

## Juggling time concepts: complex metanarrative in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams*

Fátima Chinita

### Abstract

Starting with the explanation of metanarrative as a sort of self-reflexive storytelling (as defended by Kenneth Weaver Hope in his unpublished PhD. thesis), I propose to talk about enunciative practices that stress the telling more than the told. In line with some metafictional practices applied to cinema, such as the 'mindfuck' film (Jonathan Eig, 2003), the 'psychological puzzle film' (Elliot Panek, 2003) and the 'mind-game film' (Thomas Elsaesser, 2009), I will address the manipulations that a narrative film endures in order to produce a more fruitful and complex experience for the viewer. I will particularly concentrate on the misrepresentation of time as a way to produce a labyrinthine work of fiction where the linear description of events is replaced by a game of time disclosure. The viewer is thus called upon to reconstruct the order of the various situations portrayed in a process that I call 'temporal mapping'. However, as the viewer attempts to do this, the film, ironically, because of the intricate nature of the plot and the uncertain status of the characters, resists the attempt. There is a sort of teasing taking place between the film and its spectator: an invitation of decoding that is half-denied until the end, where the puzzle is finally solved. I will use three of Alejandro Iñárritu's films to better convey my point: *Amores perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006). I will consider Iñárritu's methods to produce a non-linear storytelling as a way to stress the importance of time and its validity as one of the elements that make up for a metanarrative experience in films. I will focus especially on *21 Grams*, which I consider to be a paragon of the labyrinth.

### Key Words

Metanarrative, metafiction, self-reflexivity, time mapping, puzzle film, *21 Grams*, Alejandro Iñárritu.

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### 1. Complex film time as a metanarrative game

Metanarrative is the activity of narration centered on its own narrative foundations. Exactly what does this mean and what is its use? For me, it is a question of a specific philosophy of writing, that others, erroneously, call "authorial message" or "film style". In fact, it is both things at once, therefore the fallacy. The sum of these two ideas points to a self-reflexive discourse on the theme and practice of fictionalization, molded by the very narrative strategies employed by the author.

Kenneth Weaver Hope claims that art in general is a non-utilitarian practice and that fictional art is all the more so, because its goal is to be enjoyed by spectators. According to this view, fiction, as pure invention, is characterized by being told; exactly the opposite of the practical stuff, which is meant to be lived or felt <sup>1</sup>. In short: metanarrative is any narrative about narrative(s), told by a narrator. The essence of the narrator(s), as well as the nature of the spectator(s), are varied and concurrent. In order to distinguish between the creative entity in all its forms (real author, implied author, director/screenwriter, camera) and the diegetic characters (who may also narrate within the film), I prefer to use the words 'enunciation', to describe the activity of *writing* in audiovisual form, and *enunciator*, to mention the out-of-the-text narrator(s), the ultimate point of origin of a filmic *discourse* (I tend to collapse all creative forms into one). I contend that the manipulation of time is a discursive mechanism and by far one of the most important.

According to Edvin Vestergaard Kau <sup>2</sup>, filmic narrative tends to be metacinematic because it subjects itself to a dynamic of transformation imposed by the medium. Telling a story is altering things and events, calling attention to the process of change itself. Therefore, accidental relationships between things are more important than information and facts. Besides, the events narrated occur in a space and a time different from those of reality and between the beginning and the end of the film there is nothing but time, during which the spectator enjoys the technical properties of narration. One of the objectives of metanarrative, therefore, is to stress the workings of time as core cinematic material.

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The concept of time-image, so dear to Gilles Deleuze <sup>3</sup>, favors the dissemination of narrative time as it defends the absence of a chronological center. Deleuzian time is, by definition, non chronological, totally different from the laws of physics which bound us all in the universe of everyday reality. This sole fact places us in the territory of the telling over the told as, coincidentally, does most of the so-called postmodern narrative (be it literary or cinematic). According to Deleuze, time in modern cinema exists *per se*, in a pure state, especially in the taxonomic category of the chronosigns, which can be viewed as a temporal alignment of sorts. By emphasizing either the possibility of an eternal present *within* a past, a present and a future, or the simultaneous long sheets or layers of past events, Deleuze manifests time as filmic substance, considering it to be one of the raw materials of the crystal-image, where the artificiality of the medium is made totally evident and spreads across the entire film. Time manipulation is, therefore, one possible way of blurring the line between real and illusory (i.e. fictional). According to this theory, 'before' and 'after' are simply two sides of the same time flux.

