María del Mar Azcona 2010: *The Multi-Protagonist Film.* **Malden, Oxford, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-4443-3393-0**

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Genre theory and analysis has been one of the most fruitful areas of enquiry within Film Studies practically from the birth of the discipline around the 1960s. While other critical frameworks, approaches and perspectives have come and gone, genre, with more than four decades of theoretical speculation, continues to occupy a central position in academic and critical writing, both because of the intrinsic allure of the concept and its pervasive presence in descriptions and accounts of films. Yet, although both traditional and recent theories of the phenomenon in the cinema abound, from the work of Steve Neale (1980), Thomas Schatz (1981) and the seminal approaches included in Barry K. Grant's popular anthology now about to appear in its fourth edition (2003, 3rd edition), to Neale's more recent work (2000) and the more radical theory of Rick Altman (1999), monographs on individual genres have been remarkably conservative in their understanding of how genres work. Attempts by Richard Maltby (2003), Neale (2000) and others to fix and close the list of classical film genres have gone largely unheeded and critics and scholars have continued to add members to the list, while categories like melodrama, *film noir*, fantasy and the thriller have moved in and out of the genre system, underlining its vibrancy and fluidity. Yet, apart from discussions and speculations about the appropriateness of the category addressed in each case or the genericity of this or that genre, few accounts of individual genres have attempted to contextualize them within the generic system as a whole and, what is perhaps more discouraging, they have largely ignored the theoretical debates about the phenomenon of film genre and its history. *The Multi-Protagonist Film* is a welcome exception to this tendency. The book is part of the *New Approaches to Film Genre* series from Wiley-Blackwell and it lives up to the promise implicit in the series title: not only does it posit the birth of a new genre but it contextualizes its specific object of study within a solid understanding of current genre theory. The list of titles published in the series so far, with well-established genres such as the western or the horror film rubbing shoulders with less obvious instances such as the religious film or the history film and more controversial ones like the fantasy film or *film noir*, gives a fairly accurate idea of the complexity and volatility of the field. Given this state of affairs, Azcona's self-conscious approach to the working of film genres and to the practice of genre criticism is one of the book's main strengths.

Since the multi-protagonist genre is a recent occurrence, chapters one and two on the history and theory of the concept constitute a central part of the book. In them, we not only form an accurate idea of what a multi-protagonist film is but also become aware of its position within the generic system as a whole. For Azcona, the consolidation of a genre such as the one she discusses appears to be a dual process involving both the gradual solidification of certain characteristics in the filmic texts and the presence of the term *multi-protagonist* in critical and journalistic discussions of the films. One of the most original and also most convincing parts of Chapter Two, which offers a fully-fledged theory of the multi-protagonist movie, is precisely the account of how this category gradually emerged

in reviews and critical discussions of a relatively small group of films and of the different terms which were used to describe them. The chapter finishes with a description of the thematic, narrative and stylistic conventions of the new genre. Given that this is the first book-length discussion of the multi-protagonist film this section will become particularly useful for scholars and students of the genre but, from a theoretical viewpoint, the finality and fixity of such an endeavour is tempered by the provisionality that emerges from the earlier framing of the genre within the realm of discourse. In other words, from this packed chapter we derive the powerful notion that genres are as much particular ways of talking about films as sets of conventions to be found in various combinations in the movies themselves.

