

Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona 2010: *Alejandro González Iñárritu. Contemporary Film Directors*. Champaign: U of Illinois P. xiii + 154 pp. ISBN: 978-0-252-03569-2 (cloth), 978-0-252-07761-6 (paper).

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Because of widespread migration and generalized capital and information flows, cultural production nowadays unfolds in the hyphen that conjoins East-West, North-South, center-periphery, that is, in that interstitial threshold that Homi Bhabha famously called “in-betweenness” (1994). As hybridity and liminality have become the norm, or as we have grown more aware of their ascendancy, a figure such as Alejandro González Iñárritu, an internationally successful Mexican director who works in his native country, in the United States, as well as in Europe, North Africa, and Japan, funded by various national industries and with an array of multinational actors and actresses, is clearly symptomatic of our times. To navigate these times and their culture, it becomes more and more necessary to overstep the traditional frontiers of our fields. This is exactly what Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona do in their monograph *Alejandro González Iñárritu*. Deftly combining history, sociology, and cultural analysis, they practice a brand of American studies that brings together both sides of the Mexican-American border and both halves of the continent, while exploring cultural genealogies further afield. Their book is, in this regard, similar to other significant critical projects such as Benito and Manzanar’s *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (2002), Fregoso’s *MeXicana Encounters* (2003), or Maciel’s *El Norte: The U.S.-Mexican Border in Contemporary Cinema* (1990). In line with these titles, Deleyto and Azcona purvey a fascinating case study of transnational cultural production that is also an index of the transformation of our disciplines in recent years and an aid to their renewal.

Deleyto and Azcona’s volume is the first extended study of the director to date. Rather than stake out and open up a field, as ‘first’ works tend to do, Deleyto and Azcona mine their subject exhaustively and come close to shutting it down to further inquiry on account of their thoroughness and detail. The study appears in the prestigious Contemporary Film Directors series, published by University of Illinois Press. Created in 2002 by James Naremore, who also directed it until recently, the series has published, to date, over thirty monographs by well-known international scholars on a significant array of international filmmakers (Sterritt 2010). Many of these filmmakers are central figures in peripheral cinemas and on the festival circuit, and were previously crying out for substantial critical treatment in English, something the collection has finally provided. The launch of the

series coincided with the start of similar projects by the British Film Institute, I.B. Tauris, Wallflower, and Manchester University Press, among other publishers, and shows that, more than four decades after Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault certified the death of the author and the beginning of “writing” —or free textual play— *auteurism* remains a productive point of entry into the study of film. This is the case because the *auteur* of contemporary film criticism is no longer the exalted individual who recollects in tranquility, self-propelled by ineffable genius —the target of post-structuralist critique. Instead, the current *auteur* is a force-field where cultural and iconographic repertoires, historical trends, material forces, collaborative effort, and individual idiosyncrasy converge, and where this convergence crystallizes into text (Naremore 1990, 1999).

True to this complex view of authorship, Deleyto and Azcona locate González Iñárritu within both recent Mexican cinema and transnational film, they analyze the director’s style and ideology, and describe the contributions of his collaborators: script-writer Guillermo Arriaga, cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, and musician Gustavo Santaolalla. Deleyto and Azcona make excellent use of previous contributions on the director, whose work has been addressed mostly in reviews and interviews, but they clearly surpass them in depth and scope. While earlier studies by Smith (2003), D’Lugo (2004) and Cameron (2006), had a narrower range, Deleyto and Azcona take on the entire output of the director which, at the time of their writing, consisted of three feature films collectively labeled a “trilogy of suffering” —*Amores perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2006)— and a short in the omnibus *11’09”01—September 11* (2002). Deleyto and Azcona dig deeper and go further than their predecessors by researching more fully the intellectual genealogy of González Iñárritu and the conceptual and formal dimensions of his work. By placing genre —the multi-protagonist film, whose first extended treatment was by Azcona (2010)— at the center of their analysis, they endow their study with considerable cohesiveness, and show that many of the Mexican director’s thematic and narrative concerns are characteristic of the genre as well. As is the case in all the books in the series, the critical analysis is followed by a detailed filmography and an original interview.

