

A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE:  
DESIRE AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *21 GRAMS*

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While, according to sociologists, dominant intimate discourses in our culture favour a rational, reflexive and cautious view of love, desire as passion and as an irrational force that may abruptly and often dramatically change our lives continues to have cultural validity. Alejandro González Iñárritu's second feature film, *21 Grams* (2003), presents such an approach through a specific use of the conventions of the multi-protagonist genre and a scrambled temporality. In this film, desire is as strong and inexorable as it is fragmented and ephemeral. Its sustained manipulations of chronology contradict the linearity and teleological sense of traditional romantic narratives and put forward, instead, the determination of human beings to pursue their desires against the relentless effects of the passing of time. In this, the film is representative of the cultural discourses that have turned multi-protagonist narratives into a relevant contemporary genre.

Keywords: Multi-protagonist films; desire; time; Alejandro González Iñárritu; scrambled narratives

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*Los discursos culturales más recientes sobre la intimidad y las relaciones afectivas en la sociedad contemporánea privilegian una concepción racional y reflexiva del amor y el deseo. Sin embargo, incluso dentro de estos protocolos íntimos racionales, la visión del deseo como pasión y fuerza irracional capaz de transformar la vida de las personas no ha perdido toda su validez cultural. 21 Gramos (2003), la segunda película del director mejicano Alejandro González Iñárritu, recupera esta visión irracional del deseo a través de las convenciones del género coral y de una estructura temporal acronológica que prescinde del sentido lineal de las narrativas románticas convencionales y concibe el deseo como una fuerza poderosa e inexorable, pero también fragmentada y efímera.*

*Palabras clave:* Películas corales; deseo; tiempo; Alejandro González Iñárritu; estructura narrativa desordenada

### 1. Introduction: “The Earth Turned to Bring Us Closer”

“The Earth turned to bring us closer,/it turned on itself and in us,/until it finally brought us together in this dream”. These lines from Venezuelan poet Eugenio Montejo, quoted by Paul (Sean Penn) half way through Alejandro González Iñárritu’s second feature film, *21 Grams* (2003), refer to the number of small things that need to come together in a specific space and time for something to happen. Paul is invoking the power of numbers, chaos theory and the geometrical patterns of fractals – that is, those non linear systems formed on the basis of the random repetition of simple designs – and the role they may play in our attempts to explain those aspects of life which defy human reasoning. Underneath these brief observations about his job as a professor of mathematics, he is also referring to the attraction he feels towards Cristina (Naomi Watts) and his growing affection for her, contextualizing his individual desire within a cosmological framework. The lines of the poem link seamlessly a specific attitude towards romantic love, desire and sexual attraction with a view of human life not as a teleological narrative dominated by causality, a linear succession of events and a closed ending, but as a series of random and unlikely events which lie outside human control and powers of explanation. For Paul it is not fate or destiny that has brought them together, but, rather, contingency and randomness, his desire for her falling outside rational understanding. In order to put forward this view, *21 Grams* uses the conventions of the multi-protagonist film, a genre that challenges traditional narrative patterns often highlighting instead the same contingency and randomness that Paul posits in this passage. The view of desire as an unstoppable, irrational force goes back to classical antiquity and the Middle Ages and is still a central feature in Renaissance romantic comedy and later cultural representations, but it has, according to sociologists, fallen into relative social irrelevance. While many artistic representations – including numerous instances of the romantic comedy, the literary and cinematic genre that has most often dealt with discourses of intimacy in Western culture – may continue to further promote and even celebrate a more rational, ‘reasonable’ attitude towards desire, narratives like *21 Grams* vindicate the ongoing validity of earlier intimate discourses. In this essay I explore – through a textual analysis of Iñárritu’s second film – the potential of the multi-protagonist genre, a cinematic form that has all of a sudden become an important player in contemporary cinema, to articulate culturally relevant forms of desire and narrative alternatives to more established generic patterns.

