

Wound and Hemorrhage of the Cinematographic Story in Alejandro González Iñárritu's Trilogy: *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006)

Antonio Sustaita¹

¹University of Guanajuato, Mexico

yootro@hotmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze Iñárritu's trilogy formed by *Amores Perros* (*Love's a bitch*, 2000), *21 grams* (*21 grams*, 2003) and *Babel* (2006), under the following concepts: accident, wound and hemorrhage. It is an exemplary work in narrative terms, made with Federico Arriaga as screenwriter. This trilogy deserves special attention, not only because it is a manifesto of the broken and helical narrative, but also because it represents a reflection of the violence that suddenly appeared in the Mexico of those years. In narratological terms, Iñárritu uses a strategy based on dynamic fragmentation, a mixture of impressionism, futurism and Kurt Schwitters' Dadaism, which is animated by a futuristic helical structure.

Keywords: story, history, violence, aesthetic, Iñárritu, Mexican film.

How to cite: Sustaita, A. (2024). Wound and Hemorrhage of the Cinematographic Story in Alejandro González Iñárritu's Trilogy: *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006). *Doctoral Horizons*, 5(1), 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.37130/DrHvol5iss1pp15-29>

Jorge González Iñárritu (1963) is one of the most relevant film directors on the international scene for having won two consecutive Oscars as best director, with the films *Birdman* (2014) and *Revenant* (2015). Only two other directors had achieved it before: John Ford (1940-1941) and Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1949-1950).

The purpose of this essay is to analyze Iñárritu's trilogy formed by *Amores Perros* (Love's a bitch, 2000), *21 grams* (21 grams, 2003) and *Babel* (2006), under the following concepts: accident, wound and hemorrhage. It is an exemplary work in narrative terms, made with Federico Arriaga as screenwriter. This trilogy deserves special attention, not only because it is a manifesto of the broken and helical narrative, but also because it represents a reflection of the violence that suddenly appeared in the Mexico of those years. In narratological terms, Iñárritu uses a strategy based on dynamic fragmentation, a mixture of impressionism, futurism and Kurt Schwitters' Dadaism, which is animated by a futuristic helical structure.

The attack on the unity of objects, characters and shots is shown as a set of fragments that, animated by an exacerbated dynamic, are a clear reflection of the socio-political context in Mexico during the period covered by the trilogy: 2000-2006. They are also the years of the rupture of the tradition of a political system based on a single political party that had governed for more than 65 years. It was not only a political rupture, but also a symbolic fragmentation initiated by President Vicente Fox in 2000, with the mutilation of the national coat of arms, an eagle devouring a snake, of which only the head and a piece of the wing appeared. It was the severed head of the eagle that, until then, had represented the origin of the Aztec nation. Such abjection found its consolidation in the domain of the real, with the drug war initiated by President Felipe Calderón in 2006.

Story and wound

At the beginning of the analysis of the films of this trilogy, which masterfully narrate the intertwined stories from unsuspected accidents, I used the term crack to refer to the rupture of the story. I understood that Iñárritu places in a conceptual-methodological foreground the fracture that fragments the stories. Such an idea assumes a previous discursive unity. The crack refers to a solid thing, above all to the earth (the solid by antonomasia as opposed to the sky), and can be used to designate a construction, which symbolizes the continuation of the earth, thus constituting an architectural metaphor. Under this image, the story would be seen as a constructed space: the space where the spectator dwells, where he lives.

However, as I progressed in the analysis of the films, it seemed to me that it would be more convenient to use wound instead of crack. At that time I was

carrying out an aesthetic analysis of the human body destroyed by the narco, through mutilations and decapitations, mounted in public spaces as sinister exhibitions. Therefore, it seemed to me that the image “wounded story” provided greater clarity to what I was trying to express. This analysis, which compared grotesque graphic documents resulting from the narco war with body art images from the late twentieth century, especially those from Austrian Viennese Actionism, contributed to an aesthetics of violence. The idea of a story that is not only alive, but that shares the viewer's bodily reality, and not only serves as a habitation. It is no longer a question of the place where he lives, but of what makes him live and what he lives for. In this order of things, I have opted for the idea of the story as a living organism, a story-body: a biological metaphor. Thus, the accident that has resulted in the wounded story would need the help of the spectator/doctor. Clinical metaphor that explains the function of the spectator in this type of story.

