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FRAMING THE BORDER:
LIMINALITY IN THE NETWORK NARRATIVES
OF ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑARRITU

by

MUHAMMAD MUZAMMAL

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

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of Alejandro González Iñárritu

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Framing the Border:
Liminality in the Network Narratives
of Alejandro González Iñárritu

by

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Advisor: Paul Julian Smith

This thesis explores liminality conveyed as displacement before death in the network narrative films of Alejandro González Iñárritu. Due to their depiction of existential crises and possibly fatal scenarios of several characters in different countries and regions, these network narrative films are colloquially referred to as the “Death Trilogy.” Therefore, rearranging the many strands of death-related abstractions and notions in these films around liminality becomes a jumping-off point to explore deeper layers of these works. Through interdisciplinary yet markedly film studies excavations, this thesis projects the liminal spaces of Iñárritu’s films onto border spaces. With borders considered as sites of collision, entanglement, connection, and displacement and the varied scholarship on Iñárritu as a filmmaker of borders, this thesis will interchangeably use “liminal spaces” with “border spaces.” Borrowing from a range of sources and disciplines such as film studies, physics, mathematics, media studies, anthropology and Latin American studies, the project will seek to link the liminal border spaces in the films to those of the films’ non-filmic elements, such as production process and sociopolitical address. Different diagrams representing the filmic and non-filmic border spaces of each film will be used to help

map and make clear the many constellations and linkages that will be revealed in this project. In carrying out the project with this methodology, the diagrams are meant to be a means, like Iñárritu's films, of visually mediating the liminal border spaces associated with death that are felt most readily in a contemporary, globalized world.

PREFACE

“Abu Gi, Abu Gi.” My aunt Aisha gently feels my grandfather’s motionless hands. Her blue gloves caress his skin with a touch of tenderness and estrangement; this is the picture of COVID-19, of a roaring pandemic that fragments life. No longer is the wholesome caress and affection of a hug and a kiss applicable for the most vulnerable and deserving. My grandfather, a man of empire and simplicity, was the head of a family of an astonishing 4 sons and 15 grandchildren and strived for a moral and ethical life. Now, at the end of his path, he was alone, save for affection that would only be conveyed through the sterility and lifelessness of medical gloves.

This brief scene would be the final recording of my grandfather. A man with Olympic history and significant influence would soon die alone at the ICU that night, alone and without all his children or spouse. This recording was just one of several collected in the dreaded year of 2020, where suffering and pain became a predictable outcome. How could it not? The irreversibility of death mixed with the alienation of the dying made life feel more precarious and tragic for families, like my own, who were forced to be displaced from their dying loved ones and, in that displacement, reckoned with a moral choice of societal proportions: do we break hospital protocol and see our loved one for the final time and further the spread of COVID-19 or mitigate risk by avoiding the hospital but letting our loved one wither away alone? In this moment of reckoning, reason and rationality are displaced from their normally comfortable positions; the brutal logic of a pandemic fills the mind with the daily reminder of life’s fragility. From this reminder, comes forth the forces of liminality, for the several displacements experienced in this unique moment - the ones from reason, from life, from normalcy, from our deepest kin - can be described as liminal habitations, where we are confronted by the chaos and

brute nature of life.

Though political division and carelessness contributed greatly to the suffering, the fact remained that COVID-19, a virus unknown to most people a year ago, would threaten the social and familial fabric of our lives with its unemotional and potentially deadly damage. Therefore, to live in a world of COVID-19 is to live in a liminal moment where displacement from the everyday *becomes* the everyday. The daily becomes the experience of thresholds of life and death, with economic, political, and biological suffering being our mediators for such thresholds.

In the video, my grandfather was traveling on the path to his eventual death, a journey evidenced by the sounds of a ventilator that could only keep his heart and body operating for a few more hours and his incessant breathing, heard through the tubular circuitry of his air mask. Watching the video makes one witness the liminal space before death.

This project contends with the theme of liminality as contextualized around death in the films of director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Though Iñárritu's cinema and Dr. Smith's course and work on Latin American Cinema was the central inspiration of this project, the video of my grandfather gave this thesis its form, its *shaping*. The video was a reminder of the displacements from reason, life, normalcy, and our loved ones that the pandemic has forced on us since the virus made its presence known late last winter. The video as inspiration for this project was also a reminder that for all the rich and essential ideas a pandemic and a father's loss can inspire, there is a perversity in suffering in that it leads to a proliferation in art and scholarship inspired by said suffering. Though great art and scholarship essentially responds to and works through the cultural, societal, and political moment, a fundamental question arises: what if the moment is the collective death of millions of people? What do we make of the fact that the loss of others has given birth and therefore, nourished a space for our art and scholarship?

I have no doubt that profound works will be produced and made from this tragic moment in our history, just as it was the case following various genocides, World Wars, and other pandemics. However, the fact remains that this project, along with others responding to and inspired by the pandemic, will not have been made without the deaths of millions like my grandfather.

My grandfather's final recorded moments were captured with a shakiness by my aunt, whose unstable handheld camera motion mirrored the precariousness within me. Though this thesis project is complete, a part of me is displaced from complete satisfaction; the awareness of this project's inspiration, the sudden and indelible death of my grandfather, will make this thesis always live in a liminal space, where I am both satisfied but startled by its very existence. In that sense, all projects inspired by the suffering of others have this mark of liminality where they are the result not of "childhood curiosity" or "lifelong interests," but of moments that displaced its creators from their realities and made them ponder something beyond their world and mind's eye.

This thesis is the result of that pondering, a consequence of the suddenness of a liminal moment where something was produced like the breakage of glass from lightning caught in a bottle. The project is dedicated to my grandfather, whose tough spirit and willingness to fight was surreal and otherworldly; his spirit, like the dead, will now forever inhabit a liminal existence, simultaneously alive and dead in our minds and souls. Despite my labor and work on this project, I will always contend with this heavy inquiry: was it worth the loss of Abu Gi?

The fact that this dilemma exists, along with other reasons outlined above, makes this project, like those who perished in the pandemic, have a liminal existence, displaced from our world but not completely gone.

To Abu Gi, your love and life is felt through the tenderness and care of Baba. Your presence is but a body.

To Niloo, thank you for all your limitless love and support.

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INTRODUCTION

In Arnold van Gennep's seminal work, "The Rites of Passage," the anthropologist describes "in between" phases of life that consist of separation and transition, "I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, *preliminal rites*, those executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*" (3). Gennep, known for several contributions to his field, arguably never contributed a concept more influential than his idea of a "liminal" stage, a juncture of life that is as universal as it is mysterious; comic writer Edward Berry has written that a liminal stage is a "period of indeterminate identity, full of ambiguity and paradox" (3) and cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, largely influenced by Gennep has argued that the "attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous" (4).

The key takeaway is that liminality, according to Gennep's definition, is a deeply personal and intimate process, one whose mystery largely stems from the indeterminate, undecided characteristic of transitioning through the rites of passage. Though liminality may present itself as an experiential process and abstract concept, various artistic mediums could be studied to highlight the ambiguous character of liminality, yielding further insight on the concept.

With its unique sensibility of traversing across space and time within an enclosed frame that acts as a barrier between the image and the non-image outside of the frame, cinema is one such artistic medium that captures the spirit of liminality in all its "in-between" richness. Cristiano Dalpozzo has explored this topic, in his essay, "Off-screen: The Liminal Dimension of The Cinematic Image," when he writes, "The filmic image will then be understood as something provisional, a path, not the final destination; a mediation in a perpetual dialogue conjured up

between the visible and the invisible, between the represented and the representable — a medium that exceeds its own limits, figuring and reconfiguring itself between excess and absence” (3).

For Dalpozzo, cinema is inherently liminal for the ways in which it continually imparts images upon the viewer over the course of a film. Cinema selects certain images over others and so, the frame “figures and reconfigures itself” between what is shown and what is not shown, acting as a vessel for the “perpetual dialogue conjured up between the visible and the invisible.”

Dalpozzo’s reading of cinematic images highlights that cinema can be interpreted as liminal. Accepting this idea gives way to assessing the central subject of inquiry in this project - liminality in the first three feature films of director Alejandro González Iñárritu. Using specific filmmaking techniques, certain narrative structures, and characters who are shown in a displaced/liminal time in their lives, the filmmaker’s work depicts liminality.

The films’ depiction of liminal spaces is connected to death, with characters displaced by awaiting or being in fear of, death. This “displacement before death” is differently strategized and set up in each of the films with the use of filmic elements such as spatially and temporally disorienting editing styles and a complex mise-en-scene, made up of symbolic and emotive images, a deliberate color palette, and an evocative mixture of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. While these filmmaking techniques work to convey liminality, the slightly different narrative structures of the films also contribute to conveying such displacement.

Iñárritu’s films are a rich canvas on which the paint of liminality-related ideas can be used to draw on liminality and displacement in the filmmaker’s oeuvre. One such idea is the conceptualization of the border, a space, which Gloria Anzaldúa defines in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, as a “vague and undetermined place” that “is in a constant state of transition” (3). Using the aforementioned descriptions of liminality, borders,

with their transitory nature and undetermined sensibility are intrinsically liminal and mapping Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the border onto the liminal sensibility of Iñárritu's films, allows for a deeper examination of the spaces of transition and sites of displacement found within the director's films. With this mapping of liminality onto the border, the term "border spaces" will be used interchangeably with "liminal spaces."

As a filmmaker who has resided and worked in both Mexico City and Los Angeles, Iñárritu is situated in the border between America and Mexico. With his films wrestling with themes of political borders, socioeconomic borders and the borders between life and death through complex narrative structures and filmmaking techniques, Iñárritu earns the label of a "border" filmmaker, and therefore, to unpack and reveal the border spaces of his films becomes an important, if not essential component of studying the work of the filmmaker.

To perform a brief but dense study of borders in Iñárritu's work, this project will seek to highlight the border spaces between life and death that are depicted in both content and form of the films, as a point of departure to study the externalities of the films. These externalities range from elements of the films' production processes to the films' sociopolitical address. Linking the analysis of border spaces of the films and their externalities will be the films' narrative structures that will be mapped using different diagrams. Media studies scholar Lisa Parks, who has used diagramming to make clear the complex relationships upon which she draws and highlights, defines mapping as "the act of laying out the elements, contours or dimensions of a space" (2). Additionally, Parks specifies the linkage between viewers and the maps upon which they gaze, mentioning that a "relation of knowledge is produced as the citizen-viewer uses the map's visual information to draw inferences about and make sense of an abstract terrain" (3). Likewise, these diagrams will not only serve to elucidate narrative structures but highlight the "abstract terrains"

that are the border spaces between life and death conveyed in the films as well as the border spaces in the externalities discussed.

