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Millennium Accidents, Breaking Narratives

in Pedro Almodóvar and Alejandro González Iñárritu

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Millennium Accidents is an attempt to show the relation between the shattered, fragmented and decentralizing nature of contemporary, globalized reality and the texts it produces. In my research I aim to reveal the changes in the building and development of a story as a narrative and cognitive phenomenon. The economic globalization and the high-tech revolution have led to a modification of our mental, emotional and social functioning, converting the whole world into a huge network (M. Castells). Consequently, narrative--be it verbal or iconic--shows the same metamorphosis, as it generates multiple plots, neglects temporal and spatial conventions, and moves beyond national identities. Six films (*Carne Trémula* 1997; *Todo sobre mi madre*, 1999; *Amores Perros*, 2000; *Hable con ella,* 2002;

21 Grams, 2003; *Babel*, 2006) form the corpus of texts analyzed in my dissertation. All appeared around the third millennium and are connected by the presence of a disastrous event--an accident--that radically alters the protagonists' lives but at the same time opens up new possibilities for plot development.

The first chapter scrutinizes the six films from a narratological perspective. I analyze the interplay between causality and coincidence as the main moving forces within the story, questioning the primacy of one over the other in a "broken," multiple plot narrative structure. In examining this structure, I elaborate on C. G. Jung's model of world functioning proposed in his seminal essay "Synchronicity: an Acasual Connecting Principle", whereby subjective and objective connections between individuals and life events are orchestrated by the mechanisms of causality and coincidence. Drawing on recent scholarship in literary theory and criticism, I work to direct attention to the much neglected role of coincidence in literature and film narrative. The study of the organizing (or disorganizing) force of coincidence, chance and randomness is then linked to chaos theory, which argues for disorder and lack of logic as higher forms of order. A similar conception applied to cinematic narrative animates the complex story worlds of the six films, reaching its apex in the densely woven thematic and characterological strands of Iñárritu's *21 Grams*.

In the second chapter I move to examine the role of thematic constants such as the body, violence and death as driving forces in their own right. Taking trauma studies as my point of departure, I situate the six films with respect to the notion of *trauma culture* (R. Luckhurst) in which unforeseen and incomprehensible violent blows destroy an already fragile stability, changing people and their sense of life forever. Through Judith Butler's vision of the loss and its meaning I discern a new type of hero in contemporary visual narrative –- one who deals with trauma, becoming a new self.

Recent years have brought a break in the holistic perception of the body, a desacralization that has re/devaluated life and death, blurring the boundaries between them by creating a new hybrid space of the neo-mort. This space has become possible due to advances in medical science and clinical practice: the brain-dead are kept alive and hearts and other organs travel between bodies. A moral questioning of the rights over one's own body and the exclusiveness of personhood is a central motif in accident-driven plots. At the same time, within the trauma frame, human existence is marked by an increased fluidity in the process of transitioning from some/one thing to someone/thing else.

The third and final chapter returns to consider the further effects of the film's broken or randomized narrative structure. The formalist's concept of *defamiliarization* echoes that of *deviation* – with both standing for uniqueness of the work as a piece of art. Each of the films proposes a breakdown of conventional narrative norms on at least three levels (time, logic and meaning), thus opening new dimensions for the cognitive and emotional processing of the text. My goal is to explore the effects of this "shuffled" mode of narrating; i.e., the extent to which such complex narrative structures enrich the spectator's experience of the text beyond the satisfaction derived from putting the puzzle together and whether a "chaotic" montage becomes the vehicle of a new conception of a collective or networked mind.

Dedication Page

To Helen

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Acknowledgements

As the Indian Vedic Treatise *Chakravidya* teaches, a human life moves in seven year cycles and each cycle is dominated by one of the seven chakras located in our light body. Among "fear", "feelings", "proactivity", "harmony", "philosophy", "wisdom" and "spirituality," *Spanish* has almost entirely dominated my life for the two most recent and richest cycles since I learnt my first word in this language in 2000. "La mesa," it was and it won my heart. From then I went through many stages of learning Spanish yet there are still so many vast *tierras ignotas* to learn. From "la mesa" and hundreds of other words, verbs and worlds I reached the point of being identified by friends as "la Rusa-Hispana." This is an amazing trajectory and I am looking forward to entering the next life cycle and I expect to never stop becoming someone else.

The present work is the culmination of my career as a student and I would have never achieved it, had I not been guided by a number of people all that long way from 2000, people who patiently encouraged me and passed on to me the precious knowledge they possess. My grammar professor Tamara. G. Solomonova and my first literary analysis professor Larisa. P. Kuznetsova opened the door to the Hispanic world for me. My BA and MA theses advisors, Inna A. Shaludko and Antonio Planells, respectively, began the work of molding a scholar in me. A shift from literature to cinema happened under the strong influence of

Jennifer Cooley with whom I took my first class on film (particularly on Pedro Almodóvar) and the discovery of a new, visual language reshaped the focus of my interest in the Humanities. This motivation increased and developed in Katy Vernon's cinema classes, and turned naturally into working on this dissertation under her direction. I am immensely appreciative of Katy's firmness but gentleness for this has been the only possible manner to make me write better and see things I wasn't able to see at the beginning of this journey.

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Introduction

But the millennium of faith gave way to the millennium of doubt,
And neither serfs nor stars continued their obedient course.
(Robert Stam)

The apocalyptical implications of the turn of the third millennium are still reverberating, yet the end of the world proved instead to be a gradual process of ending, visible in the seemingly inexorable outdating of human life forms and their substitution by others more suitable for the here and now. Among these forms one that has gone through a substantial modification is the phenomenon of the *story*. The recent proliferation of narrative forms that tend to reflect reality as a broken mirror may be seen as a warning of things to come or as a simple sign of change. As Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard indicate, a corpus of works has recently come to the fore in literature and film which is distinguished by its rejection of "social cohesion, strict causality and determinacy in favor of multiple outlooks, plurality, fragmentation, ambiguity" while bringing to the fore "disorder, chaos, chance, discontinuity, indeterminacy, and forces of random or aleatory play" (15 - 16). Instead of a conventional formulaic story, developing in a chronological order and featuring a centralized protagonist, the audience is offered a text that develops in a non-linear fashion and is constituted by several plots and multiple characters.

The visual texts that inspire this dissertation emerged over a nine-year time span beginning shortly before the year 2000. Pedro Almodóvar released

Carne Trémula and *Todo sobre mi Madre* in 1997 and 1999 respectively, and they were followed by Alejandro González Iñárritu's first full-length film, *Amores Perros* in 2000. Almodóvar's *Hable con ella* dates from 2002 and Iñárritu completes what has come to be seen as a filmic trilogy with *21 Grams* in 2003 and *Babel* in 2006. Marked by the kinds of narrative fragmentation, radical contingency and ambiguity characteristic of millennial culture, all six films also feature a common denominator in the occurrence of an accident that sends the characters and plots in unpredictable directions. A car crash triggers the dramas in *Todo sobre mi Madre, Amores Perros*, *Hable con ella* and *21 Grams*; whereas in *Carne Trémula* and *Babel* the destructive/constructive event is a gunshot.

The etymological origins of the word accident derive from the Latin "ad", meaning "to" and "cadere", meaning "to fall". Gradually, its signification shifted from "something that happens, an event," to "something that happens by chance" ("Accident"). The capricious nature of the accident goes hand in hand with its unpredictability; i.e. nobody knows when, whether or what may happen and to whom. And nowadays, an accident as an event befalling somebody often implies violence and damage.

