

The Namesake

Dir: Mira Nair, USA, 2006

A review by Rashna Wadia Richards, State University of New York Brockport, USA

Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006) begins with a train crash. The year is 1974, and Ashoke Ganguli (Irfan Khan), an aspiring engineer and avid reader of Russian literature, is traveling from Calcutta to Jamshedpur to visit his grandfather. He never reaches that destination. While he is absorbed in the sartorial travails of Akaky Akakievich, Nikolai Gogol's unfortunate protagonist, the train derails, abruptly altering the course of Ashoke's life. Until now, he has sought to see the world merely through reading - to "travel without moving an inch," as his grandfather had put it. But after the wreck, he decides to heed the advice of a fellow passenger, Mr. Ghosh, who, only moments before the crash, urges him to leave home and travel outside of himself. The opening catastrophe, which becomes the film's primal scene, leads Ashoke, and later his arranged-marriage bride Ashima (Tabu), away from the familiar and familial Bengali life to the chilly, alien world of New York. [\[1\]](#) *The Namesake* follows the story of the Ganguli family - Ashoke and Ashima, and their anxiously Americanized children, Gogol and Sonia - in America. They arrive as strangers and spend the rest of their lives negotiating the complex dynamics of home and homeland, immigration and integration. What is especially remarkable about Nair's film is the way it locates the struggle for assimilation by highlighting the conflicted, hybrid cultural identities of its characters, heightened by the decisive clash between first and second generations of the Indian diaspora and their ambivalent relationships with home. If this is a film about exile, it is an exile that is both crushing and invigorating.

Nair has previously traced the pleasures and perils of leaving home in *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *The Perez Family* (1995). But the present film is a far more poignant effort. *The Namesake* merits special attention because here Nair explores the question of living in between worlds, of being tugged by a longing for roots and being yanked by the promise of beginnings. This film is a powerful example of what Hamid Naficy calls an "accented cinema," a multilingual, polyvocal exploration of expatriation, whose subjects inhabit "interstitial spaces and sites of struggle" (Naficy, 2001: 12). What makes *The Namesake* work is its deft portrayal of love, loss, and the sense of belonging. Through the story of two generations of the Ganguli family, Nair creates a poetics of exile, where home is forever lost and always beckoning.

To Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, New York is an unfamiliar place. Although they are Indian nationals, home lies in Calcutta, where the Ganges passes through before rushing into the Bay of Bengal. Unlike the vibrant energy of that warm, dusty, and crowded city, New York is a bleak, wintry place that contrasts sharply with Ashima's bright saris and shawls. Nair portrays this new city through an outsider's eyes. Ashima watches an icicle form on a frozen twig outside their cold Queens apartment. She writes home of the creature comforts - hot water and gas twenty-four hours a day - that become their way of life but do nothing to comfort her. She adapts, adding color to the dullness by mixing peanuts and chili powder with her Rice

Krispies. Ashima dreams of the familiarity of home; New York remains only an unpleasant, distant land.

What is truly notable about *The Namesake* is that it complicates the significance of home in the immigrant experience. Nair suggests that home is a source of comfort as well as of terror. For Ashoke, Calcutta is a reminder of an old nightmare. As the film flashes back to depict that traumatic crash that almost killed him, Ashima provides solace by singing a Bengali song. Together, they learn to negotiate two languages and cultures. Before their arranged marriage, Ashoke and Ashima know few details about one another. He has a doctorate in fiber optics; her favorite subject is English. On the day of their engagement, she tries on his "made in USA" shoes, while they sit respectfully outside her parents' living room; she slips her feet in stealthily, presumably liking how they fit. That is her only contact with him until their wedding. So in New York, they arrive as strangers to each other, trying to become a family in a strange land.

An awkward innocence characterizes their initial lovemaking scene. In partial lighting, Ashoke's fumbling hand works his way through the six yards of Ashima's sari. The scene is understated, economical, like something from Satyajit Ray, to whom (along with Ritwik Ghatak) the film is dedicated. This is not the passionate, heart-pounding sex of newlyweds. Rather, it is a romance that develops over the long years of their marriage. Indeed, their discovery of America parallels the blossoming of their relationship. In time, they forge bonds with other Bengali émigrés and become part of the diasporic community, maintaining ties to the homeland while establishing a home in American suburbia. Apart from the name on their mailbox, little distinguishes the Gangulis from outside. Inside, the whiff of Bengali cooking and the sound of Bengali conversation fill the house when they invite friends over for traditional rituals. Kids call the elders mashis and meshos (aunts and uncles), though it is not bloodline but their parents' shared memory of home that makes them a family.

But there is another four-letter word besides home that haunts and catalyzes the lives of the Gangulis. *The Namesake* truly begins with a name - A. Ganguli, visible on a trunk carried by a coolie making his way through the hustle and bustle of Howrah station, moments before Ashoke is to board the ill-fated train to Jamshedpur. It is not just this name, Ganguli, but another one, Gogol - the one that the film's title refers to - that the narrative pivots on, especially after the birth of their son.

For Ashima, childbirth in an American hospital, without the presence of their extended family, seems counterintuitive. Nair deftly highlights the customary differences by cross-cutting between convivial shots of Calcutta, where Ashima's family awaits news about the arrival of their grandson, and drab shots of New York, where Ashima sits shyly in a hospital room, timing her contractions. After the baby arrives, the Gangulis are informed that, counter to Bengali custom, they cannot leave the hospital without deciding their child's name. They describe Bengali naming traditions to the doctor, explaining why they must wait for a letter from Ashima's grandmother in Calcutta who has chosen a name for their son. In their world, names can wait. But the letter never arrives, lost in the chasm between continents and cultures. Unwilling to have his son's birth certificate read "Baby Boy Ganguli," Ashoke instinctively picks a nickname: Gogol. In the life that follows, Gogol Ganguli, later to be properly named Nikhil, will contend with the cultural and emotional resonances of this name; develop a love-hate relationship with his depressed, paranoid, and reclusive namesake; and, years later, on an ice-cream run with his aging father, recognize his obscure name as a profound gift of life. Later in the film, Nair uses this name to develop the generational

conflict, to illustrate that each immigrant responds differently to the challenges of living between two lands and homes.

For now, the baby is simply Gogol, and his arrival is proudly announced to Calcutta with a photograph of Ashoke and Ashima with the baby wrapped in blankets in front of the Queensboro Bridge. This is the bridge that, for Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, promises the first encounter with New York City "in its wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world" (Fitzgerald, 1925: 73). It is the bridge by which Isaac (Woody Allen) and Mary (Diane Keaton) watch the sunrise in *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979). For the Gangulis, this bridge not only connects them to their present but also strikes a chord with the past. Nair uses it as a visual reminder of another bridge that figures prominently in the film, Calcutta's Howrah Bridge, which remains, for Ashoke and Ashima, so many vast expanses of air and water away.

