

Millennium Accidents, Breaking Narratives
in Pedro Almodóvar and Alejandro González Iñárritu

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Anna Shilova

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Millennium Accidents is an attempt to show the relation between the shattered, fragmented and decentralizing nature of contemporary, globalized reality and the texts it produces. In my research I aim to reveal the changes in the building and development of a story as a narrative and cognitive phenomenon. The economic globalization and the high-tech revolution have led to a modification of our mental, emotional and social functioning, converting the whole world into a huge network (M. Castells). Consequently, narrative--be it verbal or iconic--shows the same metamorphosis, as it generates multiple plots, neglects temporal and spatial conventions, and moves beyond national identities. Six films (*Carne Trémula* 1997; *Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999; *Amores Perros*, 2000; *Hable con ella*, 2002;

21 Grams, 2003; *Babel*, 2006) form the corpus of texts analyzed in my dissertation. All appeared around the third millennium and are connected by the presence of a disastrous event--an accident--that radically alters the protagonists' lives but at the same time opens up new possibilities for plot development.

The first chapter scrutinizes the six films from a narratological perspective. I analyze the interplay between causality and coincidence as the main moving forces within the story, questioning the primacy of one over the other in a "broken," multiple plot narrative structure. In examining this structure, I elaborate on C. G. Jung's model of world functioning proposed in his seminal essay "Synchronicity: an Acasual Connecting Principle", whereby subjective and objective connections between individuals and life events are orchestrated by the mechanisms of causality and coincidence. Drawing on recent scholarship in literary theory and criticism, I work to direct attention to the much neglected role of coincidence in literature and film narrative. The study of the organizing (or disorganizing) force of coincidence, chance and randomness is then linked to chaos theory, which argues for disorder and lack of logic as higher forms of order. A similar conception applied to cinematic narrative animates the complex story worlds of the six films, reaching its apex in the densely woven thematic and characterological strands of Iñárritu's *21 Grams*.

In the second chapter I move to examine the role of thematic constants such as the body, violence and death as driving forces in their own right. Taking trauma studies as my point of departure, I situate the six films with respect to the notion of *trauma culture* (R. Luckhurst) in which unforeseen and incomprehensible violent blows destroy an already fragile stability, changing people and their sense of life forever. Through Judith Butler's vision of the loss and its meaning I discern a new type of hero in contemporary visual narrative -- one who deals with trauma, becoming a new self.

Recent years have brought a break in the holistic perception of the body, a desacralization that has re/devaluated life and death, blurring the boundaries between them by creating a new hybrid space of the neo-mort. This space has become possible due to advances in medical science and clinical practice: the brain-dead are kept alive and hearts and other organs travel between bodies. A moral questioning of the rights over one's own body and the exclusiveness of personhood is a central motif in accident-driven plots. At the same time, within the trauma frame, human existence is marked by an increased fluidity in the process of transitioning from some/one thing to someone/thing else.

The third and final chapter returns to consider the further effects of the film's broken or randomized narrative structure. The formalist's concept of *defamiliarization* echoes that of *deviation* – with both standing for uniqueness of the work as a piece of art. Each of the films proposes a breakdown of conventional narrative norms on at least three levels (time, logic and meaning), thus opening new dimensions for the cognitive and emotional processing of the text. My goal is to explore the effects of this “shuffled” mode of narrating; i.e., the extent to which such complex narrative structures enrich the spectator's experience of the text beyond the satisfaction derived from putting the puzzle together and whether a “chaotic” montage becomes the vehicle of a new conception of a collective or networked mind.

