



CONTEMPORARY FILM DIRECTORS

Alejandro González Iñárritu

Celestino Deleyto and
María del Mar Azcona

Alejandro González Iñárritu |

Contemporary Film Directors

Edited by James Naremore

The Contemporary Film Directors series provides concise, well-written introductions to directors from around the world and from every level of the film industry. Its chief aims are to broaden our awareness of important artists, to give serious critical attention to their work, and to illustrate the variety and vitality of contemporary cinema. Contributors to the series include an array of internationally respected critics and academics. Each volume contains an incisive critical commentary, an informative interview with the director, and a detailed filmography.

*A list of books in the series appears
at the end of this book.*



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CHICAGO
SPRINGFIELD

Frontispiece: Alejandro González Iñárritu

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1 2 3 4 5 C P 5 4 3 2 1

⊞ This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Deleyto, Celestino.

Alejandro González Iñárritu / Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona.

p. cm. — (Contemporary film directors)

Includes filmography.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-252-03569-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-252-07761-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. González Iñárritu, Alejandro, 1963—Criticism and interpretation.

2. González Iñárritu, Alejandro, 1963—Interviews.

3. Motion picture producers and directors—Mexico—Interviews.

I. Azcona, María del Mar. II. Title.

PN1998.3.G6566D46 2010

791.4302'33092—dc22 [B] 2010016577

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Considered by many critics as a trilogy, Alejandro González Iñárritu's first three feature films have burst onto the scene of early-twenty-first-century cinema. Released at the dawn of the new century, *Amores perros* (2000) inaugurated one more renaissance of Mexican cinema and effortlessly inscribed itself within the parameters of global art cinema. Although in many ways very different from each other and from their predecessor, *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006) confirm the consistency of Iñárritu's filmic world and his ability to connect with a contemporary *Weltanschauung*. The Mexican filmmaker has become one of the most powerful voices in the cinema of the new century on the basis of only three films. At the time of this writing, his fourth feature, *Biutiful*, was in the last stages of postproduction and slated to be released in 2010.

While most of the creative team from his first three films collaborated on *Biutiful*, one key player was missing: the scriptwriter Guillermo Arriaga. Not long after the release of *Babel*, a bitter argument abruptly ended what had been a fruitful collaboration. The release of *The Burning Plain* (2008), Arriaga's first venture as director, revealed striking differences, in spite of a comparable narrative structure, with Iñárritu's three films, suggesting that the separation might constitute a new beginning for both filmmakers. It is impossible to speculate on the direction that the director's *oeuvre* is going to take in the future. In our interview with Iñárritu, he confirmed that *Biutiful* is a linear, single-protagonist story that focuses intensely on the main character's subjectivity and that it will have little to do, at least in conceptual and structural terms, with his earlier films. In any case, the impact of his output as a feature director and the sophistication, intricacy, and manifold reverberations of his first

three filmic texts have proven sufficient to situate him at the forefront of world cinema.

Born in Mexico City in 1963, Iñárritu started as a deejay at a radio station while he studied filmmaking and wrote the musical score for several films. In the 1990s he worked for Televisa, Mexico's foremost television company, where he was one of its youngest producers. He then spent most of the decade making hundreds of TV commercials, as well as a short film, *Detrás del dinero* (1995), produced by Televisa and starring the Spanish singer Miguel Bosé. Iñárritu wrote and directed his own commercials and, in his own words, probably spent more time on the set than any other director. Seen in retrospect, this was a period of feverish activity that sharpened his cinematic skills in preparation for his film work of the next decade. Toward the end of the decade, he met Guillermo Arriaga during a project involving a series of one-minute films, with different protagonists and stories, all revolving around a single incident, in this case a fire. The series never materialized, but it gave the filmmakers the idea and the creative impulse to make *Amores perros*.

After the critical and commercial success of his first feature film, Iñárritu would return to work as a director of commercials in a very different project: a series of shorts commissioned by BMW from renowned directors, all starring Clive Owen as a driver, to appear on the Internet (later gathered in a promotional DVD for the car company). The series was called *The Hire*, and it featured filmmakers like John Frankenheimer, Wong Kar-wai, Guy Ritchie, and John Woo. Iñárritu's short, "Powder Keg," involved a war photographer in a Latin American country (Stellan Skarsgård) whom Owen's U.N.-drafted driver attempts to rescue from hostile territory. The open political commitment found in this short film reappears in the director's other important piece from between his first two feature films, his collaboration in the portmanteau movie *11'09"01—September 11* (2002). In this collection of shorts about the impact of the tragedy of the Twin Towers in different places around the world, Iñárritu's was perhaps the most radical: eleven minutes and one second of mostly black screen, with Gustavo Santaolalla's sumptuous and plaintive score taking center stage and, from time to time, flashes of light in the middle of the screen briefly showing people falling from the windows of the buildings. More effectively than many of the other short films, Iñárritu captures the darkness and dramatic absurdity of the event that launched

twenty-first-century history but also had very painful direct and indirect consequences for many people around the world.