When the Gangulis cross that expanse for the first time, Nair makes an interesting choice of not filming their homecoming. All we get of this journey is a striking scene at the airport, underscoring Ashima's hesitation. After pining so deeply to return home, after resisting raising her kids "in this lonely country," she is now terrified of re-encountering home - of being regarded as the American, the foreigner, in her homeland. Nair portrays the airport as a liminal site. In a sign that foreshadows diverging generational responses, Gogol identifies with this place that lies between territories and temporalities. Ironically standing in the International Arrivals area, he gazes at holographic art lining the hallway, fascinated by the shifting patterns of the picture, where light-skinned figures go dark and then back again. [\[2\]](#) As if to confirm his own fluid status, Gogol points to his name on the Arrivals sign. Of course, there is no Gogol Airport in the world. But what little Gogol notices are letters from the names of different places that he imagines fit together to form his name. This is Gogol's version of reading in order to travel without moving an inch.

As Nair's expansive family biography unfolds, it becomes not only a tale of two cities but also of two generations that are equally difficult to bridge. Gogol's name becomes the site where differing views of exile are played out. If his unusual name has an odd appeal for him as a child, to the gangly American teenager (Kal Penn), Gogol Ganguli sounds annoyingly foreign. Although already a nickname, its seeming absurdity prompts multiple permutations. He is variously called gogolo, goggles, and even googly. The last of these echoes a term in cricket for a delivery where the ball spins in the opposite direction than expected to surprise the batter; it is like a screwball in baseball. In India, googly is commonly referred to as "the wrong one." To Gogol, his name certainly appears to be the wrong one - estranging him from his American peers, marking his outsider status.

A key turning point in the film comes in a literature class, when Gogol learns that Nikolai Gogol was a recluse and a hypochondriac, who starved himself to death and was considered an "eccentric genius." Gogol is not flattered by these associations. He is frustrated by what he considers his father's immature gesture of fandom in naming his son after his favorite author. He does not know yet what Gogol means to Ashoke. "Did you guys know all this stuff about him when you decided to name me after him?," he asks exasperatedly. But Ashima's response does not explain. Instead, it only emphasizes the growing divide between them: "Don't call us 'guys,'" she says. "Sometimes when I close my eyes I feel like I've given birth to strangers." That does little to appease Gogol. When Ashoke gives him a special edition of Nikolai Gogol's collected works as a high school graduation present, he does not understand that sentiment either. But then Pearl Jam, which is blasting on Gogol's stereo, does not mix well

with Nikolai Gogol. His father explains his emotional connection to the Ukrainian-born Russian writer - someone "who spent most of his adult life outside his homeland . . . like me." But exile is a condition foreign to Gogol. Even though he does not wholly fit into the American landscape, Calcutta is only a distant and exotic city where ma and baba inexplicably keep returning to.

When the Gangulis return to Calcutta that summer, Nair films their visit, which begins with Sonia wanting to go home as soon as they arrive. Like her brother, she feels like a foreigner in Calcutta. By contrast, Ashima looks relaxed. She is irrepressibly content in this city where yogis sing in the streets and saris hang from balconies to dry. Gogol is simultaneously mesmerized and repulsed, sketching scenes of local color but refusing to ride in a hand-pulled rickshaw, calling it "feudal" and "exploitative." He reflects Ashoke's and Ashima's initial responses to New York. They go to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, which returns them to Howrah station. Ashoke is understandably nervous. But this time the train does not derail. The next shot, one of the film's most exquisite, has the Ganguli family standing in front of the Taj Mahal. In fact, we first see the Taj through their reaction shot. In this moving moment, there isn't much gulf between the parents and the kids. Although they are all awed by its imposing beauty, Nair wants us to see the Taj through Gogol's eyes. The camera follows his gaze, lingering on the architectural details of the columns, the ceiling, and so on. Unlike his parents' emotional connection, Nair suggests, Gogol develops an aesthetic relationship with the homeland.

The rest of *The Namesake* explores how Gogol negotiates this relationship and its attendant dualities, between past and present, tradition and modernity, history and contemporaneity. In the end, he identifies with neither one nor the other. As his ability to embody two names, Gogol and Nikhil, suggests, he is inescapably of both worlds. His journey to find where he belongs is delineated by two love affairs, with the consummate Manhattanite and fellow Yale student, Maxine (Jacinda Barrett), and the transnational cosmopolitan and fellow Bengali, Moushumi (Zuleikha Robinson). With Maxine, he is Nikhil, who claims, after they have made love, he does not care that his parents want him to marry a Bengali girl. "This is what I want," he asserts. But his emphatic declaration is only an illusion, for when he brings Maxine home to meet the parents, he is caught between the understated expressions of his parents' love for each other and Maxine's public display of affection for him.

But this trip home is not about how well Maxine fits into the family portrait as it is about where Gogol's place lies. After lunch, Ashoke and Gogol drive out to buy ice cream, and during this ride Gogol learns the import of his name. The meaning of the film's title is finally, subtly revealed. Nair completes the series of flashbacks by returning to that first, fateful night, somewhere outside of Calcutta when a train derails and Ashoke is given another chance at life. It is Gogol who rescues him. Ashoke is found lying amidst the carnage of the wreck, holding on to a single page from Nikolai Gogol's *The Collected Tales and Plays*. Although he is immobilized, the page flutters, and someone notices that a passenger may still be alive. "That is how I came to America and you got your name," Ashoke concludes, as the scene returns to the present. Nair frames Ashoke and Gogol in tight over-the-shoulder reaction shots, such that during this conversation, their location becomes irrelevant. In a film deeply concerned with its setting, place disappears. Gogol wonders if his father always thinks of that awful night in Bengal when he looks at his son. Ashoke's soft-spoken response is simple: "You remind me of everything that followed. Everyday since then has been a gift." Through various retellings of the film's primal scene, Nair challenges naïve assumptions about the experience of exile. Exile in *The Namesake* is simultaneously traumatic and

liberating. For the exiled individual, it enhances the longing for home but also the desire to deterritorialize the self. Ashoke's experience echoes Nabokov's: "The break in my destiny affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds" (Nabokov, 1966: 250). The moment of rupture is a source of pain as well as pleasure.

This historical understanding goes a long way to bridge the gap between the two generations of Gangulis in America. But Nair's film, unlike Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It like Beckham* (2002), which deals with the generational clash of an Indian family in England, goes beyond the happy ending of reconciliation. Just when Gogol begins to appreciate his parents' condition of exile, Ashoke passes away - alone, in Ohio, where he is teaching for a semester. His response to his father's death enables Nair to explode the binary of tradition and modernity to the pulsating rhythms of Mykell Miers's "The Chosen One." Gogol drives to Ohio to identify his father's body. Before returning home, he shaves his head. This scene is heartrending, more so due to its conflicting visual implications. With Miers's rap song on the soundtrack, Gogol sits in a barber's chair, gazing defiantly into the distance. It looks like an act of rebellion, but Gogol's shaved head is actually a sign of cultural respect toward his father. When Ashima tells him he did not need to follow tradition, Gogol responds, for the first time in Bengali, "I wanted to, ma." But Gogol's shaved head is not a simple conversion to Bengali traditionalism. Instead, it signals a conscious awareness of his hybrid status; he no longer sees himself as wholly American, nor does he try to become wholly Bengali. His hybridity is incomprehensible to Maxine, who sticks out in her dark mourning clothes at the funeral where everyone else is wearing white. Shortly thereafter, their relationship comes to an end.

