leonor and Brian—which leads to the children finding out about the lease issue—transforms that situation. The same night, Jake tries, unsuccessfully, to convince his parents to let him sleep over at the Calvellis’—again, the film shows them up and down the apartment’s stairs, crossing the border, covering the gap between their families. Next morning, they talk about what has happened: “our parents are involved in a business matter, and it’s getting ugly, so they’re taking it out on us”, Tony explains. This realization is a turning point at the level of the plot, as they decide not to speak to their parents until they solve the problem. It is crucial, also, for the evolution of the bordering pattern: aware of the conflict, the children see themselves forced to abandon the bordered space—their houses and the shop—and move to places that allow them to stay together.

FIGURE 3. Jake and Tony in the canopies

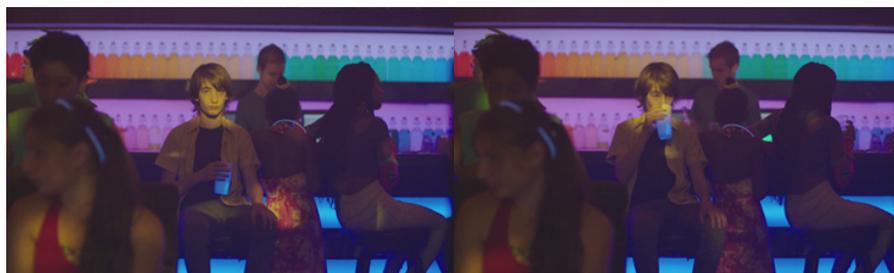


While Tony and Jake’s scenes in the first half of the film have mostly taken place at their houses—that is, border territory—, in the second half they move towards public space. The scene in which they decide not to talk to their parents is set in a park; they talk about the girl Tony likes at an outdoors square; they go to an underage club; and they come back from it on the underground (see Figure 3). All these places can be linked to Elijah Anderson’s notion of the *cosmopolitan canopy*:

public places within cities in which people are able to forget their differences with others and interact with them (Anderson 2004, 21). For Anderson, certain places in cities—such as markets, parks, the theatre or public transports—favour the encounter of people more than places linked to the private sphere. Following Celestino Deleyto's introduction of the concept into film analysis, the use of space in *Little Men* can be read in relation to it: Jake and Tony, once their parents do not allow them to cross the border anymore, find refuge in different *canopies*, places in which they can freely interact. Places, then, in which they can leave borders behind (Deleyto 2017).

These *canopies* allow the temporary dissolution of the border between Jake and Tony, but they do not make it disappear completely. The children have become aware of the economic conflict dividing their families, but they still ignore the underlying differences in their friendship—Anglo and Latino, different social class. The scenes in this second half, though, are focused in a particular difference that is slowly emerging between them: their sexual orientation. The homosexual undertone in Jake's attitude towards Tony is already hinted at in the first scene—"I got a thing for redheads, don't you?" asks Tony; "I don't know", replies Jake—and it is overtly intensified as the film develops. It becomes the focus of some of the scenes set in the *canopies*. At the square, Tony asks Jake if he likes any girl, but his only answer is that "they're all nice." Tony insists, and Jake just says—again—that he does not know. At the club, the film codes Jake as sexually *other* in more explicit terms. While Tony dances with Eva (the girl he likes), Jake sits on his own. Lighting and mise-en-scène—the shot is dominated by the colours of the LGBT flag—hint at Jake's nascent sexual orientation (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Jake at the club

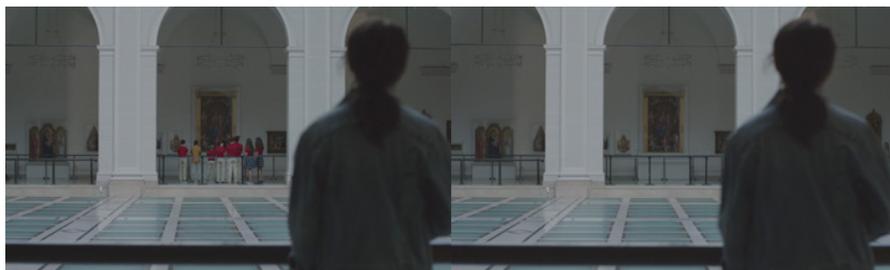


The focus on sexual orientation, in this section of the film, can be interpreted as a reminder of the underlying differences between them—of the border, after all. Yet, it also emerges as an ontological borderscape for Jack, who is in the process of negotiating his own sexual identity. The notion of borderscape, inasmuch as it emphasizes the porous and fluctuating nature of borders (Brambilla 2015,

22), provides a productive framework from which to engage with the personal transition that Jake experiences throughout the film. The child navigates his sexual identity in the search of an answer to the feelings he has for Tony; in this quest, the borders and limits of his own self are being reassembled. While the bordering process taking place between the children leads to a reaffirmation of their difference, Jake's inner borderwork—more fluid and relational—moves him towards the acceptance of his own identity. As he navigates his sexual identity so as to redefine the limits of who he is, the personal growth implicit to any *coming-of-age* narrative is achieved.