In this work I aim at elaborating several notional components of the accident from within and without the fictional worlds created by the two contemporary film directors. I explore probability, randomness, contingency and coincidence from the point of view of their functioning in the text (as projected

from author's life experience or vision) as mechanisms opposed to those based on causation. Not only is the haphazardness of the main event in each film striking but also the way that minor coincidences seem to rule the narration, forming a system, a phenomenon that I argue is in need of closer theoretical attention in the fields of literature and cinema analysis and criticism.

The inferences made by David Bordwell and Wendy Everett, concerning the textual constructs under discussion may be considered a step forward in systematizing the role of coincidences in fiction. The latter asserts that typically, what sets several narrative strands in motion is an occurrence, most frequently, an accident, the randomness of which is clearly stressed and its consequences are entirely unpredictable (163-165). The former accentuates the striking and tantalizing nature of a sheerly accidental encounter, concluding that: "when the characters aren't all familiars and they don't participate in a causal project, the action is usually triggered by coincidence. In a plot populated by strangers," Bordwell proclaims, "contingency replaces causality" ("Poetics" 204). He identifies the traffic accident as the most common chance-based convergence and makes an illuminating point by suggesting that this major coincidence must be violent. "For one thing, traffic accidents are plausible within a story world. We know that they happen all too often. Moreover, they're the most obvious chance encounter that can have grave consequences. Bump me with your shoulder, and we'll probably move on and forget about it. Dent my car with yours, and we have

to halt to sort things out. Smash into my car, and our lives can change forever" (Bordwell "Poetics" 205, my emphasis). In terms of dramatic development, the car accidents serve as "plot engines" in the films that feature them as central events. And, as it proceeds from Bordwell's argument, the degree of the impact (damage) made by the clash directly influences the degree of likeliness for unthinkable, unexpected or unpredictable interactions between characters.

Focusing on recent films that feature the car crash as a central event, Amit Thakkar signals the emergence of a new trend in Hispanophone cinema, a genre or subgenre that he dubs the "cine de choque" (19). In addition to *Todo sobre mi Madre* and *Amores Perros* Thakkar includes: *Abre los Ojos* (Alejandro Amenábar, 1997); *Los Amantes del Círculo Polar* (Julio Medem, 1998); *Kilómetro 31* Rigoberto Castaneda, 2006); and *La Mujer sin Cabeza* (Lucrecia Martel, 2010) (20). Beyond the Hispanic world there are also several notable examples: *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996); *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000); *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2001); *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004) and *Intersections* (David Marconi, 2013). Thakkar asserts that "el choque" theme and aesthetics pervade the films in which such an event plays a role: "the word *choque* contains within it an array of physical and emotional wounds, its semantic field reverberates through both the crash and throughout the whole film" (26). In the films that belong to this category "choque is not to be understood as a single event but as a carefully dispersed element of the aesthetic of the film in question (…) In *cine de*

choque, the idea of *choque* – rather than the car crash itself – binds the fragments of the narrative text" (26). This kind of understanding or interpretation, in fact, loosens the restriction for the story to be necessarily bound by a car accident. In other words, the *choque* film seems to be one marked by any kind of violent encounter. What makes a film fall into this category is how the "choque" works afterwards, how it spreads into a network of voluntary and involuntary violence. Thus, the Almodóvar and Iñárritu films under study offer a significant contribution to the aesthetics of "el choque" that is much bigger than the clash itself, which, in fact, may be even visually omitted in the narration.

As Thakkar notes, the fact that traumatic effects of the accidents are strongly present and influential in the protagonists' stories leads to the recognition of violence as omnipresent in such filmic worlds, leaving no one unaffected. It turns out that everybody loses something to the accident, in most of the cases because of the mere fact of passing by. The randomness of the accident accentuates its nothing-personal attitude for it may befall you or me, thus making us equally vulnerable. Generally speaking, the presence of the accident in the films groups them into a category of the "stories of the damaged." I will argue that this damage or trauma is expressed not only on the level of content and character but also through a certain type of narrative structure and form, namely, non-linear/ shuffled/ scrambled/ randomized and so forth. These deformations in the discourse may be metaphorized as "damaged story-telling." Roger Luckhurst

describes this phenomenon: “Of late, an array of visual and written stories involving trauma have ostentatiously played around with narrative time, disrupting linearity, suspending logical causation, running out of temporal sequence, working backwards towards the inaugurating traumatic event, or playing with belated revelations that retrospectively rewrite narrative significance” (80). All these breakages in narrative deployment first of all affect the habitual organization of temporality in the text since the process of narration is an intrinsically time based phenomenon. Trauma driven plots are mostly focused on memory work, which disrupts the chronological sequencing. As Petra Kuppers indicates: “trauma is a moment out of flow – a moment out of time, unable to be smoothly reintegrated into the memory flow”; trauma “is the block which does not allow full narrative, but which nevertheless sets it and its repetition in motion” (186). In this complex dynamics the content shapes the form of the text, or rather deforms it and, essentially, cinematic techniques are highly capable of breaking narrative. The unfamiliar narrative patterning encourages the spectator to re-conceptualize the content of the text or to derive deeper meanings from it.

The fact that contemporary audiences quite successfully digest atypically constructed visual texts may be explained by consumers’ preparedness to process such films, conditioned by a range of fundamental changes which are by no means limited to the cultural realm. In his discussion of digital texts for the 21st

century, Terrence Ross invokes the functioning of human cognition, pointing out that art must approximate our minds better for they are multilayered and non-linear. "The mind doesn't work in one strand of thought that jumps around, but rather with a variety of strands that jump around while coming more clearly or less clearly into the foreground of our consciousness" (22). Further in his argument Ross urges a renovation or alteration of conventional narrative structures: "more than ever we live in an interconnected and cross-referenced world. To speak the truth about this world, artists need to be armed with an idiom that echoes the world in its form as well as its content" (23). In "Fictions of the Global" Rita Barnard connects the need to find a new kind of plot, where our received notions of human interconnection, causality, temporality, social space and so forth are reshaped, to the demands of the new world of millennial capitalism (208). María del Mar Azcona sees the modifications in cinematic constructions as necessary in order to be able to represent the consequences of complex social, economic, and political processes crystallized in concepts such as globalization, transnationalism, deterritorialization, and diaspora ("The Multi-Protagonist Film" 7).

The apparent popularity of films that deviate from a conventional formula, featuring several plots and characters, may lie in the fact that this alternative template has "captured some of the preoccupations, anxieties and hopes of our age in a particularly potent manner" (Azcona "Love" 3). Manuel Castells

summarizes these transformations, dating from the 1980s, from a sociological perspective as grounding factors for his theory of the network society. In the first place, Castells contends that we have entered the Information Age, a "historical period in which human societies perform their activities in a technological paradigm constituted around microelectronics-based information/communication technologies, and genetic engineering. It replaces/subsumes the technological paradigm of the Industrial Age, organized primarily around the production and distribution of energy" (6). The result of this technological revolution is the formation of an economy that has become informational, global and networked with the Internet as the main locus of interactive communication and business operations (Castells 10). Secondly, the unleashing of another revolution in the field of biology made "possible for the first time, the design and manipulation of living organisms, including human parts" (Castells 10). And thirdly, the establishment of a new social structure has led to a redefinition of time and space – the two material foundations of life becoming, as Castells puts it, "timeless time and the space of flows" (13). The space of flows defines the technological possibility to organize social practices simultaneously without geographical contiguity. The use of new information/communication technologies has also contributed to the annihilating and de-sequencing of time. Temporal compression is achieved through shortening the experience of wait since, for instance, global financial transactions are completed in a split second, fresh updates about our

friends' lives constantly appear in social networks, and historic happenings are live broadcasted on TV. Electronic hypertexts have opened the possibility of random sequencing thus scrambling the relation between past, present and future (Castells 13-14). In the context of my research, the three shifts described by Castells, correspond to and ground the three chapters of this dissertation in terms of historical and social relevance.