In the wake of his father's death, Gogol returns from being Nikhil to being Gogol. Another affair follows, which turns into a short-lived marriage, with Moushumi, who is, like Gogol, a hybrid American desi. Although this chapter of the film is rushed, it serves to highlight how much the second immigrant generation is unlike the first. Their relationship begins at the behest of their mothers, but their first encounter is nothing like the one between Ashoke and Ashima back in Calcutta. For one thing, they've met before, as teenagers at the Bengali parties in American suburbia. When they get together for drinks, sparks fly, and after a brief courtship, they get married in a traditional Bengali ceremony, evoking the exuberant final scene from Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001). While their wedding night offers a nod to the song-and-dance world of Bollywood, the celebrations do not last long. There is something missing in this relationship. What Nair argues here is that having been born and raised Bengali is not enough.

The Namesake ends by meditating on the multiple meanings of home. After Ashoke dies, Ashima decides to sell the house and go back to Calcutta. But hers will not be a simple return home. Even though she has lived mostly as an outsider in America, Ashima is melancholic. In its loss, Nair intimates, the house that she is now leaving behind becomes home. On one of his final visits, Gogol looks through his old things, finds his graduation present, and dusts it off. As he leafs through the first page of Nikolai Gogol's collected works, he finds his father's inscription: "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name." After being a source of terrors for father and son, the name - this name, Gogol, as well as their name, Ganguli - is what binds them.

The film's final moments emphasize that this bond, however fragile, is crucial to navigating foreign waters as an immigrant. In its beautiful concluding scene, with Mr. Ghosh's advice to "see the world—you will never regret it" in voiceover, we see Gogol on a train, reading. He

looks up from his book, and Nair cuts to Ashoke, also on a train, reading. Their eyelines match even though the timeline does not. Their lives, their traditions, even their histories may not have blended very well, but what they have in common is this sense of always being in between places. This is what the film has been leading up to: demonstrating that what is significant about the immigrant experience is the journey itself. There is a hint of this in the preceding scene, an enigmatic flashback that resonates with Bergmanesque poetry. Gogol recalls an innocent evening at the beach where he walks to the edge of the breakwater with his father. When they reach the end, Ashoke realizes they have forgotten their camera. Rather than return for it, he asks Gogol to commit the scene to memory. "Remember," Ashoke says, "that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go." While his words gesture toward closure, the scene does not. This is where Nair's meditation on expatriation succeeds: in showing that home lies ahead as well as behind, exile is both devastating and exhilarating.

Notes

[1] The location, moved from Boston to New York City, is one of the few changes in the film's adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*.

[2] What Gogol is looking at, anachronistically, is Diller + Scofidio's "Travelogues" installation at JFK's international terminal.

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El Topo

Dir: Alejandro Jodorowsky, Mexico, 1970

A review by Jo Eadie, Open University in the East Midlands, UK

Back in 1970, when crowds of ecstatic – and narcotic – fans were queuing around the block for midnight showings of *El Topo* (1970), and John Lennon was persuading his manager Allen Klein to buy the rights and championing it as the film for his generation, it must have seemed that Jodorowsky's future was made. Who would have expected that only a few years later Jodorowsky would walk out on his deal with Klein in order to make the (never filmed) adaptation of Frank Herbert's novel *Dune*, with Salvador Dali as the mad emperor of the universe, and Klein would retaliate by refusing to release *El Topo* for future exhibition?

Jodorowsky happily went on to a career in theatre, comics, and tarot-reading, punctuated with the occasional film – cinema has only ever been one avenue of interest for him – and *El Topo* turned up in the occasional grainy bootleg copy, looking likely to pass into the annals of film legend, kept alive by Hoberman and Rosenbaum's placing of it at the apex of their pantheon of countercultural classics, *Midnight Movies* (1983). And then, out of the blue, Klein and Jodorowsky patch up their differences, and a gloriously vivid and scratch-free print of *El Topo* is both doing the celluloid rounds and out on DVD.

The film follows a black-leather clad gunfighter (played by Jodorowsky himself) through the desert on his confrontation with four mystical gunfighters, who are modeled loosely – not to say improbably – on Hindu, Sufi, indigenous South American, and Buddhist mystical teachers. The gunfighter proves his mastery only by tricking each one into defeat, a compromised victory which plunges him into an abjection of guilt. His lover is bitterly disappointed when he rejects the path of violence and worldly success in favour of spiritual salvation, and she shoots him and leaves him for dead. He is rescued by a group of outcasts, for whom he agrees to perform the penance of digging an escape route out of a cave for a rejected and imprisoned community of the ill and disabled. Performing menial jobs in the nearby town, he eventually frees his rescuers – only to see them murdered by the horrified townspeople. He takes a terrible revenge on the town before burning himself alive, leaving his new lover and his son to continue on a quest of their own – or possibly merely repeat his own journey.

It's a film that obviously owes much to the cinema of violent surrealism and gothic humour established over the previous decade in the spaghetti western: think of Django dragging his own coffin through the mud in Sergio Corbucci's *Django* (1966) -- you almost expect him to wander over the hill. But Jodorowsky strips away the semblance of realism -- narrative, historical, and cinematic -- within which those films embed their images, and instead drags you through a helter-skelter fairy tale of deranged scenes held together only by the barest of logic: he's eating beetles with a native shaman in an underground cave, he's surrounded by dead rabbits, he's killed a woman who crows like a bird, a crazed hermit has caught his bullets in a butterfly net, and a man in a fur coat is building models out of toothpicks. Having

said that, there is nothing to match the unnerving extremes of his earlier *Fando and Lis* (1968), where gargantuan men with funnels on their heads sit around a table laden with stuffed crocodiles and a naked woman covered in spaghetti. For in spite of some calculated anachronisms and absurdities, the film is clearly an attempt to rework a popular genre through the lens of surrealism (or vice versa), rather than to produce a series of pure surrealist tableaux. Indeed, Jodorowsky's love of science-fiction and comics puts him firmly on the side of those surrealists who find the bizarre in popular culture, rather than in any avant-garde opposition to the popular.

It's a pleasingly rough film, with a cast of friends and family, aided and abetted by local prostitutes and itinerant acid-casualties, filming on sets left behind in the Mexican desert by Hollywood film crews passing through. There are passages of leaden dialogue – particularly when characters lapse into mystical platitudes which must surely have been worn even to its original audience – but Jodorowsky's choice of settings remains thrilling: witness his clearly genuine – and difficult – fording of a river of flowing mud, or his crossing of the fragile ruins of an industrial bridge suspended almost impossibly far above a valley. And the comical subversions of authority – although in one sense obvious targets – remain biting. In one of the film's most mesmerising scenes, shot from overhead inside an echoing beehive of a crypt, a deranged bandit-king writhes helplessly on a bed, until his slave-lover gradually reassembles his authority by dressing him in his uniform – complete with make-up, wig and boots with false soles to boost his height. This transformation of monstrous baby into military dictator remains a beautiful and withering allegory for authoritarianism.

