

# CRAZY NARRATIVE IN FILM. ANALYSING ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU'S FILM NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

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## Abstract

Non-linear film narrative breaks the mainstream conventions of narrative structure and deceives the audience's expectations. Alejandro González Iñárritu is one of the directors that have adopted the fragmentary narration for his films, as a means of experimentation, creating a narrative puzzle that has to be reassembled by the spectators. His films could be included in the category of what has been called 'hyperlink cinema.' In hyperlink cinema the action resides in separate stories, but a connection or influence between those disparate stories is gradually revealed to the audience. This paper will analyse the non-linear narrative technique used by the Mexican film director Alejandro González Iñárritu in his trilogy: *Amores perros*<sup>1</sup>, *21 Grams*<sup>2</sup> and *Babel*<sup>3</sup>.

**Keywords:** *Non-linear Film Narrative, Hyperlink Cinema, Postmodernism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Nowadays it has become more and more difficult to find new ways of reflecting on the contemporary society. The means of expression have to keep up with the fast changing rhythm of the world. If the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by rapid changes, in particular the digital revolution and the Internet, in the 21<sup>st</sup> there begin to appear tendencies towards the acknowledgement of the consequences regarding this rapid progress. One of the effects is the fragmentation.

Fragmentation in fiction has searched new ways of expression and the most evident ones are in the narrative techniques. Writers adopt a less linear and more cyclical sense of time, as a reaction against the coherent and chronological style of writing. Both modern and post-modern literature represents a break with the 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, in which a story was told from an objective or omniscient point of view, exploring fragmentation in narrative- and character-construction.

Regarding films, many critics have expressed their dissatisfaction with narrative and its linearity. While the linear film narrative limits the viewer's participation in the film as the narrative gives no control to the public, the postmodernist one breaks the mainstream conventions of narrative structure and destroys the audience's expectations in order to create a work in which a less-recognizable internal logic forms the film's means of expression.

In the *Story of the Lost Reflection*, Paul Coates states that,

Film emerges from the Trojan horse of melodrama and reveals its true identity as the art form of a post-individual society. It is now apparent that it can be received only by a post-individual subject: one which represents a crowd of disconnected and often mutually hostile plural impulses. It is the prototype in form – and now also in content – of what Deleuze has termed 'the schizophrenic text'.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, directors have begun to make films that reject stories of time told in linear sequence and focus on polyvocal narration because they refuse to choose between competing stories, disbelieving that anyone knows the whole story anyway. Currie states that "post-modern narratology shatters living story into many disembodied fragments called 'petit' or 'local stories'. Postmodernists recognize that there are not one, but many histories."<sup>5</sup>

Directors like Robert Altman begin to have a predilection for fragmentation, which gives birth to a new way of telling stories, in a complex, multidimensional way that appeal to mass of audience of diverse interests and needs. He sees the modern society as a place of fragmentation in which traditional family relations are characterized by contradictions, paradoxes and confusion, presenting this reality in non-

traditional ways. In *Robert Altman, A Guide to Reference and Resources*, the authors underline that 'the effect of Altman's art is not to reject rationality out of hand but to exploit the pleasures of creating intellectual puzzles while at the same time suggesting the limitations of this endeavour in an absurd universe.'<sup>6</sup>

Another good example is Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*<sup>7</sup>, which presents a micro-cosm of American society through nine intertwined stories that each takes place on the same day in Southern California, during which all kinds of torrents are unleashed. Parents and children, anger and forgiveness, television and real life, longing and loss, chance and volition, sunshine and storms find themselves in collision on this day that builds through a series of accidents to an unexpected phenomenon.

This paper will deal with the phenomenon of non-linear narration using the example of the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu. More concretely, the focus will lie in the analysis of the narrative strategies and techniques in Iñárritu's trilogy: *Amores perros*<sup>8</sup>, *21 Grams*<sup>9</sup> and *Babel*<sup>10</sup>.