The opening section situates González Iñárritu in his time and place, as part of a group of, for lack of a better term, alternative Mexican filmmakers whose work has had international resonance. The best-known figures in this group are Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón. They have achieved critical and commercial success by combining recognizable generic molds with a personal approach. Unlike the previous batch of internationally known Mexican directors, such as Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Paul Leduc, Felipe Cazals, or Arturo Ripstein, all of whom got their start in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the younger filmmakers work transnationally. They combine Mexican and foreign funding and commute between their countries of origin, the United States, and, occasionally, Spain, where both del Toro and González Iñárritu have filmed some of their work. Such globalism makes the exploration of national identity less of an issue than it had been for the earlier generation or even for contemporaries such as Carlos Reygadas or Fernando Eimbecke, who, despite overseas recognition, have retained

Mexico as their production base and privileged subject matter. And yet, Deleyto and Azcona maintain that describing González Iñárritu or del Toro as transnational directors does not do justice to their fiercely affirmed Mexicanness, nor to the fact that many of their expressive resources stem from Mexican popular culture. The emotional intensity and multiple storylines of González Iñárritu's films, for example, stem from the tradition of the Mexican melodrama and the *telenovela*. And the director's concern with loneliness, unreliable public institutions, and social polarization are fully aligned with the thematic core of Mexican national cinema (see Ramírez Berg 1992). Simultaneously, González Iñárritu's films incorporate a number of non-Mexican artistic idioms: the photographs of American Nan Goldin, rock music, and independent European cinema, such as the Macedonian film *Before the Rain* (Milcho Manchevsky 1994), an influence on *Amores perros*. Moreover, rather than locality and static belonging, Iñárritu's stories dramatize border crossing and nomadic citizenship —not roots but routes, to invoke Paul Gilroy's pun (1993: 19-29). They make us see that the national and the transnational need not be stark opposites, as Néstor García Canclini had already pointed out (2001) and Deleyto and Azcona endorse. National identities are often migrant, recombinant identities that have forgotten their history. And cultural globalization does not necessarily erase locality; it only makes it more mediated and multi-layered.

'Nomadic' citizenship and the 'fractal', networked storylines of the multiprotagonist film have their own peculiar temporality and spatiality, and the largest section of the book is devoted to them. The films in the "trilogy of suffering" reject straightforward chronology. González Iñárritu and co-writer Arriaga, structure their narratives by cross-cutting between different stories and locales (*Amores perros*, *Babel*) and by scrambling the temporal sequence, mixing present, past, and future (*21 Grams*). While on first viewing the films may give the impression of randomness, Deleyto and Azcona show that they are in fact carefully pieced together. What looks like chaos is an alternative inventorying of events and relations that downplays temporal linearity and cause-effect in favor of more conceptual links. *Amores perros* shifts from the fratricidal rivalry of two young brothers, to the story of a hired assassin, to the decline of a fashion model bodily and mentally disabled as the result of an accident. In this film, cross-cutting relativizes the suffering in each separate story, highlights echoes and parallels between the various strands of the plot, and evokes the vastness of Mexico City as an endless tapestry of grief. *21 Grams* edits together moments and images on the basis of their shared affect, building up emotional atmosphere rather than seamlessly rendered events. And *Babel* explores the unpredictable ricocheting of a mishap —caused when two children mischievously fire a rifle at a tourist bus in Northern Morocco— through the oddly interconnected stories of an illegal Mexican immigrant in San Diego and forlornly hedonistic teenage girls in Tokyo.