Jodorowsky has always insisted that the central part of his ventures is not their end product – or even their audience's responses – but the rituals and transformations that take place during the making of the film, which, as he is fond of saying, was transcribed from dreams and performed in trance-states. *El Topo* is then, as Hoberman and Rosenbaum have it, "merely the end product of a specific spiritual adventure in the life of Alexandro [sic] Jodorowsky" (Hoberman, 1983). But the success of the film – both then and now – is that its very inward vision enabled it to break out of that solipsistic scenario and connect to others engaged in their own similar pursuits, asking the same questions as Jodorowsky and interested in similar methods.

It is easy to forget how completely Jodorowsky's dreams intersected with a certain milieu. As a reminder, it is worth recalling Hoberman and Rosenbaum's description of the international youth culture of the day. They single out "the syllabus of a particular course offered by the London 'Antiuniversity' in 1968 as the quintessential embodiment of the hippie world view" (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983), and go on to describe how:

Under the rubric "From Comic Books to the Dance of Shiva: Spiritual Amnesia and the Physiology of Estrangement", the course proposed itself as "a free-wheeling succession of open-ended situations" including "Exploration of Inner Space, de-conditioning of the human robot, significance of psychochemicals, and the transformation of Western European Man". "On-going vibrations" were "highly relevant", and the reading list comprised Marx; Artaud; Gurdjieff; Reich; the indologist Heinrich Zimmer; Gnostic, Sufi, and Tantric texts; "autobiographical accounts of madness and ecstatic states of consciousness"; and Pop Art. In the context of this fanatically eclectic prospectus, *El Topo* -- which its maker called "a library of all the books I love"

-- carried the cultural clout of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. (Hoberman and Rosenbaum, 1983)

If we place it in the world of Carlos Castaneda and Robert Crumb, *El Topo* makes sense as part of a countercultural move to assemble recipes for personal freedom, fragments of dreams, and vitriolic attacks on both external forms of oppressively authoritative normality and our own internal normalized states of consciousness. Riding high on his acclaim, Jodorowsky was encouraged to produce a manual deciphering the allegories of the film – much of which he reproduces for his DVD commentary – and although it offers some intriguing lines of thinking, it remains reductive in its simple equating of certain images with certain definite spiritual lessons that he is keen to propose. At the same time that Jodorowsky advances this determinedly indexical reading of the film's symbols, its images surely exceed any interpretation that he offers. This sentiment was poignantly captured in one early review, in which Phillip Strick cannily suggested that:

the brilliant photography and the simplicity of the action are counterbalanced by the sense of ritual, in which every move, every object, carries a history of meanings. At the same time the performance has an undercurrent of absurdity, as if each meaning, once analysed, would prove to contain its own contradiction ... The film tells us that the mole is a creature that digs through the earth in search of the sun, only to be blinded when it comes to the surface, but this too is a claim based on confusion rather than accuracy. It sounds tragic, its relevance to a philosophy of life, unquestionable, but it just doesn't happen to be true. (Strick 1973: 51)

The real life of the film lies in the cheerful absurdity of its imagery – the moments of profundity fatally undermined by the moments of comedy. With its shaky performances, bad dubbing, passionate denunciations of normality, monstrous violence, and rampant philosophizing, it sits alongside John Waters, Paul Morrissey, and Ken Russell, as part of a long-lost cinema of gloriously self-indulgent excess.

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Sugar

Dir: John Palmer, USA, 2004

A review by Richard Harrison, Norwich City College, UK

The tragically premature death of Andre Noble on 30th July 2004 did not exactly set the cinematic woods on fire. The celluloid world, though, has always been used to the varied nature of star destinies: those who die young, those who live long and those who, as Neil Young -- a Canadian, like Noble -- would say, simply fade away. That Andre Noble was not allowed to either grow old or fade away is something to be deeply lamented.

Of those who have passed on before their time, some died in true Hollywood style - a car accident, a shooting, or, if you were Peg Entwistle, the ultimate cinematic suicide: a jump from the famous "Hollywood" sign in the California hills. Andre Noble's short life did not end in any of these dramatic ways, but resulted from aconitine poisoning from ingesting the sap of monkshood, a deadly wild flower in Newfoundland, very close to where he was raised. He was just twenty-five years old.

Like Peter Pan, Andre Noble will not grow old. He will not look haggard and age-worn, suffer the ignominy of drug busts, the tabloid interest in failed relationships or be forced to accept bit parts in mediocre films starring the current Hollywood young-blood. Andre Noble's performance in *Sugar* (the final film role before his death) will define how he is remembered, not just playing a character but living it -- his ardent sincerity proving a compelling reminder of how powerful a medium film can be.

A powerful film that will be forever linked with the tragic loss of its star, *Sugar* (2004) was originally shot on Mini-DV and directed by John Palmer (whose only other film as director, *Me*, was made back in 1975). The title *Sugar* connotes a paradox of sweetness and addiction, all too apt when the film as a whole is considered, for it presents an unusual take on the "teen film" as well as a wider consideration of cinematic spectatorship, particularly in the way we watch the turmoil of the relationships undergone by its characters.

In *Sugar*, Andre Noble plays Cliff, a teenager on the verge of manhood still trying to discover who he really is. Interestingly, Noble was twenty-four when *Sugar* started filming, the same age as James Dean when he starred in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955).

After the opening credits, the first live action we see is a young heterosexual couple sitting under a tree. They are kissing eagerly, the close framing preventing us from situating them in any context, and from this opening it would perhaps be assumed that the couple will play some significant part in the film to follow. The fact that they do not feature after this in the movie is an early indication of the way *Sugar* plays with traditional notions of film spectatorship and identification. As the couple's kissing continues, it is revealed that they are being watched by Cliff, our first view of this unconventional teenager. The camera is positioned just behind his right shoulder as he watches the couple kiss, and he sucks a strand of what appears to be liquorice. As we see what he sees, from a position close beside him, we

become aligned with the Andre Noble character through this act of voyeurism, and it is this kind of identification that *Sugar* utilises strongly throughout.

As the music becomes slower and its gentle rhythmical thudding becomes akin to a heartbeat, the sensuality of the moment is heightened by the shot which changes to a sideways close up of Cliff's provocative sucking. Then, as the "heartbeats" continue, we see Cliff pleasuring himself in long shot. This complex introduction to the film does several things, but its main purpose is to introduce us to Cliff whilst confronting the issue of voyeuristic and empathetic film spectatorship which is significant in *Sugar* as a whole.