Significantly for the present work, this new social morphology directly projects into a certain type of filmic patterns frequently characterized and metaphorized as a network narrative by Bordwell, Azcona, Everett and others. Besides the conceptual and structural model of the network, a variety of terms from different fields have been applied to the visual narratives in question. The analogous nature of certain phenomena in science and narrative allow for interdisciplinary bridging or borrowing. These parallelisms mostly focus on multiplicity, simultaneity, randomness, non-linearity and fragmentation. In attempts to classify the shuffled, scrambled, mosaic, and jigsaw organization of the texts terms such as fractal, modular, hyperlink, six-degree separation and converging fates narrative have been used. It must be noted that there is still a great deal of vagueness in identifying the determining characteristics for a film to belong to a certain category. Until now, in cinema theory and criticism, all these terms have been used interchangeably to refer to any film that features multiple plots and protagonists. The multiplication of both in filmic narrative is seen by

Azcona as a "contemporary tendency to abandon the single-protagonist structure on which most film narratives have traditionally relied and replace it by a wider assortment of characters with more or less independent narrative lines" ("The Multi-Protagonist Film" 1). However, the emergence of this storytelling pattern as such by no means dates from last two decades of the 20th century. It is more accurate to speak of a re-emergence or flourishing of a multiple plot structure. As Azcona testifies on the matter, recently "multi-protagonist movies have developed a versatile and multi-faceted narrative structure, as a wide array of recent and not so recent examples demonstrate. When in the course of this process the films began to accrue a number of common narrative and stylistic characteristics, attached to a specific perspective on certain contemporary social issues, what started as a narrative structure gradually acquired the status of a genre" ("The Multi-Protagonist Film" 1). Bordwell seconds Azcona's observation by pointing out the fact that although the network narrative pattern in film goes quite far back r (e.g. *Grand Hotel*, E. Goulding, 1932), most of such films have been made since 1980s ("Lessons").

The reasons for the multi-protagonist boom seem to stem from the advent of the Informational Age announced by Castells that has directly impacted digital media. The fact that a multiple plot structure is often termed as a "database" or a "hyperlink" film speaks for itself. In relation to this, Alison McMahan traces a parallel with the appearance of new modes of subjectivity, to be found in

computer games as well as in Hollywood films (146). "Often produced by the same companies that produce interactive media, these films," she concludes, "have already absorbed the lessons of multiform subjectivity in interactive media and have applied it to the more linear cinema" (McMahan 146). The invention and development of the Internet, beyond the network structure per se, have also contributed to the multiple plot model, offering perspectives that "range from the constraining effects of global processes on people's freedom to the interconnectedness between individuals on a global scale" (Azcona 7).

Among the terms applied to a multiple plot structure, my personal preference is that of network narrative[1] for it seems to be ontologically the closest to the texts under study, with relationality and a-centeredness being their main and common denominators.

Castells describes a network as a set of interconnected nodes where "some nodes are more important than others, but they all need each other as long as they are within the network" (15); hence, there is no centralized hierarchy among the units of the network, in other words, by definition it has no center (Castells 15). This description echoes the one offered by Azcona in reference to multi-protagonist films, which "feature a wider group of characters without establishing

[1] The definition of a network narrative given by Bordwell is the most explanatory and applicable to the texts in question where " several protagonists are given more or less the same weight as they participate in intertwining plotlines. Usually these lines affect one another to some degree. The characters might be strangers, slight acquaintances, friends, or kinfolk. The film aims to show a larger pattern underlying their individual trajectories" ("Lessons").

a strict narrative hierarchy among them" ("The Multi-Protagonist Film" 2). Bordwell, focusing on the effects on film perception, observes that "when watching movies like this, we mentally construct not an overarching causal project but an expanding social network"; and "we wouldn't get so strong a sense of a spreading web, and we wouldn't discern the degrees of separation so vividly, if we were following the sort of narrative that guides us to center on one or two protagonists and their goals" (Bordwell "Poetics" 193). Everett considers such decentered and dynamic narrative structures as particularly apt for the 21st century, since the fluidity and flexibility of the network format, its rejection of stable divisions between center and periphery reflect the essential changes in contemporary society (170).

Naturally, culture hasn't remained immune to the drastic reconfigurations in the social and economic order. It becomes "similarly fragmented and constantly recombined in the networks of a kaleidoscopic hypertext" (Castells 19). In addition, "in the interplay between relationships of production and cultural framing, relationships of production define levels of consumption, and culture induces consumption patterns and life styles" (Castells 19). I would like to develop these two notions, as applied to the films as cultural products of contemporaneity, through the lens of the newly formed space where both Hispanic authors function.

The fragmented space resists any kind of consolidation, be it based on national, cultural, political or ideological identity. The "space of flows" is a locus of nowhere that translates into a number of "de's" – namely, decentering, delocalization, deracination, depoliticization and so forth. In the world of filmmaking, the tendency towards decentering is marked by the neutralization of the long lasting opposition of European production to that of Hollywood. In 1991, Marsha Kinder already testified to an essential historical reconstruction, writing that "the terms *cinema, nation*, and *national cinema* are increasingly becoming outmoded concepts that are being decentered and assimilated within larger global systems of mass entertainment" ("Remapping" 5). Joint intercontinental projects (in terms of production, context, cast and crew) have grown in popularity, offering an eclectic mix of identities and discourses in their final products. One truly global phenomenon generated out of these commercial and creative collaborations is the emergence of a transatlantic star system. It must also be noted that the American component within the Euro-American confluence is not limited to Hollywood. Recently, Latin American cinema has effectively manifested itself in the international arena, thus, as Smith puts it, becoming the third part of a golden triangle ("Transatlantic Traffic" 389).

The role of Almodóvar (Europe - Spain) and Iñárritu (Latin America – Mexico) within the dynamics of this intercultural interchange is characterized by a different type of involvement. For example, Iñárritu shot his second film, *21*

Grams (2003), spoken entirely in the English language, in Memphis in the United States. The phenomenon is amplified with *Babel* (2006) - "a film of great scale and global ambition"- in which four stories unfold in four countries (USA, Mexico, Morocco and Japan) operating in six languages: Spanish, Arabic, Berber, Japanese, sign language and English (Shaw 13). And his last work (*Biutiful* 2010) is set in Spain, in Barcelona, and is in Spanish. As Smith notes, Iñárritu's initial impulse to broaden geographical and cultural horizons originates from his and his Mexican colleague Alfonso Cuarón's refusal to be confined to a Latin ghetto, as a result of no longer seeing the relationships with the US in the antagonistic terms as earlier Mexican directors did, and from the desire to have the freedom to travel to realize their projects ("Transatlantic Traffic" 395). Unlike Iñárritu, Almodóvar has never made a film outside Spain and he films only in Spanish. However, as Kinder points out, making films only on his home soil doesn't "insulate" Almodóvar's work. Apart from a rich intertextuality with Hollywood movies the Spanish director also emphasizes connections with Latin America through the cast and the choice of musical material ("Reinventing the Motherland" Kinder 246). "By extending the reach of his films throughout the Spanish language world," Kinder concludes, Almodóvar "deepens his penetration of the global market in a way that rivals Hollywood and Europe while still remaining loyal to his Spanish speaking origins and still retaining the outsider's edge" (Kinder "Reinventing the Motherland" 246). Compared to Almodóvar's "Spanish-ness," Iñárritu's

"Mexican-ness" is residual; i.e. it is reduced to the repercussions of *Amores Perros* that in 2000 opened the door to the international scene for the novice Mexican director. As Joanne Hershfield insightfully notes, the works of "los tres amigos," Cuarón, Iñárritu and their equally international Mexican colleague Guillermo del Toro, "are identified as 'Mexican' films even though they have little to do with Mexico in terms of subject or institutional affiliations" and this tendency in labeling "reveals how the term national functions within the rubric of what has come to be known as a borderless or global cinema"[2] (171).

