

Amores Perros – National Identity Vs International Appeal

“In its storyline and characters, even in its fast-paced narrative style, *Amores Perros* seems tailored to appeal to both a Mexican audience as well as to audiences across national borders. Nor is it surprising that the film does not hide its debt to a slick kind of Hollywood pop cinema. These are elements that have enabled it to circulate in global markets, but they are also features that help audiences focus on the central theme of *Amores Perros*: the contradictions of cultural modernity in contemporary Latin American society”

Amores Perros (d. Iñárritu, Alejandro González. 2000) may seem to deviate from the established storytelling techniques and traditions of Mexican cinema, pandering to the tastes of foreigners (the colossal U.S. audience in particular), but I believe a less contrived process is occurring behind this glossy (some might say superficial) façade.

We are not witnessing a capricious betrayal of Mexico’s cinematic heritage, but the embracing of an inevitable global evolution of the vernacular language of cinema. An ongoing process: A case of film movements in certain countries having varying degrees of influence — at different times, and for different reasons — on the output of other national cinemas.

I shall compare *Amores Perros* with a film of another nation — the, ostensibly different, but thematically similar, British film of the sixties, *Billy Liar* (d. Schlesinger, John. 1963) — in order to demonstrate how a national cinema can be influenced by the film output of other nations and still retain the values and sensibilities which make up their own identity. I have chosen to compare these two films as they both addressed ‘the contradictions of cultural modernity’ in their respective contemporary societies. By way of this comparison, I shall dissect their individually influenced approaches to the same universal themes and, in doing so, demonstrate how the accommodation of contemporary cinematic trends can help audiences focus on the themes at hand.

“[Iñárritu] conspicuously borrows from a variety of international cinematic sources, which far from detracting from the film’s power, lend force to its theme of the contradictions of Latin American modernity.”¹

I believe that the cinematic output of a particular nation is not only characterised by the cinematic techniques deployed but, more importantly, by the themes explored and the ways in which they are explored — whether it be stylistically, philosophically, by means of representation², or otherwise. In looking at these films in this way, I hope to justify my claim that, with *Amores Perros*, director Alejandro González Iñárritu is simply adjusting to changes in the ever-expanding vernacular of film language — by maintaining a contemporary mode of filmmaking — and that, in doing so, neither the national identity of his film, nor

¹ D’Lugo, Marvin. “Amores Perros” *The Cinema of Latin America*. Ed. Alberto Elena and Marina Diaz Lopez London: Wallflower Press, 2003. p227

² Lay, Samantha. *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*. London: Wallflower Press, 2002. p14-15

the film's message are compromised, but rather they are reinforced in a language with which the audience is taken.

This inclination, to draw upon exciting new cinematic techniques from foreign cinemas, can be followed in the adoption of realist tendencies in *Billy Liar* — this film being part of the British New Wave movement that drew a great deal of inspiration, as regards this practice, from the Cinema Verité of the French New Wave, but also from the work of early documentarists such as the British filmmaker Humphrey Jennings.

Incidentally, Jennings sometimes sought to convey the poetry in everyday life by showing everyday occurrences with a surrealist bent (which is perhaps what Schlesinger also aimed to achieve, with the 'Ambrosia' sequences in *Billy Liar*). His 1939 film *Spare Time*, focusing on pre-war working class Britons, features an "intermittent, minimalist commentary, a music track that often bears little obvious relationship to the images, and a perfunctory, snapshot-like mise-en-scène".³

The use of real locations and handheld cameras by New Wave filmmakers, as opposed to expensive sets and dollies, meant that, arguably, the viewer got a truer impression of the characters' lives and environments — the idea therefore being that the audience becomes closer to and gains sympathy for the characters, and becomes less aware of the cinematic techniques which supposedly create a distance between the viewer and the characters portrayed.⁴

Before this trend, places in films were often shrouded with fictitious names and, as a result, became rather generic and characterless. In *Billy Liar*, however, the use of a definite, genuine location — Bradford — adds a great deal of weight to the film's central theme — that of being caught in this old industrial town and way of life, whilst the glamorous city life beckons. Bradford becomes as important to the story as one of the characters.⁵

Themes common in British New Wave cinema, and also common between both *Billy Liar* and *Amores Perros* include "social instabilities in class (and especially working class) identity and gender identity":⁶

"Billy's society is a society of conformity. There is a captivity and a lack of communication in his relationships with his family and the dullness of the routine of his work"⁷, John Schlesinger.

This lack of communication extends beyond family, for Billy. We discover that he has been leading two different girls on, in a struggle of sexual frustration and boredom. Billy's life lacks excitement and promise, until Liz returns to Bradford, and comes to represent everything Billy longs for: Freedom, adventure, sexual

³ Petely, Julian. "Humphrey Jennings." BFI ScreenOnline <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/453623/>>.