The film proper starts with Cliff's eighteenth birthday party. In the restaurant, his innocence and domestic lifestyle are symbolised by the candles on his cake, his insistence on washing his hands before eating, and the presence of his close (but fatherless) family: Madge (his mother), his gran, and Cookie (his younger sister, who shouts "sugar!" as she grabs a gingerbread rabbit, referring back to the film's title in her yearn for an addictive sweetness). Cliff himself looks embarrassed and withdrawn. This early section of *Sugar* forms a strong audience identification with Cliff, drawing us into his experiences as he undergoes each moment, and as result, introducing us to the star, Andre Noble himself.

As *Sugar* introduces its theme of identity, Cliff is presented as an archetypal teenager. Madge delivers a maternal 'pep talk' and presents her son with a skateboard, an iconic object he clearly feels he doesn't need. However, despite Cliff's teen angst about it, he soon finds solace in the skateboard and clasps it as if it were a valuable comfort-blanket, somehow protecting him against the adult world his mother outlined. Then, paradoxically, he uses it to go 'downtown' in search of the vicarious thrills the precocious Cookie encourages him to seek. With obligatory side tracking shots that follow Cliff on his skateboard, oscillating with point-of-view shots aboard, *Sugar* could well be about any typical teenager dressed in jacket and jeans off to see friends on the night of his eighteenth birthday. In fact, Cliff is a protected teenager, a naïve boy whose life experiences have been few, and whose wide-eyed, baby-faced innocence is about to be changed forever.

Cliff's first view of Butch is the latter urinating against a lattice wire fence. It is a sight that evidently fills him with overwhelming curiosity and a certain admiring fascination, so mesmeric that Cliff stumbles into a group of dustbins. The industrial, urban music that accompanies this first encounter is light years away from the frothy melodies usually associated with a romantic meeting but the well-composed close-ups link both Cliff and Butch together. Cliff's face is also bathed in chiaroscuro light, the lattice work of the fence casting bars on his face hinting that he is becoming trapped in a world that is alien to him.

Although Cliff and Butch leave the scene together, their brief grope in a dark doorway is the antithesis of a typical screen romance (although perhaps truer to life). With some irony, the identity of the two characters is established in this section of the film. "Butch" lives up to his manly name in his sleeveless top, muscles, a chain and tattoos -- but he is a hustler with a penchant for gay relationships. Cliff's more conservative clothing is significant, for not only does it demarcate his sheltered upbringing but its gradual diminishing marks his transition throughout the film from withdrawn heterosexual teenager to self-controlled, sexually-liberated young man. In fact, it is partly this gradual (and eminently credible) dissolution of what Cliff *was* to what Cliff *is* that makes *Sugar* such a constantly absorbing film.

Arguably the most iconic sequence in *Sugar* opens in Butch's apartment as its shirtless owner lies on the bed. Cliff asks him, "Do you want me to sleep on the floor?" But Butch does not, and offers Cliff a place in the bed beside him. As Cliff lies down, and the two shirtless bodies are placed together, they are bathed in an aesthetic brightness of light. Combined with a static camera, a sense of peace and stability is created which is only broken by Butch telling Cliff, "I can't give you sex today." Cliff's reply, "That's okay," placates Butch and places both young men at their ease, although Cliff still looks a little discomforted by the close proximity to another body, especially a male one. "I've never had sex with a guy before...well, with anybody" Cliff mutters. Butch seems to respond positively to this naivety and openness, although he turns away from Cliff to sleep. Disconcerted, Cliff places a nervously gentle kiss on Butch's back. The pair go to sleep, and the scene fades to black. This scene is important because it lays bare the pair's relationship. Butch regards it in base terms, whilst Cliff is overcome by an admiring sense of awe mingled with trepidation toward his new friend.

The key sequence continues as the two wake and prepare for the day ahead - Cliff's self-consciousness being strongly apparent by his getting dressed sat on the bed, in contrast to Butch's freedom and confidence in his body. As Cliff admires Butch's tattoo, and runs his finger over it, a sensual beauty to their relationship (that was initiated in bed), again emerges. Then, it is Cliff that suggests in businesslike fashion: "Breakfast." In the kitchen, they sit opposite each other and eat cornflakes. This banal act turns, though, into an intense display of physical and emotional ecstasy as the two masturbate together. For me, the event becomes organic, poetic and entirely plausible, and the two leads become not merely players acting out their roles but seem to become somehow subsumed within them.

In common with the voyeuristic theme of the entire film, Butch's paid visit to the morbidly overweight, disabled Darlene in a later sequence is even more provoking. Ironically, after the pair photograph each other, Butch points the camera directly at us, as if we are the subject of his observation. This alters our position of spectatorship, as we have moved from being mere observers, to becoming (through the photograph) implicated in the sordid, mercenary fandango that is Butch and Darlene's "session" together.

The viewer-viewed relationship becomes more uncomfortable later, when the pair visit a middle-aged man. As they sit on an old-fashioned sofa in a depressingly drab room, the older man's fantasy (that he is Butch's father and their mother has gone out to the supermarket) causes consternation in Cliff, who sinks further down in the sofa as if looking for obscurity. Cliff's isolated framing also shows he is genuinely discomforted and nervous of what the situation might bring, the monosyllabic answers he gives to the older man's questions proving uneasy viewing due to our empathy with Cliff set up so far. Later, the older man's desire to watch the two fondle each other makes the Cliff/Butch relationship seem entirely sordid and devoid of any beauty it had earlier in the film. The fact that Butch even has to undress the reluctant Cliff is telling. When Butch uses violent sexual rape to stimulate the older man, he alienates both Cliff and ourselves.

As the story progresses, Butch and Cliff's relationship falls apart as Butch suffers an emotional breakdown. The audience does not subsequently see Butch's death per se, but the way he later smashes his arm in anger through a window, leading to it bleeding uncontrollably, is a shocking moment in the film. Butch dies alone. Sufficiently shaken, Cliff uses the skateboard, a symbol of transition between childhood and adulthood, to escape from the scene, closely followed by Cookie. In a cyclical return to the start of the film, brother and sister sit in the restaurant. Cookie's comment that "it's just not fair" aptly sums up the

sentiment of the movie. Cliff is, however, determined not to let the dowdy restaurant setting lower his spirits, and begins flirting with another man, their conversation being alike to one in the early Cliff-Butch relationship such is its tenderness. Andre Noble effortlessly conveys a confident Cliff who has been affected by his experiences to the extent that he feels able to strike out on his own.

If *Sugar* is to be Andre Noble's final blazon, the fascinating extras on the 2004 DVD are a fittingly melancholic eulogy. Apart from the interview with Brendan Fehr (Andre's poignant absence is almost more telling than Fehr's presence) and the obligatory trailer, there are also three deleted scenes (which range from the awkward to the bizarre, but are constantly interesting) plus a tribute to Andre. This thoughtful addition starts with his screen test for *Sugar*, in which he is required to vocally act out the early bed scene. The sincerity Andre brings to the reading makes it easy to see why he was awarded the role of Cliff, but is also tinged with a sad emptiness.