Another sign of the blurring of national boundaries is expressed in the increasing intercontinental mobility of the stars appearing in their films. Speaking of Almodóvar and Iñárritu's casting choices a constant interchange is observed. The Spanish actor, Javier Bardem stars in Almodóvar's *Carne Trémula* in 1997 and in Iñárritu's *Biutiful* in 2010, while Mexican Gael García Bernal appears in Iñárritu's *Amores Perros* as a male lead in 2000 and as a protagonist in Almodóvar's *La Mala Educación* in 2004. In addition, both directors share the fact of including Argentinian actors and actresses in their films (Cecilia Ross as Manuela*, Todo sobre mi Madre*; Darío Grandinetti as Marco, *Hable con ella*;

[2] For example *Babel* is a complex co-production behind which there were five companies, namely: The Mexican production company Zeta Films (founded by Iñárritu himself in 1991 in México), the American company Media Rights Capital, the American distribution company Paramount Vantage, the American company Anonymous Content and the French film company Central Films. As Kerr notes, although "the exact amounts invested in Babel by these five companies have not been made public, (…) it is likely that the bulk of the budget came from the three American companies, making it, in financial terms at least, a predominantly American film" (45-46). Therefore, it is questionable to label *Babel* as a Mexican film.

Maricel Álvarez as Marambra, *Biutiful*). What distinguishes Iñárritu from Almodóvar in this regard is the direct Hollywood presence in two of his films, *21 Grams* and *Babel,* featuring Sean Penn and Naomi Watts in the first and Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett in the second. These choices may be criticized. For example, Deborah Shaw attributes the excessive focus on Pitt and Blanchett in *Babel* (despite the fact that they share equivalent screen time with other lesser known and unknown actors from other national contexts) to marketing strategies and as a premise for privileging a North American point of view in this presumably global saga (16).

The consequences of internationalizing and globalizing the work of art in the economic conditions of late capitalism may be assessed as ambivalent. On the one hand, the interchange, facilitated by the vertiginous development of media, video and transportation technologies, provides a much wider span for distribution of the films in question, thus arousing interest in other cultures among diverse audiences all over the globe. On the other hand, the cultural products these audiences are offered are characterized by a partial loss of cultural specificity for the sake of increasing their selling potential on the cinema market. Various critics coincide in pointing to the necessity for a certain compromise that affects the authenticity of the context where the film is made or which the film intends to depict. For example, Hershfield notes that a national film projected abroad cannot be "too national" if it aims at appealing to a global audience. A

national film "must supplement its localness with a global aesthetic that appeals to an audience educated through globalizing models of cinema practices" (171). Referring to the conditions of Latin American film production, Luisela Alvaray indicates that the local film directors must please foreign producers by watering down, or altering in some way, the home-grown product (62). Paul Kerr uses the term "deracinate" in defining the process by which cultural products are made more accessible and less objectionable for foreign audiences (47). To summarize, the neutralization of ethnic/cultural/historical specificity guarantees the better comprehension of the story among worldwide audience whose cultural norms may essentially differ from the ones represented in the film.

What may also partially decontextualize Almodóvar and Iñárritu's fiction from a specific national terrain is a different take on the political. Both directors do not explicitly involve political or government institutions but acknowledge the (trans) national forces that shapes the characters' lives. For the most part the political and social aspects of the given societies are viewed and problematized through the personal relations of people belonging to these societies. In that sense the films adopt a kind of "close-up" view, which focuses almost exclusively on the human and finds its way to the global spectators' mind and soul, playing down the cultural and national differences. In his critique of *Babel* Bordwell brings up Pico Iyer's concept of a "global soul" as one unifying all four continents' dramas ("Lessons"). Barnard alludes to the same concept by suggesting that what enables

the spectator to connect all stories and all social locales in *Babel* is "ultimately an intense, overarching affect: a kind of globalization of compassion that arises from a profound sense of human isolation and physical vulnerability" (209). Both factors mark the post/trans-national cinema, and seem to be a recuperative effort in rescuing or creating "forms of relationality based on experience rather than old identities of nation, religion, biology"[3]. The global soul extends to eternal notions and emotions of pain, grief, love and hope that are the keys to the "universal grammar" of global, world, international or planetary storytelling.

The first chapter of this dissertation scrutinizes the six films from a narratological perspective. Film critics and theorists focusing on different types of multiple plot structures conclude that the primacy of causality in the dramas imbedded in these structures has been undermined. "In contrast to those stories in which characters' lives are the outcome of a logical succession of events," observes Azcona, "human existence is seen here as contingent and fragile (…) Randomness challenges individuals' ability to control their own lives and, therefore, the emphasis on chance also carries an implicit questioning of most long-standing myth regarding the power of the individual" ("The Multi-Protagonist Film" 35). Naturally, the emphasis on serendipity urges the search for the causes of the events that went out of control and led to an unexpected or undesirable aftermath, the interplay between causality and casualty having always

[3] Kathleen Vernon's reflection.

been quite intriguing and enigmatic. In my explorations I bring *casualty* (which, in fact, is often interpreted as *acausality*) to the fore as a structural means and a narrational device, seeing it in a constant existential dialogue with *causality* within Almodóvar and Iñárritu's multilayered universes.

To this end I analyze the interplay between causality and coincidence as the main moving forces within the story, questioning the primacy of one over the other in a multiple plot narrative construct. In examining this type of structure, I elaborate on C. G. Jung's model of world functioning proposed in his seminal essay "Synchronicity: an Acasual Connecting Principle," whereby subjective and objective connections between individuals and life events are orchestrated by the mechanisms of causality and coincidence. Drawing on recent scholarship in literary theory and criticism, I work to direct attention to the much neglected role of coincidence in literature and film narrative. The study of the organizing (or disorganizing) force of coincidence, chance and randomness is then linked to chaos theory, which argues for disorder and lack of logic as higher forms of order. A similar conception applied to cinematic narrative animates the complex story worlds of the six films, reaching its apex in the densely woven thematic and characterological strands of Iñárritu's *21 Grams*.

In the second chapter I move to examine the role of thematic constants such as the *body, violence* and *death* as driving forces in their own right. Taking trauma theory as my point of departure, I situate the six films with respect to the

notion of "trauma culture" (Luckhurst) in which unforeseen and incomprehensible violent blows destroy an already fragile stability, changing people and their sense of life forever. Through Judith Butler's vision of the loss and its meaning I discern a new type of hero in contemporary visual narrative – one who deals with trauma, becoming a new self. According to Butler, both vulnerability and the experience of loss make a tenuous "we" of us all. We are "attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (20). The fact of being related to each other translates into social bonding through violence. However, despite the threat of physical or psychic annihilation, as victims of an accident, we should not fail to acknowledge its promise of rebirth through the formation of a community that shares a common grief.