### 2. Beyond the Always and Forever

In one of the most influential theories of modern intimacy, Anthony Giddens describes what he calls the pure relationship – the type of relationship that predominates in our society’s discourses and practices in the realm of intimate matters – as “reflexively organized”, forever subject to self-examination, and an extension, in fact, of the broader reflexivity of modernity (1991: 91-92). In the closing paragraph of his most important

book on this issue, he explicitly links contemporary sexuality and the pure relationship with the failure of a civilization dedicated to economic growth and technical control (1992: 203). More recently and more explicitly, James Dowd and Nicole Palotta start where Giddens had left off, arguing that in a time of global economic transformation, the general process of rationalization and demystification of the world has reached the private realms of love and intimacy in which people have learned to act with caution (2000: 549-50). The result of this transformation is, for these authors, that people are beginning to feel inauthentic, even embarrassed by the words and gestures of romance, since in our daily routine we approach romance as we would any rational market transaction (569-70). Yet, other sociologists still record the persistence of the irrational in contemporary discourses of love (Swidler 2003: 129), and, in the case of Mary Evans, even lament such a nagging presence. In her polemical essay *Love: An Unromantic Discussion* she argues that love ought to be rescued from the sphere of the irrational and relocated within the dictates of good judgment (2003).

This process demanded by Evans and decried by Dowd and Palotta is nothing new. According to Mary Beth Rose, for example, Shakespeare's romantic comedies, although still traversed by a medieval view of love as a form of lunacy, revealed an increasing sense of confidence that sexuality can be organized for society's good (1988: 37). Since then, literary and, later, filmic representations of love can be said to have veered between, or to have attempted to integrate, these two extreme views of desire, depending, among other variables, on the cultural climate in which they have appeared. Although romantic comedy, and in particular its recent manifestations in Hollywood cinema, is more flexible and varied than critics have often given it credit for, the trend identified as the New Romance by Steve Neale (1992), or as the neo-traditional romantic comedy by Tamar Jeffers McDonald (2007), is an example, as described by these critics, of the tendency of the genre to attenuate the irrational drives of romantic love and incorporate it into a socially acceptable format. Dowd and Palotta refer precisely to these films as worthy examples of the romantic ideal that has lately been crushed by a calculating, cautious society, yet they admit that film critics have often interpreted them as being reactionary (2000: 565).

One of the dimensions of romantic comedy that has led contemporary critics to lament its constant conservativeness and has blinded them to the variety of ideological positions that it has encompassed during its sustained boom of the last two decades is its narrative structure, and particularly its happy endings. Within its well-rehearsed template, the genre parallels Giddens's description of romantic love as a narrative of the couple (1993: 46), the ending commonly celebrating the consolidation of a relationship with a clear vocation for the always and forever. In this, the genre replicates the traditional single-protagonist structure of most narratives, except that in this case the single hero is replaced by the couple, the main goal of the story being to bring them together in the face of the usual external and internal obstacles. Melodrama, the other genre that has most often dealt with the vicissitudes of desire, has generally featured an equally linear succession of events, intensified in this case by the genre's usual focus on one rather than two protagonists. In classical melodramas, desire is, if not completely repressed, at least governed by a moral view of the universe (Brooks 1976) in which anti-social, morally reprehensible drives tend to be curbed and either punished or

recuperated for society. A strong sense of closure is complemented in many of these films, according to Linda Williams's study, with a careful articulation of a chronology based on the hope that it may not be too late for a return to an original space of virtue. The movement forward often signifies a return to some semblance of a lost past, a return attained in the nick of time, when everything seemed lost (2001: 30-37). Temporality, therefore, carries particular relevance in the genre. In these, as in other linear narratives, cause-effect relationships predominate over other types of links between events – including, as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have pointed out – chronological relationships (1985: 47). Things may have started to change in recent decades. Although this form of narrative continues to abound, in a world increasingly dominated by forces that are as difficult to understand as to act upon, causal linearity may be said to have gone into crisis. The recent popularity of the multi-protagonist genre – with its constant emphasis on coincidence and fragmentation, and in the case of movies like *21 Grams*, its articulation within a scrambled narrative structure – is a symptom of this crisis.