Although Deleuze stands on a philosophical point of view, pretty much the same can be advocated with a much less noble intent. In fact, postmodern narrative makes a deliberate playful use of time manipulation. The underlining objective to all the practices of this sort is to create a puzzle, a mystery to solve, thus enticing the reader or the viewer to return for another cognitive go at it. To consume a work of art becomes a game of intelligence between creator and public, favoring the repeat reading or viewing. The complexity is no longer part of the experience; the experience itself is what causes the repetition (and the complexity) to take place.

In the realm of cinema, the concept of 'mind-game film', as expounded by Thomas Elsaesser <sup>4</sup>, accommodates temporality as a dimension of consciousness amongst a myriad other playful factors, such as entertainment value, cognitive complexity, narrative puzzles, no perceptible difference between reality and imagined world, and so on. There is a definite sense of teasing involved, but the mind-game film does not lie to the film viewer, keeping within the bounds of its own diegetic world, no matter how strange it might be. Formally, the enunciative manipulation may come across in several ways: a suspension of cause and effect; an altered or inverted linear progression; narrative twists; trick endings; information which remains unrevealed or is revealed too late; existence of a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily by that order; simultaneity of actions; circular or multiple narratives, and so forth. As they represent 'the rules of the game' (i.e. the permanent exposition of their own construction methods), these films evince their nature of meta-text. The films seduce the viewer based entirely on their own architecture and capitalize on the mystery factor that now moves most narratives along.

These films provide the viewer with a pleasurable film experience. Part of that experience resides, precisely, in decoding the secret, in putting together all the pieces of the temporal order. Therefore, it resides in what I call 'temporal mapping': a re-construction of the film chronology based on the internal clues provided by the film itself. No such film comes without such clues.

### **2. The temporal mapping of *21 Grams***

In *21 Grams* (2003, USA), a film scripted by Guillermo Arriaga, the director Alejandro González Iñárritu enunciates, three stories in one single film. There is an interweaving of narrative realities, as the destiny of each of the three protagonists intersects those of the other two. Therefore, it is not only the characters lives that intersect each other in space and time; it is also the film that conjoins them, stressing, through the alternate enunciation of events in each narrative line, the ties that exist between them. This filmic articulation is directly related with the main title *21 Grams* (the weight the body loses at the exact moment of death) and the film theme (the meaning of life until or after death arrives).

The first narrative line portrays the story of Paul Rivers (played by Sean Penn), a heart patient who needs an urgent transplant in order to stay alive; the second depicts Cristina Peck's drama (Naomi Watts), where a young mother and wife loses her husband and her two young daughters in a hit-and-run car crash; the third draws on the story of Jack Jordan (Benicio Del Toro), former inmate who renounces his criminal past through the teachings of Jesus Christ and who now tries to live a moral life. The order I used to make this description equals the order by which all three narrative lines are presented at the beginning of the film. Let it be said that all of the stories garner equal importance and attention throughout the film. Indeed, *21 Grams* is a triptych told in an alternate fashion, clearly disrespecting a linear chronology. However, despite this fact, the film structure is not random. On the contrary: a thorough analysis reveals a

rigorous and precise work which, while seeming to be disconnected, in fact obeys a profoundly intentional order.

The film opens with an image whose context is not clear, which renders it somewhat abstract: a man is sitting on a bed (Penn) watching a woman who sleeps by his side (Watts). Three short sequences taking place in different spaces follow: a father is having a meal in a diner with his two small daughters; a woman is attending a victim's support group therapy session; a tattooed man preaches to a teenager delinquent about the paths of righteousness. Together, these sequences reveal the tripartite nature of the film as a whole, although the first two happen to belong to the same narrative line (as we will gather later on). The apparent duplication of narratives in this particular instance is not an oversight but, instead, an intelligent way of delaying the appearance of Paul, the protagonist of the first story, who is bedridden in a hospital, waiting to die. Throughout the entire film, each segment on all three narrative lines, doesn't take more than two minutes. In fact, the average sequence length is one minute (there are even some sequences who have but a few seconds of screen time). Therefore, *21 Grams* is, structurally, a highly fragmented mosaic, making it very hard to apprehend the film as a whole as well as the relationship(s) at stake between the characters from each story.