In administrating the project with this methodology, the goal will be to show how the liminal nature of Iñárritu's films both extend and compliment the films' form and content, and how different diagrams that use lines and figures to demarcate boundaries and narrative elements can be used as a thoughtful consideration on how the films engage with and highlight border spaces. There will also be two additional goals: first, to expound on the ways in which Iñárritu's network narratives are largely defined by several border spaces which serve to bridge, entangle, connect, and displace characters and plot lines. Second, to call attention to the project's methodology that seeks to reveal the border space between the internal formation of the film (form and content) and its external spaces of production process and sociopolitical address. Inspired by Anna McCarthy and Nick Couldry's conception of MediaSpace, a space that contains "the links that media objects form between spaces" (2) as well as Shaun Moore's work on media, who posits that media tends to "multiply the situational interconnections that are possible between places" (quoted in McCarthy and Couldry, 8), the second goal will be to link the "inside" components of the film/media to those on the "outside," with their link taken as a border space.

When discussing the models/diagrams, I will refer to each one as the "border narrativity" of the film. "Narrativity" is defined by narrative scholar Marie-Laurie Ryan as the "various text realizations of plots, the various ways in which a text relies on a narrative structure (or plot, or story)" (2). The methodology of visually representing narrativity, is inspired by Ryan's own essay, "The Modes of Narrativity and Their Visual Metaphors" wherein she describes visual artworks as analogies of different modes of narrativity. The narrativity represented in the

diagrams is described with the term “border” to contextualize the ways in which the narrativity shown manifests the present film’s relationship with borders with lines and shapes in the diagram mimicking actual borders as they demarcate, separate, and connect different plot lines, characters, and sequences. By using the same diagram to both capture the film’s narrativity and its filmic and non-filmic characteristics and contextualize the diagram around borders, the border narrativity model will then be considered as a kind of border space between this analysis of Iñárritu’s films and the films themselves.

The body of the thesis will comprise of three chapters and each chapter will be devoted to one film. The order of the chapters is determined by the chronology of the films’ release. Chapter 1 will center on *Amores Perros* (2000), Chapter 2 on *21 Grams* (2003) and Chapter 3 on *Babel* (2007).

In each chapter, there will be excavations of the theoretical ideas underpinning this project, from graph theory to globalization studies to string theory, along with other writings on cinematic and literary depictions of liminality and borders. Though the border narrativity models presented will be used to analyze the film’s intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics, they are also meant to be consideration of the ways in which the border spaces of a model or diagram can be mapped onto concepts related to their referent. However, in carrying out this project, one must also accept that these diagrams, with their single-image, immovable character are insufficient to fully encapsulate the rich dynamism of Iñárritu’s films. With that, the diagrams strive to visually analogize the narrative object of their reference and seek a different approach to reading the work of Iñárritu, to ultimately explore and traverse the liminal border spaces of his films.

CHAPTER 1:
BRIDGES OF COLLISION



Fig. 1 – *Amores Perros* (2000): Opening Shot.

In the opening shot of Iñárritu's first commercial film, *Amores Perros*, the central reservation of a highway is depicted shakily, as the camera incessantly rocks in place, capturing the seemingly never-ending path of the road marker (Fig. 1). The shot can be interpreted as a metaphor for the lives of the film's characters, who, depicted as displaced from their past, strive to obtain a different, more ideal life outside of their current one. The rambunctious Octavio (Gael García Bernal) wishes to elope with his sister-in-law, Susana (Vanessa Bauche) and escape the tight grip of Octavio's older brother, the nefarious and abusive Ramiro (Marco Pérez). In the middle passage, the successful publisher Daniel (Álvaro Guerrero) moves in with his lover, the supermodel Valeria (Goya Toledo), with hopes of transitioning out of an unhappy life with his family. In the final and most poetic segment, the vagrant and assassin El Chivo (Emilio Echevarría) looks to reinvent himself after realizing the damage done from leaving his daughter Maru years ago. Taking these characters into consideration, it is no surprise that Iñárritu chooses

to display a never-ending road marker as his first image; with an “in betweenness” that is akin to liminality, the shot is representative of the liminal, transitory stages in which the film’s characters live.

Death is the unique marker of the characters’ liminality for the figurative cloud of death hangs ominously above them in different ways. From the opening scene, wherein Octavio’s dog, Kofi, bleeds profusely in the backseat as Octavio, trying to escape the dangerous gangsters chasing him, violently crashes into Valeria’s car, who struggles to crawl out, to the aftermath of the crash for Valeria, who becomes so badly crippled, she eventually amputates her leg due to gangrene, to El Chivo’s wager to have two brothers kill the other, Iñárritu has no shortage of moments where characters flirt with death. Such reoccurrences of this flirtation with death puts viewers in a paranoid, but excited state for any character might die any time, perhaps an effect of the film as “a portrayal of unbridled violence, incest, company corruption, and lives built around crime, in a way that most viewers (find) breathtaking” (Hart 190). The following exchange between El Chivo and his target, Luis (Jorge Salinas) best posits the precariousness with which Iñárritu depicts his characters:

Luis: Is this kidnapping or robbery?

El Chivo: It could be the last day of your life.

With this sense of precariousness, the characters’ liminal space is not just a space between the life they live and the one for which they strive, but the space between life *and* death. Therefore, the displacement conveyed does not just stem from the displacement of characters between different stages of their lives, but between their lives *and* possible deaths.

This sense of displacement is partly a result of the color schemes used. Due to the process of desaturating colors such as skin tones and enhancing other colors like red and blue, Mexico City is rendered as gritty and foreboding. When composing the color schemes of the film, Iñárritu and his team “were after the power of imperfection [and wanted to] use ‘mistakes’ to enhance the urgency and unpredictability of life in a place like Mexico City” (Smith 77). In addition to its color schemes, *Amores Perros* conveys displacement through the constant depiction of characters losing their most prized and worthy possessions (i.e., Valeria’s amputated leg, Octavio’s friend Jorge’s tragic death, the near deaths and disappearances of Kofi and Richie), its network narrative structure and the use of non-diegetic music in montage sequences.

Amores Perros has a network narrative structure, and as being such a film from Latin America, is part of “an indigenous realist movement, somewhat comparable to Italian neorealism” which became “more conscious of the conventions involved in realism” and eventually developed “more abstract experiments in form” (quoted in Smith, 176-177). This “self-conscious reflexivity of the network narrative only intensifies this unstable combination of sociopolitical address (alienation, lack of communication) and formal complexity and fragility (anachronism, fragmentation)” (Smith 177) thereby emphasizing the narrative’s importance in a liminal aspect, especially when themes of displacement, precariousness and instability are at the forefront of a film with this structure. Mexico City’s social hierarchy is presented as a rich mosaic, as the film revolves around the lives of the lower class (Octavio y Susana), the upper middle (Valeria y Daniel) and the desolate, “outsider” group (El Chivo). These characters, though alienated from each other, become entangled in the central car crash scene. The film consists of a non-linear structure, with three chapters presented as individualized stories, intercut with non-linear temporal shifts. The film begins in the middle of the story, with the car crash.

The beginning does not build up to this scene, instead dropping us *en media res*. The crash is the center of the story, for characters such as Valeria and Octavio will be directly affected by this accident and so will El Chivo, albeit at the periphery level, as he will obtain Octavio's money and become the eventual guardian of Kofi, part of the object of his gaze when he first watches the crash, standing at a distance. After the crash, the film cuts to the beginning of Octavio and Susana's chapter and after that chapter reaches its "liminal threshold" and a near death experience happens to Octavio with the crash, we cut to before the crash, to Valeria's chapter, which will continue beyond the "crash point."

By presenting the film with such a non-linear approach, Iñárritu displaces his viewers, who must contend with a narrative structure that does not abide by linearity, but with its own rules as the filmmaker chooses to tell the entire story, with all its rich details, like a slightly disjointed puzzle that shifts in different points in time throughout the film. Such a shifting displaces the viewers from preceding moments/chapters, transplanting them to separate moments in time. This displacement is juxtaposed with the displacement of the film's characters, to whose stories the spectator becomes transplanted.

Bordwell and Thompson offer a rudimentary definition of the montage sequence, describing it as a collection of images and footage "joined by dissolves and music to create a quick, regular rhythm and to compress a lengthy series of actions into a few moments" (252). Using this definition of montage as a point of departure, we can analyze how Iñárritu conveys displacement in two montage sequences using non-diegetic music. These sequences are composed of different images which play over the same piece of music. For example, in the montage sequence which plays over Control Machete's "Si Señor," the music begins with Octavio's request to Susana to "Come away with me," then cuts to Ramiro preparing to rob a

local market. In addition to Ramiro's theft, this portion of the sequence will show him cheat with a woman, with their breaths heard during sex in the storeroom of a market (the breaths are the only diegetic sounds *explicitly* heard during this sequence). In contrast to Ramiro's sins, Octavio collects more cash from Kofi's persistent success as a fighter dog, with Octavio buying a car near the end of the sequence (another personal possession Octavio will lose later in the story). There is a preceding montage sequence within the same chapter of Octavio and Susana; this sequence is less abstract. When Octavio looks at Susana, Nacha Pop's iconic single, "Lucha De Gigantes" begins playing. The film then cuts to Ramiro who is escorted to a private, unrecognizable space where he is beaten by local gangsters. Unlike the music in the "Si Señor" sequence, the music here is more muted and the diegetic noises of Octavio and Susana's lovemaking and Ramiro's beating, is at the foreground, with the former's sounds being an ironic contrast to the "breaths of lovemaking" heard from Ramiro and his co-worker.

These complimentary sequences progress the story of Octavio and Susana to the point where Octavio demands that Susana run away with him, a rational beginning to the "Si Señor" montage wherein all Octavio's actions are related to a transition *out* of his current life. In other words, these sequences work to progress Octavio's journey deeper into the liminal space in which he finds himself before the crash.

Despite differences in the volume of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, these sequences feature music which bridge multiple distinct storylines that may or may not be concurrent. However, the music in both montages betrays the integrity it has the first time it is played with an image (which is coincidentally the face of Octavio). Thus, the music undergoes a displacement, shifting its association with different images within the same montage sequence. The displacement of music harkens back to the theme of liminality. Contextualizing the use of

music in these sequences around a theme of displacement helps reveal these montage sequences as liminal spaces, for music is displaced to different images, mirroring the displacement of the characters.

Though it is only a minor detail, the description of the music of the film's montage sequences "bridging" multiple images can be extrapolated to formulate the border narrativity of *Amores Perros* as a structure defined by "bridges." Inspired by "bridge graphs" from the field of graph theory, a mathematical subfield centered on graphs as structures used to model relations between objects, bridges represent "vulnerabilities in a connected network and are useful for designing reliable networks" (Geeks for Geeks). According to graph theory, bridges are components which connect two disparate objects, forming a connector space or simply, *a bridge*.

Likewise, the network narrative structure and mise-en-scene of *Amores Perros* can be conceptualized as a bridge graph, wherein disparate objects, characters, and narrative elements are connected through certain events, scenes and symbols like a car crash, a montage sequence, or the loss of prized objects. Characters from different social classes collide, the diegetic and non-diegetic music and sounds from one scene meld with a separate scene in the same montage sequence, and the loss of loved ones and possessions are readily felt by each of the principal characters. Bridges then, characterize these spaces with the incessant collision of objects, characters, and filmic elements.