Dedication Page

To Helen

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Acknowledgements

As the Indian Vedic Treatise *Chakravidya* teaches, a human life moves in seven year cycles and each cycle is dominated by one of the seven chakras located in our light body. Among “fear”, “feelings”, “proactivity”, “harmony”, “philosophy”, “wisdom” and “spirituality,” *Spanish* has almost entirely dominated my life for the two most recent and richest cycles since I learnt my first word in this language in 2000. “La mesa,” it was and it won my heart. From then I went through many stages of learning Spanish yet there are still so many vast *tierras ignotas* to learn. From “la mesa” and hundreds of other words, verbs and worlds I reached the point of being identified by friends as “la Rusa-Hispana.” This is an amazing trajectory and I am looking forward to entering the next life cycle and I expect to never stop becoming someone else.

The present work is the culmination of my career as a student and I would have never achieved it, had I not been guided by a number of people all that long way from 2000, people who patiently encouraged me and passed on to me the precious knowledge they possess. My grammar professor Tamara. G. Solomonova and my first literary analysis professor Larisa. P. Kuznetsova opened the door to the Hispanic world for me. My BA and MA theses advisors, Inna A. Shaludko and Antonio Planells, respectively, began the work of molding a scholar in me. A shift from literature to cinema happened under the strong influence of

Jennifer Cooley with whom I took my first class on film (particularly on Pedro Almodóvar) and the discovery of a new, visual language reshaped the focus of my interest in the Humanities. This motivation increased and developed in Katy Vernon's cinema classes, and turned naturally into working on this dissertation under her direction. I am immensely appreciative of Katy's firmness but gentleness for this has been the only possible manner to make me write better and see things I wasn't able to see at the beginning of this journey.

I thank the Stony Brook Hispanic Languages and Literature Department for having been my second home since 2008! The professors' and secretaries' kindness and assistance on all kinds of matters helped me to survive and to find strength in struggling for who I am now. And, of course, I wouldn't be here now defending this dissertation without the support from overseas, where my family have always kept their fingers crossed.

Introduction

*But the millennium of faith gave way to the millennium of doubt,
And neither serfs nor stars continued their obedient course.*
(Robert Stam)

The apocalyptic implications of the turn of the third millennium are still reverberating, yet the end of the world proved instead to be a gradual process of ending, visible in the seemingly inexorable outdating of human life forms and their substitution by others more suitable for the here and now. Among these forms one that has gone through a substantial modification is the phenomenon of the *story*. The recent proliferation of narrative forms that tend to reflect reality as a broken mirror may be seen as a warning of things to come or as a simple sign of change. As Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard indicate, a corpus of works has recently come to the fore in literature and film which is distinguished by its rejection of “social cohesion, strict causality and determinacy in favor of multiple outlooks, plurality, fragmentation, ambiguity” while bringing to the fore “disorder, chaos, chance, discontinuity, indeterminacy, and forces of random or aleatory play” (15 - 16). Instead of a conventional formulaic story, developing in a chronological order and featuring a centralized protagonist, the audience is offered a text that develops in a non-linear fashion and is constituted by several plots and multiple characters.

The visual texts that inspire this dissertation emerged over a nine-year time span beginning shortly before the year 2000. Pedro Almodóvar released

Carne Trémula and *Todo sobre mi Madre* in 1997 and 1999 respectively, and they were followed by Alejandro González Iñárritu's first full-length film, *Amores Perros* in 2000. Almodóvar's *Hable con ella* dates from 2002 and Iñárritu completes what has come to be seen as a filmic trilogy with *21 Grams* in 2003 and *Babel* in 2006. Marked by the kinds of narrative fragmentation, radical contingency and ambiguity characteristic of millennial culture, all six films also feature a common denominator in the occurrence of an accident that sends the characters and plots in unpredictable directions. A car crash triggers the dramas in *Todo sobre mi Madre*, *Amores Perros*, *Hable con ella* and *21 Grams*; whereas in *Carne Trémula* and *Babel* the destructive/constructive event is a gunshot.

The etymological origins of the word accident derive from the Latin "ad", meaning "to" and "cadere", meaning "to fall". Gradually, its signification shifted from "something that happens, an event," to "something that happens by chance" ("Accident"). The capricious nature of the accident goes hand in hand with its unpredictability; i.e. nobody knows when, whether or what may happen and to whom. And nowadays, an accident as an event befalling somebody often implies violence and damage.