## **ALEJANDRO GONZALEZ IÑARRITU' S NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE**

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Alejandro González Iñárritu is one of the directors that have adopted the fragmentary narration for his films, as a means of experimentation, as he himself states in an interview: 'La modernidad es más que cosas que sean fragmentadas: es una posibilidad de exploración.'<sup>11</sup> Just like Altman, he is interested in creating a narrative puzzle and it is the viewers' task to reassemble it.

His films could be included in the category of what has recently been called 'hyperlink cinema'<sup>12</sup> These films are not hypermedia and do not have actual hyperlinks, but are multi-linear in a more metaphorical sense. Playing with time and character's personal history, plot twists, interwoven storylines between multiple characters, jumping between the beginning and end (flashback and flash-forward) are elements that one can find in this sort of cinema. In

hyperlink cinema the action resides in separate stories, but a connection or influence between those disparate stories is gradually revealed to the audience. The characters inhabit separate stories, but we gradually discover how those in one story are connected to those in another.

Iñárritu's narrative resembles the painting technique called pointillism in which the use of tiny primary-colour dots is used to generate secondary colours. The technique relies on the perceptive ability of the eye and mind of the viewer to mix the colour spots into a fuller range of tones. Iñárritu uses the same technique, offering only small bits of action, that seem to be disconnected with the one another and only when the viewer is able to take distance and see the whole, can he or she see the connection between every dot, which is related to the one next to it and together make up the whole story. He speaks about this technique in an interview: 'Se trata de hacer una película desde una teoría puntillista, donde si tomas perspectiva, los puntos adquieren una forma y sentido.'<sup>13</sup>

His narrative can also be resembled to a whole, a nucleus or a puzzle that has exploded and the pieces are scattered everywhere, being difficult to understand where each of them belongs to. It is the viewer's task to find an element in common that could unite the pieces and bring them back together, thus reassembling the nucleus, the puzzle. Furthermore, the stories are told from different perspectives, each of them bringing something new to the understanding of the whole, but at the same time each of them having their own gap that has to be filled in by another perspective. These gaps are also a critique to the modern society, which is divided by social, cultural or economical gaps that in their turn create gaps inside families and inside the self.

## **THE PUZZLE TRILOGY**

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With *Amores perros*, *21 Grams* and *Babel*, Iñárritu has created a complex series of interlocking stories of loss, love and broken families. Each of the three movies has been a pretext for the director to analyse social and cultural issues,

revolving around common themes, also basing on similar structures, as he explains in an interview:

Since *Amores perros*, I have tried to explore different realities in different social classes. One of the advantages of this kind of style of parallel stories is that you can explore different levels and arrive at the same conclusion: that, at the bottom line, we are human beings, and it doesn't matter where you are or which God you believe in or which country you live in.<sup>14</sup>

The trilogy is made up of three films, which can be regarded as puzzle pieces of a greater whole. In its turn, each film is made up of stories, which can be also seen as puzzle pieces being scattered all over the film. In this context, it is the viewer who has to connect them and reassemble the initial image.

His first film from the trilogy, *Amores Perros*, interweaves three stories illustrating love and loss in modern Mexico City, using human and animal blood as a metaphor. In each story the human condition is reflected in the parallel lives of the dogs that share their owners' worlds and become joint victims to their extreme violence.

The first puzzle piece in *Amores Perros* is the story of Octavio and Susana, which focuses on Octavio's dream of escaping the world of poverty. His only hope of raising the money for the dream is to let his dog, Cofi fight. Cofi's success angers one of Octavio's rivals who shoots the dog during one of the fights. As Octavio races to get the dog medical attention he drives fast through the streets of Mexico City, everything ending with a car accident.

During the development of this story there are also introduced fragments from other stories which, at this stage, do not make too much sense. The viewer has difficulties in understanding the connection between them and the effect can be irritating, as it interrupts the continuity of the first story. This story, which has begun with a car race and an accident, ends with the same accident, creating a circular sense of time and leaving the viewer in confusion. The entire action developed so far has been a flashback, presenting all the events that have led to the

accident, which is the starting point.