The candid on and off set footage captures Andre, not as part of his scripted role, but relaxing and being himself. In all this priceless footage, we witness the clock-ticking on the unsuspecting Andre Noble's life, and there is something very sad in that. I would suggest it is the *raison d'être* of film to preserve lost actors, such as the beauty and innocence of Andre Noble, who, inexplicably, was taken before his time. The existence of a film like *Sugar* is an essential one, for in it Andre Noble lives, breathes and *is*.

Water

Dir: Deepa Mehta, Canada/India, 2005

A review by Amitava Nag, India

A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste.
A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven.
A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

The Laws of Manu Chapter 5, verse 156-161 Dharamshastras (Sacred Hindu texts)

The first shot of Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005) shows a lush landscape splashed with a riot of colours and a cow-drawn cart carrying a little girl. The score reminds one of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) for its semblance with the unforgettable *Rajya Kalyan* raga by the maestro Ravi Shankar, and also the image of a lonely sweet-seller in some remote Indian village. A serene atmosphere prevails and a story unfolds. Cut to the near end of the film and we find Mahatma Gandhi in one of his many gatherings during the Indian freedom movement that comprise of people from every strata of society. One of the film's central characters seeks refuge with him in search of solace, peace and a better future, perhaps. These two sequences together, however, frame a story which confronts many important social and political issues. As onscreen text tells us later in the film, "There are over 30 million widows in India according to the 2001 census. Many continue to live in conditions of social, economic and cultural deprivations as prescribed 2000 years ago by the sacred texts of Manu."

In between, for almost two hours, we experience an exceptional 'Indian' story set in the British Raj of the late 1930s. Primarily, *Water* is a story of the struggle between love and faith. It's the battle between tradition and individual expression. And like the other two Mehta films of the 'elements trilogy' *Fire* (1996) and *Earth* (1998), it depicts the lack of choice of individuals due to social and patriarchal regulations. With this film the director completes a circle which started with contemporary modern India ('the politics of sexuality'), harking back to the time of the Indian Partition (the late 1940s – 'the politics of nationality') and finally to the India of the 1930s ('the politics of religion'). The trilogy tries to examine patriarchal paradigms and raises quite a few questions in its stride and more importantly, it tries to distance itself from pointing fingers at individuals.

At the heart of the film there are three women. The first is the eight year old widow Chuiya, the young Kalyani (played stunningly by Lisa Ray, who seldom seemed to be a typical Indian widow of the 1930s) who used to prostitute herself and was the sole earning member of the widow-house a.k.a. the 'ashram' (a place to pursue religious and spiritual Hindu disciplines). We also see Shakuntala (poignantly played by Seema Biswas of the *Bandit Queen* [1994]), who governs this ashram. Chuiya is the destabilizing force in the house of sequestered individuals with her vibrancy, her questions against the internment and her complete censure of the patriarchal norms. On the fringes lie Madhumati, the ashram's tyrannical mother figure

who runs the prostitution chain and Narayan (an equally uncomfortable John Abraham as Lisa Ray), the young progressive follower of Mahatma Gandhi. However, as mentioned above, this film is essentially "about three women trying to break the cycle and trying to find dignity, and trying to get rid of the yoke of oppression" (Mayer, 2005).

The film starts off with Chuiya's husband's death, and her coming to this ashram and finding it difficult to cope with a different life. In the middle we see the love-affair bloom between Kalyani and Narayan, and in the end we see Shakuntala taking up the responsibility of a supposedly better life for Chuiya. In this sense, the film draws closer to Jafar Panahi's *Circle* (2000), where we find a host of women characters, each in a different strata of Iran's society, all finally bound to an unsurpassable, invisible circle of patriarchal thread where meaning for women is in their relationship to men rather than in the sexual gratification of men. The widows, who are devoid of any material comforts, are symbols of chastity and yet they are the pariahs of their society, defiled of any physical beauty lest they become victims of lust. Ironically, Kalyani was permitted to keep her beautiful tresses in order to make her appealing to her nightly suitors. But the moment Madhumati knows of her love-affair with Narayan, she hacks off Kalyani's hair and debases her. For, as it says in the Laws of Manu, chapter nine verse three, "Her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth and her sons protect [her] in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."

This 'circle' is reflected when the widows of the ashram are deprived of their 'saviors.' They live in conditions of abject poverty, both spiritual and material. Their living conditions are so bleak, that at the death of one widow, another widow remarks starkly, "God willing, she'll be reborn as a man!" However, instead of meekly accepting all the agencies of their confinement, there are occasions where we find a female voice or two being raised, sometimes in sinister acts like the killing of Madhumati's favourite parrot by Chuiya or in Shakuntala's disobeying of Madhumati in freeing Kalyani. The director skillfully plays with the psychology of the characters, the time, and so invites the audience to engage with the issues. For example, we find situations which are non-linear in their interpretation e.g. in showing that the worst enemies of the widows are the widows themselves in being rigid to the age-old norms (patriarchy as an agency remains camouflaged). Altruistic acts are at times tainted with disbelief, as when Chuiya gets sweets for an old widow (who is obsessed with her dream of eating sweets) and when she dies the day after, Chuiya holds herself responsible for the forbidden act.

On the backdrop of this iniquitous regime flows the Ganges, the holy river which submerges all sin. In the opening shots of the fleeting lily pads, the flowing rains and the serenity of the river, the director aims for a certain fluidity on screen as a contrast to the strict principle of the ashram. The flowing river symbolizing liberation and openness, taunts the widows in their denial of an ingenuous life. In Greek mythology the rivers Acheron and Cocytus were used to ferry the souls of the dead from the living world to the underworld of the dead. The river Ganges also acts as a bridge here, and ferries Kalyani's battered soul and body from the 'house of redemption' to the 'house of lust' and mocks us at our face. And when Kalyani commits suicide, it transports the child Chuiya to that 'underworld of the dead.'

The rape of Chuiya poignantly alludes to the impending disaster and the complete obviation of any moral sanity of the Hindu upper caste. Two pairs of dichotomy are in action here: on one hand the 'impure' lower caste against the 'pure' upper caste and on the other, the supreme 'male' gender as opposed to the 'inferior' female gender. This shows how individuals are inflicted with caste-based and gender-based preconceptions that led to many being sexualized

in Indian society. The forcible entry of Chuiya into prostitution leads us to some other contemporary facts. In particular, the prevalent tradition of Devdasis is South India where young girls sacrificed to God soon end up prostituting to his very disciples, or the forced labour arrangement, known as the 'Chukri system' where young women are coerced into prostitution to pay off debts - and the 'Bachara' tribe of Western Madhya Pradesh, who still practice child prostitution to support the poverty-stricken family, as depicted in the documentary film *Highway Courtesans* (2004) directed by Mystelle Brabbee.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great legendary leader of the Indian freedom movement has a very important role to play in the film *Water*. He is the voice of hope in turbulent times. Narayan, the messiah of hope in Kalyani's life in particular, and to Chuiya and Shakuntala in general, is progressive in his beliefs and is a follower of Gandhi. The soft-spoken, tender-heart law graduate recites poetry, absent-mindedly spills ink on his dress and plays flute, another fleeting imagery from Ray's *The World of Apu* (1959). Narayan is often vociferous in his debate with his anglicized friend and argues with his father on behalf of Gandhi. Narayan confronts his father about the regulations of the caste system and the social norms followed by most people. After Kalyani's death he debates on the actual reason for the widows to be sent to these houses in Varanasi, the reason is purely monetary than religious, reducing one member from the daily expense.