In this work I aim at elaborating several notional components of the accident from within and without the fictional worlds created by the two contemporary film directors. I explore probability, randomness, contingency and coincidence from the point of view of their functioning in the text (as projected

from author's life experience or vision) as mechanisms opposed to those based on causation. Not only is the haphazardness of the main event in each film striking but also the way that minor coincidences seem to rule the narration, forming a system, a phenomenon that I argue is in need of closer theoretical attention in the fields of literature and cinema analysis and criticism.

The inferences made by David Bordwell and Wendy Everett, concerning the textual constructs under discussion may be considered a step forward in systematizing the role of coincidences in fiction. The latter asserts that typically, what sets several narrative strands in motion is an occurrence, most frequently, an accident, the randomness of which is clearly stressed and its consequences are entirely unpredictable (163-165). The former accentuates the striking and tantalizing nature of a sheerly accidental encounter, concluding that: "when the characters aren't all familiars and they don't participate in a causal project, the action is usually triggered by coincidence. In a plot populated by strangers," Bordwell proclaims, "contingency replaces causality" ("Poetics" 204). He identifies the traffic accident as the most common chance-based convergence and makes an illuminating point by suggesting that this major coincidence must be violent. "For one thing, traffic accidents are plausible within a story world. We know that they happen all too often. Moreover, they're the most obvious chance encounter that can have grave consequences. Bump me with your shoulder, and we'll probably move on and forget about it. Dent my car with yours, and we have

to halt to sort things out. Smash into my car, and our lives can change forever” (Bordwell “Poetics” 205, my emphasis). In terms of dramatic development, the car accidents serve as “plot engines” in the films that feature them as central events. And, as it proceeds from Bordwell’s argument, the degree of the impact (damage) made by the clash directly influences the degree of likelihood for unthinkable, unexpected or unpredictable interactions between characters.

Focusing on recent films that feature the car crash as a central event, Amit Thakkar signals the emergence of a new trend in Hispanophone cinema, a genre or subgenre that he dubs the “cine de choque” (19). In addition to *Todo sobre mi Madre* and *Amores Perros* Thakkar includes: *Abre los Ojos* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997); *Los Amantes del Círculo Polar* (Julio Medem, 1998); *Kilómetro 31* (Rigoberto Castaneda, 2006); and *La Mujer sin Cabeza* (Lucrecia Martel, 2010) (20). Beyond the Hispanic world there are also several notable examples: *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996); *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000); *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001); *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004) and *Intersections* (David Marconi, 2013). Thakkar asserts that “el choque” theme and aesthetics pervade the films in which such an event plays a role: “the word *choque* contains within it an array of physical and emotional wounds, its semantic field reverberates through both the crash and throughout the whole film” (26). In the films that belong to this category “choque is not to be understood as a single event but as a carefully dispersed element of the aesthetic of the film in question (...) In *cine de*

choque, the idea of *choque* – rather than the car crash itself – binds the fragments of the narrative text” (26). This kind of understanding or interpretation, in fact, loosens the restriction for the story to be necessarily bound by a car accident. In other words, the *choque* film seems to be one marked by any kind of violent encounter. What makes a film fall into this category is how the “choque” works afterwards, how it spreads into a network of voluntary and involuntary violence. Thus, the Almodóvar and Iñárritu films under study offer a significant contribution to the aesthetics of “el choque” that is much bigger than the clash itself, which, in fact, may be even visually omitted in the narration.