Recent years have brought a break in the holistic perception of the body, a desacralization that has re/devaluated life and death, blurring the boundaries between them by creating a new hybrid space of the neo-mort. This space has become possible due to advances in medical science and clinical practice: the brain-dead are kept alive and hearts and other organs travel between bodies. A moral questioning of the rights over one's own body and the exclusiveness of personhood is a central motif in accident-driven plots. At the same time, within the trauma frame, human existence is marked by an increased fluidity in the process of transitioning from some/one thing to someone/thing else.

The third and final chapter returns to consider the further effects of the films' broken or randomized narrative structure. The formalist concept of "defamiliarization" echoes that of "deviation" – with both standing for uniqueness of the work as a piece of art. Each of the films proposes a breakdown of at least three aspects of conventional narrative norms (temporality, order and cohesion), thus opening new dimensions for the cognitive and emotional processing of the text. My goal is to explore the effects of this "shuffled" mode of narrating; i.e., the extent to which such complex narrative structures enrich the spectator's experience of the text beyond the satisfaction derived from putting the puzzle together and whether a "chaotic" montage becomes the vehicle of a new conception of a collective or networked mind. In this quest I turn to the works of film scholars and practitioners whose theorizations examine the specificity of visual discourse in terms of its unique ability to twist time form in connection with the content.

The Case and the Cause of Coincidence

Gracias quiero dar al divino
Laberinto de los efectos y de las causas
Por la diversidad de las criaturas
que forman este singular universo.
(Jorge Luis Borges)

The fictional universes of all six films studied in this dissertation may be compared to the creations of Antoni Gaudi, due to their peculiar architectonics, bizarre content and ways of expression that bewilder the spectator. Nevertheless we finally emerge from the time and space labyrinths able to answer the question: what really happened? The reason for the potential comprehensibility of each text or, for the impossibility of complete incomprehension, is that however shuffled the order and however intricate the intrigue, the fabula[4] of each plotline still makes sense because it obeys the laws of canonical narrative structure, namely a "specific textual strategy generally used to forge meaningful connections for the reader between events and characters within the narrative world, thereby creating immersion" (Dannenberg 26). And if this requirement is met, even the story told backwards will not be discarded as nonsense (Bordwell "Poetics" 110).

This chapter is dedicated to analyzing the fictional worlds embodied through multiple plot complexes in their pure form, in other words, freed from artistic (dis) organization. For this purpose, each text has been processed and

[4] *Fabula* and *syuzhet* are terms that originate from the Russian Formalist School as applied to the analysis of the text from a narratological perspective. Fabula defines the recounted events in causal chronological sequence while syuzhet is a representation of fabula events in the text (Bordwell "Classical Hollywood Cinema" 18).

transcribed into a scheme that represents the chronological order of events with all connections and collisions between several plot lines that take place during their development. Operating on the level of deep structures also allows us to focus on the logic of the story governed by two main mechanisms, the workings of which are less visible due to formal and temporal organization complexity of the films in question. The first mechanism is *causality*. It seemingly lies on the surface and has been traditionally given primacy over the other – *casualty* – which is no less powerful, if not more important. Significantly, in multi-strand narratives of the kind found in Iñárritu's films the potential of causal or casual connections grows immensely since an inter-plot triggering becomes possible. I will examine both mechanisms with respect to a broader context of humanities and science, given that an overview of different approaches to both phenomena seems useful to disclose better the mystery and mastery of storytelling.

The supposed primacy of causality does not necessarily come from empirical experience; rather it represents a more comfortable perception and accommodation of things happening, out of which a system is built. Although not perfect, it is still convincing enough for us to hold to it in making sense of a story or of an experience. As David F. Bell observes in this respect: "plunged into the midst of social and historical existence…we constantly explain our actions and relations in terms of motivations couched in causal reasoning and are truly at home within that method of rationalizing the world" (2). The idea that actions and

events derive from chance more than from purpose is (un)consciously refused by our minds since it threatens and destabilizes the notions of order, agency, liberty, identity and ethical responsibilities (Kavanagh v). The tendency to always look for a precedent in the past in order to explain the present state of affairs - fortunate or unfortunate for the agent – is a psychological mechanism that helps to reduce uncertainty and fears about the future (Doob 34). Looking for the antecedent conditions of an event lets us rationalize or interpret the whole sequence or even the whole world in causal terms. The supposition that every event has a cause to be detected, that, in turn, is another event which had a cause, in a more general, universal context means the possibility to rewind human evolution to the first precedent, a point at which natural science ironically meets with creationists, in search of the *Prima Causa* (Storm 247). The paradox of the first cause consists of the fact that it is finite, in other words, the causal chain stops there without an explicable or hypothetical antecedent, which could be interpreted as the premise for the existence of mechanisms other than causality. As Lance Storm asserts: "causal models are relative structures, valid only in accordance with the current epistemological foundations upon which such models are built (…) and by the natural limitations of human cognitive functions, the description of many phenomena in causal terms may come to be seen as less informative than first thought" (248).

It would be fair to acknowledge that human thought has always questioned the cause – effect mechanism seeking other links or connections between events on a scale that ranges from particular, everyday situations up to an individual's whole life trajectory and the rise and fall of centuries long civilizations. The Ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Democritus considered chance as an alternative force that exists in opposition to "a deterministic world of compulsory and invariable causality" (Monk 18). Aristotle understands coincidence as a random convergence of two causal chains. In other words, a coincidence happens when the trajectories of two or more moving objects or human paths meet at some point without the intention of doing so and this fact may change their further intended trajectories, or end them entirely (Hacking 12). The Democritus model offers two interpretations of chance interventions into a chain of events: "in terrestrial terms, chance is ascribed to occurrences of whose determining causes we are simply ignorant; and in celestial terms chance exists as the original and enabling *self*-caused event that saves the deterministic system from the problem of infinite regress" (Monk 19). Seeing chance as a self- caused or as an acausal event, opens the door to another level of comprehending reality, which might give a more complex but at the same time more complete picture of the world. According to Leland Monk the main obstacle to this view lies in a form of metaphysical thinking organized by "a series of mutually exclusive and contradictory categories that are defined by their logical opposition" and entails

"the prioritizing of one term and the consequent devaluation of its logical opposite" (4). "Necessity and contingency, determinism and indeterminism, order and randomness are all particular instances of the binominal structure of metaphysical thought. Traditionally and consistently, the former terms of these pairings have been exalted while the latter terms have been relegated to a marginal and denigrated position" (Monk 4).

At least in Western cosmology, the tendency to prioritize determinism, necessity and order from both a religious and scientific perspective, has been the major existential anchor for society throughout the centuries. The Medieval paradigm implied that "in a God–directed world there is no room for coincidence" (Sternberg, cited in Dannenberg 90). Even as religion and science struggled for dominance over human affairs, a refusal to consider equally randomness and causality was still quite prominent. As Lorraine Daston accordingly observes:

> In the annals of seventeenth-century philosophy and most especially in the writings of the probabilists, there was no error more vulgar than admitting the reality of Fortuna and her boon companion, Chance. In the clamorous debates of seventeenth – century philosophy, which challenged the foundations of theology, natural philosophy, ethics, politics, and even mathematics, there was one unisonal chord struck: the unanimous and resounding rejection of the reality of fortune. Antipathy to fortune united Protestant and Catholic, mechanical philosopher and Cambridge Platonist, Hobbesian with Christian virtuoso.
>
> (26).