With the image of the wounded tale I have sought to exploit the clinical symbolism. Wounded, the story would be in the clinic awaiting attention and healing. Its seriousness would demand a quick and solicitous intervention on the part of the spectator, that visual doctor. All the activity and dedication of the director, like that of the paramedic, has only been enough to make the diagnosis of the injured person and transport him to the doctor. He brings to the viewer's sight the wounded body of the story. And this (de)showing -the exhibition of what is monstrous because it is excessive, because it is incapable of being perceived-, implies in itself a diagnosis: it gives us what is overflowing, what is incapable of being seen (of being contained, of giving it form) due to its fragmentation and disorder.

Against the idea of a healthy story, we have the idea of a wounded story. In this sense, the healthy narrative, like the body, is an integral, unitary narrative, with a defined form and a clear meaning. Normalized by linguistic and aesthetic laws, self-sufficient, the healthy narrative is, to a certain extent, isolated, concluded, enclosed in itself. Framed. Immobile in its determination, no matter how much illusion of movement it projects, the idea of displacement, which would imply acceleration and collision, is absent in the healthy story. It is not an erotic story, since it is self-sufficient.

Broken, dynamic, with a demand for reconstruction, Iñárritu's story, present in the three films of this trilogy, is highly erotic. In our eyes, like the assemblage games in the eyes and hands of small children, there is a demand for

reconstruction, for re-arranging and re-assembling the loose pieces - those puzzle pieces, or strands or filaments, the shards of the pomegranate that the story has become. These scraps are present in a ritual context, in the consecrated place that is cinema. (Clair, 2004)

Dismembered and mutilated, the wounded story brings us only remains, the remains of the stories that sought to be told, of the story with capital letters, which serves as a context for the particular (Didi-Huberman, 2008). It will be up to the spectator, as Didi-Huberman understands to a spectator who is like a ragpicker, to take charge of such work. It does not remain for the spectator but to work with the remains, with the fragments, to reconstruct what is possible.

The body of the story as a human body

Like water, which acquires the form of the container that holds it, meaning finds its form thanks to the story that serves as its container. If a rupture is provoked in the container, a wound in the body of the narrative, the latter could, in an extreme case, empty itself. To what extent? That depends on the place where the crack or wound has been inflicted; it also depends on the manipulation of the body of the narrative, that continent.

The wound, which is nothing other than the rupture of the bodily limits, that continent we call body, represents an attack against its unity. Therefore, it provokes the overflowing of the interior, its leakage. It is a hemorrhage. Once the story is wounded, the meaning, that fluid that is like its blood, would flow out of the story until it is emptied. Such hemorrhage is the announcement of its destruction, of its death. In this sense, the spectator functions as a bandage: his or her gaze is sought to cover the wounds, to heal them, to contain the hemorrhage and thus reestablish meaning. His action will prevent the total overflow of meaning, its fatal escape. This is the hypothesis of the function of the spectator in Iñárritu's wounded stories.

The representation achieved in the trilogy leads us to think of a transubstantiation of domains that allows us to read, in the cinematographic story, the events of the social and individual body in Mexico in the first decade of the 21st century. "Each of the three movies has been a pretext for the director to analyse social and cultural issues (Mihoc: 2011). Because it is exposed, the human body tells a story, narrates a story, its becoming. The body becomes a story. By telling about bodies, the director also tells about the society in which they live. Subjected

to becoming, in the social fabric, the body speaks about its constructions and destructions. Death becomes a central theme in his work (Karam: 2019)

For the ancient Greeks, the body was the measure of all things. This anthropomorphic vision leads us to understand that between man and the universe a specular relationship is established. The cosmos is the image of man and vice versa. A harmonious, proportionate and ordered body, that is, a canonical body, implied in the Renaissance the idea of a harmonious world. A deformed, shattered, broken body would give us the idea of a fragmented, shattered universe, the world we live in since postmodernity.