⁴ Hutchings, Peter. "Beyond the New Wave: Realism in British Cinema, 1959-63". *The British Cinema Book*. Ed: Robert Murphy. BFI: London, 2001. p176

⁵ Lay, Samantha. *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*. London: Wallflower Press, 2002. p11-12

⁶ Hutchings, Peter. "Beyond the New Wave: Realism in British Cinema, 1959-63". *The British Cinema Book*. Ed: Robert Murphy. BFI: London, 2001. p176

⁷ Hill, John. *Sex, Class and Realism. British Cinema 1956-1963*. BFI: London, 1986. p218

exploration, travel, etc. His communication problems are only exacerbated upon Liz's arrival. Boys like Billy, Robert Murphy comments, "are not socially mobile enough to mix with middle-class girls and seek the sort of exciting but equal relationship which unconventional classless young women like Liz seem to promise"⁸.

For *Amores Perros*, such themes of communicational breakdown are part and parcel of Latin American Cinema's infatuation with the melodrama — a fascination which has its roots in the 'white telephone' working-class melodramas that were popular in forties and fifties Mexican cinema, and from which sprang the basis of today's soap operas - the telenovela.

"No other genre ... has managed to take off in Latin America like melodrama. It is as if the way our people live and feel finds its most open expression in melodrama", Martín Barbero⁹

In *Amores Perros*, Octavio suffers much grief as a result of the lack of understanding between himself, Susanna and his brother, Ramiro. He cannot explain adequately to Susanna the way he feels about her, and nor does he accept that she does not feel the same way about him. His unhealthily hostile relationship with Ramiro escalates to violent confrontation on several occasions, and almost results in Ramiro's death.

Amores Perros has other realist influences. The sources of these influences, however, are somewhat more disputable. However, I think it's fair to say that the realism exhibited in the gritty, urban aesthetic of Octavio's scenes — depicting his working class family and their interactions — may well be a direct influence of early the films of Quentin Tarantino, from which Iñárritu has drawn much inspiration for this film¹⁰, and who in turn is said to have drawn a great deal of inspiration from the French New Wave movement.¹¹

Tarantino has made many references to this influence in his work: Particularly that of Jean-Luc Godard — "one of his biggest directorial and screenwriting influences"¹² — to which, amongst other filmmakers and cinema icons his early film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) is dedicated.

Amongst the influences which may have carried over from Godard to Iñárritu include the way in which women are regarded often as "either a woman or whore"¹³. Regarding Godard's films, Raymond Bellour comments, "exaltation of women and aggression against women seem to be indissolubly linked"¹⁴. In *Amores Perros*, Octavio lusts after Susanna, and at one stage attempts to force himself upon her. Susanna is also seen as the victim of her relationship with Ramiro, when Octavio discovers her black eye.

⁸ Murphy, Robert. *Sixties British Cinema*. BFI: London, 1992. p30

⁹ Noble, Andrea. *Mexican National Cinema*. Routledge: Oxon, 2005. p95

¹⁰ D'Lugo, Marvin. "Amores Perros" *The Cinema of Latin America*. Ed. Alberto Elena and Marina Diaz Lopez London: Wallflower Press, 2003. p227

¹¹ Clarkson, Wensley. *Quentin Tarantino: Shooting from the Hip* Judy Piatkus: UK, 1995. p66-67

¹² Clarkson, Wensley. *Quentin Tarantino: Shooting from the Hip* Judy Piatkus: UK, 1995. p66-67

¹³ Morrey, Douglas. *Jean-Luc Godard*. Manchester University Press, 2006. p146-147

¹⁴ Bellour, Raymond. *Jean-Luc Godard: Son + Image 1974-1991*. Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1992. p120

It is as a result of Octavio's animalistic lust for Susanna — and therefore in the desire to earn enough money to coax her away from their current lifestyle in order to start a new life with him — that Octavio pushes his dog Cofi to its limits in the dog-fighting ring, and is willing to take big risks in order to ascertain a future with Susanna. With this in mind, Cofi could be seen to represent the darker, primal side of Octavio's character, as could the dogs of the other characters in the film.

“The dog becomes an extension of the violent personality of his trainer”, suggests Marvin D'Lugo.¹⁵

Where Tarantino's influence on *Amores Perros* clearly comes into focus, is in the narrative structure, which in this film is tailored to allow the viewer to travel from one time to another, and from one subplot to another, in order to focus on different characters and events in the story's timeline. This forces us to view the chain of events relatively of one another, in such a way as to convey Iñárritu's take on the story. This disregard for a more linear mode of storytelling was popularised by Tarantino with his early films, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and also featured in the first script he sold, *True Romance* (d. Scott, Tony. 1993), but was edited out by Scott, possibly because it was still regarded as unorthodox and it might have been feared that a global audience might find these sorts of film conventions challenging or alienating.