Before this, in Chapter One, a brief history of the genre is attempted, following the general outline of the collection. In this historical chapter Azcona develops the notion, already advanced in the introduction, that multi-protagonist narratives have always existed as an alternative to the single-hero template, not only in the cinema but also much before. Continuing a trend that can be traced back to the contrast between Homer's two epic poems, the cinema used this narrative structure from its very beginning and the author calls our attention to relatively isolated moments in the brief history of the cinema when multi-protagonist stories proliferated, such as the early 1930s in Hollywood or the cycle of disaster movies of the 1970s. However, it was only in the 1980s, because of certain cultural phenomena, that films with several protagonists and interlaced stories began to proliferate. Gradually, through a snowball effect, the familiar narrative structure began to gather additional characteristics, to develop in a specific number of ways and to specialize in a limited number of issues; simultaneous developments such as what David Bordwell (2006: 72-82, 121-38) has called *intensified continuity* and *adventurous plotting* combined in certain films with the proliferation of protagonists and stories, the intensification of a new type of filmic space, the constant presence of such concepts as serendipity, coincidence and chance, and the partial substitution of parallel plotting and connections between story lines for traditional teleology and character development arcs; spectators became used to a new and more active participation in linking characters and events, and to novel distortions in chronological time, and soon a new familiarity and set of expectations grew which marked the consolidation of the genre. In spite of obvious differences between them, the distinctive fictional worlds of films such as *Playing by Heart* (1998), *Magnolia* (1999), *Traffic* (2000), *Lantana* (2001), *Crash* (2004), *Babel* (2006) and others briefly discussed in the opening chapters revealed that a new generic form had materialized. Their distance from ancestors such as *Intolerance* (1916), *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *La règle du jeu* (1939) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) became increasingly obvious.

However, Chapter Three, the first of five chapters devoted to the analysis of individual films, offers an analysis of precisely one of these precedents, *Grand Hotel* (1932). Although the trend that producer Irving Thalberg wanted to set with this movie did not take hold, its interest in conveying the role of contingency in people's lives through an intricate structure that paradoxically de-centred the glamorous stars which constituted its main marketing asset, anticipated in many ways the generic development that would take place fifty years later. This chapter inaugurates Azcona's analytical method, which proposes a combination of theoretical framing, historical contextualization and close textual analysis, with particular attention to narrative and visual devices and the ways in which they produce meaning and encourage interpretation. As a consequence of this critical practice, individual films are both considered as unique texts which have their own special relationships with the viewers and as instances of the workings of the genre system and

exemplars of specific generic tendencies. While the emergence of the genre became apparent in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Altman is often seen, and for good reason, as the father of contemporary multi-protagonist films. The author points out that fourteen of the thirty-four films that he directed featured multiple protagonists and several plot lines. While these were all immediately recognizable as 'Altman films', because of their characteristic visual and aural style, the filming methods employed in them and their approach to character construction, they also provided the most obvious template for what was to come. From *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975) to his last movie, *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006), Altman experimented incessantly with the form, but it was *Short Cuts* (1993) that would turn out to be most influential. The adjective *altmanesque* that, as Azcona points out in Chapter Two, was repeatedly used by reviewers to describe films in the 1990s while the form was asserting itself in critical discourse, almost always referred to the narrative structure, particular mood and visual style of this movie. For this reason, the book devotes Chapter Four to an analysis of this film as representative of its director's *oeuvre*. *Short Cuts* is an important landmark in the short history of the genre not only because of its pervasive influence both on other films and on critical constructions of the category as an object of enquiry but also because it features many of the characteristic that would later become commonplace in the genre. At the same time it remained wholly an Altman film, including the particular link between film style and contemporary cultural phenomena that later became a trademark of the genre: as the author points out, the film combines a powerful feeling of isolation in our complex relationships with the characters with a structural awareness of the network nature of our existence in a world dominated by globalizing impulses.