A bridge connects multiple disparate units, but is integral to the functionality, success, and operation of a network and as such, can be conceptualized, as an example, the car crash that connects multiple characters (Fig. 2, for the sake of simplicity, El Chivo's storyline was excluded in this example to highlight the more direct entanglement of Valeria and Octavio). This "bridge graph" representation of the film's network narrative structure is also mapped onto the

act of connecting disparate units - like noise and score - which I define here as “bridging.” In bridging, we find a connection that seeks to link separate units of the film, and such a connection conveys displacement and liminality. In the space of the bridge and the act of bridging, units are connected but, in their connection, the units undergo disconnection and therefore, displacement from their singularity, briefly existing in a liminal state of collision and crash.

Likewise, the film’s relationship with the complex apparatus of globalization can be conceptualized as an event of bridging that sees the collision of different modes of globalized identities. Consider a definition of globalization as an economic and cultural system which purports to increase travel and influence between lands and borders, all of which is designed to accelerate “a singular linear progression toward industrialization and capitalism, modernity and urbanization” (Manning & Shackford-Bradley 2). In *Amores Perros*, the virtual, modern, and capitalistic flows of globalization manifested as a highly commercialized screen culture found within the contours of television studios and billboards runs parallel to the urban velocity captured in the stories of the impoverished that are most ignored but not completely isolated from globalization (the high stakes, risky affair of Octavio and Susana fit the bill). Such a point is argued in Geoffrey Kantaris’ essay, “Translocal Identities in Contemporary Mexican Film,” with Kantaris commenting “the juxtaposition of urban velocity and virtual flows allows us to think the material effects of these flows, their forms of global connection and local disconnection” (Kantaris 525).

This sense of the contradictory clashing of the local and global that is inherent in globalization is brought forth by the complex aesthetic of the film, which mixes hyperrealism through its gritty, harsh look (which yields a natural depiction of the local) with a staged music video-like atmosphere that is accentuated by the film’s heavy reliance on rapid-pace editing

(which appeals to non-Mexican, “global” audiences). The hyperrealism coexists with the more artificial aesthetic of rapid-pace editing, and this mixture serves to underscore the situations of crisscrossing of the characters, with Susana cheating on her husband with his brother and Daniel dating Valeria behind his wife’s back. These situations, like the film’s mixture of hyperrealism and music video-like style, sees the intermixing and *bridging* of different characters/objects, bringing forth the bridge graph border narrativity of the film.

The film as a vessel that bridges different modes of globalized identities, allow us to see *Amores Perros*’ network narrative as an engaged consideration on the paradoxes and contradictions of globalization. In embodying these contradictions, the film becomes a liminal space where globalization flows, character stories, and filmic and narrative elements clash, like collisions in a border space. Here, the bridge as site of collision is conceptualized as a border, with different objects, persons and identities converging and striking against each other as they would on actual border lands.

Bridges as sites of collision and therefore exchange, are border spaces. The bridge between Octavio and Valeria, which also indirectly links Daniel with Ramon and the bridge that is the depiction and capture of distinct globalized identities and modes, are presented as a collision of objects. Therefore, the bridge becomes a border space which illuminates and highlights the degree to which liminal sites of passage, though spaces of transition, are filled with encounter and conflict. In *Amores Perros*, these antilogies as elements of the interval between life and death, different scenes, and distinct globalized identities reflect the film’s bridge-based narrative model, specifically its border space of the bridge. Like the film’s network narrative, the film’s depiction of the liminal spaces between life and death of its characters and its intermixing of globalized identities, the bridge/border space is a space of exchange, collision,

displacement, and crash. Therefore, in conceptualizing *Amores Perros*' border narrativity as a bridge graph which sees bridges connecting individual objects that become entangled in the bridge space, borders *become* sites of collision, where liminality and displacement are a condition of the bridges/border spaces intrinsic to the film.

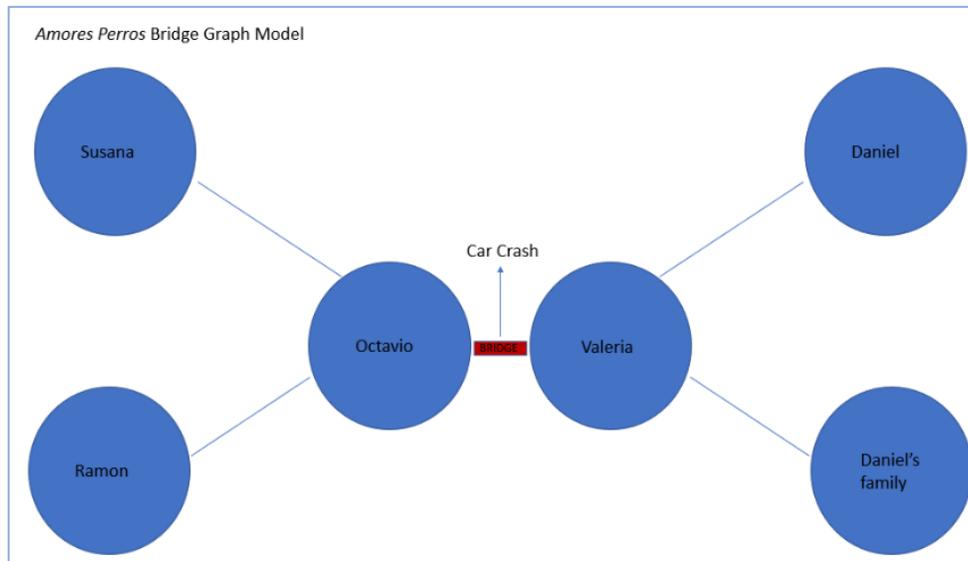


Fig. 2 – *Amores Perros* Bridge Graph Model

CHAPTER 2:
NESTING OF ENTANGLEMENTS

In the previous chapter, the opening shot of *Amores Perros* was contextualized around liminality, with the shot of a road marker considered as a symbol of the “in betweenness” sensibility of liminality the characters experience. Conversely, an analysis of liminality in Iñárritu’s second film, *21 Grams*, will begin not with an assessment of a single shot, but a brief sequence near the end of the film.

Birds girdle the frame, flying against the backdrop of a serene, purple sky. Paul (Sean Penn), a former college professor and heart transplant recipient, speaks in voiceover while the film cuts to a shot of his bloodied head cradled by Cristina (Naomi Watts), the former wife of the man whose heart Jack now has. Like Octavio’s dog Cofi, who bleeds in the backseat of a car in the opening scene of *Amores Perros*, Jack also bleeds profusely in the backseat of a car, beginning a voiceover with the following inquiries, “How many lives do we live? How many times do we die?”

The film then cuts to Paul in a hospital bed, harkening back to his hospice stay before his heart transplant procedure - another time in his life when he was facing the threat of a very possible death. This five shot sequence, where the film jumps from a poetic image of birds (an extension of a shot that was first shown in the opening minutes) to one moment in the story (Cristina cries holding Paul) to another moment later in the story (Paul’s hospital stay) with a voiceover that isn’t originating in any of these moments, not only encapsulates the fragmentary nature of the film, but zeroes in on the ways in which the threat of death and character displacement is the theme that binds the images and shots together.

Like the opening shot of *Amores Perros*, this brief sequence in *21 Grams* displaces both character and viewer from comfort living and viewing, forcing each to confront the threat of death and extreme change, respectively. Paul's questions emerge from this confrontation, "How many lives do we live? How many times do we die?" Though the film does not offer any clear answers to these questions, it, like *Amores Perros* depicts the rearrangement and displacement of characters from their normal lives to their "future" lives, with death always looming as a threat in the background.

However, the fundamental difference between the films, in terms of the ways in which character displacement is shown, is found in its network narrative structure. In a chapter on the aesthetics of *21 Grams* and the unique auteurism of Iñárritu, "21 Grams: an American Independent Film Made by Mexicans," Deborah Shaw compares *Amores Perros* to *21 Grams*, offering one key difference:

21 Grams shares many stylistic and narrative features with *Amores Perros*: it also relies on a number of plotlines (three, as in the first film) and protagonists (also three); there is a rejection of the traditional hero; and it makes use of free-ranging camera movements, experimental framing devices, and variations in lens length. It, too, plays with concepts of time, but takes this to a new level, with the film cultivating greater confusion regarding the chronological placing of elements of the plot (123).

This "greater confusion" of the chronological pacing of the plot is best captured by writer James Harkin's conceptualization of a genre of filmmaking that brings forth the 21st century's "cybernetic imagination," "cyberealism" (Harkins 2). According to Harkins, cyberealist films "seem to allow the audience to adjust and zigzag their way through the story - not by giving away some physical control of the narrative, like a computer game, but by adjusting themselves

to a sensibility that will be familiar to anyone who has spent time sending out messages and battling back feedback on an electronic information loop” (2). In further explicating his theory on cyberrealist films, Harkins writes

the plots of these new stories emphasise chance, coincidence, and random connections. They don't have an obvious beginning, middle and end; if they are thrown forward at all, it is by bad luck, freakish twists of fate, and the systematic inability of characters to take things into their hands and make sense of their own lives. Like all good stories, these new stories are invested with morals and meaning, but more often than not the meaning is that meaning itself is difficult to decipher. What is special about this new kind of storytelling in cinema and television is that it is becoming increasingly nonlinear (3).

Harkins considers *21 Grams* as one of the most precise examples of a cyberrealist film. For Harkins, the movie's jigsaw puzzle-like structure, the multiplicity of character perspectives, the “loop” inherent to the film (the end of the film loops back to the beginning, with Paul shown in the hospital bed alongside his eventual deadly fate) and the “tie” that binds all the characters together (Cristina pressures Paul to kill the ex-convict Jack for running over and killing her husband and two daughters and the plot culminates in the meeting of these characters, with Paul's attempted suicide the result of their meeting) make the film essential to understanding the genre.

Contextualizing *21 Grams*' cyberrealist genre around the theme of liminality and character displacement allows for an identification of the non-linear sequences as precarious, mirroring the precarious lives of the characters. The precariousness is perhaps intrinsic to the experimental, fragmentary nature of the film, which cuts from different points in time in the plot, without completing the depicted scene. This precariousness is especially pronounced at the half-

hour mark, when Jack (Benicio del Toro) confesses to his wife, Marianne (Melissa Leo) about his hit-and-run incident with Cristina's husband and daughters. A scene that shows the simultaneous sensation of life and death (Jack commits the hit-and-run the night of his birthday), Jack's emotional confession to his wife is cut short by a scene wherein Jack - with shortened hair - frantically drives a vehicle in broad daylight, while Cristina holds a bloodied Paul in the back. Cristina tells Paul she loves him, and the film then cuts to Paul taking a health exam while accompanied by his ex-wife (now present), Mary (Charlotte Gainsbourg). In this 30-second portion of the film, Iñárritu traverses through three different scenes, moving from one important scene (Jack's confession) to another (Jack driving Cristina and Paul who now seem to be romantically involved) to another (Paul's exam). This snippet has a circular movement; it travels from the night of Jack's killing to the future consequence of his act, with Jack driving the mother and wife of the daughters and husband he had killed to Paul's pre-Cristina, past life. Despite the emotional gravitas found in each scene in the snippet, there is a sense of *en media res* in the playing out of the scenes that feels distinctly *Iñárritúan*. As is the case in the opening scene of *Amores Perros*, we are dropped in the middle of the action in the fragmented scenes of *21 Grams*; we do not see Jack's hit and run, it is not revealed yet how Jack, Paul and Cristina have assembled in a car and it is unclear what is the severity of Paul's heart issues when he visits the doctor. If this snippet is to be taken as a synecdoche for the entire film, then it can be deduced that the blatant incompleteness of the scenes and the film's unwillingness to give context to its scenes, make the viewing experience a precarious one. A scene, like the lives of the characters, may be cut short and unrealized any time. In structuring his film in this manner, Iñárritu narratively construes liminality, with the fragments of sequences acting as markers of precariousness and therefore, sites of thresholds. In the snippet, cuts occur during moments of

thresholds, suspending the viewer in a liminal space, binding the viewer in limbo as the film cuts to different scenes. When Marianne touches the blood of Cristina's family on Jack's car, the film cuts to Jack driving Paul and Cristina, with the next significant cut following Cristina's confession of love to Paul. Here, moments of thresholds - confessions, discoveries, and points of emotional intensity - are cut short by similar moments. The consequence of such displacement and non-linear structuring of scenes is a liminal viewing experience that displaces viewers from the position of linear viewing, mirroring the ways in which the onscreen characters are displaced from their past lives.