The next piece in the puzzle is the story of Daniel and Valeria, whose fragments have been introduced during the first story, but its official development also begins with the accident that appeared in the story of Octavio and Susana. This story, just like the previous one, has at its centre a love triangle, Daniel, his wife and his lover, Valeria. At the beginning, Valeria is involved in a car accident, together with her dog. We learn she is the other driver and victim of Octavio's accident. Her dog is unscathed, but Valeria is critically injured and confined to a wheelchair. The development of the story focuses on the events following the accident.

Throughout the first two stories, there is a reoccurring character that is not defined until the third story is told. The man, El Chivo, appears to be a street person who wanders about the streets of Mexico City by day and lives in an abandoned building. His travelling companions are six dogs who are his friends and family. El Chivo and Maru's story intertwines with the others ones at the scene of the car accident. His rescue of Octavio's dog, Cofi, connects him with the other story.

The second film in the trilogy, *21 Grams*, is a story of hope and humanity, of resilience and survival. The film revolves around the lives of three couples, who are faced with fragmentation and disintegration and we see their reaction in moments of crisis. The director plays with time and space, swinging between past, present and future, alternating flashbacks with flashforwards between three stories that result in the viewer's confusion and difficulty in detecting the logic of the narrative evolution.

The first narrative line focuses on the life and marriage of the college professor, Paul Rivers, who is mortally ill and awaiting a heart transplant, while his wife, Mary, hopes to become pregnant with his child through artificial insemination, after previously having made an abortion. Cristina Peck, married to Michael with whom she has two daughters, just as she begins to find equilibrium in her life after a reckless past, loses everything in a second. Her husband and two little girls are killed in a car accident

and her decision to donate his heart makes the connection to the first story.

Through the third story the viewer enters another social class, that of ex-con Jack Jordan and his wife Marianne who struggle to keep the family united although the obstacles seem impossible to overcome. Jack has decided to repair his past, affirming his fervent commitment to religion, but all his good intentions and plans are destroyed when he runs over Michael and his daughters.

The third film of the trilogy, *Babel* tells four stories of people set adrift by cultural and idiomatic frontiers, presenting their physical and psychological journey, focusing on the theme of communication, as the title suggests it.

The first puzzle piece follows a troubled American couple who find themselves fighting for their lives in the middle of a tragic incident while trying to save their marriage by making a trip to Morocco. Entwined with this marital drama is the story of the two Moroccan children who accidentally endanger many lives and set off a chain of global events they could never have imagined.

Another tale revolves around a Mexican nanny looking after the children of the American family that is on vacation in Morocco, who decides to bring the children illegally across the border in Mexico.

The final story focuses on a widowed father trying to emotionally connect with his deaf daughter, the tale being set in Tokyo. This story of a teenager who falls into sexual extremes as a way to fulfil her yearning for affection, expresses another side of language – the physical. Making a movie that crosses borders, cultures, conflicts and the internal lines people draw between themselves, *Babel* follows four equally compelling narratives that unravel in different corners of the planet, yet are nevertheless tied together at the roots.

## **PUZZLE CLUES - UNIFYING OR UNITY-BREAKING ELEMENTS**

We have seen so far that the narratives are intentionally fragmented and some of the

reasons that led Iñárritu to using such an approach for his trilogy. In order to facilitate the viewers' task of bringing together the puzzle pieces, which are scattered all over the films, the director gives some "clues" or hints that are supposed to connect the fragments:

In the script, there were cues to help you understand where you were in the chronology of each story, but I felt we should support that visually. We therefore designed an emotional arc for each of the stories, and whenever we went back to one, we tried to be at that place visually.<sup>15</sup>

But before searching for the unifying clues, one should first see what breaks the narrative into fragments. There many types of hints that the viewer can identify in all the three films, which can be: characters, events, spaces, symbols, objects or themes that create a link first between the stories and then between the films, giving unity to the trilogy. However, it is interesting to observe that the apparently unifying elements are sometimes identical to those used to render fragmentation. Moreover, the same element can have different effects in the development of different stories and characters.

### **Accident**

The event that reoccurs in all the puzzle pieces is the accident that is used concomitantly to break the lives of the characters and the narrative linearity and to unite the fragments, both metaphorically, being a new start or an ending for the characters, and literally, taking into account the narrative unity.