As in *Amores perros*, cross-cutting in *Babel* is the source of striking contrasts: between the impoverished boys in North Africa and the wealthy Tokyo teens who spend their afternoons in drugged abandon; or between the material comfort of an American upper-middle class family and the precarious circumstances of their Mexican house-servant. In

addition, editing in *Babel* brings together two contemporary temporalities. The smooth shifting across stories recalls what sociologist Manuel Castells has called “timeless time”: the instant availability of events, stored and circulated in various media and easily retrievable by a click on a computer keyboard or the push of a button (2010: 460-98). Yet inside each story, characters are subjected to the inexorable unfolding of “chronological” or “traditional” time (again, Castells’s terms). Some examples of the latter are the slowness of ‘Moroccan time’ that enrages the American tourist waiting for medical help that never seems to arrive, or the irreversibility of misfortune that will neither bring back a killed Moroccan child nor return the Mexican house servant to her former American life.

Parallel to the contrast between timeless time and chronological succession, Castells has developed a distinction between “spaces of flows” and “spaces of place”, that is, between nodes for multiple trajectories, connections, and data streams, on the one hand, and locations for personal habitation, on the other (2010: 407-53). Deleyto and Azcona show that all of González Iñárritu’s films showcase these two types of space. When locations act as sites of connection and transfer, they become “spaces of flows”, and when they are settings for relationships, dwelling, and affect, they act as “spaces of place”. Each of these spaces is constructed by means of different formal strategies. Connectivity and flow are communicated in all the films through movement across different storylines. *Babel*, for example, uses false eye-line matches and matches on action that give the impression that an action in a given story is completed in the adjoining one, or that the object of an off-screen stare in a sub-plot is in the one that follows, even if this last takes place at the other end of the world. In *Amores perros*, flow is additionally conveyed through the fleeting coincidence of characters in a given spot. At the site of a car crash, perhaps the central event in the film, the three strands of the plot and its main characters momentarily converge, and on other occasions, characters pass each other in the streets, mutually unaware of tenuous connections that are only visible to the film spectator.

The spaces of place are constructed through a variety of devices. *Amores perros* combines depth of field and wide-angle lenses to deepen interiors and emphasize clutter and emotional entrapment, as in the various scenes that show the brothers’ cramped dwelling. In *Babel*, color and camera angle transmit, by turns, the blessings and occasional servitudes of home. And in a wedding scene in Tijuana, slow motion and shallow focus communicate intimacy, and shift what had been an eminently realistic sequence into the registers of memory or dreaminess. *21 Grams* depicts intimate space through shallow focus and a hazy, over-exposed cinematography achieved by means of the bleach-bypass process, a stylistic choice whose significance in the film is painstakingly explored by Deleyto and Azcona. As is the case in *Babel*, these devices subjectivize the world of *21 Grams*, and so do, in addition, the predominant close-ups and medium shots, and the numerous sequences that revolve around face-to-face encounters and exchanges.

The detailed formal analysis provided by Deleyto and Azcona is rather exceptional in studies of national and peripheral cinemas, more frequently treated as symptoms of social and historical forces than as aesthetic statements in their own right. But for Deleyto and

Azcona form is not an end in itself, nor an index of González Iñárritu's particularity as a creator, but rather a conduit to explore the films' ideology. This may be summarized as a profound humanism that shows the inevitability of suffering and the ephemerality of happiness, but also the resilience of the human spirit and the periodic availability of affection, understanding, and support. As comments on our beleaguered (late-? post-? post-post?) modernity, González Iñárritu's films assert a balance between the conjunctive and disjunctive effects of connectivity and flow. In a world defined by quick circulation and instability, the possibilities for disunity and atomization are great, but so too are the chances for random kindness and unexpected alliance.

Overall Deleyto and Azcona's study leaves little to be desired. Theoretically sophisticated, encompassing, and luminous in its readings, the monograph will be an essential reference for anyone interested in the filmmaker and in transnational cinema, as well as a sound model of interdisciplinary scholarship.

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