In addition to its cyberrealist narrative structure, *21 Grams*' mise-en-scene works in service of the theme of liminality and displacement. Though much has been written about the use of color in this film, specifically how certain colors represent specific characters, this section of the chapter will touch on the transitory sequences in the film, where color schemes in the visual make-up are mixed to evoke a sense of "in-betweenness" or liminality, felt by the depicted characters as they go through periods of transition or displacement. In an interview with American Cinematographer, director of photography Rodrigo Prieto commented on the color schemes used in the film, "We pictured Paul's story in cool colors; the [interior] lighting is generally white, and the night exteriors have the cool, greenish look of metal-halide lamps. By contrast, we went for warmer colors for Jack..." (Calhoun 2). With white representing Cristina's story, Prieto then mentions how the color schemes change as the story and plot develop and characters converge, as Cristina's "story mixes so much [with] Paul's that they both have blue-green night exteriors. And when they finally meet Jack, all three color schemes become more red-orange" (Calhoun 2). While the convergence of characters is not surprising for a network narrative film, the choice of developing color schemes as markers of story development is

fascinating in an analysis of liminality, for this visual strategy is used in moments of development, which by their very nature are *liminal*. To develop is to transition and to capture a state of development is to capture a state of *becoming*, wherein liminality is but an essential offshoot of the modus operandi of development. Therefore, in the moments where Paul and Cristina are seen together and their relationship develops and, in the sequence where Paul and Cristina attempt to kill Jack, developing their murder plot, transitory moments are captured and in these “in between” moments, color schemes of all characters involved converge, accentuating the liminality of these moments and the overall film. The result is not only a convergence of characters, but a convergence of liminality and a further fragmentation of the film, as both the chronology of the plot and color schemes are presented in a fragmented fashion, displacing characters and viewers from scenes and color schemes.

In addition to the development and use of color, *21 Grams* uses lighting to evoke liminality. In the same interview with American Cinematographer, Prieto commented on the use of a filter in scenes with Jack in church earlier in the story:

‘Using that filter gave me an almost godly religious intensity, a sense of Jack believing in the holiness of his life's mission. On interiors, I would purposefully light Benicio with the sunlight coming through the windows but would keep it off of the person he's with. After the accident, which sparks his downfall, I stopped doing that’ (Calhoun 4).

Two striking elements in Prieto’s comments and the scenes with Jack he mentions are windows and a blank, clear light, both potent symbols of liminality. Windows are the subject of chapter one of the book, *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, and the following questions doubly serve as metaphorical descriptions of windows, “What is a window? framed space? A liminal connection between inner and outer? An aperture that reveals a scene

beyond, or a scene within? an impermeable membrane?” (Beer 6). Though these are penetrating questions, they work to further enforce windows as a liminal space, a sheath that demarcates one space from another, but can allow transfusion of each side through its transparent barrier. This analysis of windows further corroborates them as liminal symbols in Jack’s church and community scenes, serving as a gateway and a look into the “other space” from which Jack is traveling (as an ex-convict, Jack becomes a church counselor out of guilt, only to find himself in trouble when he commits the tragic hit and run crime). Windows are captured when Jack attends a sermon (Fig. 3). The windows have a distinct, blankness to them; they do not reveal the outside space of Memphis. Instead, light pervades the room, and this light, coupled with its frame-shaped purveyor, is arguably a symbol to show Jack’s displacement from his past troubled life. In “The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,” Vladimir Lossky writes on the awareness of the divine through light, “Gnosis, the highest stage of awareness of the divine, is an experience of uncreated light, the experience itself being light: ‘in Thy light, we shall see light’” (218). The light that pervades the church could be the same light that pervades the scene when Jack speaks with a troubled teenager about converting, and his face as opposed to the teenager’s is lit, graced with an illumination that represents the “Gnosis.” In this “Gnosis,” Jack becomes increasingly aware of the divine/transcendent world he wishes to enter (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). This light travels to the doctor’s office when Mary is told her past abortion is preventing her from conceiving a child with Paul (Fig. 6), who has one month to live with his bad heart. The light is also conveyed through the windows of the swimming pool facility where Cristina regularly swims. These scenes - which are shown within a span of 5 minutes - feature windows lit by an overwhelmingly, blank light – situate Cristina, Jack, and Mary in liminal stages of their lives. While Jack is working to better himself from his past life as an ex-convict, Mary is trying to

conceive a child with Paul despite the troubles of her past and Cristina uses the pool as a means of rehab to help treat her past drug addiction. In these scenes, characters are displaced from their past lives, vying for a better future, with the light presenting promise and the windows, a signifier of the transitory nature of the moment. Characters vie for better lives, just as Octavia plans to run away with Susana or Daniel tries to live with Valeria or El Chivo promises to change himself. The combination of this specific usage of light and the liminal symbol of a window, both of which are depicted in the closed parameters of a church, a doctor's office, and a swimming pool facility, allows Iñárritu convey the displacement and liminal spaces in which his characters currently live.



Fig. 3 – *21 Grams* (2003): Jack speaks with a teenager who is depicted in a darker hue than Jack



Fig. 4 – *21 Grams* (2003): Feeling touched by “Gnosis,” Jack is depicted with light on his face



Fig. 5 – *21 Grams* (2003): Jack at church



Fig. 6 – *21 Grams* (2003): A white light Shines in Mary's doctor's office



Fig. 7 – *21 Grams* (2003): Cristina swims in a pool draped by a white light

If the border narrativity in *Amores Perros* is to be conceptualized as a bridge graph, with bridges representing the border spaces that conjoin the filmic and narrative elements in the film, with the car accident being considered as one border space, the border narrativity in *21 Grams* is more obtuse, with the presentation of the film as highly fragmented and the relationships between characters, overtly metaphysical (i.e. Cristina becomes pregnant with Paul's child). While there is a central confrontation (Paul and Cristina attempt to kill Jack at the end of the story), the film's jigsaw-like sensibility complicates its border narrativity diagram. Instead of centralizing an event (car crash) as the border space through which characters converge, the border narrativity diagram of *21 Grams* is akin to a nested box that contains several nested boxes inside, with the boxes representing character arcs and storylines within the same temporal and spatial plane as the larger box that is the overall structure of the film. Here, border spaces are the spaces between the layers of the nested boxes, representing moments where different characters meet or become entangled. A simplistic iteration of this model is presented below (Fig. 8), with the story arcs of the three principal characters represented as nested boxes within the larger box that is the film (in this nested box model, the deeper layers represent further points of the plot). In *21 Grams*, the development of characters is not depicted in a linear fashion and instead, jostled through space and time, with climactic moments shown alongside anti-climactic moments (i.e. Jack aggressively driving Paul and Cristina at the end of the story is sandwiched between Paul's admission of culpability for the hit-and-run to Marianne and a doctor administering a routine heart exam on Paul). Conceptualizing the border narrativity of *21 Grams* as a nested box with several nested boxes inside allows one to see the ways in which different character arcs and stories are demarcated yet blended, with their border spaces being the sites of character entanglements that are in the same temporal and spatial plane as other, distinct storylines. This

tendency of the proposed nested box model to hold different storylines and character arcs as nested boxes in the same plane is reminiscent of the hybrid nature of the film, as it relates to cultural modes of film production.

In Deborah Shaw's aforementioned essay, the writer argues that *21 Grams*' hybrid nature as an American independent film made by a team of largely Mexican artists, who endow an American city with a certain "Mexicaness" "demonstrates that they have mastered and personalised the languages associated with this form" (115). Shaw's ideas are thematically connected to Dolores Tierney's thoughts on *21 Grams*' hybrid nature, as expressed in her article, "Alejandro González Iñárritu: Director without Borders," "21 Grams subverts the First World/Third World binary by presenting a part of the United States in the same way it presents the Third World. We view violent, chaotic, shabby Mexico City, mediated through the same representational strategies through which we see Memphis" (15). *21 Grams*' experimental, non-commercial aesthetic that is akin to the grungy aesthetic of *Amores Perros*, its American independent financing (Focus Features produced the film) and choice of American characters allow it to be on the border space between the USA and Mexico, with both cultures coexisting as two distinct nested boxes inside the larger nested box that is the film. Like the demarcated yet interconnected storylines of *21 Grams*, these cultures are entangled through the production of the film, and what is a space of entanglements but a *liminal/border* space, where cultures, characters, and viewers are displaced from their prior, more stabilized positions to be merged in their current position. The ways in which the film entangles its characters in different scenes and storylines reflect the culturally entangled sensibility with which the creators imbue their film, and the result is a work that inhabits and highlights the border space between different cultures, storylines and life and death. Therefore, in conceptualizing *21 Grams*' border narrativity as a larger nested box

that contains multiple nested boxes, border spaces are sites of entanglement of the nested boxes, wherein liminality and displacement are found.