Not only Narayan, Mehta uses another holy man, rather an aged priest -- in the 'ghats,' or steps, leading down to the Ganges -- as the flag-bearers of reforms and also Gandhi's views. The priest recites the holy texts to the widows, and Shakuntala finds in him a philosopher and guide. He questions the validity of the texts that shun the widows from society. He mentions Shakuntala that as per the holy texts, a widow has three options: (1) to throw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, (2) to marry his brother (if he has one and it is permitted by the family), or (3) to live in poverty in a group home for widows. But he adds that in changing times there is a law that favours widow remarriage. [\[1\]](#) Unlike many other religious servants, he was quick in understanding the importance of Gandhi as he tells Shakuntala: "Gandhiji is one of the few in the world who listens to his voice of conscience." But when Shakuntala questions back, "What if conscience conflicts with faith?" we fail to hear the director's voice.

Water belongs to a sudden surge in Hindi films in general to show Gandhi as a real person or using his ideals and thoughts as vehicles to promote film philosophy. Extending that, 'Gandhi-giri' -- or applying Gandhism to contemporary living -- has started to become an accepted idiom of expression in art and culture as practiced in India. In setting the film in the late 1930s Mehta probably wanted to hit a couple of blows in one shot. On the one hand, in the depiction of Gandhi as a harbinger of hope, she silenced her critics who disrupted shooting of the film in 2001. On the other, with Gandhi, she wants to convey a strong social and political message. This is the time (the late 1930s) when the awareness of Gandhi is reaching beyond the limited intellectual periphery and touching the cauldron of caste and creed, rich and poor. Madhumati and her eunuch don't advocate Gandhi since they fear their trade will be affected by Gandhi's preaching ("untouchables are children of God") and yet Gandhi stands for liberation, hope and emancipation. In Mehta's *Fire* (1996), the first film of the 'elements' trilogy, we find the two central female characters Sita and Radha take refuge to a mosque, another agency of male oppression. Mehta failed to capitalize on the female/male, protagonist/antagonist dichotomy there. In contrast, in *Water*, the symbol of Gandhi as the purifier of sin across caste, gender and class, gains more momentum because of its relevance to the Indian society of the twenty-first century. Gandhi and the Ganges represent the fluidity of life, the unobstructed flow of humanness and the path to spiritual freedom.

Historically, Western writers have been harshly critical of Eastern cultures. In his seminal book *Modern Egypt*, Lord Cramer commented, "Want of accuracy which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is in fact the main characteristic of the oriental mind ... They are often incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises of which they may admit the truth" (Baring, 1908: 146). This once common European outlook towards Arabs and Egyptians has been often extended to all Orientals in general, and the Indians in particular. Deepa Mehta herself admits:

there are several conceptions that prevail in the west about India. There is firstly the spiritual India - a place where you go and find nirvana. Secondly, there is the conception that India is entirely poverty stricken, with a permanent kind of begging bowl attitude. There is the India of Maharajas, princes and queens, and the India that comes from nostalgia for the Raj. And there is always the prevailing pressure that people should feel superior to some other place: look how bad India is with all the beggars, aren't we lucky to be better off. (Philips, 1998)

In answer to this cultural critique, the question that logically crops up is whether Mehta's film aims to portray a different, self-esteemed India to the Western world or not, and more importantly, whether her film aims for a Western audience in the first place. As an Indian emigrant to Canada, whose films are predominantly on Indian themes (though they enter festivals as Canadian films) there probably isn't much doubt that her audience is essentially 'global.' On top of that, there is no reason to believe that *Water*, to a Western audience, portrays anything but India's 'begging bowl attitude,' which she denounced in the interview referred to above.

It is also notable that in 2000, when Deepa started working on this film, she faced with a harsh adversary in Shiv Sena who burnt down the sets, fearing that *Water* would portray India and her customs in poor light to the West. It is interesting that once Deepa completed the film in Sri Lanka afterwards, this incident added mileage to the general interest surrounding this film. In the film's official website, the background of the film is set up, noting, "It was once rumoured that Bal Thackeray was quoted as saying that the person he hates most in the world is Deepa Mehta." It is apparent that care has been taken to mark this film as 'controversial' as possible for its own commercial interests. Also provocative, is the use of two actors with Anglo-Indian origin and marked 'Western' looks to portray the two important characters. John Abraham (as Narayan) and Lisa Ray (as Kalyani) are hopelessly misfit in ingraining the mood of the 1930s, but they probably feature better at International film festivals!

Deepa Mehta has played safe, politically, in her representation of Gandhi. During the final complete shooting of the film in 2005 in Sri Lanka, the Indian central ministry was ruled by the Congress (I) Government. With Gandhi being the supreme of the Indian National Congress (the predecessor of that current party) – such a portrayal of Gandhi seems to be a conscious decision, in order to be accepted by these organizational powers. However, Mehta is not entirely towing the line - readers of Indian political history since the last century possibly cannot overlook the fact that the Congress in general, had never attacked at the root of the prevalent and wide-spread caste system itself or its economic and political manifestations.

With all due respect to the fact that the Gandhi-led Congress had been vocal against certain atrocities against the widows, they had largely been oblivious of the dreaded caste disparity

in the Indian society. The Congress was, and continues to be the bastion of power and money in the Indian political milieu: for, by and of the rich, upper caste, Hindu Indians. Hence, the revival of 'Gandhi-giri' as a social expression is farcical as well as misleading. In *Water*, Shakuntala's troubled expression in the end probably depicts her own doubts about the fate of Chuiya but as the shot fades to titles we read that many widows still live in abject social and economic depravation. Gandhi's movement in the end is probably incapable of ending this social cancer thereby dashing the hopes of millions of subalterns in the Indian sub continent. Hence, in showing Gandhi as a saviour in *Water*, and then commenting that the situation is more or less unchanged, the director is being street-smart. These aberrations apart, the film raises many important political and social questions in the Oriental mind as well, in spite of Baring's suggestion that Orientals are "singularly deficient in the logical faculty"! (Baring, 1908:9) Deepa Mehta, in the end, should be thanked for achieving this feat.

Notes

[1] Although almost eighty years after the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856 by the unflinching campaigns of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, history shows that at the time of *Water*'s setting, it was largely ignored since the upper-caste Brahmins are 'not benefited' by the law.

