

A few ounces of self-indulgence

By Joanne Laurier
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21 Grams, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, written by Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga

Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu's latest film, *21 Grams*, is structured as an overlapping triptych following the difficulties of its three central characters: Jack Jordan (Benicio Del Toro), a born-again Christian and ex-con, who now counsels wayward teens; Paul Rivers (Sean Penn), a mathematics professor in a failing marriage who needs a heart transplant; and Cristina Peck (Naomi Watts), a mother of two girls married to an architect. The lives of this disparate threesome intersect in the aftermath of a tragic hit-and-run.

Jack, husband and father of two small children, has become a religious zealot in a last-ditch attempt to handle life without alcohol or criminal behavior. Paul, an unlikely intellectual in Penn's characterization, awaits a heart donor while his wife insists—even as the marriage founders—on being artificially inseminated. Cristina, a former junkie, attempts to find happiness as a suburban housewife.

When Jack accidentally runs over and kills Cristina's husband and two daughters, Paul receives the adult victim's heart in a transplant. Medical protocol dictates that Paul's donor remains anonymous.

Not satisfied with having defied death, the academic, who has an endless array of self-destructive habits, becomes obsessed with tracking down his donor. Paul manages to locate Cristina who has, out of grief, returned to *her* self-destructive habits. They fall for each other—Cristina goes from revulsion at, to love for, Paul's "new" heart. With revenge as their agenda, the couple track down Jack, who has left his family and has, out of guilt, resumed *his* self-destructive habits. The film's climax takes place in a seedy motel room where all three end up.

The movie concludes with Paul's voice, ponderously intoning: "They say that 21 grams is the weight we lose when we die. The weight of five nickels, of a hummingbird, of a chocolate bar—and perhaps a human soul. How much does love weigh? How much does guilt weigh? How much does life weigh?"

Gritty imagery and jerky, hand-held camera work—the external trappings of *cinema verité*—are the film's visual

trademarks. The storyline jumps forward and backward in time in non-linear fragments. The film's nervousness and confusingly arranged sequences, however, appear to be more than anything else a diversion from its general lack of substance and insight.

It appears that the filmmakers intend, somewhat schematically, to provide a glimpse into the lives and feelings of the different social classes. Del Toro's Jack, a lumpen proletariat type, seems to represent the working class for the director, Penn's Paul, the intelligentsia, and Watts's Cristina, the middle class suburban petty bourgeois.

21 Grams argues that all social layers share in life's abundance of physical and mental agonies. But no matter the duration or intensity of suffering, life (and death) always remains incomprehensible. It is a not-so-pleasant, mysterious gift. Absent is any hint that it is possible to understand, much less change the world.

Let's give the filmmakers the benefit of the doubt and assume that such people as Jack, Paul and Cristina, with their distinct foibles and circumstances, do exist. What then of the film's approach? Does it probe their situations in a thought-provoking and meaningful fashion?

On the contrary, the approach adopted by the filmmakers is superficial, indeed tabloid-like. *21 Grams* is unable to grasp the underlying social dynamic. There is no context for its characters' self-destructive behavior. How is it that the weight of life is so crushing that alcohol, drug abuse and lethal doses of nicotine get the better of Jack, Cristina and Paul, respectively? The role of the artist is to explain something about life, not to sensationalize, effectively mystifying, its hardships.

The film's grainy, bleak look is joined to suffocating dramatic situations in which the actors emote without restraint. There is more than a little loss of dignity involved in this process for the talented cast, with the normally convincing and appealing Naomi Watts expending more energy in hysterics than could ever be generated by the "Energizer Bunny." There is no end here to the misreading of society and human relationships. Jack's wife, Marianne, (Melissa Leo) is the most affecting of all the leads.

Iñárritu states in the film's production notes that "we are

all just floating in an immense universe of circumstances.” What does this mean? Is there a logic to the circumstances? Or is life made up of discrete, disconnected “facts”? One doesn’t know, but fears the worst.

The filmmaker’s shallow philosophical construct encourages him to create an implausible drama. His view of the world as a series of “circumstances” obliges him to introduce abstract and banal connections into his work as a substitute for coherence. The performers’ contortions come from the need to make these false connections believable and real.

Iñárritu’s partner, Guillermo Arriaga, was the scriptwriter for both *21 Grams* and the director’s first, much-acclaimed film, *Amores Perros*, commonly translated as “Love’s a Bitch.” Both works specialize in gratuitous portrayals of what the duo consider to be man’s congenitally diseased essence. Although Arriaga claims to be an atheist, there is more than a whiff of the doctrine of Original Sin present in his writing.

On the subject of *Amores Perros*, Arriaga spoke to *CinemaSpeak.com*: “I wrote horrible, awful characters with awful motivations, but people understand them. To understand a hit man—a hit man is always a terrible person, but I wanted the audience to understand the other side of the hit man.” This is simply puerile and irresponsible. Does anyone seriously believe that Arriaga is familiar with the “other side of the hit man”? This character study takes place in the midst of bloody scenes of dog fighting so graphic that the film drew ire from the British Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

About *21 Grams*, Arriaga said: “It’s easy to talk about hope when we have these feel-good movies, but what about hope when you are deep in hell.... I think that in these times we are having very dark moments. September 11 was a very dark moment. The Oklahoma City bombing was a very dark moment for the United States and the Columbine killings. Where can you find hope?” There’s nothing about this approach that distinguishes it from the superficial explanations offered by the bourgeois media. It is precisely a “radical” accommodation to such explanations. Arriaga discloses, to say the least, a serious lack of insight into a complex period that cannot simply be characterized as “dark.”

Jittery, semi-hysterical films like *21 Grams* may appear at first glance to be more profound than Hollywood “feel-good” movies, but in reality, neither genre seriously takes on social or psychological complexities. The former’s phony “nitty-grittiness” is meant more to impress than raise consciousness, if one discounts the filmmakers’ own consciousness of career, image and status.

Arriaga claims to believe that “Life is worth it [all the

pain] and that life has more power than death”; and “I think life is our only chance; our only chance to tell people how much we love them”; and “I want to tell the story very basic[ally] with very basic feelings. Our idea is that it’s so basic that it doesn’t need a specific place to happen.... The feelings that this brings is love, hate, revenge guilt, forgiveness—I think they are very basic.”

Director Iñárritu weighed in on *FFWD Weekly*, praising his scriptwriter: “He doesn’t fear to show the human condition in a naked way. And he talks about very basic, primitive things that I can relate to.... That’s tough because when people talk about those kinds of things, they get very cerebral, very deep, very important, and that’s boring.” After viewing *21 Grams*, the spectator may find him or herself in immediate need of the cerebral, the deep and the important. In any event, to show “the human condition in a naked way” would actually mean demystifying class relations, laying bare the social process. Nothing could be farther from the filmmakers’ minds.

Neither Iñárritu nor Arriaga appears to have much of a clue about life in Mexico, the US or anywhere else. The filmmakers specialty involves translating the media’s sensationalism and impressionism into art-house language. This is then received with great fanfare by those in the cinema community who instinctively have an aversion to an examination of the source of these problems.

The extreme violence and anti-social behavior, the physical and moral decomposition represented in Iñárritu’s films are never attributable, in the end, to a decaying social order and its outmoded institutions, but to the mystical, to Fate, to the Soul—to the 21 grams.

It is far easier to make a ruckus than to lift the lid on the real, profound social issues—particularly the vast polarization of wealth and its inhuman consequences for the populations in Mexico, the US and globally. These conditions are malignant, explosive and at least 21 times more dramatic than the typical independent filmmaker or critic imagines.

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