The year 2000, when *Amores perros*, the first of the films that make up the trilogy resulting from the creative complicity of director Alejandro González Iñárritu and writer Guillermo Arriaga, was released, marked the rupture of two foundational myths in our country. One is the one related to ancient Mexico. The myth of the serpent devouring an eagle on a cactus, whose image represents the national coat of arms. The other is the foundational myth of Mexican modernity. It is the PRI, whose continuity in power, after almost 70 years, was broken by the rise of the main opposition party, the PAN. As we can see, this is a double break with tradition. In the visual dimension, the government of Vicente Fox began with the mutilation of a national symbol: the eagle is an eagle whose head alone has been left with the rest of its body cut off. The mutilation of this symbol not only iconically characterized the new government, but also served as a harbinger of a new discursive practice. Seeking the relevance of its messages, this exercise carried out by the Narco Cartels attacked the State by carrying out as a proposed methodology the articulation or assembly of the body fragments together with the words, giving rise to a new corpo-linguistic grammar. Body fragmentation, which would encompass a wide range of mutilations, left the realm of myth and ritual, to become part of the chaotic and catastrophic Mexican reality.

On June 22, 2006, the year Babel was presented, *La jornada* (a Mexico City newspaper) published the news item "Five are beheaded in Baja California". Almost three months later, on September 7, a similar news item can be read, only this time the events took place in the state of Michoacán: "Five human heads are thrown in a nightclub in Uruapan".

In the second news item there are two details of great importance, if we are to think of an aesthetics of body fragmentation in Mexico at the beginning of the 21st century. The first is the fact that the heads are thrown onto the dance floor of

a nightclub called "Sol y sombra". The second is that a sign has been placed next to them with the message: "The family does not kill for pay. It does not kill women, it does not kill innocents, only those who must die die die, all the people know this, this is divine justice". Symbolically, the words complement the bodies that have been presented as pure head, discursively restoring the bodily integrity of the decapitated.

From then on, many similar acts, characterized by the presentation of severed heads, accompanied by a poster, would form a new form of the terrible confrontation that has a tinge of sinister spectacularity.

These sinister acts, which occurred in the context of a confrontation between drug cartels, represent the emergence of a new form of execution with ritual elements. The new body, consisting of a head and a message, tells (says) a message that aspires to be true, which implies that the previous body, which had to be split, was lying. There is a notable opposition between a body of flesh and a body of text in relation to truth. Similarly, reading Iñárritu's films in the above context, we could think that the broken story arises because the previous story (whole, ordered, closed, concluded) from the year 2000 onwards appears as a false story. Its structuring and exposition, which depended on a specific logic, are now insufficient. Just like the broken bodies, which are assembled and exposed as a sinister spectacle before an unexpected spectator, Iñárritu's films appear before a normalized spectator as something unexpected. It gives us the feeling that we are watching something we should not be watching. There is a feeling of discomfort. Because of the normalization of morality in the second half of the twentieth century, Jean Clair finds an enormous need for abject art, and Iñárritu's films certainly are. (Clair, 2004)