Coincidences of several sorts are, of course, not exclusive to films with multiple protagonists – after all it is difficult to think of a narrative that does not include a coincidence of one type or another – but their visibility and the narrative relevance that they have acquired in this genre are unprecedented. *Magnolia* (1999) provides an accurate template for the role of coincidence in the new genre and self-reflexively explores its cultural centrality at the turn of the century. The film's narrative, which revels in coincidences of all sorts to weave its ensemble of characters into a complex web where symmetries and parallelisms abound, is framed by the words of an external narrator referring to three cases of 'real life' coincidences to highlight, from the very beginning, the function that apparently incredible events will have in the film. In less explicit ways, coincidence and random chance run through many instances of this genre, from a character's singing to the 'unexpected and the uncertain' as those aspects of life that 'keep us going' and make life worth living for, as happens in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), to the way in which they tragically affect the lives of different characters spread over three continents in *Babel* (2006). In this sense, the development of the multi-protagonist genre in the last two decades has run parallel with the significant cultural impact of a series of scientific and social discourses – such as chaos theory, the butterfly effect, the global village conception of the world and six degrees of separation theories – which have both challenged traditional notions of causality and emphasized the network nature of human life and interaction in an increasingly shrinking and globalized world. In multi-protagonist films like *Babel* and *Syriana* (2005), random interconnections abound in spite of the physical distance between the characters and their narrative paths. The unpredictable consequences of an apparently minor event ripple over the world, challenging individuals' attempts to control their own destinies and forcing them to acknowledge their precarious position in a world ruled by the uncontrollable and the unexpected.

As a result of the genre's almost obsessive interest in the external and uncontrollable forces ruling people's lives, the position and power of the individual characters is seriously compromised in multi-protagonist films. Rather than portraying people in full control of their destinies who manage, through effort, determination and will, to

overcome the obstacles ahead, these movies present human beings at the mercy of external circumstances. Character development and narrative turning points do not originate as much from human determination as from the accidental intersections between different characters and their narrative lines. In multi-protagonist films such as *Crash* (2004) or *Auf der Anderen Seite* (2007), random encounters carry most of the narrative weight and may even end up deflecting the plot in unexpected directions. Accidental interactions are not just the means to tell a story: they are the story itself. It is these intersections – and their reverberations and the patterns of similarity within difference generated through them – that create the plot and not vice versa.

The structural and thematic peculiarities of the multi-protagonist genre, as briefly summarized here, situate it at the opposite end of the narrative spectrum from the classical configurations described above. The consequences of this contrast for the representation of desire are obvious: no longer a narrative of the couple, the multi-protagonist film tends to highlight the finite, the fragmented, the ephemeral and the multiple in intimate matters. In these movies, the role of desire in people's lives is also affected by the subordination of individuals to an overarching structure where randomness and serendipity reign and accidental encounters control characters' paths. Within a genre theory that perceives individual genres not as groups of films but as sets of conventions that mix together in all sorts of permutations in individual texts (Altman 1999; Deleyto 2009), the multi-protagonist film is particularly prone to combinations with other genres, including romantic comedy and melodrama. In these particular combinations a specific view of desire tends to materialize, one that may be more in tune with contemporary mores than those promoted by single- or dual-protagonist narratives. In multi-protagonist romantic comedies and melodramas like *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *This Year's Love* (1999), *200 Cigarettes* (1999), *Sidewalks of New York* (2001), *Lantana* (2001), *Goldfish Memory* (2003) or *Heights* (2004), desire is no longer the powerful drive that gives characters the strength to overcome insurmountable obstacles and becomes instead more fleeting and ephemeral. Like the characters themselves, it is always at the mercy of external forces. Accidental encounters usually thwart peoples' wishes and may lead them in unexpected and sometimes even divergent directions. In general terms, and allowing for a multiplicity of nuances, multi-protagonist romantic comedies may look at this new regime of desire with amusement and equanimity and even celebrate it, whereas melodramas reveal anxieties and uncertainties peculiar to our age. In general, these films appear to be well-suited to representing some of the changes in intimate relationships described by Giddens and the other sociologist mentioned above. The romantic ideal of one true love is revised and recontextualised in a polyphonic panorama where individuals are constantly falling in and out of love and where forever has suddenly become shorter than expected. As happens in the British multi-protagonist romantic comedy *This Year's Love*, people still crave for the stability of the romantic ideals but their aspirations are cut short by the vicissitudes of external circumstances and/or the desires and plans of others, or even by their own constant changes of heart. Aided by its fragmented structure and its impatience with linear narratives, the genre has contributed to the cultural mainstreaming of inconstant, incongruent and fleeting types of attraction. If romantic comedy and melodrama have traditionally celebrated or repressed desire, the multi-

protagonist film has changed the face of such celebrations and repressions by calling to the party other forms of intimate relationships beyond the always and forever.