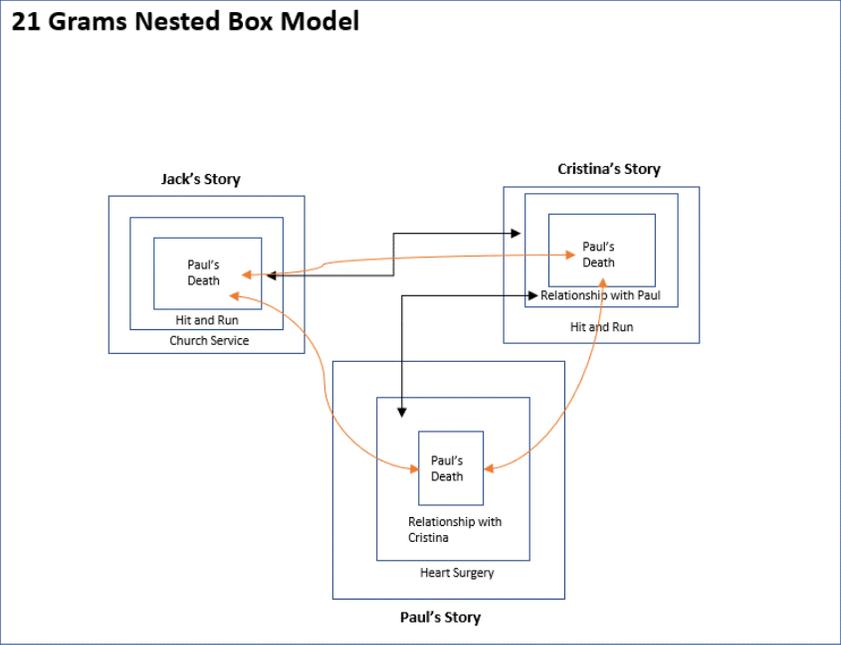


Fig. 8– 21 Grams Nested Box Model

CHAPTER 3:
STRINGS OF (DIS)CONNECTION

A woman clutches her son at the US-Mexico border (Fig 9). We cut to another point in the narrative, to a Moroccan mountain range with a dirt road in the foreground (Fig 10). A dead teenager is carried by officers (Fig 11). Another boy, younger, (the lifeless teenager's brother) looks in pain and agony at his sibling's carcass (Fig. 12). As the camera encircles the younger boy's face of pain, we cut to a flashback scene where the boys hold their arms out, while atop a mountain with high winds pushing against them (Fig. 13). Ahmed, the teenager embraces the fierce winds, as he shapes his arms into a wing-like manner, wanting to fly while his little brother Yussef follows suit. As the boys playfully prepare for takeoff, we then cut to another point in the plot, this time in a similar location. We see a descending helicopter in the Moroccan village of Tazarine (Fig. 14). The helicopter will be used to transport Susan, an American tourist, who we see in the next shot, lying on a handspun gurney (Fig. 15). As Susan and her husband Richard will soon leave Tazarine, to receive more medical attention for Susan's wound, Yussef and his family are left to mourn the death of Ahmed, whose body is all but another carcass in the field of the dead.

This montage in *Babel* (2007), Iñárritu's third feature film, is the ending of three distinct, but intertwined tales. Americans Richard (Brad Pitt) and Susan (Cate Blanchett), who vacation in Morocco while mourning the recent loss of a child, flirt with tragedy when Susan is shot inadvertently by Yussef (Boubker Ait El Caid), who practices shooting long range with the new rifle of Abdullah, his father (Mustapha Rachidi). Despite the carelessness of his deadly act, Yussef's shooting is nonetheless deemed a terrorist act by the American government, setting off a domestic manhunt by the local Moroccan authorities who seek to restore diplomacy with the

US through finding Susan's shooter. The manhunt itself culminates in a shootout, where Moroccan officers force Yusef and Abdullah to surrender after Ahmed (Said Tarchani) is shot dead. After her shooting, Susan is transported to Tazarine, where local villagers treat her bullet wounds until a helicopter comes to take her to the American embassy. While Susan receives medical attention, Richard calls his children in San Diego and alerts them of a delay in his return to the states. With Richard's delay as unexpected and surprising, the nanny of the children, Amelia (Adriana Barraza), living in the US illegally, will soon take the children to her son's wedding near Tijuana, and her brief expedition to Mexico will lead to her deportation when she is chased by border patrol agents after her drunk nephew (Gael García Bernal) is caught driving while intoxicated at the border, on a return trip back to the states. Richard's children (Elle Fanning and Nathan Gamble) will be collected by immigration officers and Amelia, having raised the kids for their whole lives, is, as the beginning of this montage shows, deported.

While liminality is partly conveyed through the chapter-like narrative style of *Amores Perros* and the jigsaw puzzle-like narrative style of *21 Grams*, it is felt through a more concurrent narrative style in *Babel*. Like the preceding two films, *Babel* has a network narrative and as such, has multiple strands of characters and storylines, but its discourse of its storylines is such that each storyline progresses linearly, with the film's presentation being one that shifts from one portion of one story to another portion in a separate story, giving the illusion that the tales share a common temporality. Therefore, the discourse of stories is one of *simultaneous connection and disconnection*; while the editing style of the film makes it *seem* that the stories are happening concurrently and are thus *connected* through their sharing of the same temporality, the stories are in fact, *disconnected*. This is especially pronounced with Richard's phone call to Amelia near the end of the film. Both the end of Richard/Susan's story and the beginning of



Fig. 9- *Babel* (2007): Near the US-Mexico border, Amelia hugs her son after she is deported



Figs. 10:12 - *Babel* (2007): We shift to Morocco as Yussef gazes in pain, reflecting on Ahmed



Figs. 13:14 - *Babel* (2007): We shift to Tazarine, where a helicopter descends for Susan

Amelia's, this phone call serves to reverse the perception that the stories share a similar temporality, a perception conveyed before the unveiling of the phone call.

This simultaneous sense of connection and disconnection conveyed in the discourse of the network narrative of *Babel* is of disorientation and ambiguity and thus, creates a liminal space. The instable marker of the narrative discourse as either full of connection or disconnection gives way to the production of a liminal space. Like the liminal spaces observed in *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*, the displacement of characters and the dark of cloud death largely associates with the liminal spaces in *Babel* and such associations make their way through the ways in which characters simultaneously experience connection and disconnection.

Before she is taken to the American embassy by helicopter, Susan receives help from local Moroccans to recover from her bullet wound and though there are linguistic differences between her and the locals, there is a shared understanding between them, a mutuality that produces a connection. Contrary to this example of *connection*, the manhunt for Yussef is produced by and further produces confusion, a failure to understand and isolation, elements associated with *disconnection*. In the manhunt for Yussef, the local authorities and the American government's conclusion about Yussef act is disconnected from the truth, and their conclusion threatens disconnection between Morocco and the US as far as their diplomatic relationship is concerned. Yussef, who become more connected with his older brother through their play with Abdullah's rifle, also suffers disconnection from normalcy because of that rifle. The manhunt, connected to Yussef's shooting, results in Yussef becoming disconnected from his present life as Ahmed is both disciplined and eventually, killed for Yussef's careless shooting. In the end, Yussef gazes out at the endless desert alone, isolated, *disconnected*. Though Susan and Yussef never meet, his shooting permanently connects him to Susan.

Susan, Yussef and Ahmed each come close to dying and thus, undergo displacements from their normal lives. While Ahmed is eventually killed, Yussef runs for his life during a climactic shootout and it is his shot that strikes and almost kills Susan, who vacations in Morocco to help cope with the recent death of a child. With that, we see how the simultaneous sense of disconnection and connection produces a liminal space before death for the characters. The cloud of death and loss largely hangs above the characters, with the characters' displacement and precariousness mirroring the ways in which storylines precariously connect but disconnect to each other.

Therefore, *Babel's* network narrative form full of concurrent storytelling allows it to configure the film's liminal spaces. If *Babel* were to have *Amores Perros'* jigsaw-like cyperrealist structure, Amelia's tragic tale would be featured separately from Richard/Susan's story, depicted as an isolated chapter. However, given the specific network narrative style of the film, Amelia's story is presented parallel to Richard/Susan's, with the film cutting between the aftermath of the shooting of Susan and Amelia vying to return to the states, giving the viewer the illusion that both stories share a common temporality, a type of fluid connection unfounded in *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*. Despite this fluid back-and-forth editing style between the two stories, Richard's phone call to Amelia at the end of film confirms the stories' different sense of temporality and therefore, indicates that the stories are disconnected when it comes to their embodiment of a similar temporality.

In addition to character interaction and the discourse of the narrative, filmic elements such as color schemes and the soundtrack simultaneously convey connection and disconnection and thus, convey liminality. In an interview, Brigitte Broch, production designer of the film mentions the reasoning behind the use of color in specific locations:

Alejandro and Rodrigo accepted that Morocco would be void of a primary red, so it would basically be a very dark, rich red and the oranges of that country in contrast to Mexico, where we decided to use a primary red color, like the red of the flag, to represent the straightforward Mexican passion. For Tokyo, we chose to use a lot of purples, pinks and fuchsias to make it look like a diluted blood of futuristic essence (Sneider)

Like *21 Grams*, each storyline in *Babel* has its own distinct color scheme, but there is a fundamental difference with regards to the reasoning for the color schemes used. Whereas *21 Grams* deploys different color schemes according to the profile of each principal character, *Babel's* color schemes are set according to place. With Morocco is depicted as “very dark,” Japan “purple” and “futuristic,” and Mexico “red”, *Babel* not only alternates between different storylines but between different geographical places whose differences are accentuated by the aesthetic and color schemes used. Considering this multi-varied approach in depicting the places and stories along with the narrative discourse of the film, the experience of viewing *Babel* is a fragmented one. The dynamic of connection and disconnection as theme and characteristic of the film abound, with connection being conveyed through the continuity of scenes but disconnection channeled through the scenes' different color schemes.

In addition to the color schemes and narrative discourse of the film, *Babel's* usage of music highlights the dialectic of connection and disconnection, with music, as it functions in *Amores Perros*, acting as a bridge to different scenes and storylines but also as an identifier of the specific storylines according to the depicted storyline's place. For example, in the original soundtrack, Iñárritu's longtime collaborator Gustavo Santaolalla features a few tracks which play over sequences that feature snippets of various storylines in an alternating fashion. Consider the montage explicated at the beginning of this chapter. In this montage, “Deportation/Iguaza,” an 8-

minute track, plays over the sequence which cuts from the aftermath of Amelia's deportation to the aftermath of Ahmed's death to the descending helicopter that comes for Susan. In this sequence, the music acts as a bridge that connects all the characters and storylines shown in the sequence despite differences in color schemes, temporality, and spatiality.

Whereas Santaolalla's score shifts through different stories in *Babel*, the diegetic music does not act as a bridge to other scenes and is instead, like the color schemes used, unique to the scenes within which it plays. The Spanish-language love song, "Tu Me Acostumbraste" by Chavela Vargas is played at the wedding of Amelia's son, when she dances with an older man. The song does not carry over to another scene, staying put in Amelia's story and the Mexican, Spanish-language space. Likewise, in the nightclub scene in Tokyo with Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi), a deaf Japanese teenager who struggles with sexual awakening amidst the recent suicide of her mother, Earth Wind and Fire's "September" plays while Chieko navigates a crowded nightclub that is only half heard to her and to us, as the volume shifts to a lower register when the camera comes near her. After leaving the club, Chieko walks through the streets and the film drowns out all diegetic noises with silence, placing us in the same noise register as Chieko. Like Amelia's dance at the wedding, Chieko's excursions through and out of the nightclub belong to her and her storyline. Neither the song nor the complete sense of silence carries over to other scenes in the film, with the music essentially "disconnecting" the scenes from the continuous flow of the alternating narrative style. This is a contrast to the modus operandi of Santaolalla's "Deportation/Igazu" that played over several snippets of storylines and therefore, worked to *connect* the stories.

The use of music is an important subject for an analysis of connection and disconnection as it relates to the liminal space before death in *Babel*. In a film that traverses Mexican,

American, Moroccan, and Japanese boundaries, it is only appropriate that among Santaolalla's most used instruments used in the film, it was the oud that resonated most with the composer who contextualized his opportunity to play the instrument around its genealogy in an interview, "The oud is an Arabic instrument, is the ancestor of the lute, therefore the ancestor of the guitar, and 'Babel' gave me the great excuse to get an oud, and I wrote most of the music of that film with that instrument" (Martin).