Stories of injuries: mutilation and hemorrhage

Amores perros (*Love's a Bitch*, 2000) The continuous white line with which the film begins, the separation of lanes on a Mexico City street, immediately fragments on the screen, serving as an announcement for a broken story, whose sequence, or union, will depend on speed. The movement of the story is produced by the montage, one of Eisenstein's main bets since 1937. After the line, the images correspond to fragments of urban space. From the beginning, everything appears as rupture and fragment, and, consequently, the desire for reconstruction or

recovery of unity is latent. The attempt of a boy to cover the wound of the dog in the back seat of the rickety black car, is an example of this: “-This bastard is bleeding to death.” “-Cover his wound.” “-I can't.” “-With my finger.” “-I can't, it's too much blood.” In the second story of this film, the floor of Valeria's apartment, broken from the beginning and then dismantled in the search for a dog that has fallen prey to rats, is a symbol of the rupture of the story, in an attempt to find the truth -the true telling-, next to the body, mutilated because of the axial vehicular accident, of the protagonist, a beautiful and sophisticated Spanish model.



Amores perros. Movie poster, 2000.
<https://www.imdb.com/es/title/tt0245712/>

Despite the dynamic beginning of this film, there is an evident rigidity in the attempt to weave the three stories together, to the point that, at the beginning of each of them, the names of the two main characters appear on a black background -a clear announcement of change: Octavio and Susana; Daniel and Valeria; El chivo and Marco. *Amores perros* is, of the trilogy, the most timid and least daring work, the least dynamic.

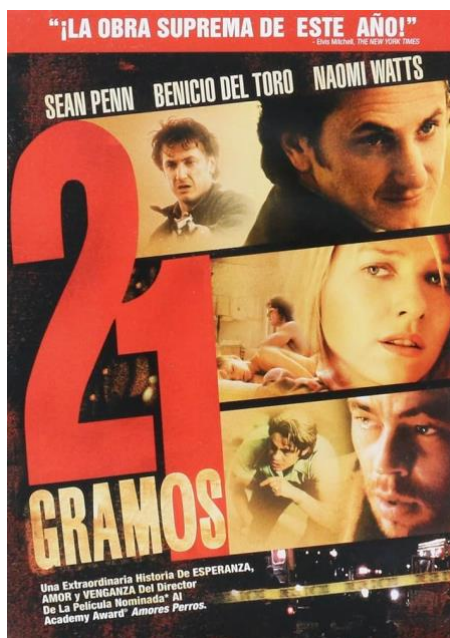
The overflow, the hemorrhage, is minor. The suture of the dog's wound, which serves to end the third story, contains the hemorrhage of the story, its overflow. What appears from this first installment, and which will be a constant in the rest, is the visual allusion to a helical structure that would reveal the strategy of formal construction of the story: the fragments of the story are set to rotate from an initial collision, and the viewer would have to assemble them. The fall, the inversion and

the envelopment, terms related to Benjamin's proposal of a dialectical image, are present in Iñárritu's films. Without them, there would be neither the fragment nor the helical strategy of its construction. What in *Amores perros* serves as a symbol of the above is the washing machine on which Octavio and Susana, loving brothers-in-law, make love for the first time.

In *21 gramos* (2003), the second installment of the trilogy, the dynamics of the story increase significantly. The scraps, fragments or narrative strands seem to be more scattered, spinning without apparent order on the screen. Dynamited, the story is nothing more than a manifestation of the explosion experienced by the continuity of the historical context in which it is housed. Once again, as in *Amores perros*, it is the washing machine that symbolizes the spiral dynamics of the story.

After the image of the spinning blades of the washing machine, the image of a woman with a glass of drink in her hand, inside which are some ice cubes, appears; the next image corresponds to a man lying on a hospital bed, holding in his hand a jar inside which, filled with a dark liquid, is his own heart. The man has had the heart transplanted from the heart of the husband of the woman holding the glass in the previous sequence. As can be seen, the blades of the washing machine would indicate an interweaving not only of images, but of characters in the maelstrom that is this film. This constitutes, like the image discussed above, a *mise-en-scène* of intertwined stories and disrupted characters whose actions, contradictory, cut and mended, give account of a story that advances vertiginously and haphazardly. We must renounce any oriented story: "there is no 'line of progress' but omnidirectional series, rhizomes of bifurcations".