### 3. Love in the Interstices of Time

Alejandro González Iñárritu has emerged as one of the key figures of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century cinema on the basis of his first three feature films. These films, the product of the director's collaboration with scriptwriter Guillermo Arriaga, have employed different multi-protagonist structures and conventions and have become privileged exemplars of the relevance of the generic form to represent certain aspects of contemporary culture. It could be argued that Iñárritu has succeeded Robert Altman as the most consummate practitioner of multi-protagonist narratives and as the director that has most contributed to the evolution of this filmic form in the first decade of the new century. In their common exploration of themes related to human suffering, loneliness and connectedness, extreme emotions and redemption, the three films also come close to the familiar world of melodrama. Of the three, *21 Grams* has been most often associated with the genre, generally as a way for critics and reviewers to deplore what was largely seen as soap opera disguised as high art (Hoberman 2003: 64; Ansen 2003: 82; Landesman 2004: 1). The association of melodrama with exploitative popular art forms is nothing new and in this Iñárritu is in good company, from D.W. Griffith to Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli, but the specificity of the link is relevant to understanding the Mexican director's ambivalent position between popular and art cinema, a position that may explain his success with a variety of audiences. In any case, the melodramatic world of *21 Grams* cannot be separated from its scrambled narrative structure, a structure that, as will be seen, determines the textual attitude towards human relationships. In this case, popular art form and modernist temporal structure go hand in hand as a formal correlative of the thematic concerns of the text.

In his analysis of the film, Michael Stewart sees it as both melodrama and art cinema and defends the compatibility of both terms (2007: 50), taking issue with Robert Hahn's defence of the film as modernist rather than "luridly melodramatic" (2005: 54). Stewart invokes the modernist techniques of classical melodramas like *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *Sunrise* (1927) in order to contextualize the radical formal approach to the genre taken by Iñárritu. He then proceeds to review the film's melodramatic themes, including Oedipal tensions, moral legibility, masochism and antinomy, pathos and abjection, suffering and death, among others. He concludes that, in spite of the ostensible grimness and dejection, the movie is ultimately uplifting, celebrating the life, affirmation and utopia that stem from death, abjection and trauma, and becoming "a survival manual of sorts" (2007: 66). This author, however, is, like most reviewers of this and the other Iñárritu films, silent about the place of desire within its melodramatic imagination and its modernist aesthetics. Yet sexual desire and affection play a crucial part in the story told by the film and are revealed as a central component of the new order that Stewart finds emanating from its discourse. In *21 Grams* desire, like other human emotions, is seen as a consequence of a new temporality. As argued above, the film's innovative and highly original approach to temporality is not merely cosmetic

but, among other things, an expedient way of reflecting the inconsistencies and precariousness of human identity and desire in a world which is beyond our grasp. The movie bends, inverts and scrambles events in order to underline the role of coincidence, and the uselessness as well as the inevitability of looking for causes beyond random occurrences, and frames the intricacies and the continuing but elusive power of desire within this tyranny of chance. The combination of this approach to temporality characteristic of multi-protagonist films and the melodramatic ethos suggests a particular attitude to interpersonal relationships based on the primacy of intense emotions as a response to extreme situations.

<sup>21</sup> *Grams* tells the story of several characters whose lives are made to converge first through a traffic accident and then in other direct and indirect ways. In the film's unconventional narrative structure, past, present and future are mixed and merge into one another through a complex web which emphasizes the emotional connections between characters and situations over chronological and causal links. As the director himself has often remarked, chronological time, if never completely abandoned, is replaced by emotional time (in Romney 2003: 15). Characters' desires are also part of the emotional continuum running through the film even if, within the context of the multi-protagonist genre, they seem more a consequence of the context than the fullest expression of the subjective and individual drives of human beings. Yet, that does not make them less powerful or legitimate. The scene mentioned at the beginning of this article belongs to the opening stages of Paul's and Cristina's infatuation with each other. Their relationship constitutes the strand of the plot that most clearly explores the vicissitudes of desire in a story of death, suffering and redemption. Within this general context, this scene constitutes one of the few moments of respite that the two characters are afforded in the course of the narrative. Suffering from a weak heart, Paul has been given a new (although, as it will soon be revealed, brief) lease of life by means of a timely heart transplant. As part of his feeble attempts to start a new life, he becomes obsessed with the identity of the person whose heart he now has and discovers that it belonged to Michael (Danny Huston), who was knocked down and killed, along with his two daughters, in the pivotal event around which the whole structure of the film revolves. He then starts to follow Cristina, Michael's widow, and, after several attempts to make contact, finally persuades her to have lunch with him. Michael's real heart becomes a symbol of a transfer of affect on the part of Cristina which she initially resists but to which she finally succumbs, no matter what social propriety and even emotional stability may prescribe. In this rarely luminous scene, her interest is awakened both by Paul's persistent intensity and, ostensibly, by his poetic approach to mathematical science. The meal they share and the subsequent walk are a suggestion of hopeful beginnings, yet the film's fractured temporality positions their blossoming desire at the mercy of forces beyond individual control and turns it into just a passing and ephemeral moment, highly subordinated to the capriciousness and unpredictability of life, which makes it both equally poignant and precious.

