

ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU

Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona
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Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona present an in-depth study of the first three feature films of Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu, “one of the most powerful voices in the cinema of the new century”, as the authors maintain in their Preface (ix). This is the first volume devoted exclusively to the Mexican director and it is part of the series Contemporary Film Directors edited by James Naremore. Every volume in the series is dedicated to a filmmaker, from Wong Kar-wai to Pedro Almodovar to Jim Jarmusch, to name but a few, and they all contain a critique of the director’s work followed by an interview. In the present volume, the authors busy themselves with an important aspect of Iñárritu’s oeuvre, namely, his dimension as a transnational, global artist, whilst devoting ample attention to his use of the multiprotagonist film and what the authors describe as “scrambled narratives” (xi). Well known for using a number of common themes and a somewhat unusual narrative structure, Iñárritu concedes in the final interview that he cannot “expand the pattern [of multiprotagonist films] anymore” (131) and so his next film, *Biutiful* (released in 2010), will be a linear narrative concentrating on the story of one character. We now know that this was indeed the case, but Deleyto and Azcona’s study proves that in order to reach the linearity of *Biutiful*, the fragmentation of the multiprotagonist film had to be explored to its ultimate consequences.

“I was always an outsider,” Iñárritu claims in the interview with the authors (123). Deleyto and Azcona set out to investigate the reasons for such a presumed

marginality with incisive and meticulous care, dissecting the first three works of the director; that is, the ones which brought him international fame: *Amores perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006). The first part of the study, entitled “Of Times and Places: The Films of Alejandro González Iñárritu”, is devoted to a critical approach of the three films, whilst the second contains the interview with the director which took place in Barcelona on June 22, 2009, while he was immersed in the postproduction of *Biutiful*. In the interview, we discover an intimate Iñárritu who distances himself from his more public persona: a director who is generous, kind, intelligent, and well read. The structure of the interview mirrors that of the study, becoming a splendid complement to it. The interview not only echoes the proposals made by Deleyto and Azcona in the course of their analysis, but also reverberates them, acting as a kind of acoustic chamber for the ideas they have been structuring.

It would seem that for a filmmaker who claims that “art should have no nationality” (122) the contextualization of his oeuvre should be a banal exercise. Nothing further from the truth. Deleyto and Azcona wisely decide to begin their study by situating Iñárritu within the history of Mexican cinema and culture, which allows them to demonstrate the ways in which he transcends national parameters. The authors question the validity of the concept of Mexican national cinema and in a solid, articulate manner, explore how Iñárritu’s texts prove “the extremely porous nature of that concept” (3). Later, in the interview, the director proves them right: “Nationalist cinema as a concept does not interest me,” he asserts (122). One of the most stimulating questions asked in relation to this idea is whether Iñárritu’s films represent a rethinking of Mexican identity for the twenty-first century or they are instances of the crisis of national cinemas. Even further and more basically: whether they are evidence of a crisis of the cultural concept of national identity in general. Reference is made here to the antecedents, the older generation of Mexican filmmakers (Ripstein, Hermosillo, Leduc, amongst others), and the triad Alejandro González Iñárritu-Alfonso Cuarón-Guillermo del Toro as representatives of the new Mexican cinema in its more transnational aspect or, as Jeff Menn puts it: the Mexican “Nouvelle Vague” (2007: 70 and *passim*).

In relation to the ideas outlined above, the exploration of the concept of “Mexicanidad” is much welcomed by readers who at this stage may have a feeling akin to the one expressed by Iñárritu in the interview, when he claims that “the image projected by Mexican cinema is bipolar” (124). Within “Mexicanidad”, Deleyto and Azcona pay particular attention to the constituents of solitude and awareness of death as contributing to the construction of Mexican identity.

Firmly rooted in Mexican cinema’s rhetoric of excess, *Amores perros* exemplifies the impact of the multiprotagonist format, a narrative structure the influence of

which can be traced in popular telenovelas, the novels of William Faulkner (22), and the way Iñárritu's father tells stories, "a primary influence" according to the filmmaker (128). In their thorough and incisive analysis of this first film, the authors focus on the initial car crash which constitutes the origin of the narrative, proving how urban dynamics become a privileged setting for multiprotagonist films, in so far as they offer random connections —"accidental crisscrossing" (31)— amongst citizens of the big city.

The presentation of a truly enticing mosaic of lives ruled by random events is the emollient which promotes the contemporary feeling of a world beyond our understanding, tragically explored in Iñárritu's second film, *21 Grams*. As the authors accurately prove, the display of emotional time in the film has the power to capture the instability and precariousness of human identity. Human experience, however, can be structured in a myriad of alternative ways. Iñárritu's blockbuster *Babel*, proves firm evidence of this. Here the authors focus on the temporal structure of the film, offering a scrupulous and exhaustive analysis. The key theoretical reference is to Manuel Castells's concept of 'timeless time', one of the main features of 'the network society'. From here on, the authors demonstrate how the narrative structure of the film is based on the clash between temporal paradigms. By making reference to the use of time, musical score, and converging narrative strands, Deleyto and Azcona reflect upon the dynamics of multiprotagonist films.

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If time is of the utmost importance, as has been mentioned above, space also features high in the construction of Iñárritu's narratives. Again, reference is made here to the work of Manuel Castells, cleverly combined with ideas by philosopher Michel de Certeau and geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. *Babel*, the authors claim, is a fictionalization of the space of flows; namely, "migrations, diasporas, and tourism [which] may not be so closely connected with communication networks, but they are as characteristic of the social structure of the modern world as those in charge of the information systems" (67). The fluctuating concept of space is also explored in relation to *Amores perros* (Mexico) and *21 Grams* (Memphis and Albuquerque). "The most dangerous borders are the ideological, not the physical ones," Iñárritu claims in the final interview (126). A typical feature of space is its ambiguity, its mobility. The authors find an interesting metaphor of this in the director's move from Mexico to the US ('Al otro lado'), together with his characters and stories. The concept of 'la frontera' has ample and firm "presence in Mexican history, in the definition of national identity, and in the Mexican collective psyche" (88), as evidenced by the existence of a wide number of border films from the 1970s on. Deleyto and Azcona focus here on the special position occupied by *Babel*, a hybrid between a border movie and a multiprotagonist film, particularly in the section

devoted to the story of Amelia, who goes to Tijuana in order to attend her son's wedding. The reference in this section is to the seminal study on border theory written by Gloria Anzaldúa in 1999, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which allows the authors to claim that "In a world characterized by more frequent and intense transnational links between people, the border is where the transnational takes place, and the borderland is the space constructed around such exchanges" (96). Widely centred around Tijuana and what it represents in the film, Deleyto and Azcona examine music and iconography in order to offer an insightful exploration of such an ambiguous space to conclude that "In *Babel*, Tijuana is the site of the diasporic public sphere" (100), a cultural borderland which contributes to the film's vivid sense of locatedness together with Tokyo and the Moroccan villages of the other two stories.

Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona offer an important contribution on the work of one of the most interesting contemporary filmmakers. Through meticulous analysis and attention to detail, style and structure, the authors offer an in-depth analysis of the work of Alejandro González Iñárritu. They reveal his innovative appropriation of the generic convention of multiprotagonist films whilst deploying time, space, and aesthetics in his own personal, fascinating way.

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Works cited

MENNE, Jeff. 2007. "A Mexican 'Nouvelle Vague': The Logic of New Waves Under Globalization". *Cinema Journal* 47: 1 (Autumn): 70-92.

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