The Age of Reason didn't favor chance either, placing it in the same category as superstition and vulgarity. "The rational man, averting his eyes from

such things, could cover chaos with a veil of inexorable laws (…). The world might often look haphazard, but only because we do not know the inevitable workings of its inner springs" (Hacking 1). By the end of the 19th century, the bulwark of predictability and control was significantly shaken. An American philosopher C. S. Peirce states in 1892 that "the world is irreducibly chancy" and "the apparently universal laws that are the glory of the natural sciences are a by-product of the workings of chance" (cited in Hacking 11). The indeterminist revolution finally bursts in the 20th century in the field of physics, dismantling causality as the main and the only possible metaphysical law and affirming that: "the past doesn't determine exactly what happens next" (Hacking 1).

Importantly, taken as a stronghold of stability, the laws of necessity, determinism and order never guaranteed the full control of a situation by the agent; nor could these laws fully assure that all events are causal. During the anthropocentric eras the belief in science and the individual's certainty that wisely made choices would lead to desirable results was always undermined by unpredictable outcomes. The theocentric system didn't even permit questioning of God's decisions however inexplicable or unfair they might have seemed. Thus, all responsibility for tragic events was abdicated to a superior mind. In other cultures and before Christianity in Europe, the higher control over human lives was attributed to certain divinities and "the decrees and commands of these divine agencies were consistently portrayed as fixed, binding and inexorable" (Raphals

562). Significantly, such concepts as *fate, fortune, providence, destiny* and so forth are operational even in contemporary, superstition-free societies, and perceived as beneficial or counter forces against which the personal will is powerless. The fact of being purely intuitive distinguishes the perception of these concepts. In other words, one feels their presence and influence but is incapable of understanding them fully. In regard to such phenomena as *chance* and *luck* even a partial or an a posteriori explanation of why things went one way rather than another is barely possible; both (chance and luck) have been completely ungraspable since ancient times. In describing Cicero's conclusion on these concepts Deborah Bennet emphasizes uncertainty as their common conceptual component. "We do not apply," she writes, "the words 'chance', 'luck', 'accident' or 'casualty' except to an event which has so occurred or happened that it either might not have occurred at all, or might have occurred in any other way" (153). This means that the final result of a series of events is incalculable and it is impossible to predict what is coming by what we have seen or known before; or, in other words, the effects are not conditioned by the causes. The randomness of the outcomes undermines the control over one's actions and threatens one's security. Both factors are fearful and that explains why chance, luck and coincidence have been relegated to deep denial, which, however, is the best way to acknowledge their existence.

Besides the dominant vision of the world as explicable and ruled by causality, there have always been manifestations of an alternative logic. Neglected or even suppressed for centuries, the evidence for this other way of understanding the functioning of the universe has recently begun to attract more attention and seems to contribute to the construction of a new world view. As indicated above, the Greek philosophers didn't discard chance and coincidence and, for instance, the model provided by Aristotle acknowledges their objective existence and experiential reality. In addition, this model succeeds in avoiding "the strict logical opposition of chance and necessity which leads to many of the false problems that have occupied thinkers about chance" (Monk 20).

Where official religious and scientific discourse channeled evidence and explanation in the only "right" direction, the study of unpredictability and randomness was concentrated in the sphere of semi-scientific and occult practices. Bennett's research on the topic testifies that:

> Chance mechanism, or randomizers, used for divination, decision-making, and games have been discovered throughout Mesopotamia, the Indus valley, Egypt, Greece, and the Roman Empire. Yet the beginnings of an understanding of probability did not appear until the mid–1500s, and the subject was not seriously discussed until almost one hundred years later. Historians have wondered why conceptual progress in this field was so slow, given that humans encountered chance repeatedly from earliest times.
>
> (8)

Analyzing the ontology of such concepts as inevitability, determinism, fatalism and destiny throughout mankind's history, Leonard Doob offers examples of the

presence of an alternative reasoning in the cases of non-personified divinations (where inanimate magic objects are used) along with prophets as holders of information about the future not derived from previous experience and thus appearing illogical and enigmatic (42,43). In addition, Jung taps astrology and alchemy as exponents of non-deterministic knowledge situated on the boarder between science and magic; this kind of knowledge stands for the possibility of acausal connections without excluding the causal ones (79).

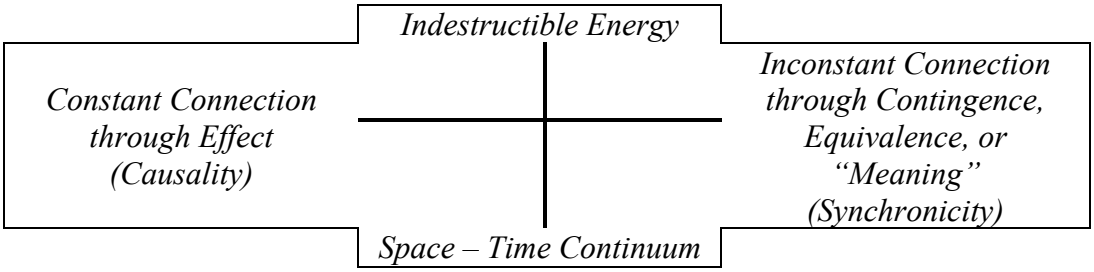
As noted above, by the beginning of the 20th century a radical reconsideration of the univocal and one-sided interpretation of natural laws as deterministic and causal took place. As Katherine N. Hayles indicates in this respect: "the pendulum, having gone so far as it could in the direction of encompassing order, began to swing the other way as various disciplines became interested in exploring the possibilities of disorder. Attention focused on the mechanisms that made unpredictability a fact of life rather than the aberration it had seemed in Newtonian mechanics" (xii). In such a context, it became indispensable to create a third territory and to start operating "in the middle of a 'chaosmos ' where lawful regularity and purposeful design mingle with purely random developments in complex confusion (White 173). Further development in the direction of complexity in the picturing of the world marks the decades of 1960-70s, when science turned away from totalizing and universalizing perspectives toward decentralized, local, fragmented and fractured systems

(Hayles 2). The functioning of these systems is mainly characterized by non-linearity, unpredictability and randomness – the qualities first analyzed and brought to the fore in physics and mathematics, then spread to biology, epidemiology, meteorology and, subsequently, projected into philosophy and art. The study of complex systems, in which non-linear problems, rather than inconvenient deviations from linearity, are considered in their own right, has developed into a wide-ranging interdisciplinary research area coined *chaos theory* (Hayles 9). The overarching function of chaos theory, according to Harriett Hawkins, consists in serving "as a cross-roads, a juncture, a matrix where various cultural associations interact and converge" (xi). In addition, chaotic dynamics challenges the linear historical, ideological and cultural determinism that has been theoretically imposed on art – the fact that enables us at least to recognize or to comprehend but never to predict or to control (Hawkins xi, 18). The interrelatedness of science and art is also seen in the appropriation and metaphorization of chaos-related phenomena by literature and especially cinema. Such terms as *butterfly effect*, *fractals* and *strange attractors* are applied to organizational principals of certain type of texts, at the same time as they "provide important theoretical perspectives on the persistent instability that characterizes the dynamical interaction between order and disorder both in canonical and popular fictions" (Hawkins ix).