Short Cuts is also special in that it displays many of the characteristics of the budding genre in relative isolation from other genres, something which, as the next three chapters suggest, is unusual in the multi-protagonist film. As Deborah Thomas argues for the case of the romance in a slightly different context (2000), multi-protagonist conventions tend to mix with a variety of genres, a mixture which in many cases has affected the other genres. In these chapters Azcona analyzes combinations with three popular genres: the teen comedy, the romantic comedy and the thriller. Mainstream movies like *American Pie* (1999) and *Syriana* (2005) and a less-known, independent production like *Singles* (1992) are selected for individual study. In the course of these discussions, the contours of the new genre are delineated. Whereas the effects of economic, social and technological developments in our society have brought us closer to one another and have made the world a smaller place, intimate relationships have gone into a state of permanent crisis, alienation and loneliness becoming the corollary of changes in interpersonal relationships. The book argues that the multi-protagonist film is particularly apt to represent these two dimensions of our experience and has in turn influenced the ways in which other genres such as the romantic comedy, the thriller or the melodrama have inflected their traditional meanings. In the course of these chapters, we see the multi-protagonist template at work while we develop a sharper notion of how genres function, one which is very distant from traditional accounts of genres as closed categories and groups of films in which hybrid phenomena are the exception rather than the rule. Impurity is the name of the game in the generic world outlined by Azcona, and the multi-protagonist film is a particularly adept player at this game. Other films that indicate various avenues for future development in the immediate future are briefly discussed in the final chapter and in the conclusion, such as *Lantana*, *The Dead Girl* (2006), *Babel*, and *Fast Food Nation* (2006). Alejandro González Iñárritu, one of the foremost practitioners of the genre in the twenty-first century said in interviews, while he was making his fourth feature film,

Biutiful (2010), that he had already gone as far as he could with the form and he needed a radical change. *Biutiful* afforded him that change: a single-hero story whose protagonist Uxbal (Javier Bardem) is present in practically every shot of the film. This might be taken as a premonition of the brief life span of the genre as a whole and of its imminent death, once its expressive possibilities have been exploited. Yet, curiously, *Biutiful* is a film in which many more stories and protagonists pop in and out and are consistently repressed by a narrative which insists on sticking with its main character. At times it feels as if Iñárritu has to make a visible effort to return to his main story, but the fascination of the film might well be in the ways in which alternative stories continue to proliferate, even if, in this case, only on the margins of the film. Similarly, multi-protagonist movies show no signs of receding from the limelight for the moment. Yet, lacking the long history of other genres, it is difficult to predict the directions that this genre will take in the future, or even whether it will be just a flash in the pan and fall out of fashion in the next few years, a fate that has been visited on many genres before. Be that as it may, this volume is a timely record of the impact it has already had in the history of the genre system and of its ability to represent issues and ways of thinking that chime in with the preoccupations of many contemporary men and women.

This is the first book-length study of the genre in English and, therefore, at present it dominates the field unchallenged. It is to be hoped that the continuing visibility of the genre as well as, in scholarly circles, the appearance of this volume will provide the impulse for further enquiry. Magrit Tröhler's *Offene Welten ohne Helden. Plurale Figuren-Konstellationem im Film* (2007), a work which is acknowledged and discussed by Azcona, is its closest relative, although for Tröhler the narrative structure that she describes and classifies does not have the makings of a genre. Even David Bordwell (2006), who refers to the same films as *network narratives*, and discusses them in the context of other novelties in contemporary cinema, stays shy of considering them a genre although he repeatedly describes them in generic terms. Similarly, Kristin Thompson devotes to this form a section of her analysis of contemporary narrative trends in Hollywood (1999) but stops short of considering the multi-protagonist film a generic category. Unlike these authors, however, Azcona places her object of study simultaneously on a formal and cultural level. This book contends that genres exist on the interface not only between the film industry and society but also between narrative/stylistic and cultural/ideological considerations, and the two levels are inseparable. Whereas many theorists and film critics would agree with this position in theory, there are few which manage to strike a balance between the two, and in the case of *The Multi-Protagonist Film* this is not only the result of a critical practice but almost a matter of principle. This is in part because the new genre is so obviously the product of relatively recent historical and cultural developments and simultaneously it is visually and narratively so remarkable, but the end result is a consistent and well-balanced study which has something to offer for everyone: for cultural critics and genre theorists, for narratologists and defenders of mise-en-scène analysis. This is film genre analysis at its best, and while some might object to the author's choice of movies for individual analysis, with its clear bias towards popular cinema and the mainstream or, at least, the 'middlebrow' to the detriment of 'art films', this is done by overcoming frequent critical prejudices that the book does not even bother to address. Probably the main objection that one can find to this book is its excessive price tag, since for the moment it is available only in hardback. It is to be hoped that the publisher will redress this problem and bring out the paperback edition that will give Azcona's study the visibility and accessibility it deserves.

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