*Amores Perros* begins with an accident that involves the three main characters from the three stories that make up the film, two of them directly, Octavio and Valeria, and one of them indirectly, as a witness, El Chivo. However, at the beginning the viewer does not know who the characters are and what connection there is between them. New information is revealed by repeating the scene of the accident four times during the film, each time from a new perspective.

As already said, the accident has different

effects on each character, but generally it is associated with an ending, however, not in all cases. For one of them, Octavio's friend, it means the end of his life, for Octavio, Valeria and Daniel it means the end of their dreams while for El Chivo it is a new beginning, as from that moment on his life will begin to change direction.

The film presents both the effects and the events that triggered the accident, appearing in different moments in the development of the three stories. In the story of Octavio and Susana, it appears two times, at the beginning and at the end, but the whole story is a flashback, presenting the events previous to the accident, in the second story, that of Daniel and Valeria, it is introduced at the beginning and the rest of the story focuses on the events following the accident, and in the last story, it happens in the middle.

Each time, this linking element is seen from another perspective and each time new elements are added that give the viewer a better understanding of what is going on. The second time it appears, at the end of the first story, the rhythm is very fast and the sounds are digitally modified to increase the tension. Moreover, the accident is always associated with a line told by Valeria to Richie or with a different kind of music, either hip-hop or Latin American.

In *21 Grams*, there is also an accident that changes and connects the lives of strangers. This time, we do not see the accident, we only hear it, but there are references about it and the film is made up only of sequences of events that happened before or after the accident. The phone call that Michael makes before the accident is repeated several times during the film, every time in a different context, in order to help the viewers connect the events.

The course of events includes the lives of three families, which will be broken by the accident, only one of them being saved in the end. Only Jack Jordan is directly involved in the accident, the other two main characters, Paul and Christina, being only indirectly involved, but all three of them suffering its consequences.

Before the accident, Jack, an ex-con had focused his life only around religious practice,

living with his family, Paul was dying because of a heart condition, and Christina was regaining her equilibrium after having had drug problems with the help of her husband and her daughters. After the accident Jack and Christina are the losers, both of them losing their peace and family, and Paul seems to be the winner, as he gets a new heart that means a new life.

However, the accident means both life and death, being associated with Paul's heart transplant, with a new rebirth and with Michael's death. By the end of the film, the characters seem to return to the state previous to the accident: Jack returns to his family, Paul is dying, Christina regains her peace and hope as she finds out she is pregnant and forgives Jack.

In *Babel*, there is no car accident, but a random shot that, just like in the previous cases, crosses the lives of strangers, this time from different corners of the world. We can say that in this case, the accident connects not only people, but also peoples.

The accident is seen from different perspectives, one time from the outside, another time from inside the bus and in another case it is spoken about, either on the TV or on the telephone. This time the consequences affected not only the directly involved persons and their families, but also indirectly involved individuals and the political situation between America and Morocco. This narrative element is introduced in different moments in the development of each story, the film presenting events that happened before and after the accident, but not in chronological order.

In all the four tales, the moment of the accident is associated with a crisis in the characters' lives. Before the accident, Susan and Richard's marriage is in crisis, so they decide to make a trip to Morocco to rediscover their love, the Moroccan family is confronted with moral dilemmas, Amelia is an illegal Mexican immigrant working in America and the Japanese teenager has great communication difficulties with her father, that lead to an identity crisis. After the accident, one could say that all crises are solved, although in some cases the price was high: Susan and Richard overcome the marital

crisis, Ahmed reveals the truth about his brother spying on his naked sister and ends up by being shot during the confrontation with the police, Amelia is deported back to Mexico and reunited with her family and Chieko reaches for her father's consolation.

### Characters

Another narrative clue used by the director in uniting or disuniting the stories are characters, who either through presence or absence help to connect the tales. Their dynamic aspect and mobility make them good tools in manipulating the narrative development.