This scene takes place half way through both the chronological and the filmic timelines and constitutes, as we have seen, the beginning of the characters' intimacy. Almost immediately, however, it introduces the erosion and deterioration that their feelings for one another will undergo as they will inevitably gravitate towards revenge,

anxiety and death. Iñárritu's films are characterized not only by their complex narrative structures but also by the use of highly sophisticated and evocative stylistic devices, the product of his close collaborative work with director of photography Rodrigo Prieto and composer Gustavo Santaolalla. In visual terms, the three films employ specific techniques which, in each one, become formal motifs which gather a multiplicity of meanings and strengthen connections between different characters and storylines. In the case of *21 Grams*, one of the most salient formal strategies is its use of the process called *silver retention* or *bleach bypass*. This process consists in skipping the bleaching function during processing of a colour film, as a consequence of which silver is retained in the emulsion, an operation which can also be replicated digitally. The result is a weakening of the colours, as if a black and white image were superimposed on top of a coloured one, and an intensification of contrast and graininess. The desaturated look that this technique gives to the film expressionistically conveys various states of mind, suggesting changes in the characters and links between them. In this case, its association with intensely bright lighting conveys a sensation of well-being and even serenity, of people being lifted out of their ordinary existence by their rare and intense feelings. This intensity is partly explained by the specific circumstances of their acquaintance – Paul's gratitude for his new heart, Cristina's extreme vulnerability and lasting attachment to the memory of her beloved husband and daughters – but through this formal manipulation Iñárritu attempts to express a more abstract view of relationships which in this as in his other movies are most human at moments of deep crisis and bereavement. It is at moments such as this that characters and spectators best realise the strength of their passions. Around Paul and Cristina not only the empty restaurant but also most colours have become redundant and only the man, the woman and the intense bright light remain. Silver retention as it is used here does not interfere with realistic representation but suggests a certain aura, a magic realm which envelops the characters and protects them from a hostile environment. It is a metaphor of the strength and beauty of their burgeoning desire.

A cut then takes us outside and shows the couple walking to Cristina's house later in the afternoon, the dazzling light of the sun coming through the wintry trees, reinforcing the presence of the space of desire between the prospective lovers. The combination of lighting and bleach bypass continues to have the same function as in the previous sequence. With a different *mise en scène* this scene might have seemed more conventional, less momentous. Yet Iñárritu's formal manipulations confer on it an intensity that is probably not yet warranted by narrative development but which calls our attention to the power and violence of the sexual feeling in the director's view of human relationships.

Violence, but also brevity: as Cristina invites Paul in for a drink and he accepts, and the romantically-minded spectator happily anticipates at least a passionate kiss, the film cruelly frustrates our expectations and cuts to a disorienting shot of the derelict motel where Cristina's obsession with revenge will take them later on in the film's chronology. By now spectators have become well used to these sudden and narratively unmotivated temporal shifts and have trained themselves to disregard the traditional associations made between cuts and temporality in continuity editing. The cut, therefore, does not come as a surprise. Inside the motel, we still see the same two characters but the



relationship between them appears to have changed drastically. The shot shows Cristina asleep and Paul, in the background, sitting up, visibly anxious and distressed but determined to go out and kill Jack (Benicio del Toro) to revenge the deaths of Cristina's husband and children. In other circumstances, we might have surmised a post-coital scene, the tryst to culminate their hunger for each other, but if that is indeed the case, the aftermath of sex between these two seems at this point nightmarish rather than joyful and uplifting. The connotations of sexual consummation are compounded by a further evocation. The film had opened with a similar and similarly memorable shot of the same two characters in a bedroom, placed in similar positions. Since that was the film's first shot and it had then been impossible to ascertain its temporal position in the film's scrambled narrative then, attentive spectators may surmise that its chronology and also its causality are now being revealed: after their successful first date, Paul and Cristina have consummated their desire sexually. Yet, unlike our memory of that shot, the one that follows the sequence of their walk to her house does not suggest happiness and peacefulness but rather distress, agony and revenge. We immediately realize that this is not the same but a later moment and, therefore, the chronology of the initial shot remains imprecise for the time being. Now we are being summarily transported to a later, darker moment. Yet the parallelism with the earlier shot is explicit and the connecting game generally promoted by multi-protagonist films and specifically encouraged here by Iñárritu's formal structure is very much in place. What we make of the connections is partly up to us but also becomes more elaborate as the film develops.