The articulation itself begins soon after the film starts. Following the first sequence of each story, we are offered a new abstract shot (this time of birds in flight at sundown, accompanied by instrumental music). The shot of the birds separates this part of the film from what ensues and enlightens us as to the didactic nature of those inaugural sequences that, mainly, serve to explain the enunciative method of the film. Concurrently, it helps the spectator in familiarizing himself/herself with what is to follow.

Soon after, there is a voice over (belonging to Paul): 'So, this is death row. I don't know even when all of this began or when it's gonna end'. The mystery is on and the challenge is cast for the film viewer to decrypt the temporal (and spatial) coordinates of the film, thus reconstructing the chronology of events. Close to the end, the film returns to the same image of a bedridden Paul speaking in voice over, thus completing the idea that is here suspended and closing the reconstruction cycle. Only at the end do we understand fully the key to the temporal mapping of the film: Paul is hospitalized and bedridden twice ('How many lives do we live? How many times do we die?') and twice is he equally out in the world (healthy in some scenes, very sick in others). The film ends with a new abstract shot, this time of a swimming pool completely abandoned ('dead', in fact). What happens between these two voices over, and that makes up the core of the film, is nothing but sparse excerpts of a broken chronology.

*21 Grams* is a film that emphasizes the importance of the plot and the primacy of the enunciation. The film does not seem to obey any pre-established design. The stories alternate between themselves without a precise order. In some segments we can see only one of the protagonists and the elements that compose his/her narrative world, while in others two or three of the protagonists are seen to coexist (in what are the high points of narrative intersection between stories). One segment of one story may actually follow another segment from the same story. However, when this happens, the narrative time is not, recognizably, the same. Little by little, we begin to understand that the film contains two blocks of events, organized around a 'before' and an 'after' which are valid in exactly the same way for all the three protagonists. The filmic structure appears, at a *first understanding*, to be as follows:

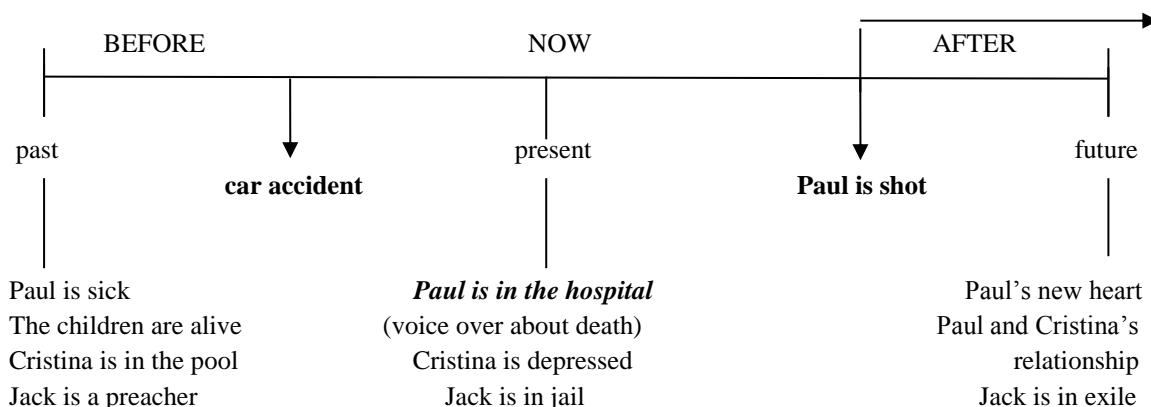


Figure 1: "Apparent" time mapping of *21 Grams*

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We can now gather the importance of the car accident that kills Cristina's husband and her two daughters, as well as the relevance of the gunshot that hits Paul. We will understand, afterwards, that these two filmic moments are the kernel of the intersection between the three stories and mark the physical coexistence of the characters in one and only time-space continuum. In the car accident, the husband and the two daughters walk on the street when the truck driven by Jack hits them; Cristina had been talking on her cellular with her husband a few seconds before. In the second event, the fact that Paul is wounded, after having been shot, results in Cristina, Paul and Jack sharing a car on the way to the hospital, in an attempt to save him. Between the 'before' and the 'after' the character's lives alter drastically and that in-between time is clearly very negative for all of them. There are still, however, aspects that do not fit this puzzle and that need to be determined if the meaning of the film is to be understood.