The best example is the character of El Chivo from *Amores Perros* whose story is alternated with the other two and who is a witness of the accident. He crosses with the first story when he steals Octavio's wallet and looks at the pictures inside, when he meets Ramiro and Susana on the streets after they ran away and when he saves Cofi. With the second story he crosses only indirectly, as he drives by the publicity billboard, depicting Valeria. He is also the character that unites the two social classes that are presented in the other two stories, the rich and the poor. He belongs to both social classes, as he used to have everything and now he has nothing.

Another example could be the detective goes to El Chivo to arrange a homicide and who is in the bank when Ramiro commits the robbery and is killed.

In the same film, the dogs become an important element in the narrative unity, as they are present in all the three stories. Cofi or Negro, which appears in both the story of Octavio and Susana and in that of El Chivo and Maru, plays different roles in the characters' lives. It becomes a source of money for Octavio, but also the one that triggers the accident, as Octavio's rival gets stabbed after shooting the dog, event which is followed by the car race and by the accident. After having been saved by El Chivo, Cofi kills all his dogs and brings about a moment of reflection in his life which will lead him to a change of direction. Richie is Valeria's dog to which she talks just before the accident and that line which is repeated hints to the viewer what is

going to happen.

In *21 Grams*, paradoxically, the characters and the stories are united and separated by an absent person, Michael. His death crosses the lives of individuals he had never even met. Paul, who gets Michael's heart, feels a connection to him and an urge to meet his widow with whom he falls in love and wants to kill Jack from a feeling of debt. In her turn, Christina falls in love with Paul as she sees Michael in him and wants to revenge her husband's death by killing Jack, who feels guilty for his deed and punishes himself.

The charters that unite the stories in *Babel* are Hassan, the Arabian merchant that sells the gun to Abdullah and Yasujiro, and the Japanese hunter who had offered the gun to Hassan when he went in Morroco as a tourist. The meeting of two people from different social and cultural spaces triggers unimaginable events whose effects are felt on four continents.

### Objects

Each puzzle piece contains objects that connect it to another piece, the best example being the photos that appear in all the films.

In *Amores Perros*, El Chivo looks at the photos of Octavio and his family after the accident and the spectators relive their story. At the same time, he has a picture of his daughter over his bed, which he watches and he replaces the photo of his wife's second husband with his own, in his desire to regain what he had lost. Daniel still has the photos of his family on his desk although he had moved in with Valeria, as he had not been able to break up completely with them.

In *21 Grams*, Paul sees pictures with Christina and Michael he had never met and he suddenly feels dizzy, as the pictures give the impression that the person is still alive not only inside him, as he has his heart, but also in Christina's memory.

In *Babel*, Hassan and Yasujiro' picture with the gun connects the stories and saves Abdullah from being punished for shooting at Susan. The picture appears both in Morocco and in Japan, in Yasujiro's house. The gun is another connection element, being the object that triggers the whole action.

In *Babel* and in the other two films, the telephone and the TV are important narrative clues. At the beginning of the film, Richard calls Amelia after Susan has been taken to the hospital and one only hears his voice, but see Amelia and his son. At the end of the film we hear the conversation for the second time, but this time we see Richard and hear the ones at the other end. The conversation unites not only the stories and the characters, but also spaces, Morocco and the USA. The story taking place in Tokyo is connected with the one in Morocco through the TV news where we hear about Yusef's arrest and about Susan's recovery after the incident.

In *21 Grams*, the telephone is used as a narrative connector as the news that there is a heart available for Paul comes over the telephone; Christina finds out about the accident also over the telephone. During the film she listens over and over again to the last message Michael had left her on the telephone just before the accident; she also calls Paul at night and asks him to come over at her place.

In *Amores Perros*, the story of Octavio and Susana crosses with that of Valeria and Daniel through the TV set as Octavio and his friend watch a TV show where Valeria appears together with her dog, Richie.

### Themes

It is perhaps right to say that one of the best narrative clue that connects all the stories and all the films of the trilogy are the common themes, which although they are more or less the same, the approach is another one in each case, giving each story originality and stirring the viewer's interest. The main theme that predominates in all the stories is that concerning the relations between parents and children.