In spite of the remarkable interest of the rest of the director's output, this book is going to focus exclusively on his first three feature films. From our perspective, Alejandro González Iñárritu's privileged position as one of the most significant and influential directors of the new century rests on two pillars, both of which can best be perceived through an analysis of *Amores perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*: his dimensions as a transnational artist and as a consummate practitioner of the multiprotagonist film. Starting with an intensely localized story about his native Mexico City that immediately connected with thousands of spectators around the world and contributed to the international visibility of recent Mexican cinema, he then crossed the northern border with a story set in an unspecified city of the southern United States. As the logical continuation of this journey, *Babel* took him to three continents and became an almost literal example of global cinema (Europe was dropped at some point but has since become the destination of his fourth film, *Biutiful*). The films are equally transnational in industrial terms. Iñárritu has strived to maintain his creative independence by diversifying production and distribution deals across the world. More importantly, the films, particularly *Babel*, tell transnational stories and feature characters whose ambiguous mobility makes them representative of twenty-first-century global phenomena.

Essential to his filmic embodiment of transnationality is the use of the conventions of the multiprotagonist genre and the deployment of scrambled narratives. In his three collaborations with Arriaga, Iñárritu took one of the most popular cinematic forms of recent decades and crucially contributed to its development with three filmic narratives that have in common a multiplicity of stories, characters, and points of view but are also very different from one another. The complex and resounding narrative structures of these films go hand in hand with a formal sophistication in which visual and acoustic elements, as well as resonant editing strategies, become a crucial part of the director's approach to the new genre.

In this respect, the contribution of Iñárritu's usual collaborators—the director of photography Rodrigo Prieto, the composer Gustavo Santaolalla, the sound designer Martín Hernández, the production designer

Brigitte Broch, and the editor Stephen Mirrione—should not be underestimated. Above all of them, the figure of Guillermo Arriaga looms large. His involvement in the three films from the very beginning and the crucial role played by their sophisticated narrative structures place him alongside the director as more than just the author of the scripts. In this book, however, we will not explore the specific contributions made by each filmmaker to the creative process; we will consider the finished products as the consequence of the combined work of a team of exceptional artists. Following decade-long debates on film authorship, the use of the label “Alejandro González Iñárritu” to refer to the origin of the meanings created by the movies is to some extent a matter of convention and convenience. At the same time, Iñárritu, as the director, is a very real presence behind the movies and the central force under whose leadership the input of Arriaga and the rest has come to fruition. Our book, therefore, remains the study of a singular filmmaker.

The structure of this volume attempts to capture the distinctiveness of the Mexican director’s *oeuvre* and some of the reasons for its cultural centrality. We begin by situating Iñárritu within the history of Mexican cinema and culture in an effort to explore his ability to transcend national parameters. The multiprotagonist film, as a narrative, generic, and interpretative framework, permeates most of our analysis, which focuses on the representation of time and space within the structure of this genre. Since *Amores perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel* are equally significant for their cultural reverberations and their filmic sophistication, our critical commentary attempts to offer a combination of theoretical speculation and contextualization and textual analysis, zeroing in on the dimensions of each text that we find most suggestive. In temporal terms, each film conveys cultural and social meanings in specific ways, from the enhancement of simultaneity to the scrambling of time and the expansion and contraction of our sense of chronology. These temporal manipulations allow us, in our first approach to *Babel*, to tease out part of the links between the movies and issues of globalization and contemporary identity. Our take on the deployment of space is more formal, and we concentrate on the use of specific strategies such as the wide angle, the bleach bypass, and editing in transitions. Again, the analysis of formal transitions in *Babel* leads us to the cultural relevance of the concept of the border, in its material and metaphoric dimensions, in

Iñárritu's films and, more generally, in our transnational society. Space and time are, therefore, the driving forces of our study. Among other considerations, they help us place Iñárritu as both a located and deterritorialized artist, a filmic icon of the beginning of the twenty-first century and a philosopher of the intensity and inevitability of timeless human emotions and passions.