Considered within the oppositions of causal to casual, certain to unpredictable, ordered to random, the second terms of the pairs are taken to designate the illogical or chaotic behavior of the elements of a system. However, with the development of interdisciplinary research on chaos theory, the connotation of random events has oscillated from negative to positive. As Hayles observes in this respect, chaos is seen as liberating while order "became correspondingly inimical, associated with the mindless replication of military logic or with the oppressive control of a totalitarian state (or state of mind)" (22). Another premise for re-evaluating the significance of chaotically functioning systems is based on the supposition that chaos in nature and art serves "higher order as a creative force that may produce beauty, freedom and growth as well as catastrophe" (Hawkins 4).

The impossibility to discern connections between the elements of a structure doesn't mean that there is no order in it. It may be hidden since the world is "ordinarily shielded from us by our intrusive consciousness; but coincidental, chancy or any other disparate correspondences are possibly an entry point to revealing the order beyond plain causality" (Alford 68). What follows from Steven E. Alford's supposition is that the conscious perception of reality is limited to the realm of causes and effects, while lack or absence of awareness opens the door to another level of comprehension. In this respect Jung assumes that unconscious knowledge is an "absolute knowledge" and that it is not

cognition but perception which provides the ground for acausal connections or, as he puts it for *causeless order* (87-88, 101). Carl Gustav Jung represents the so-called causeless order in a metaphysical model, which seems to embrace the functioning of the world more accurately or completely:



Jung's essay "Synchronicity: an Acausal Connecting Principle" is a thoughtful contribution to the polemic about cause–effect mechanisms and any kind of alternatives to it. By pure chance, it also happens to be of great use for the present work dedicated to story worlds. In general, it is an attempt to draw attention to the interconnectedness of subjects and objects within the universe on levels such as causality and parallelism. Drawing on the phenomenon repeatedly met in his practice as a therapist, which consists of the meaningful coinciding of a thought, feeling or reminiscence with an event, taking place in the exterior world at the same moment, Jung interprets and elaborates this particular case to the level of macrocosm. His main claim is that "besides the connection between cause and effect there is another factor in nature which expresses itself in the arrangement of events and appears to us as meaning"; thus the "rationalistic attitude of the West

is not the only possible one and is not all embracing, but is in many ways a prejudice and a bias that ought perhaps to be corrected" (79). Proving his argument, Jung brings up examples of the models[5] intended to embrace the world as a whole and he observes that "in this totality as in primitive or in our medieval, pre–scientific psychology (still very much alive), are included things which seem to be connected with one another only 'by chance', by a coincidence whose meaningfulness appears altogether arbitrary" (83). In addition to an exhaustive study of philosophical precedents of this kind, the cases from his own practice as a psychologist led Jung to a set of conclusions on how human life incorporates and operates in the world as a holistic system:

> All the events in a man's life would accordingly stand in two fundamentally different kinds of connection: firstly, in the objective causal connection of the natural process; secondly, in a subjective connection which exists only in relation to the individual who experiences it (…) That both kinds of connection exist simultaneously, and the selfsame event, although a link in two totally different chains, nevertheless falls into place in both, so that the fate of one individual invariably fits the fate of the other, and each is the hero of his own drama while simultaneously figuring in a drama foreign to him.
>
> (21)

In the diagram included in the Appendix I have developed and applied this definition to the fabula schemes of the plots and textual organization for each film. As a result, every fictional universe appears as a network,[6] where the

[5] E. g.; the Greek classical idea of the sympathy of all things; the theory of *correspondentia* by natural philosophers of the Middle Ages (Jung 83).

[6] The first definition for the word and the concept of network goes as follows: "An arrangement of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines ("Network"). I find this perfect matching of the definition

horizontal lines are the objective life sequences of the protagonists (not always causal) and the vertical lines are subjective and mostly coincidental links that condition the mutual interaction of the characters, thus creating new dramas.

From narratological point of view, each diagram represents a story world, which is a fictional construct composed of agents, circumstances and surroundings. All these factors correspond to the conventions of a particular universe, characteristic of a period, culture and geographical location (Bordwell 90 "Poetics"; Bremond 387). The agents' activity consists in pursuing their goals, desires and deadlines with their up and downs and forms a series of events that, on the fabula level, develop successively. From structural perspective, the presence of more than one plot ontologically changes the way the whole text is "cemented." If in a single-plot narrative the centrality of one or two protagonists along with the causal arching of the story is more than enough to keep the story from falling apart, in a multiple plot construct there must be a powerful center, which connects the segments of the plot non-linearly. María del Mar Azcona distinguishes three possible organizational centers in such films: a) a place where a group of people meet purposefully or by chance; b) a period of time in which something happens in different places; c) an event (usually a disastrous one) which brings people together or an event which will be interpreted from different points of view by all who witnessed or participated in it. Citing numerous

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and the graphic representation of the story worlds as another strong argument for preferring the term "network narrative" for a multi-protagonist film.

examples for each type, Azcona concludes that: “the range of narrative patterns that can be found under the label mosaic films is remarkable” (22). However, she finds a common denominator for all multi-protagonist films asserting that “these films reveal an interest in the representation of the relationships between the characters” and “even in the cases in which there is a strong and clear line of action, as happens in the disaster cycle (…) relationships are usually brought to the fore” (19). Further on, Azcona describes the essence of characters’ connections in multiple plot universes. “While in some of them,” she observes, “characters are tightly linked by friendship or family ties, in others they are no more than mere acquaintances” and in some cases: “Instead of featuring the interactions among a group of people related to a central meeting place, these texts deal with much more isolated characters with apparently no connection to each other, even if in the course of the story, most of them cross paths and their storylines become enmeshed, mainly through coincidence” (20-21). The process of constantly forming relationships (be they short or long term, superficial or deep) is, in fact, one of networking and each film under study is, above all, a depiction of a network formation, every participant of which is marked by his/her involvement in the accident.

It is noteworthy that in a film featuring several plot lines there could still be a main character among other characters, which makes the text function similarly to a conventional narration. In other cases, all protagonists are given an

equal emphasis, and all narrative lines are developed to the same extent without prioritizing any of them. In the first two Almodóvar films, *Carne Trémula* and *Todo sobre mi Madre*, the various plot lines evolve around two principal characters – Víctor and Manuela respectively. Their stories are centralized and given the most narrative attention while the development of other plots grows out of and is dependent on Víctor and Manuela's goals and needs. Simplistically speaking, the former falls in love with a woman, sets a goal to conquer her and, surmounting all the obstacles, finally marries her. The latter loses her son, Esteban, in an accident and wends her way in search of his father - her ex husband, the first Esteban. Heading towards her past, Manuela encounters new perspectives in the present and for the future, finally being granted a new son – the third Esteban.

Carne Trémula's story world includes six characters: Isabel, Víctor, Elena, David, Clara and Sancho. The lives of all but Isabel's intertwine through the gunshot fired near the start in Elena's apartment, and further on, their stories develop mutually. The accident drastically changes Víctor, David, and Elena's life trajectories. Although the latter two fall in love with each other and marry, the situation is aggravated by David's physical impairment. Elena, besides being a devoted wife, also founds and runs an orphanage, while Víctor is sentenced to four years in jail. Further on, all three re-connect and become involved in a love triangle complicated by Víctor's affair with Clara, who is Sancho's wife. The

situation is also intensified by the fact that before the accident, Clara cheated on her husband with David. The denouement to each of their drama re-converges in time and space. Gunshots, this time in Víctor's place, take the lives of the unhappy couple, Clara and Sancho, who have been stuck in a dysfunctional marriage, and bring David and Víctor's rivalry to the end.