In any case, the visual contrast between the two consecutive scenes is very pointed: from light to darkness, from pure happiness to sordidness. The bleach bypass is still very much used here but its connotations are very different. Used now in combination with the half-light that comes through the partly drawn curtains to defamiliarize the *mise en scène*, it makes us focus on Paul's face and share his anxiety about his impending assault on Jack. From the character's point of view, the tension has been growing steadily since he decided to carry out Cristina's wish for revenge and to accompany her to the place where Jack works. For the spectator, however, due to the film's scrambled temporality, the change is sudden and discouraging when we witness the cruel and inexplicable way in which their flourishing desire and happiness has been cut short by a snatch of their less than joyful future.

This ruthless temporal ordering highlights the ephemerality of the present and the need to treasure the few moments of happiness that it affords us. As Paul tells Cristina over lunch, the chances of two people getting together are minimal and, as the film continually reminds us by means of temporal lapses like the one mentioned here, when they happen they are already starting to disappear. In the film's achronological arrangement of events, the mutual attraction growing between Paul and Cristina leads to chaos, misery and death even before any kind of closeness is allowed to develop between them. Thus, the moments of intimacy and stability, when they actually happen, as in the restaurant scene, are already impregnated by a sense of fragility and loss. Happiness, serenity and communication are indeed possible in *21 Grams*, but, as a result of the film's scrambled chronology, they can only take place in the interstices of time and are surrounded by an intense awareness of their fleetingness and evanescence.

As in classical melodrama, the fullness of romantic love and desire is accompanied and made more poignant by the certainty of loss.

#### 4. In the Wings of Desire

This awareness intensifies as the film's emotional temporality develops, and it gathers melodramatic depth from foreknowledge of what is going to happen. However, the certainty of the evanescence of life and love does not diminish the power of desire, and films like *21 Grams* teach us, maybe paradoxically, to confront the tyranny of time even while insistently reminding us of its inexorability. A later scene combines even more forcefully the force of desire with the awareness of its brevity. This combination is again conveyed through a particular employment of the silver retention process. When Paul, seeing that Cristina reciprocates his feelings for her, tells Cristina that he is carrying Michael's heart, she cannot cope with the revelation and throws him out of her house. But the next morning, seeing that he has not left and has spent the night in his car outside her front door, she relents and joins him. Inside the car, he explains why he decided to look for her in the first place; they make up and kiss passionately, a prelude to the single sex scene in the film which follows immediately after. The car scene is visualized through a characteristic series of close-ups and extreme close-ups of the characters' faces and detail shots of other parts of their bodies, with a nervous handheld camera that replicates the excitement and the depth of feeling experienced by the characters. The scene is lit with artificially enhanced natural lighting and further inflected in post-production through bleach bypass. The wintry atmosphere of the story is both emphasized and exaggerated in order to provide a more abstract exploration of human emotions. The bleach bypass, therefore, isolates desire from its narrative moorings and offers the spectators a general statement on its impact on human beings: as happens with other emotions in Iñárritu's films, desire brings the characters very close to one another, the space between them shrinking to the distance between the two front seats of a car. As in Shakespeare's comedies, life is never the same after the experience of desire; our daily routine is thrown into disarray and, if considered rationally and from a detached position, it is probably always the wrong thing to succumb to. It is also as inexorable as time and, in the film's intimate discourse, what makes life worth living. In Cristina and Paul we recognize here two people struggling with their deepest fears as they discover the powerful currents that have started to flow between them. The sequence ultimately becoming a powerful visualization of the line of the poem Paul had mentioned to Cristina at the restaurant. The sequence then segues almost immediately into the bedroom where the two lovers are shown finally consummating their desire sexually, the bright white light once again taking over in order to convey both the extent of the sexual passion and the abstract and universal quality of this particular encounter. Time, as we know, will soon pull them apart and deep love will turn, before we know it, into anxiety and destructive passion, but its presence at this moment is as real as any other experiences the characters may have undergone and it has changed them forever.