Research for this book has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education (research project no. HUM2007-61183/FILO) and the Diputación General de Aragón (re. H12). We carried out our research at the libraries of the University of Zaragoza, the Filmoteca de Madrid, and the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. We would like to thank Javier Herrera at the Filmoteca and Linda Mehr at the Herrick for their help and generosity. Our stay in Los Angeles was partly underwritten by the research fund of the University of Zaragoza. We would also like to thank James Naremore for giving us the opportunity to write this book and Joan Catapano and the staff at the University of Illinois Press for their editorial help. Juan Suárez, Isabel Santaolalla, Chris Holmlund, and Glenn Man provided advice and assistance at various stages, and our student Julia Echeverría helped us with various aspects of the book. Contacting Alejandro González Iñárritu was no easy task. We are indebted to Elena Deleyto, Joaquín Oristrell, and Sandra Hermida, who were the first links in the chain. Isolda Patrón-Costas, Iñárritu's agent, was a model of efficiency, generosity, and patience, and Alejandro González Iñárritu overwhelmed us with his kindness, humaneness, and intelligence. We are truly grateful to both for making the interview possible. Finally, our special gratitude goes to Tamar Jeffers McDonald, who read our manuscript on ridiculously short notice and provided invaluable comments and advice from which the book has benefited enormously.

Alejandro González Iñárritu |

Of Times and Places | The Films of Alejandro González Iñárritu

Down Mexico Way

In *21 Grams*, sometime after the deaths of her husband and two daughters, Cristina (Naomi Watts) walks to the corner where they were run over by a truck and sits briefly on the curb, overwhelmed by grief (fig. 1). The film underscores the importance of the moment visually and acoustically: in the first shot of the sequence, a long take, the handheld camera follows the character along the street in a sustained close-up, circles around her when she reaches the spot, and nervously stands in front of her while she looks around as if lost. Two briefer shots show her sitting and looking at the road, and then the camera pans left, leaving her offscreen, and focuses on the empty road where the accident took place. While Gustavo Santaolalla's slow musical theme incorporates a strain of sad tango music, a sound bridge of Michael's (Danny Huston) last cell-phone message carries us to the end of the sequence: Cristina lying on her bed, first in close-up and then in an oppressive high-angle



Figure 1. Cristina overwhelmed by grief and loneliness in *21 Grams*.

long shot, listening to her husband's words again and again. The stylistic articulation of the sequence, along with Watts's effective performance, forces spectators to feel the unbearable loneliness of the character after the deaths of her dear ones and her radical isolation from a world that has stopped making sense. Comparable close-ups and extreme close-ups of the three protagonists' faces abound throughout the film. Long shots, generally brief, constantly punctuate the narrative, emphasizing the barrenness and desolation, which can be felt so strongly at this point. This sequence may therefore be seen as a stylistic *mise-en-abyme* of the whole text.

Both stylistically and narratively, *21 Grams* is immediately recognizable as an early-twenty-first-century U.S. independent film. Indeed, the movie was produced by This Is That, Ted Hope's production company, and distributed by Focus Features, headed by James Schamus. Hope and Schamus cofounded Good Machine in the early 1990s and quickly turned it into one of the crucial players in the independent scene. Following the path of other independent companies, Good Machine was acquired by Universal Pictures, whose new "independent" branch was renamed Focus Features. Schamus stayed in the studio while Hope broke away, but both remained important figures within the now-reshaped field. *21 Grams* was representative of these developments at

the beginning of the twenty-first century. In addition, the presence in the cast of such crossover actors as Naomi Watts, Sean Penn, Benicio del Toro, and even Danny Huston place the film firmly within “the discourse of independence.” According to Yannis Tzioumakis, what had once literally been independent (films produced and distributed outside the Hollywood industry) evolved into a label to designate the more adventurous products of the specialized divisions of the majors and, more significantly, a specific way of speaking about certain movies (9–11). Iñárritu himself feels part of this discourse when he describes himself as an independent filmmaker (Wood 145), thus adding his name to a cinematic tendency that only makes full sense within the cinema of the United States and with reference to Hollywood. At first sight, then, *21 Grams* can industrially and stylistically be considered part of the independent scene, along with films released in the same year, such as *The Good Girl*, *Lost in Translation*, *Thirteen*, *The Station Agent*, *American Splendor*, or *Casa de los Babys*.

Yet the history of *21 Grams* began many months before as a story and a script written in Spanish to be filmed in Mexico with Mexican actors. The film was the second feature directed by Iñárritu, who, after the international success of *Amores perros*, had become, along with his fellow filmmakers Alfonso Cuarón and Guillermo del Toro and the actors Gael García Bernal and Salma Hayek, a symbol of the success, vitality, and strength of Mexican cinema at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If there is little doubt that the discourse of American independent cinema constitutes an appropriate context for the study of a film like *21 Grams*, is the recent history of Mexican cinema another such context? Can the film usefully be seen not only as an instance in the career of its director but also as bearing specific resonances of his national culture? In more general terms, is this film, and its director’s *oeuvre* as a whole, representative of larger trends within contemporary cinema? In this section we would like to look at the films of Alejandro González Iñárritu in their national context. We will interrogate the validity of the concept of Mexican national cinema and explore the extent to which the texts originate from and illuminate the extremely porous nature of that concept. As a necessary corollary, we will point at the ways in which they relate to the much debated but central notion of *mexicanidad*.

National identity has been the lynchpin of contemporary discus-