As Thakkar notes, the fact that traumatic effects of the accidents are strongly present and influential in the protagonists’ stories leads to the recognition of violence as omnipresent in such filmic worlds, leaving no one unaffected. It turns out that everybody loses something to the accident, in most of the cases because of the mere fact of passing by. The randomness of the accident accentuates its nothing-personal attitude for it may befall you or me, thus making us equally vulnerable. Generally speaking, the presence of the accident in the films groups them into a category of the “stories of the damaged.” I will argue that this damage or trauma is expressed not only on the level of content and character but also through a certain type of narrative structure and form, namely, non-linear/ shuffled/ scrambled/ randomized and so forth. These deformations in the discourse may be metaphorized as “damaged story-telling.” Roger Luckhurst

describes this phenomenon: “Of late, an array of visual and written stories involving trauma have ostentatiously played around with narrative time, disrupting linearity, suspending logical causation, running out of temporal sequence, working backwards towards the inaugurating traumatic event, or playing with belated revelations that retrospectively rewrite narrative significance” (80). All these breakages in narrative deployment first of all affect the habitual organization of temporality in the text since the process of narration is an intrinsically time based phenomenon. Trauma driven plots are mostly focused on memory work, which disrupts the chronological sequencing. As Petra Kuppers indicates: “trauma is a moment out of flow – a moment out of time, unable to be smoothly reintegrated into the memory flow”; trauma “is the block which does not allow full narrative, but which nevertheless sets it and its repetition in motion” (186). In this complex dynamics the content shapes the form of the text, or rather deforms it and, essentially, cinematic techniques are highly capable of breaking narrative. The unfamiliar narrative patterning encourages the spectator to re-conceptualize the content of the text or to derive deeper meanings from it.

The fact that contemporary audiences quite successfully digest atypically constructed visual texts may be explained by consumers’ preparedness to process such films, conditioned by a range of fundamental changes which are by no means limited to the cultural realm. In his discussion of digital texts for the 21st

century, Terrence Ross invokes the functioning of human cognition, pointing out that art must approximate our minds better for they are multilayered and non-linear. “The mind doesn’t work in one strand of thought that jumps around, but rather with a variety of strands that jump around while coming more clearly or less clearly into the foreground of our consciousness” (22). Further in his argument Ross urges a renovation or alteration of conventional narrative structures: “more than ever we live in an interconnected and cross-referenced world. To speak the truth about this world, artists need to be armed with an idiom that echoes the world in its form as well as its content” (23). In “Fictions of the Global” Rita Barnard connects the need to find a new kind of plot, where our received notions of human interconnection, causality, temporality, social space and so forth are reshaped, to the demands of the new world of millennial capitalism (208). María del Mar Azcona sees the modifications in cinematic constructions as necessary in order to be able to represent the consequences of complex social, economic, and political processes crystallized in concepts such as globalization, transnationalism, deterritorialization, and diaspora (“The Multi-Protagonist Film” 7).

The apparent popularity of films that deviate from a conventional formula, featuring several plots and characters, may lie in the fact that this alternative template has “captured some of the preoccupations, anxieties and hopes of our age in a particularly potent manner” (Azcona “Love” 3). Manuel Castells

summarizes these transformations, dating from the 1980s, from a sociological perspective as grounding factors for his theory of the network society. In the first place, Castells contends that we have entered the Information Age, a “historical period in which human societies perform their activities in a technological paradigm constituted around microelectronics-based information/communication technologies, and genetic engineering. It replaces/subsumes the technological paradigm of the Industrial Age, organized primarily around the production and distribution of energy” (6). The result of this technological revolution is the formation of an economy that has become informational, global and networked with the Internet as the main locus of interactive communication and business operations (Castells 10). Secondly, the unleashing of another revolution in the field of biology made “possible for the first time, the design and manipulation of living organisms, including human parts” (Castells 10). And thirdly, the establishment of a new social structure has led to a redefinition of time and space – the two material foundations of life becoming, as Castells puts it, “timeless time and the space of flows” (13). The space of flows defines the technological possibility to organize social practices simultaneously without geographical contiguity. The use of new information/communication technologies has also contributed to the annihilating and de-sequencing of time. Temporal compression is achieved through shortening the experience of wait since, for instance, global financial transactions are completed in a split second, fresh updates about our

friends' lives constantly appear in social networks, and historic happenings are live broadcasted on TV. Electronic hypertexts have opened the possibility of random sequencing thus scrambling the relation between past, present and future (Castells 13-14). In the context of my research, the three shifts described by Castells, correspond to and ground the three chapters of this dissertation in terms of historical and social relevance.