The historical character and genealogy of the oud is one marked by both connection and disconnection. Like the stories of connection between different cultures and places which occur in *Babel*, the oud is directly connected to various cultures and places and yet, like those stories, the oud is partly *disconnected* from those cultures by its singular identity as an Arabic instrument. If we are to extrapolate this to the rest of the film, then the symbol of the oud becomes analogous to the global flows of the film. In an essay on *Babel* and the implications of considering it as a global Hollywood film, "Babel and the global Hollywood gaze," Deborah Shaw contextualizes Santaolalla's usage of the oud around the cultural entanglements in the film:

The oud is frequently played in the same way in which the composer uses the electric guitar in previous collaborations with Iñárritu, with signature single plucked notes repeated throughout to create a simple repetitive sound that aims to link disparate stories. Here, the marriage of Eastern and Western styles achieved through the choice of instrument aims to signify the union between the characters (it is, for example, very apparent in the scene in which Richard and Susan are in the Moroccan tourist guide's shack) (141).

The pluck of an oud string brings forth the cultural flows in *Babel* as well as the ways in which the instrument is both connected and disconnected to its global past through its present,

singular identity. However, the *string* instrument as a model of thinking through the dialectic of connection and disconnection leads us to consider the border narrativity of *Babel* through one of the most divisive but fruitful theories in recent memory about a full conceptualization of the world with all its connections and disconnections, string theory.

Much has been written on the depiction of borders in *Babel*. Considering the film's globetrotting plot and structure, it is not surprising that in nearly every review of the film, there is at least a few mentions and analysis of the film's representation of borders. The conceptualization of the liminal border spaces in *Babel* aims to focus not only on the ways in which the geopolitical or cultural border between sovereign countries is depicted in the film, but on the ways in which the border space is not one of explicit collision, crash, or entanglements as it is in *Amores Perros* or *21 Grams*, but of the simultaneous sense of connection and disconnection. In such a liminal border space, the relations between stories, characters, filmic elements, and elements of production process and sociopolitical address can be conceptualized as sites of simultaneous connection and disconnection, much like the characterization of the relations of strings to higher dimensions.

String theorists postulate that the universe, despite its seemingly complex and hybrid nature, can be described in terms of strings, with everything in the world having its own string, hidden to our eyes beneath multiple dimensions. At this microlevel named the quantum level, the string is indivisible. We can look at the strings as a theoretical proof that, despite the interaction between different elements at the molar and molecular level, at the quantum level, the ontological character of everything can be described by the vibrations of its string. A detailed description of string theory is provided:

String theory is an attempt at a "theory of everything" which can explain all the physics in the Universe. Such a theory was, and still is, the holy grail of physics because the two major theories in existence, general relativity (which describes the macroscopic world) and quantum field theory (which describes the world at the sub-atomic scale) contradict each other. String theory resolves the mathematical contradictions by proclaiming that the smallest pieces of matter and energy are not point-like particles, but tiny little strings. These strings can vibrate, just as guitar strings can vibrate, and the different types of vibration correspond to the fundamental particles and the physical forces we observe (Freiberger).

It is evident that a string theory conceptualization of the universe brings forth a model where the singularity of strings coexists with the plurality of different elements at higher dimensions. This dialectic of singularity and plurality can be projected onto the dialectic of disconnection and connection that has been used to study liminality in *Babel* so far. The singularity of strings can be projected onto the ways in which individual characters, storylines and filmic elements are rendered as disconnected from each other and therefore, *singular* and the plurality/hybridity of the macroscopic world can be projected onto the film's many connections and linkages. The film's border narrativity (Fig. 16) is then revealed as a model that relates an object of connectivity in a higher dimension (particles of the atom) to objects of lower dimensions, namely strings.

Though strings are theoretically contained within everything in the universe, they are still fundamentally indivisible, unable to be separated. This "nonseparation" sensibility makes strings uniquely singular in a model of the universe where all particles and bodies, from water to cells to subatomic particles, can be divisible and the connections within them can be made visible.

Conversely, strings are singular elements but not completely alone; beneath all particles are strings. When these indivisible, singular strings vibrate, it causes changes in higher dimensions.

If we conceptualize *Babel's* individual storylines, characters, or filmic elements as strings, and the connections between them as higher dimensional particles of the atom, then we can see how a string theory model can be helpful in bringing forth the border narrativity of the various stories and characters in *Babel*. The rendering of disconnection between characters is captured by their representation as strings and the connections are conceptualized as a subatomic particle, which is the result of the relations between several, individual strings. Here, the border space of liminality is between the particle of intertwinement/connection and the string of singularity/disconnection. For example, if we consider Yusef's shooting in Morocco as the particle of connection between him and Susan, then the many disconnections they experience around that event render them as strings. Similarly, if we consider Amelia bringing one of Richard's children, Mike with her to Tijuana as a particle of connection, then the disconnections that are associated this connection allow Amelia and Mike to be depicted as strings. If we consider the suicide of Yasujiro's wife and Chieko's mother in Japan as a particle of connection, then the many disconnections each character experiences are shown as a string (the deaf Chieko grows progressively isolated from her friends and father Yasujiro, who also grows disconnected from his daughter and social circle).

In the diagram, the border space between strings and particles is simplified, to highlight the space between seemingly disconnected, singular strings and several particles. Despite their singularity, strings are linked and connected to other strings in particles, as are characters and storylines in the film through narrative events and character interactions. Like strings coexisting with other strings in the space of particles, singular elements like narrative threads coexist in

Babel, and their connections are made bare in the domino effect that drives the film's narrative, analogous to the way the vibrations of several strings affect movements in higher dimensions.

The space between strings as sites of disconnection and particles as sites of connection are border spaces of liminality where the coexistence of connection and disconnection is brought forth. The higher dimension of particles represents the connectivity of the strings and in *Babel's* case, the ways in which the film's characters, storylines and filmic elements are connected, and the represented quantum level is a stand-in for singularity/disconnection and in *Babel's* case, the ways in which characters, storylines and filmic elements are disconnected and rendered as singular.

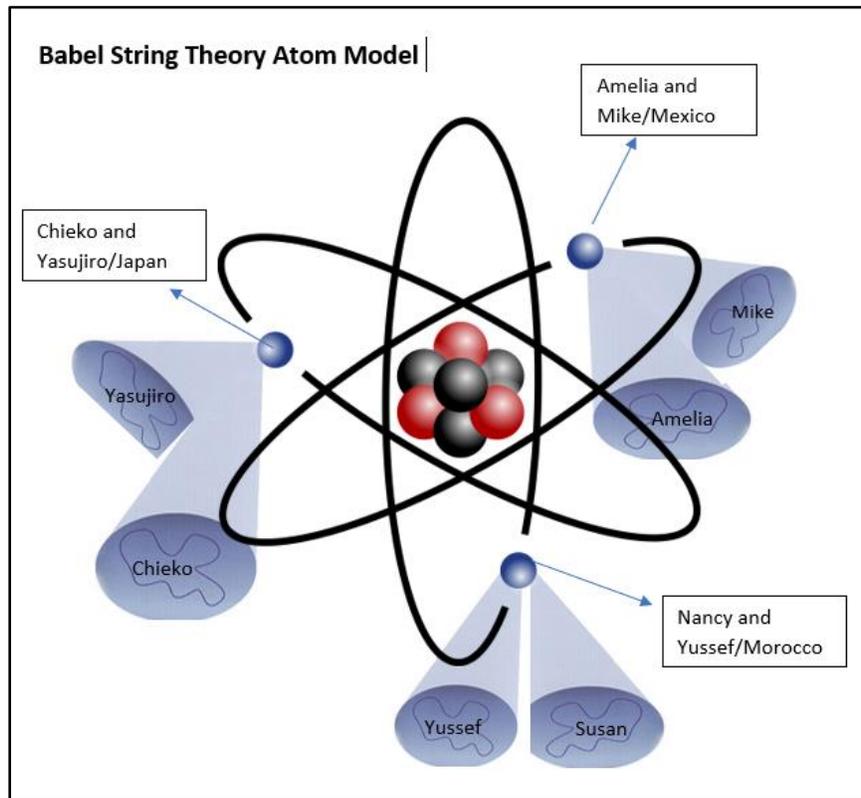


Fig. 16 – *Babel* String Theory Model

In addition to being a representation of the dialectic of disconnection and connection in the storylines, characters and filmic elements in *Babel*, the string theory model can help shed light on the ways in which the elements of production processes and sociopolitical address of the film can be used to highlight how the film is simultaneously connected and disconnected to an authentic depiction of the local spaces of its narrative. *Babel* seems to be a film about connection for it highlights the ways in which people from different cultures interact, sometimes forging bonds. However, most of the relations depicted onscreen are limited by cultural and linguistic differences, elements that can cause disconnection. Such a simultaneity of connection and disconnection seen in the interactions between people of different cultures and countries is an offshoot of globalization.

As mentioned in the chapter on *Amores Perros*, globalization is an economic and cultural system which purports to keep “enclosure in the undifferentiated sphere of a unitotality” (Nancy 3) through its dictum to increase travel and influence between lands and borders, all of which is designed to accelerate “a singular linear progression toward industrialization and capitalism, modernity and urbanization” (Manning & Shackford-Bradley 2) to ultimately form a totalizing, global identity that threatens to erase localized identities. Despite this totalizing goal of globalization and the connections it proliferates, differences in languages and cultures between the travelers are revealed through the cross pollination of globalization.

With this, the dialectic of disconnection and connection as seen through several extrinsic elements of *Babel* make it “a film on globalization because it not only thematically but also structurally mirrors the complex realities of a globalized world” (Baggesgaard 2). For *Babel*, such mirroring of the “complex realities of a globalized world” are captured by various extrinsic elements related to its production process and sociopolitical address that highlight both the

connections that a globalized world can spur and the disconnections that can come from that same connection building operation of globalization. This sense of connection and disconnection is observed through the ways in which the film is simultaneously connected and disconnected to an authentic depiction of the local spaces of its narrative.

Despite the ways in which *Babel* purports to authentically portray its local contemporary spaces – through its inclusion of many languages, its rendering of the power distances between the Third and First World and its emphasis on the global complexity of the contemporary age - it also depicts an inauthentic rendering of its local spaces, an effect of its funding history and reliance on cultural tropes and stereotypes. In this analysis of the authentic rendering of local places in *Babel*, a helpful point of departure is the richness of the languages and cultures displayed in the film. The film “includes dialogue in at least seven languages (English, Spanish, French, Japanese, Japanese sign language, Berber, and Arabic), mixing well-known actors from the United States, Mexico, and Japan with amateurs” (Baggesgaard 2). Despite its linguistic veracity, *Babel* is in some ways, disconnected from an authentic portrayal of the countries of the languages it contains. According to Deborah Shaw’s aforementioned essay on *Babel*, the film embodies a Western cultural framework to create its “global vision”:

While the film has a focus on non-Western cultures, the shadow of US socio-political concerns hangs over all of these, with the exception of the Japanese storyline. Two of the four storylines are concerned with the fates of North American characters: Susan and Richard, and, in the sections dealing with Amelia’s story, their children. It can also be argued that the plot dynamic in the Moroccans’ storyline is only possible and of interest because Yussef shoots a North American citizen. In addition, in terms of topics addressed, Mexican immigration to the USA and the ‘war on terror’ are very much North

American ‘global’ concerns. The Japanese storyline, which focuses on teenage alienation, is presented in such a way as to make it easily accessible to Western audiences, with a focus on teen culture, including Western dance music (139).