The correct mapping key of *21 Grams* is the realization that the 'present' and the 'past' of Paul are not exactly what they seem to be. While Cristina is depressed, following the death of her family, and Jack is in jail, for having turned himself in; Paul is at home before undergoing the necessary heart transplant and before separating from his wife, facts that will enable him to involve himself with Cristina at a later stage of the film. In fact, the heart that he receives belongs to Cristina's late husband and it is that sharing of an organ that will inspire him to approach the widow of the heart's donor. When Paul looks Cristina up she is already deeply depressed and Jack is in jail. Without the new heart Paul and Cristina would never have been able to get involved in a physical relationship of a sexual nature. The transplant Paul needs at the end of the film turns out not to be the same. He needs another donor and another heart because he has deliberately shot himself in that organ in an attempt to save Jack who was about to be murdered by a revengeful Cristina totally out of control.

Although the film disguises the secret of its temporal alignment, it also conveys the mechanisms that help to solve the riddle. This joining of the dots is accomplished through the assortment of the segments belonging to the three stories, which, little by little, converge to the dramaturgical center of the film, at which point the two crucial events (the car accident and the gunshot) are, at last, fully explained. This clarification does not coincide with the middle of the film, happening in fact very close to the end. If the time of the story was to coincide with the time of the authorial enunciation, it would not be possible to maintain the secret. The right chronology of events is attained at the end, by means of a montage-sequence that contains images of the 'past' (a reconstruction of part of the car accident), the 'present' (Paul in the hospital, in a shot similar to the one of the beginning; Cristina and Jack standing in the hospital waiting-room) and the 'future' (Jack returning to his home, after the exile he had imposed on himself as a form of expiation; Cristina devoting herself to the announced maternity of a child conceived with Paul's body and her first husband's heart).

To allow for the right chronological line-up and the spectator's step-by-step learning, the film needs to make use of another enunciative prescription: the partial overlapping of sequences. Without this narrative superposition of a few images previously seen, the spectator would not come to realize the way in which time evolves and towards which spaces it progresses. The overlapping occurs around the two events stressed in the previous diagram: the car accident and the gunshot. In the first case the spectator is given a portrayal of approximately the same event from four different perspectives: the short walk of Cristina's husband and the two children from the diner, where they just ate, to the crossroads, where they are hit by Jack's pick-up truck, is conveyed from the point of view of (a) Cristina who is talking to her husband on the phone (we hear the male voice in off, but not the actual crash because they hang up before the accident); (b) the knocked down characters (the husband is on the phone with Cristina for a short while, which constitutes a sort of reverse shot of the preceding segment); (c) Cristina, again, as she, later on, mentally reconstitutes the crash at the very site where it happened; (d) a witness (after the husband and the girls go by, the camera stays with a young gardener who actually sees the crash taking place, while the spectator merely hears it).

To conclude, this elaborate enunciative architecture needs to be appreciated as an evidence of the director's power as narrator and his hold over the narrative material he is manipulating. In order to prevent the achievement from being mistaken for formal virtuosity alone, the film allocates to Paul – professional mathematician and academic – the discourse that conveys the authorial message about the narrative as reconstitution of a fictional universe: 'There's a number hidden in every act of life. In every aspect of the universe, fractals, matter, there is a number screaming to tell us something. [...] So many things have to happen for two people to meet. That's what mathematics are'. This is pretty much the

underlying idea of my time mapping concept; *21 Grams* is but one way of making this metanarrative experience happen for the film viewer.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Weaver Hope, "Film and Meta-Narrative" (PhD. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1975): 87.

<sup>2</sup> Edvin Vestergaard Kau, 'Where's the Story? Notes on Telling Stories Cinematically', *P.O.V* 18 (December 2004): 53-60. Viewed on 7 October 2010, <http://pov.imv.au.dk/pdf/pov18.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2 – L'Image-temps* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Mind-game Film', *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Malden, MA, and Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 13-41.

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## Bio

Fátima Chinita is a Professor of Cinema at the Lisbon Higher Polytechnic Drama and Film School, in Portugal, where she teaches Production, Narrative and Film Studies. She has a PhD. in Art Studies (Cinema) and a Masters Degree in Communication Sciences. She has published a book on David Lynch.