In *Amores Perros*, as the title suggests it, the central topic is that of dogs' love, the dogs' fighting and connection to the humans being only a metaphor for the family relations between brothers (Octavio is blinded by his ambition and sees in his brother Ramiro a rival, just like in the case of the man who pays El Chivo to kill his brother) or between parents and children: El Chivo had left his family in order to fulfil his

dreams and his only family become the dogs which he loves and with which he shares everything, but he begins to regret having sacrificed his family and wants to regain his daughter. The same happened to Daniel, who left everything to follow his desires, but he keeps thinking about his daughters; Valeria has no contact with her father.

In *21 Grams*, this issue is approached from different perspectives. On the one hand, we have the situation from Jack's family, who is on the point of losing his children because of his guilt and the tragedy of Christina, who loses her husband and daughters and with them the desire to live. On the other hand, there is a more subtle issue: that of Mary, Paul's wife, who is determined to get pregnant, although he is dying. At the end, Christina finds out that she is pregnant, this news giving her the power to forgive Jack, to free herself from the past and the hope to look ahead.

In *Babel*, the Moroccan, the American and the Japanese families are all in moment of crisis caused by a lack of communication between its members. The director evokes the ancient concept of Babel and questions its modern day implications: the mistaken identities, misunderstandings and missed chances for communication. 'You don't have to be lost in the Morocco desert or in the middle of the Shibuya district to feel that you are isolated. The most terrifying loneliness and isolation is the one that we experiment with ourselves, our wives and our children,'<sup>16</sup> explains Iñárritu.

Another recurring theme in the entire trilogy is that of human sufferance, symbolized by blood, which is in strong connection to loss, loneliness, death, and not the least, to hope. Sufferance unites people, no matter the reasons, the social or cultural background, being capable of breaking barriers, as all people are equal when faced with tragedy.

In *Amores Perros* all the characters have aspirations and all lose something in their attempt to fulfil those desires: Octavio loses Susana and Cofi, Valeria, her leg and her success, Daniel, his family and his youth, and El Chivo, his daughter and his dogs. In *21 Grams*, the

characters are faced with the extreme limits of their endurance, which leads them to self destruction (Paul smokes although he isn't supposed to, Christina takes drugs and drinks alcohol, Jack lives in self-exile away from his family) and causes a loss of identity, the question of knowing who one is being rhetorically asked by almost every character in the development of the film. In *Babel*, the American couple looks like one who gets lost in the desert, when in reality, they are a lost couple who find one another in their loneliness. The same applies to the Japanese father and his teenage daughter, who cannot express her frustration and anger and shuts herself from her father.

The religious message is explicit in all the three movies: in *Amores Perros* the Cross appears in many context as a trivial object, that nobody pays attention to, in *21 Grams*, the names of the characters are suggestive (Jack Jordan, Marianne, Mary, Paul, Michael), and Jack's refuge in religion, followed by a crisis is a central issue, in *Babel*, the title itself makes reference to the biblical episode and the moral dilemma in the Muslim family raises many questions.

The religious message is tightly connected to a moral one, as it seems that most of the characters have broken a moral or even a juridical law at a certain point in their lives and they have to pay the consequences. Iñárritu's collaborator, Arriaga states that 'there is always a moral issue in all of my work; moral in the sense that decisions have consequences. Almost all of my work is about the dead influencing the living.'<sup>17</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

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An important feature that characterizes Iñárritu's narrative, is the hazard, the coincidence that can change one's live in a second and also the course of the narrative shifts direction apparently at random, creating a feeling of confusion and frustration in the viewer, who can no longer passively expect for the film to answer all the questions and to solve all the mysteries. It is also his or her responsibility to get involved and to fill in the

gaps, finding meaning where apparently there is only chaos.

The spectator is offered a creative power, an active involvement in the narrative. While speaking about his movies, Iñárritu underlines that 'an experience like that - where you're exposed to so much humanity, so many realities and cultures - it changes your perspective, your point of view, your prejudice, yourself.'<sup>18</sup>

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