Significantly for the present work, this new social morphology directly projects into a certain type of filmic patterns frequently characterized and metaphorized as a network narrative by Bordwell, Azcona, Everett and others. Besides the conceptual and structural model of the network, a variety of terms from different fields have been applied to the visual narratives in question. The analogous nature of certain phenomena in science and narrative allow for interdisciplinary bridging or borrowing. These parallelisms mostly focus on multiplicity, simultaneity, randomness, non-linearity and fragmentation. In attempts to classify the shuffled, scrambled, mosaic, and jigsaw organization of the texts terms such as fractal, modular, hyperlink, six-degree separation and converging fates narrative have been used. It must be noted that there is still a great deal of vagueness in identifying the determining characteristics for a film to belong to a certain category. Until now, in cinema theory and criticism, all these terms have been used interchangeably to refer to any film that features multiple plots and protagonists. The multiplication of both in filmic narrative is seen by

Azcona as a “contemporary tendency to abandon the single-protagonist structure on which most film narratives have traditionally relied and replace it by a wider assortment of characters with more or less independent narrative lines” (“The Multi-Protagonist Film” 1). However, the emergence of this storytelling pattern as such by no means dates from last two decades of the 20th century. It is more accurate to speak of a re-emergence or flourishing of a multiple plot structure. As Azcona testifies on the matter, recently “multi-protagonist movies have developed a versatile and multi-faceted narrative structure, as a wide array of recent and not so recent examples demonstrate. When in the course of this process the films began to accrue a number of common narrative and stylistic characteristics, attached to a specific perspective on certain contemporary social issues, what started as a narrative structure gradually acquired the status of a genre” (“The Multi-Protagonist Film” 1). Bordwell seconds Azcona’s observation by pointing out the fact that although the network narrative pattern in film goes quite far back (e.g. *Grand Hotel*, E. Goulding, 1932), most of such films have been made since 1980s (“Lessons”).

The reasons for the multi-protagonist boom seem to stem from the advent of the Informational Age announced by Castells that has directly impacted digital media. The fact that a multiple plot structure is often termed as a “database” or a “hyperlink” film speaks for itself. In relation to this, Alison McMahan traces a parallel with the appearance of new modes of subjectivity, to be found in

computer games as well as in Hollywood films (146). “Often produced by the same companies that produce interactive media, these films,” she concludes, “have already absorbed the lessons of multiform subjectivity in interactive media and have applied it to the more linear cinema” (McMahan 146). The invention and development of the Internet, beyond the network structure per se, have also contributed to the multiple plot model, offering perspectives that “range from the constraining effects of global processes on people’s freedom to the interconnectedness between individuals on a global scale” (Azcona 7).

Among the terms applied to a multiple plot structure, my personal preference is that of network narrative¹ for it seems to be ontologically the closest to the texts under study, with relationality and a-centeredness being their main and common denominators.

Castells describes a network as a set of interconnected nodes where “some nodes are more important than others, but they all need each other as long as they are within the network” (15); hence, there is no centralized hierarchy among the units of the network, in other words, by definition it has no center (Castells 15).