A car accident caused by a man, an ex-convict and extremely religious, who runs over two girls and their father, is the axial point from which the stories intermingle at great speed and in an incomprehensible order.



21 gramos. Movie poster, 2003.

<https://www.imdb.com/es-es/title/tt0315733/>

One of the first scenes, which serves as a symbol of the fragmented story, corresponds to a landscape where countless birds, flying from right to left of the screen, are cut out like tiny spots against the sky. After this scene, the image of a flat lamp on the ceiling of a hospital -geometrical and still-, would account for the search for unity and determination of the story.



21 gramos. Images taken from the movie.

Babel is the final installment of the trilogy. As in the previous films, we find a radial and intertwined story. What seems like an innocent game triggers a tragedy that will start the wounded story. A rifle shot by some children in the desert mountains

of North Africa will detonate an international conflict that links characters from three different continents. In the previous films the space was bounded, even if the story was broken. In *Babel*, on the contrary, different geographies corresponding to four different cultures, Arab, North American, Mexican and Japanese, are brought into play. The story is a cartographic attempt to recompose a map that technology has turned into fragments. The desert of North Africa, the desert of western North America and northern Mexico, and the Japanese city, an icon of technological development as opposed to the Arab people, characterized by technological backwardness, serve as the setting for the interweaving of these three stories.

The poor Arab children must hunt a jackal that decimates their herd, but what they manage to do is to hunt an American tourist traveling in a truck rented by a travel agency for foreigners. This event destroys the notion of frontier.

With *Babel* we face a global conflict. Very much in tune with its title, Iñárritu delivers a story that seeks to recall the biblical myth. The unique, original language, fragmented by the development of different cultures, becomes a broken story that, despite seeking communication and understanding, achieves the opposite.

As in the previous films, in *Babel* there is an image that symbolizes the helical nature of the story. The first corresponds to the act of a young Mexican man who, on a holiday, in front of some children who play the role of spectators, takes a chicken by the head and spins it around until it is torn off. Headless, the chicken runs randomly, like the stories that Iñárritu delivers in his trilogy.



Babel (2006). Movie poster,
<https://www.amazon.com/-/es/Babel-P%C3%B3ster-Pel%C3%ADcula-27-inches/dp/B00KK6MWI2>



Babel (2006). Images taken from the movie.

To narrate: with and from debris

In 1986 Francis Alÿs arrived in Mexico City from Belgium. He was part of a group of architects participating in the rescue of the city destroyed by the earthquake of the previous year. There was something of a revelation in the encounter between the Belgian architect and the city that is The Navel of the Moon. Francis Alys became a conceptual artist. The city had transformed him. Almost immediately he took the historic center of the city as his laboratory of artistic experimentation, that network of streets where the past and the present mix palimpsestically. Many of his works have been created around the Zócalo, the city's main square, an emblematic space that includes the National Palace Building, the Metropolitan Cathedral and the ruins of the Templo Mayor.

At a time when most contemporary art galleries opted for technological or clinical environments, enabled by cutting-edge technologies (interfaces and sensors), Alÿs opted for the Dadaist proposal, taken up at the time by Situationist art and Italian arte povera. The Belgian artist claimed the rejection of the norms of high art, traditional and conceptual, characterized by cleanliness and technological precision. Not homo faber, but homo ludens seemed to be his formula. Art, we understand in Alys' proposals, is questioning and playing. His aesthetic aspiration is very similar to what we find in the director Jorge González Iñárritu, especially in the trilogy analyzed here, that is, his passion for the animal remains, the debris and the waste product of the accident.

In *The Colector* (1991-1992), a work emblematic of a Dadaist aesthetic, Alys walks carefree, carrying behind him, pulled by a rope as if he were a pet, a device made up of a magnet mounted on wheels. At each step of the performer, at each turn of the wheels, small metallic pieces are attracted by the magnet, confirming an elemental eroticism. Everything happens as the confirmation of a supreme will. Magnet image. image magnet, elemental magic that is shaped by the random incorporation of strange and foreign elements, common in its iron nature. Very much in the path marked by the work of Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters, fragment and chance are the determining realities. There is present, on the one hand, the idea of fragment, remainder and waste; on the other hand, of reintegration and narration. The advance allowed by the wheeled platform has to do with the helical advance of Iñárritu's narrative.