If the emergence of the lease conflict changes the border pattern—from dynamic border-crossing to an exile in borderless canopies—when Leonor is evicted from the shop the shift is more drastic: the children's relation is abruptly interrupted. However, Jake and Tony do not (yet) become aware of the border and give up on their friendship; rather, the definite affirmation of borders in their parents' relationship is imposed over them. This move, then, is caused by an external force, against which the children cannot do anything. For the real resolution of the children's storyline—and therefore of their border pattern—we have to look at the epilogue of the film.

FIGURE 5. Jake facing the border



The scene takes place months after Leonor and Tony have been evicted from the store and the relationship between the children has drastically come to an end. Both Jake and Tony visit the same museum that day, although they do not get to talk to each other. Jake is with a group of students—all carry sketchbooks—and he is notably changed. He has longer hair in a ponytail and wears different clothes: it is implied, then, that he has made it into LaGuardia. Tony, however, wears the same uniform he had worn in previous scenes, suggesting that he has stayed, apparently, at the same school where he was before. It is Jake who realises that Tony is on the other side of the museum's room: a point-of-view shot shows how he looks at Tony and his classmates. In the shot, the two children are separated by the empty room: the huge, empty space epitomizes

the differences which have eventually grown between them (see Figure 5). The Latino child, son of a shop assistant, has stayed at his former school; while the Anglo, son of the upper-middle class owners of the store, has been accepted into the elitist La Guardia. The final shot conveys Jake's realization of the differences between them. From his point of view, we see the gap that separates them. He remains there, still, unable or unwilling to go and talk to his friend. Tony, then, leaves the room, and we are left with the view of Jake, alone, contemplating the empty space: he has discovered the border.

### 3. conclusion

In its approach to the relationship between an Anglo family and their Latino tenants, *Little Men* illustrates the double-sided nature of borders: the border as a line of exclusion, division, and conflict; and the borderland as the space allowing for an encounter between different nationalities, cultures, and languages. It identifies each of these spheres with one of the storylines. The adults' pattern of economically motivated border-crossing is more attuned with the idea of border as a dividing line; while the fruitful interaction taking place between the children encapsulates the dynamism of the borderland. Furthermore, it places these two ideas in the context of the city—Brooklyn in particular, New York in general—, thus acknowledging the key role of cities as bordered spaces in a globalised world. However, both border dynamics—that of the adults and that of the children—lead to the same conclusion. It is clear in the case of Leonor, Kathy and Brian: their deployment of the border as a battlefield for their economic conflict results in its reinforcement. In the case of Jake and Tony, despite the initial encounter, the outcome is equally hopeless: they start as active citizens of the borderlands, move to the *canopies* that allow their friendship, but eventually discover and reaffirm the border. The adults' dynamic is static—the border remains a border all the way through—while the children's is dynamic—it evolves from borderland to border—but the result is the same in both cases: the reaffirmation of the border and the characters' inability to overcome it.

This outcome works to highlight the pervasive sense of inequality that runs through the relation between the families. In an interview, the director of the film acknowledged the existence of an alternative ending: in this version—which was shot but eventually removed from the final cut—Leonor would reappear with a job as a real estate agent, and Tony and Jake would recover their friendship after their encounter at the museum (Elliott 2016, 38). This would not imply a complete dissolution of the border, but it would allow the children to remain in the borderland. The fact that Sachs decided to discard this ending determines the political and economic message of the film. The reaffirmation of the border in

*Little Men* is a consequence of the persistence of the differences in terms of social class—these, of course, influenced by the question of race. Neoliberal ideology insists on the equality of opportunities as something already achieved: in this rationale, we are all individuals—Latino and Anglo, bourgeois and working-class, black and white—with the same rights and the same chances to improve in the social system (Fisher 2009, 13). This belief is at the core of the myth of the American Dream—America as the land of opportunities in which everyone is equal—now spread across the rest of the world. The film, however, challenges this ideology and shows that those differences do matter: the Latino immigrant is at the expense of the Anglo owners—who have inherited the property—if she wants to keep her store; and her son has to give up on his dream of going to an elitist arts school. The reinforcement of the border works as a strategy to keep each family in the place where they belong; the border, ultimately, stands for the deterministic immobility of the social structure. In its use of borders as a critique of neoliberal ideology, *Little Men* emerges as a prominent example of a contemporary border film.

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