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Babel

Dir: Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu, USA/ Mexico, 2006

A review by Devorah Macdonald, University of British Columbia, Canada

Babel (2006), a film that consists of four stories in different timeframes in four countries, shows the prowess of its director Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu as a master of intricate and engaging narratives. The film completes a trilogy started with his first feature film in 2000. This film, and his following work writing and directing feature films, has earned him numerous nominations and awards that include a nomination for the Academy Award for best achievement as a director and best motion picture of the year for *Babel*.

Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu developed his 'legs' as a director in television and advertising. By the age of twenty-seven, Iñárritu was one of Mexican television company Televisa's youngest directors. He broke away from Televisa to form a company called Zeta Films that saw his start as a director in commercial productions. As a continuation of his earlier work as a talented disc jockey and a composer of music for Mexican feature films, television commercials offered a canvas on which to develop his artistry as a director.

With screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, Iñárritu made his first feature film, *Amores perros* (2000) - a gritty look at the underbelly of Mexican life that garnered an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. The success of *Amores perros* opened the doors of Hollywood to Iñárritu. Arguably, this film was the first in what would be a trilogy about death, which includes *21 Grams*, (2003), and now the Academy Award nominated *Babel*.

Made in the US, the second film of this trilogy, the hauntingly sober *21 Grams*, is a visual exploration in the human search for anodyne to grief. The film presents a variety of views on the subject. Death being the stimulus for grief; there is self-inflicted grief, hidden grief and grief that is unexpected and uncontrollable. The exploration revolves around the intersection of lives briefly touched through chance encounters that leave lasting effects. Watching Iñárritu's masterful narrative allows for a vicarious experience in disconsolation that is so close to the bone as to feel first-hand. Throughout the film, Iñárritu envelops his audience in heartbreak, despair, guilt and sorrow, leaving no room to escape from the pain of the film's theme, nor the emotions of the individuals who inhabit it.

The emotional grit afforded by Iñárritu's extraordinary ability to both select and direct actors who flawlessly tap into the emotional context of the characters of the story, offers the audience an experience that is riveting, though not always a comfortable one. The stories themselves are riveting as well. The stories weave around the simple idea that small mistakes can take on tragic consequences, which in turn, create a 'butterfly effect.' As such, choices made by the individuals in these stories affect the complexities of their lives, as do the choices made by individuals who cross their paths directly and indirectly. In some stories, actions that take place in one locale, have a large impact on actions unfolding in another locale as well as an impact on other characters in the larger story.

In *Babel*, from the first frames of an endless Moroccan desert landscape mystically unfolding with a haunting musical background, the last installment of Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's trilogy takes hold. Events are taking place that, while seemingly disconnected, cleverly connect as if pieces of a puzzle. The connections are subtle, but they form part of a larger political story. The beauty of the film is the beauty of Iñárritu's vision enhanced by cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto and the colourful cast of characters he chose to inhabit the screen from four disparate parts of the world.

Throughout *Babel*, this 'butterfly effect' is subtly predominant, showing how puny individuals are, within the vastness of earth's landscapes. Even so, decisions, sometimes innocently made, create unforeseen chaos and angst further along. There are choices made that result in consequences affected by conditions that have little to do with those who make these choices. Something happening in one part of the world directly affects events unfolding in another part of the world. In *Babel*, the four timeframes govern four countries where four distinct stories that are seemingly unrelated and deliver enjoyable narratives on the own merit, ultimately, are found to be related to one another. Small decisions culminate with large impact on the lives of the characters within the individual stories, and there is interplay amongst the various stories themselves that results in the chaos that individually inhabits each of them.

An example is one story in which we follow the Americans Richard, played by Brad Pitt, who gave up a starring role in Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) to work with Iñárritu, and Susan, played by Cate Blanchette. While touring Morocco, after the tragic loss of one of their children from sudden infant death syndrome, they struggle to heal their volatile relationship and, at the same time, they are pitted against frightening events that seem to have no logic. Two children in a mountain village in Morocco practice with a rifle bought by their goat-herder father for the purpose of killing predators to his herds. One son aims for the tour bus and accidentally shoots Susan. This sparks an international incident with terrorist undertones. The result of this incident is the furthest thing from the father's intention when he earlier accepted that gun in a trade.

While this story evolves, another story is spinning back home in the United States. Richard and Susan's children are in the care of their Mexican nanny Amelia (Adriana Barrasa), who must attend her son's wedding in Mexico, but cannot find a replacement to mind the children because Richard and Susan are delayed returning home due to the shooting. Amelia's decision to take the children with her to Mexico turns into chaos at the hands of her nephew, Santiago (Gael García Bernal). She allows him to drive her and the children back to the United States after he has steadily consumed an evening's worth of alcohol. What ensues becomes near catastrophic for all of them.

At the same time, a fourth story is woven into this tapestry, which involves the disturbed life of deaf-mute teenager Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi), who is testing her teenage boundaries in Japan with an abandon created largely due to the death of her mother and her life with a distant father. One powerful scene has ecstasy enhanced Chieko and friends entering a rave to the sounds of a phenomenal remix of Earth, Wind and Fire's disco hit *September* by Shinichi Osawa. The sound is cleverly muted on and off allowing the audience to experience Chieko's life first hand in a most disturbing, yet engrossing way. The insanity of the loudness and the crushing crowds becomes an even more intense experience with no sound and only the crushing crowds to contend with.

The relationships between the characters in *Babel*'s stories are entirely confused. Chieko's isolation through deafness is the perfect metaphor for the condition of the other characters: throughout the film, they try to be heard but are never truly understood by one another. [\[1\]](#) Chieko's father cannot verbalize his love for his daughter. She assumes that he does not love her because of the death of her mother. For the vacationing couple Richard (who chose the trip), and Susan (who hates everything about it), it takes an accident for Richard to realize and speak the love he has inside for his wife Susan. She could not, until the accident, tell him of the pain she carries inside from his distance and neglect. Nanny Amelia cannot find the words to convince Richard that she must attend her son's wedding in Mexico, nor that he is being unreasonable expecting her to ignore her family's needs in exchange for tending to his. Taking his children with her to Mexico, Amelia finds trouble when she cannot convince her nephew Santiago to listen to reason. At the same time, a Moroccan goat herder cannot convince the authorities that he has nothing to do with an international conspiracy. The authorities do not listen to their suspects, choosing instead to believe the worst-case scenario.

That is the wonder of the film. *Babel* involves the viewer with the struggles in the lives of everyone. Iñárritu's masterful talent brings an intimacy between the audience and the characters on the screen that makes the happenings feel so immediate that it hurts to watch their individual pain. Each performance is achingly honest with emotions revealed so truthfully that the viewer cannot possibly disconnect from the personal tragedies unfolding onscreen. The film gives you a close-up of the human condition and you are left considering the world's cultures, people and places with a feeling of familiarity gleaned from the experience of watching. The overall message suggests that, in places of the heart, we are all the same.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) In Genesis, chapter 11, verses 1 – 11, the Bible describes how there was only one language used prior to the construction of the tower of Babel. God was offended by the construction, and to confuse its builders, caused them to speak in different languages.