Francys Alys. The collector, performance, 1990-92. <https://flash---art.com/article/in-and-out/>

In Iñárritu's work, as in that of Alÿs, there is a magnetic aesthetic that implies a random increase and an uncontrolled, expressionist narrative. An elemental and primal eroticism, typical of symbol and metaphor, is at work in this machine of attraction. This is how Iñárritu's helicoidal narrative aesthetics works: a violent and random fragmentation, the product of accident, leaves in the narrative desert only remnants of the stories, characters and valid narrative strategies, those that obey the normative academic principle. Faced with the rubbles of stories, Iñárritu uses a non-linear (Mihoc: 2011) and multi-plot (Gutiérrez de Terán: 2012) narrative. These remains are taken by the director to structure them in an abject and painful way, like the bodies recovered after car accidents in *Crash* (J. G. Ballard, 1979).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can affirm that the work of both creators has been shaped by a precarious and violent context, that of contemporary Mexico, spanning from the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre to the present day, with the clandestine graves of

hundred of thousands of missing persons. Whether due to natural or social causes. In Alys's case, it was the 1985 earthquake; in Iñárritu's we are referring widespread and systematic violence caused by the Drug War. There are common point between them: the presence of accidents, the commitment to the fragment and the remainder, the role of chance in the narrative. Something that constitutes a major difference as noted from the outset the fact that, in the case of Iñárritu's trilogy, the role of the spectator is essential. To the point that it has been hypothesized here that their gaze bandage that staunches the bleeding of the story. This can be explained by considering Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history, which asserts that the spectator is responsible for providing temporality to the image, which makes him a historical subject. Only the spectator, through a dialectical exercise of gaze, can construct the images the director presents before their eyes, providing them with temporality, it is to say, social life. Thus, knowledges of images is not distinct from knowledge of one's own world.

References

- Clair, J. (2004) *De Immundo. Apophatisme et apocatastase dans l'art d'aujourd'hui*: Paris, Galilée.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2008) *Ante el tiempo. Historia del arte y anacronismo de las imágenes*: Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo Editora.
- Gutiérrez de Teran, J. O. (2012) *Las mixtificaciones narrativas en el cine de Alejandro González Iñárritu*. Available at: <https://idus.us.es/server/api/core/bitstreams/e21ced54-41b5-4fc1-ab66-549aad262444/content> (Accessed 12 June 2025)
- Karam, T. (2019) *Modos de experimentar la muerte en el cine de González Iñárritu*. Quórum Académico. Available at: <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/1990/199061671002/html/> (Accesed 05 July 2025).
- Mihoc, A. (2011) *Crazy narrative in film. Analysing alejandro gonzález Iñárritu's film narrative technique*. Available at: https://www.ijcr.eu/articole/31_pdfsam_IJCR%202-2011.pdf (Accesed 03 June 2025)
- Ohchi, S. (2011) *William Faulkner and Alejandro González Iñárritu: The fragmentation of the Time and Space in a Story*. Available at:

<https://www.faulknerjapan.com/journal/no11/pdf/E|No11-ohchi.pdf>

(Accesed 10 June 2025)

Filmography

Amores perros (2009) Directed by Jorge Gonzalez Iñarritu [Film]. Altavista Films – Zeta Films

21 gramos (2003) Directed by Jorge Gonzalez Iñarritu [Film]. Focos Features, This is That Productions 6Y Productions.

Babel (2006) Directed by Jorge Gonzalez Iñarritu [Film]. Paramount Pictures, Paramount Vantage, Anonymous Content, Zeta Film & Central Films.