Later in the same paper, Shaw explicates the finances of the film’s production, tracing its American funding, “The three principal financial backers of *Babel*, Media Rights Capital, Paramount Vantage, and Anonymous Content, are all known for their mainstream/independent features, and *Babel* can be seen to fit well within this remit, despite its transnational settings” (140). She then reaches her conclusion about the film, with regards to its North American perspective, “It is not surprising that *Babel*’s global reach is, in large part, conditioned by a North American perspective, given that most of the money came principally from US production and distribution companies (Paramount Vantage was the principal distributor)” (140).

The contrast between the potential for an authentic depiction of the local and the inauthentic results that end up onscreen is accentuated by Jillian York, a blogger who writes on the linguistic inaccuracies of the local Moroccan dialect, “In the film’s production information, it was also noted that the villagers can trace their Berber ancestry back 3,000 years. Interesting! Why then, were they speaking Darija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic, and not Tamazight, the local Berber dialect?” (York). Returning to Shaw, the cultural tropes of the local, non-American places depicted is expounded:

Thus, in the film the locations correspond to national stereotypes: Japan is hyper-modern, featuring the latest mobile phones, cool clubs, trendy cafés, and impressive neon bright cityscapes. Mexico is rural and poor, complete with dusty tracks and a drunken wedding with traditional norteño music. Morocco also conforms to type and is reduced to rocky, arid land, mountainous scenery, and poor villages (146).

In addition to Shaw's problematization of Babel's portrayal of stereotypes, Paul Kerr writes about cultural tropes in his essay, "Babel's network narrative: packaging a globalized art cinema":

It also recycled some of these countries most familiar cinematic tropes - the Mexico/America border, American art house marital anomie, urban Japanese teenage angst, Moroccan desert poverty - and types - bereaved western tourists, played by Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, looking to salvage their marriage in orientalist climes, not unlike *The Sheltering Sky* (Bertolucci, 1990)); the hopeless, hapless Mexican, played by Gael García Bernal; and the sexually fetishized Japanese schoolgirl, played by Rinko Kikuchi (45).

With that, it can be argued that through elements of its production process, namely its largely American sources of funding and reliance on cultural tropes and stereotypes of largely non-American spaces and characters, the film inaccurately portrays its local places. Returning to the above definition of globalization, the ignorance of specific cultural contexts through the usage of cultural tropes and stereotypes produces an "undifferentiated sphere of a unitotality" wherein details of the local are disregarded to help paint a more totalizing picture. For Iñárritu, such a totalizing picture could be that of suffering, a point he makes in the following excerpt from an interview:

I realized that what makes us happy as human beings could differ greatly, but what makes us miserable and vulnerable beyond our culture, race, language, or financial standing is the same for all.... Accordingly, Babel was transformed into a picture about what joins us, not what separates us (Grove and AP).

In response to Iñárritu's quote that universalizes suffering and take focus away from social and economic factors of differentiation, Deborah Shaw writes "what is lacking in *Babel* for the connections to work is a political vision that explores the ways in which US power structures are played out in specific political contexts, rooted in class and cultural realities" (154). In addition to this observation, Shaw also includes the following line of analysis that evaluates *Babel*'s rendering of its local places, specifically Morocco as truly authentic:

The film presents an image of a linguistically and ethnically unified country because it is not concerned with creating an authentic documentary-like portrait of rural Morocco but seeks to present characters as archetypes that sit comfortably in a tale ultimately more concerned with representing US concerns (148).

These excerpts from Shaw, Kerr and York are included to underscore the polarizing nature of *Babel*. Despite the film's inclusion of several languages, its status as a work that is connected to an authentic depiction of the cultures and places that is part of its narrative, is brought into question. Through its American funding history, reliance on cultural tropes and stereotypes and the universalizing of suffering that works to not only connect multiple characters from different backgrounds, but perhaps ignore the potency of their specific social and economic circumstances, *Babel*'s authenticity of its depiction of local places is questioned. These factors of the film's production history, its use of tropes and Iñárritu's willingness to not discuss the socioeconomic factors at play *disconnects* the local places from the rendition of them in the film.

Despite this analysis, *Babel* is marked by polarity and so, for every scholar that doubts the authenticity of place in *Babel*, another emphasizes the film's and by extension, Iñárritu's ability to authentically depict place and the complexity of life in a globalized world. In an essay on Iñárritu's fourth feature film *Biutiful*, Maria Del Mar Azcona describes the director's

filmmaking style and complex narratives as tools that authentically portray the complexity of living in the contemporary period, “the multiplicity of the contemporary individual’s experience of living in a complex world defines both Iñárritu’s fictional worlds and his cinematic practices” (3). An alternative reading to Deborah Shaw’s breakdown of the centralizing Hollywood/Western perspective that largely pervades *Babel*, Laura Podalsky’s essay, “Migrant Feelings: Melodrama, *Babel* and Affective Communities” problematizes “the theoretical propositions about Third World films’ singular ability to ‘cognitively map’ contemporary global relations” (1) by relating the drama of the commercial, “First World” production of *Babel* to Mexican melodrama. Through the exploration of this provocative relation, Podalsky argues the film instructs a non-Mexican audience about the structures of feeling of Mexican melodrama through the juxtaposition of the suffering of ordinary people with the cold, distant disposition of law enforcement. In inviting a transnational audience to recognize the suffering of those of the “Third World” like Amelia, the film uses Mexican melodramatic structures of feeling to create a larger “community of feeling” (1). I relate Podalsky’s and Azcona’s reading of Iñárritu’s mode of filmmaking and the significant presence of non-Western or at the very least, *global* perspectives in *Babel* to an authentic creation of place that seeks to depict and capture authentic structures of cultures or the contemporary world that is filled with complexity.

In their introduction to the book *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre, and Aine O’Heal comment on *Babel* and its authentic depictions of political and social realities of the border crossings between “First Worlders” (Americans such as Richard and Susan) and “Third Worlders” (Moroccans such as Ahmed and Yussef):

Highlighting transnational encounters between the so-called first and Third Worlds, *Babel* submits a critique of U.S. entitlement to unhindered mobility and delivers its

argument with an uncompromising force: no matter who crosses borders, the crossing is potentially risky and difficult. But not all crossings are equal: when privileged First Worlders venture abroad, border crossing is a matter of “cosmopolitan” choice; and their trauma can be alleviated by the international apparatus of embassies and rescue helicopters. When the Third Worlders cross borders in the film, however, there is no aid, only the risk of severe punishment (3)

In this excerpt, the writers reconcile Iñárritu’s focus on universalizing the suffering of his characters with a contextualization of *Babel*’s characters that refocuses attention on their political and social circumstances. The writers pull this off by conceptualizing *Babel* as a recognition of both the suffering that border crossing brings to the crosser and how the type of care that is given to certain characters is largely mediated by their political and social background and circumstances.

It is indeed in the space of the border that Iñárritu’s film finds its universalizing power, for the act of border crossing, whether it be done by Amelia, Susan or Yasujiro (who ends up giving the rifle to Abdullah on a leisure trip to Morocco) leads to loss as conveyed through actual death (Yussef) or deportation (Amelia). If the liminal spaces before death are considered as a border space between life and death and extrapolated onto the space between elements of connection as particles full of connectivity and elements of disconnection as singular strings, then the polarizing nature of the analysis of the authentic representation of place in *Babel* locates elements of the film’s production process and its complex sociopolitical address in this border space between disconnection and connection. In this border space, the film is caught between its status as a work that is *connected* to the local places it depicts through an authentic rendering of such places and its identity as a film that is *disconnected* from the local places it depicts through

an inauthentic representation of such places. Through the mediating power of authenticity, *Babel* and its local places as strings are disconnected from each other but are also connected as particles when the film is seen as authentically conveying the local places it depicts.

Considering the polarizing response to various elements of the film's production processes and sociopolitical address as it relates to an authentic portrayal of place in *Babel*, the challenges of creating a film with as many languages and cultures cannot be understated, and it brings forth a fundamental question regarding the authentic depiction of place: can a filmmaker authentically portray places and stories separate from his home language and culture? Though there have been recent accounts of filmmakers venturing into such a territory (the French-Canadian director Xavier Dolan recently released his first English language film in *The Death & Life of John F. Donovan*, the Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi has directed a French language and Spanish language film and American documentarian Joshua Oppenheimer has directed two films that take place in Indonesia and involve Indonesian persons), *Babel* is unique in that it attempts to depict several places and stories outside the home culture or language of its creator. An oft-cited quote from Iñárritu illuminates the unique challenges the director faced in carrying out such a Herculean effort, "Directing non-actors is difficult. Directing actors in a foreign language is even more difficult. Directing non-actors in a language that you yourself don't understand is the craziest thing you can possibly think of" ("Alejandro G. Iñárritu"). Iñárritu's quote illuminates the unique linguistic and by extension, cultural challenges that are revealed in making a multi-place film like *Babel* and allows for a deeper examination of the disruptions of globalization.

When discussing anthropologist Ali Appadurai's "scapes" as forces of globalization, Caitlin Manning and Julie Shackford-Bradley write that "These 'scapes' are characterized by

both flows (of people, ideas, images, etc.) and disjunctures (Modernity 33–37)” (3). If we project Appadurai’s flows onto the many ways in which the filmic elements, storylines, character interactions, sociopolitical address and production process of *Babel* work to create linkages and connections and Appadurai’s disjunctures on the ways in which those same elements lead to disconnection, then locating the film between the space of connection and disconnection allows us to see *Babel*, with all its contradictory and polarizing readings, as an ideal representation of the complex flows/connection and disjunctures/disconnection inherent in globalization. With this, the border narrativity model of string theory that simultaneously depicts disconnection and connection reveals the border space between singular strings and particles as a liminal space. In this space, characters, storylines, filmic elements, components of the production process and sociopolitical address simultaneously associate with connection and disconnection, with their position in either field an unstable, precarious one as they exist both through flows/connections and disjuncture/disconnections.

In *Babel*, characters experience connection and disconnection. Through his friendship connection, Yasujiro gifts Abdullah a rifle, but the recently widowed father fails to connect with his daughter Chieko, whose deafness strains her chances of sparking a romantic connection with local men. After Amelia reconnects with her family in Tijuana, she is disconnected from her life in America when she is deported and consequently forced to separate from the American children she raised. Like Yussef’s reckless shooting of Susan, Amelia’s careless transgression frames her as a criminal and in Chieko’s case, the bullying she experiences at school makes her act out and so, for these characters, especially Amelia and Chieko, the confusion that spurs in their lives is an offshoot of the connections and disconnections surrounding them. If we are to extrapolate this space of confusion and breakdown to the “complex realities of a globalized

world,” we can frame the confusion detailed by Iñárritu in the above quote as an expected response in the realm of globalization, where confusion and misrepresentation is a result of the simultaneous sense of connection and disconnection.