From the point of view of cultural discourses on intimacy, the interruptions and disruptions of the chronological flow of *21 Grams* reflect the tension between two different narrative views of desire: desire as a series of discontinuous emotions and drives and desire as a forward moving story. According to Anthony Giddens, the discourse of romantic love is responsible for having established an intense emotion, which is by its own nature short-lived, as the basis for a narrative of the couple which looks to, extends into, and attempts to control the future, providing (at least in principle) some sort of psychological security and stability for those whose lives were touched by it (1992: 39-40). Unlike some of the multi-protagonist romantic comedies previously mentioned, *21 Grams* is not particularly interested in highlighting the internal contradictions of the romantic love complex; yet, through its constant temporal leaps into the future, it annuls the narrative possibilities of the romantic view of desire. Instead, the film marvels at the power of isolated emotions, while reminding us of their inevitably ephemeral nature.

The film's view of sexuality is clearly impregnated with that of one of its most obvious intertexts, Nan Goldin's photo series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. The scene at the motel mentioned above evokes the photograph 'Couple in bed', which shows a man and a woman in bed, presumably after having had sex, with the woman naked in the foreground, (awake in this case) and her face turned away from the man, who is half-dressed and sits on the corner of the bed in a pensive pose. Sex appears not to have brought about understanding and happiness to Goldin's couple, but instead, is fraught with tension, anxiety and suffering. Goldin's series may sometimes celebrate the joys of sex, but at this point the focus is on the impossibility of communication between two human beings and the fragility that sexual tension produces in one of the partners. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* often focuses on the destructive character of desire and sexuality and emphasises the link between desire and physical violence. Some images, for example, show one of the 'protagonists' of the series (Goldin herself) battered by her lover. At the same time, in the book in which the series was published, this photograph is part of a group of seven shots which include a shot of ruffled, empty beds, one of two skeletons coupling, and two graves in Mexico (1986: 137-43). In this sequence, the link between sex and death is pervasive, both in dramatic and comic forms. Inárritu's visual quotation, however, is not simply a tribute to the New York photographer he admires (Wood 2006: 78) but a powerful way of constructing a different type of interpersonal relationship on the basis of the connotations of the original text.

In *21 Grams* the connections between desire and death are also everywhere but they are more ambivalent. The looming but invisible car accident in *21 Grams* floats in the air throughout the narrative. It is never directly seen, but in the film's scrambled temporal structure, any change of scene is likely to take us back to the moments previous to the accident from a different perspective. In the film's ordering of events, love and pain are inextricably intertwined; hope and despair inevitably follow one another. In a movie in which death is literally around every corner, desire can never lead to psychological security and stability since it contains in itself the germ of decay and the shadow of death. Yet, the film's awareness of death, the precariousness of human existence and the ephemerality of desire are not necessarily as pessimistic as it may seem from this discussion. Mortality, accidents and chance are inherent to life but

so are hope, human resilience and our enormous urge to reach out to others and to be lifted off the ground on the wings of desire, even if nowadays desire has a shorter life than it used to have. By manipulating chronological time in such an ostensible way, *21 Grams* not only emphasizes the contingency and mortality inherent to life itself but also puts forward its unbreakable faith in the power of human relationships and the resilience of human beings as they search for happiness and harmony even in the direst of circumstances. Time in *21 Grams* upsets its own chronological logic in order to construct a community of feelings and deep bonding out of the shreds and scraps of its demolished edifice.

## 5. Conclusion

These feelings, which include sexual feelings, are not only fragile and finite, but have also lost the teleological confidence that traditional narrative forms had given them in the past. In the context of the multi-protagonist movie they are part of a new cultural awareness of the volatility as well as the intricate relatedness of human life. In this contemporary genre, desire is ephemeral and inconstant, violent and doomed to oblivion, unreasonable and inexplicable, and yet, within the complex structures of the multi-protagonist film and in a world characterized by ever recurring signs of the randomness of existence, it makes perfect sense. Freed from the linearity and causality of traditional narratives, desire may be losing the projection towards the future life of the couple that it started to acquire five centuries ago, its emergence within the new genre liberating us from the tyranny of the always and forever.<sup>1</sup>

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