This description echoes the one offered by Azcona in reference to multi-protagonist films, which “feature a wider group of characters without establishing

¹ The definition of a network narrative given by Bordwell is the most explanatory and applicable to the texts in question where “several protagonists are given more or less the same weight as they participate in intertwining plotlines. Usually these lines affect one another to some degree. The characters might be strangers, slight acquaintances, friends, or kinfolk. The film aims to show a larger pattern underlying their individual trajectories” (“Lessons”).

a strict narrative hierarchy among them” (“The Multi-Protagonist Film” 2). Bordwell, focusing on the effects on film perception, observes that “when watching movies like this, we mentally construct not an overarching causal project but an expanding social network”; and “we wouldn’t get so strong a sense of a spreading web, and we wouldn’t discern the degrees of separation so vividly, if we were following the sort of narrative that guides us to center on one or two protagonists and their goals” (Bordwell “Poetics” 193). Everett considers such decentered and dynamic narrative structures as particularly apt for the 21st century, since the fluidity and flexibility of the network format, its rejection of stable divisions between center and periphery reflect the essential changes in contemporary society (170).

Naturally, culture hasn’t remained immune to the drastic reconfigurations in the social and economic order. It becomes “similarly fragmented and constantly recombined in the networks of a kaleidoscopic hypertext” (Castells 19). In addition, “in the interplay between relationships of production and cultural framing, relationships of production define levels of consumption, and culture induces consumption patterns and life styles” (Castells 19). I would like to develop these two notions, as applied to the films as cultural products of contemporaneity, through the lens of the newly formed space where both Hispanic authors function.

The fragmented space resists any kind of consolidation, be it based on national, cultural, political or ideological identity. The “space of flows” is a locus of nowhere that translates into a number of “de’s” – namely, decentering, delocalization, deracination, depoliticization and so forth. In the world of filmmaking, the tendency towards decentering is marked by the neutralization of the long lasting opposition of European production to that of Hollywood. In 1991, Marsha Kinder already testified to an essential historical reconstruction, writing that “the terms *cinema*, *nation*, and *national cinema* are increasingly becoming outmoded concepts that are being decentered and assimilated within larger global systems of mass entertainment” (“Remapping” 5). Joint intercontinental projects (in terms of production, context, cast and crew) have grown in popularity, offering an eclectic mix of identities and discourses in their final products. One truly global phenomenon generated out of these commercial and creative collaborations is the emergence of a transatlantic star system. It must also be noted that the American component within the Euro-American confluence is not limited to Hollywood. Recently, Latin American cinema has effectively manifested itself in the international arena, thus, as Smith puts it, becoming the third part of a golden triangle (“Transatlantic Traffic” 389).

The role of Almodóvar (Europe - Spain) and Iñárritu (Latin America – Mexico) within the dynamics of this intercultural interchange is characterized by a different type of involvement. For example, Iñárritu shot his second film, *21*

Grams (2003), spoken entirely in the English language, in Memphis in the United States. The phenomenon is amplified with *Babel* (2006) - “a film of great scale and global ambition”- in which four stories unfold in four countries (USA, Mexico, Morocco and Japan) operating in six languages: Spanish, Arabic, Berber, Japanese, sign language and English (Shaw 13). And his last work (*Biutiful* 2010) is set in Spain, in Barcelona, and is in Spanish. As Smith notes, Iñárritu’s initial impulse to broaden geographical and cultural horizons originates from his and his Mexican colleague Alfonso Cuarón’s refusal to be confined to a Latin ghetto, as a result of no longer seeing the relationships with the US in the antagonistic terms as earlier Mexican directors did, and from the desire to have the freedom to travel to realize their projects (“Transatlantic Traffic” 395). Unlike Iñárritu, Almodóvar has never made a film outside Spain and he films only in Spanish. However, as Kinder points out, making films only on his home soil doesn’t “insulate” Almodóvar’s work. Apart from a rich intertextuality with Hollywood movies the Spanish director also emphasizes connections with Latin America through the cast and the choice of musical material (“Reinventing the Motherland” Kinder 246). “By extending the reach of his films throughout the Spanish language world,” Kinder concludes, Almodóvar “deepens his penetration of the global market in a way that rivals Hollywood and Europe while still remaining loyal to his Spanish speaking origins and still retaining the outsider’s edge” (Kinder “Reinventing the Motherland” 246). Compared to Almodóvar’s “Spanish-ness,” Iñárritu’s