Although *Amores Perros* is split into three distinct sections — dealing with three sets of characters whose stories intersect — I think Octavio can be seen as the 'main' character, despite the equal importance of the other constituent characters to the chain of events which comprise the story. The film begins with his story, and returns to it later to consider it in light of the other subplots of the film. This is a narrative technique (unknown to earlier films like *Billy Liar*) thanks to which *Amores Perros* boasts a clear thematic agenda and strong narrative voice.

To compare the two directors' individual approaches to the common themes of these films, we can see that the approach taken by Iñárritu for the ending of *Amores Perros* is less pessimistic and more open-minded than the approach taken in *Billy Liar* by Schlesinger. Although Octavio's life is left in a mess by the end of the film, and he, like Billy, does not successfully escape his old life (Susanna doesn't agree to run away with him), we get an overriding sense of hope from El Chivo's subplot, which shows that there is always hope for a new life, and that people can always change. We learn from Valeria's story that the glory and happiness of the celebrity is fleeting and shallow. All these ideas combine to form a different overall outlook to that found in *Billy Liar*.

In *Billy Liar*, Billy has the chance to get away from Bradford with Liz, and catch the train to London, where he dreams of a new life as a writer. At the last minute, however, Billy gets cold feet and gets off the train. He tells Liz he'll be back, but it transpires that he does not make it back on time. When he returns to the train, it is revealed that Liz has second-guessed him and concluded that he wasn't going to come back, anyway — his bags have been unloaded and are waiting for him on

¹⁵ D'Lugo, Marvin. "Amores Perros" *The Cinema of Latin America*. Ed. Alberto Elena and Marina Diaz Lopez London: Wallflower Press, 2003. p225

the platform. We are left to believe that Billy is hopelessly caught up in this vicious cycle and may never find it within himself to escape the trappings of his working class existence. Once more, Billy is lost to his dreamworld. One feels sympathetic towards Billy and is left to contemplate how often we ourselves are guilty of burying our heads in the sand in light of conflict or risk.

“He hates it all but ultimately he doesn’t have the courage to break away from it.”¹⁶, John Schlesinger, regarding Billy’s inability to stay on the train and escape.

For Philip French, “the ending of [*Billy Liar*] epitomised a major shift in British culture”.¹⁷

To take this comparison of approaches one step further, if we look at *Billy Elliot* (d. Daldry, Stephen. 2000) — a British film, thematically very similar to *Billy Liar*, but envisioned from a modern perspective — the protagonist, ends up doing what that of *Billy Liar* seemed doomed never to achieve: He escapes the hopelessness of his working-class background, and makes a new life for himself as an artist in London.

I believe this demonstrates that these films convey the national sensibilities of the day, and do so even more effectively, as a result of embracing influences in style and technique which speak to a contemporary audience (at home and abroad) at the time of their release.

An amusingly shameful example of a past, failed attempt to undermine the importance of the cinema heritage of individual nations, and their individual voices, is the disastrous attempt of North American producers, before dubbing technology had made its mark on the international film industry, to make it’s own foreign language versions of English titles. The result was a brazenly insensitive batch of films referred to as ‘The Hispanic Films’.

“The films in Spanish that Hollywood landed us with ended up being a complete mix. Members of the same family spoke with different accents, mixing Asturian with Argentine, Mexican, Cuban and Andalusian accents!”
— Director Alejandro Galindo, on *the Hispanic Films*.¹⁸

The result, however, of national film industries being influenced by foreign tendencies in filmmaking — in the example of the British New Wave, and the film *Amores Perros*, at the very least — was box office success and various critical acclaim.

By comparing *Amores Perros* with *Billy Liar* I hope I have shown how their two directors have approached many of the same universal (transnational) themes, but interpreted them in ways which were true to their nation’s political and social sensibilities. I believe that the impact and popularity of these films is partly thanks to their embracing of contemporary cinematic influences of their

¹⁶ Hill, John. *Sex, Class and Realism. British Cinema 1956-1963*. BFI: London, 1986. p218

¹⁷ Leach, Jim. *British Film*. Cambridge University Press, 2004. p129

¹⁸ Noble, Andrea. *Mexican National Cinema*. Routledge: Oxon, 2005. p31

respective times, in a way that captured the imagination of, and felt relevant to, a constantly changing international audience.

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