Babel highlights such a dialectic of disconnection and connection, and its analysis of globalization is wide ranging, as the film seeks to not only show the inevitable hybridity and flows that comes with a globalized world, but the cultural and linguistic singularity that is associated with difference and terror in such a world. In this analysis, the space of the dialectic of plurality/connection and singularity/disconnection is imagined as a liminal space and this space is projected onto a border space between strings and the linkages between other strings within subatomic particles in a string theory model, representing the simultaneous sense of connection and disconnection inherent in globalization, strings, liminality, and *Babel*. Iñárritu’s film as captured by this model is not so much a recognition of his failure to reconcile difference as it is to show his film as a successful film of globalization, for connections and disconnections are inherent in a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

If this study were extended, a more comprehensive analysis would be performed on the rest of Iñárritu's filmography, to highlight the ways in which the director strives to recognize the liminal border spaces that are associated with his characters and arguably, career. For the sake of brevity, this brief coda has been placed to spark such a discussion, and hint at future directions of the project.

If Iñárritu's first three feature films are primarily characterized by their stylistic variation on the network narrative, then the filmmaker's next three films can be described according to each film's take on the single character narrative. Unlike the "Death Trilogy," *Biutiful*, *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, and *The Revenant* trace the life of a middle-aged father who contends, like the characters in the "Death Trilogy," with his own mortality. In *Biutiful*, Uxbal (Javier Bardem) the psychic and smuggler of migrants must rearrange his life to accommodate the figurative cloud of death that is cancer, which hangs above him throughout the film. In *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, former Hollywood star and aspiring Broadway director Riggan Thompson (Michael Keaton) copes with fading relevance as he strives to obtain respect from his peers as a serious artist. *Birdman* climaxes with a self-inflicted gunshot to the head. *The Revenant* sees frontiersman and father to a part-Native American son, Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) be mauled by a bear and witness the killing of his own son. After his traumatic incident with a bear, Glass goes through a kind of rebirth and vows to avenge the man who wronged him and his son, becoming so obsessed with his revenge plot that he accepts his death as a possible consequence of his act.

In these films, the main characters' dance with death and interactions with other characters do not stem from collisions or entanglements; instead, these films are built on the

ways in which these characters challenge their uniquely difficult circumstances through the “unexpected virtue of ignorance.” The main characters ignore the dire circumstances of their fringing mortality and less-than-ideal circumstances that surround their path to accomplishing their goals, mirroring the sheer ignorance of their creator.

By the end of the release of *Babel*, Iñárritu was framed by the press as a director of only network narratives. In an interview with the Directors Guild of America (DGA), Iñárritu mentioned taking on the challenge of *Biutiful*, responding to being framed as a network narrative filmmaker, “And then I was starting to be criticized because it was ‘Oh my God, the same shit now, just reversed.’ And in a way it felt [done], it was enough. And then I challenged myself by doing my first linear, orthodox, classic film” (Chagollan). In making *Biutiful*, Iñárritu freed himself from the shackles of the network narrative, and with *Birdman*, he became even more free from serious and intense dramas, again “surprising both critics and collaborators” (highsnobiety). In making *The Revenant*, the filmmaker ignored tough weather conditions, studio lighting and a type of reverence normally reserved for a Hollywood star with the stature of Leonardo DiCaprio (Iñárritu reportedly made the actor eat live bison meat to help him embody his 19th century embattled frontiersman character) and ended up with a film largely shot in subzero temperatures and with natural lighting.

The liminal border spaces of Iñárritu’s three single character narratives can be mapped onto the ways in which both the lead characters and Iñárritu ignore dire circumstances and strive to either save migrant workers, stage a brilliant play, avenge the death of a child, or make films outside the purview of expectations and non-experimental commercial filmmaking. Through their ignorance, the characters became destabilized and end up either dying or undergoing a kind of rebirth; either way, in their ignorance of their mortality and dire circumstances, characters still

end up facing their death.

A corridor to a virtual border. Sand brushes up against the legs. These elements, part haptic, part virtual constitute Alejandro González Iñárritu's experimental VR (virtual reality) short film, *Carne y Arena* (Flesh and Sand) which purports to make its viewers/attendees empathize with migrants through its modus operandi; for the majority of the experience, viewers are tasked to wear a headset while in a large, expansive room filled with sand that aggressively blows at their legs while they girdle through the space, viewing themselves - with hands and all - as a migrant at the US-Mexico border (Fig. 17). There are aggressive confrontations with border patrol agents, frenetic movement of other characters and high-pitched screaming, all contained in a desolate, deserted space that is traversed in 7 minutes. In the press release *Carne y Arena*, Iñárritu notes that his film attempts to “break the dictatorship of the frame, within which things are just observed, and claim the space to allow the visitor to go through a direct experience walking in the immigrants’ feet, under their skin, and into their hearts” (MIT).

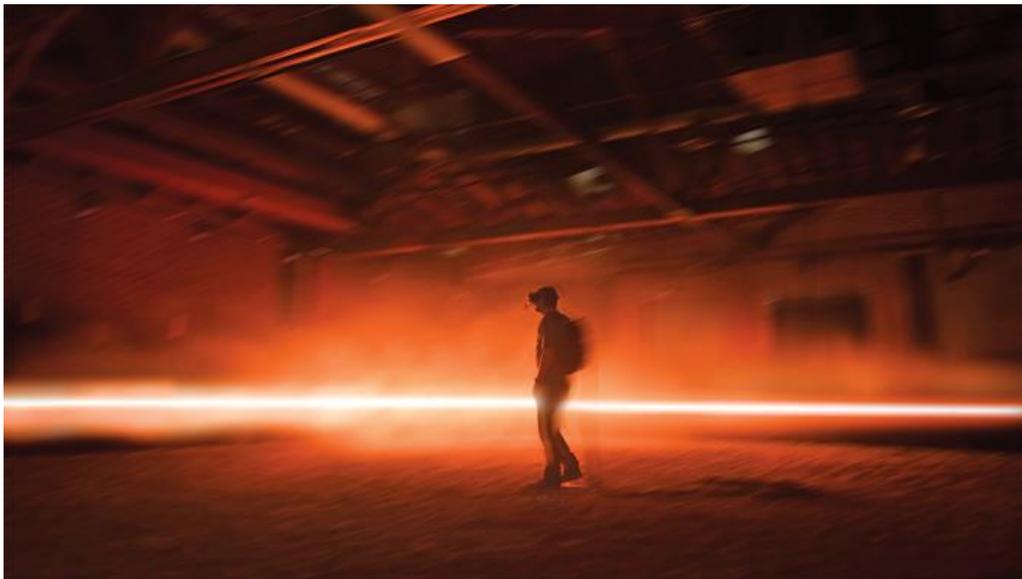


Fig. 17 – Carne y Arena (2017): A spectator experiences the film

Liminal border spaces, experienced through the complexities of the “Death Trilogy’s” network narratives, then more intimately in single character narratives, radically transforms in *Carne y Arena*, as the line/border between viewer and character, non-migrant and migrant, “First Worlder” and “Third Worlder” is blurred. With the VR technology and material sensibilities of the project, the viewer crosses the border spaces that separate her from another and comes to embody the migrant. Despite the critical acclaim, fierce ambition, and complex play with border spaces, the project has an incongruent presence in Iñárritu’s work. If Iñárritu has taught us anything, it is that liminality and border spaces are not only a condition of contemporary life, but *intrinsic* to human interaction. If we consider that liminal border spaces are sites of indeterminate identity, constant transition, and overwhelming ambiguity, and that the “Death Trilogy” makes such border spaces clear through its depiction of the differences, difficulties, and confusion regarding human interactions, then *Carne y Arena*’s premise of making another person “directly experience walking in the immigrants’ feet,” is ill-founded and contrasts deeply with the liminal border spaces of Iñárritu’s filmography.

Though empathy and understanding are an essential theme in Iñárritu’s work, so is difference. As the chapter on *Babel* argues, for every instance of hybridity and connection, there is a moment of singularity and disconnection. The dialectics of hybridity and singularity, connection and disconnection, similarity and difference cannot be so easily reconciled, even with the escapist potentiality of VR filmmaking. Despite Iñárritu’s insistence that *Carne y Arena* can use VR technology to allow a viewer to experience life as a Mexican migrant, the viewer is still a spectator, experiencing an art project from the comfort of a museum or high-end film festival. Mirroring the destabilization from ignorance of the main characters of his single-character narratives, Iñárritu as a filmmaker of border spaces becomes destabilized in *Carne y Arena*,

ignoring not only the difficulties of making his film (an otherwise productive trait in the director), but the complex framework of liminal border spaces intrinsic and essential to the rest of his filmography.

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In Frederic Jameson's seminal work on the understanding of ideology in a postmodern age, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson identifies the method of "cognitive mapping" as a way to contest the dominant ideology of capitalism. For Jameson, a "cognitive map" enables "a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (51). With this methodology of making clear the seemingly unrepresentable structures of society, Jameson was able to reveal the many contradictions and inconsistencies of the dominant ideology of a given work or culture.

In his essay on the effect of photographic reproductions of the world, "The Age of the World Picture," Martin Heidegger proclaims, "The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture" (133). If we consider cinema as a technology dependent, advanced artform that relies on the reproduction of a world, then filmmaking is the act of producing images *upon* the world *about* the world, an act with which Heidegger would describe as a "conquest of the world."

With Jameson's "cognitive mapping" and Heidegger's proclamation as points of departure, the methodology of mapping the border narrativity of Iñárritu's network narratives becomes an exercise in "cognitively mapping" the world of Iñárritu's cinema/picture as an *actual picture*. In the act of mapping the liminal border spaces of Iñárritu's films, a liminal border space is formed between the narrativity diagrams and Iñárritu's films, just as Iñárritu's films form a

border space with the world. Though the liminal border spaces of Iñárritu's cinema is cognitively mapped as a picture through the border narrativity diagrams, the marker of the methodology of this mapping contrasts with Heidegger's assessment of the state of pictures in the modern age as "conquest."

A liminal border space is not a site of conquest or reconciliation, but transition, ambiguity, and irreconcilability. In carrying out the methodology of mapping the liminal border spaces of a film, the films are not subjugated or assumed control by the diagrams. Rather, this mapping attempts to cross the border between itself and its cinematic referent by approaching the film through the prism of the unity of its filmic elements, narrative components, sociopolitical address, and production processes. Despite the surprising reversal of the depiction of liminal border spaces in *Carne y Arena*, Alejandro González Iñárritu remains one of Hollywood's and contemporary cinema's most fruitful and complex filmmakers on liminality and borders. The liminal border spaces of Iñárritu's network narratives are produced in the collisions, crashes and entanglements that associate with border crossing, whether that border be the one between sovereign nations, separate cultures, filmic and non-filmic elements, life and death.

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