It is noteworthy that *Carne Trémula*'s fictional universe is characterized by straightforwardness and dramatic unity while *Todo sobre mi Madre* is split into two sub worlds - real life and the theater. While Víctor functions in one reality where one goal is consistently pursued from the beginning to the end of the film, Manuela is balancing between the two and her projects multiply when she gets involved in different situations with other characters. Manuela serves as a juncture point between real and theatrical space as well as being an intermediary between the seven main characters, namely Lola, Esteban, Agrado, Rosa, Huma and Nina. Theater plays a significant role personally for Manuela and for the development of the narration. She was an actress in the past and we have seen her perform in a simulation of an organ donation in the hospital where she works. The fatal accident that killed her son happened after attending a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the same production follows Manuela when she travels from Madrid to Barcelona in search of her former husband Esteban/Lola. Later, Manuela is involved in an intense interaction with Huma and Nina that, in the end, benefits both parties. In the world outside the theatre, Manuela plays a

nurturing role for Agrado and Rosa. The former re-appears from Manuela's past and connects her to Rosa and the latter happens to have a secret to share (her impregnation by Lola), which directly links Rosa to Manuela. Through this interaction, Agrado is able to change her life style and work in the theater as Huma's personal assistant, while Rosa is given emotional and physical support which was vitally necessary for her but which unfortunately didn't prevent her death.

Hable con ella is based structurally on two parallel romantic stories that, towards the film's end, merge into a third one with an open ending. According to Adriana Novoa, the whole film is "built on a fairy tale, with its corresponding dividing line between the real world and the world of fantasy" (224). Marco and Benigno's romances flourish in each world respectively.

Benigno, Alicia, Dr. Roncero and Katerina form a cluster where Alicia is the central figure to which all others are attached, despite the fact that for most of the narration she remains unconscious. Marco, Lidia and El Niño de Valencia form the second group interacting in a love triangle situation frame. Two destructive events (a car accident and a goring in the bullring) contribute to the fact that both stories continue to develop in the same space (the clinic "El Bosque") where Benigno and Marco meet and become friends. Finally, a chain of events and circumstances make Marco and Alicia available for a relation. In the

case of Marco it was separation from Lidia and her subsequent death, and in the case of Alicia, her miraculous resuscitation and the death of Benigno.

Compared to the two previous Almodóvar films, the fabula structure of *Hable con ella* is more sophisticated, a fact which still doesn't overshadow Benigno's centrality as a protagonist. As Novoa observes: "the relationship between Benigno and Alicia is particularly crucial" for she is a sleeping beauty of the story, around whom the plot revolves, finally awakened by his kiss (226). Benigno initiates and establishes the main personal connections in the film – one to Alicia and the other to Marco. In addition, like Víctor in *Carne Trémula*, Benigno has a steady goal during the whole story which he partially achieves. Even in prison he doesn't lose his determination and makes an abortive attempt to follow Alicia into a coma, which results in his death. Benigno's life trajectory is quite controversial. Nevertheless Alicia seems to benefit from this encounter, for the accident didn't have anything to do with Benigno, but the power of his feelings brought her back to life.

Interestingly, the textual construction of *21 Grams* echoes that of *Hable con ella* in terms of its structural pattern. Iñárritu's second film represents an intricate system of lines and links that converge by the end of the narration and burst into a violent resolution of all three dramas. The opening state of affairs in *21 Grams* introduces three families - Paul and Mary Rivers, Michael and Cristina Peck and Jack and Marianne Jordan. Paul is terminally ill and before he gets a

heart transplant his state is characterized by resignation to an imminent death. However, when he is granted a chance to survive, due to the car accident that takes Michael's life and the subsequent heart transplantation, his attitude becomes quite active and his primary goal is to investigate the identity of the donor. Driven by this incentive, Paul enters Cristina's life, thus making two plots merge and develop into the third one.[7] As soon as Paul's relation to Cristina turns out to be a romantic one, his actions depend on her desires and needs and finally they both are involved in a joint project, which consists in taking revenge on Jack Jordan. After completing this mission, Paul dies.

When Paul spends several days with Cristina, his wife Mary leaves the scene without a struggle. Michael, Cristina's husband dies near the beginning of the film and reincarnates in Paul through donating his heart. These factors condition Paul and Cristina's union. The latter is portrayed as an unstable person. Before marrying Michael and having children with him she was addicted to drugs and alcohol and after the accident took her family away, she starts drinking and consuming drugs again. When she meets Paul she awakens from apathy and develops a new goal - to kill Jack Jordan. By the end of the film, after Cristina mercilessly beats Jack in the motel room where, at the same time, Paul shoots himself into the chest, she finds herself pregnant by Paul, a circumstance which brings sense and light into her life.

[7] As happens in *Hable con ella,* yet the possibility of Marco and Alicia's coupling is only implied.

Iñárritu follows the same model in organizing the *Amores Perros* and *Babel* story worlds by using a family as a structural unit for each plot. Yet the crucial difference between these two and *21 Grams* as well as the three Almodóvar films consists in the fact that the car accident and the gunshot are the only events that invade and link all the dramas. The plot lines in *Amores Perros* and *Babel* are sealed and no character travels from one story to the other. These film's fabula structures do not offer inter-plot connections and every drama comes to its resolution independently. In *Babel*, the parallelism and non-convergence of the narrative lines are reinforced by the wide spatial dispersal of the locations where each story originates and develops. Japan and Cheiko's drama are most geographically distant from the others. The rifle, transported from Japan to Morocco by Cheiko's father and given to his guide Abdullah there, traces the connection between two plots. Further on, the Moroccan tragedy and Cheiko's adolescence crisis do not influence each other, except for the fact that the detective comes to investigate the gun's origin and therefore gives Cheiko a chance to release her psychological and emotional tension.

The other three plots are linked more closely in terms of space and logic. Richard and Susan Jones are Americans who travel to Morocco in order to revive their marriage, which has been affected by the sudden death of their infant child. Shot by a stray bullet, Susan is thrown into a life-threatening situation, which she and her husband courageously overcome and through which they finally

reconcile. The American drama, which in fact takes place in Morocco, triggers the Mexican one, which unfolds in United States and Mexico. Susan and Richard's housekeeper and nanny, Amelia, is obliged to take care of their two children on the day of her own son's wedding since the gunshot impeded their parents' timely return. By taking the children to Mexico Amelia makes a bad decision that leads to disastrous consequences. On their way back her nephew confronts the border guard and later on, Amelia is left in the desert night with the children. Following her desperate efforts to successfully resolve the situation she is deported from the United States.

The tragedy in Morocco develops concurrently with the American one and they are causally connected by the gunshot accidentally fired by Abdullah's son Yussef. The investigation brings the Moroccan police to Abdullah's house and the attempts of the family to escape in the mountains prove useless. The chase and the subsequent skirmish between the police officers and Yussef result in killing his brother, Ahmed.

As opposed to *Babel*'s globalized geographical span, all three vignettes in *Amores Perros* are set in Mexico City. However, as indicated above, each plot remains hermetic in terms of any kind of interaction between the characters from different stories. Octavio, Ramiro and Susana form the first character knot and their relatedness through family kinship makes the rivalry between two men for one woman quite controversial. The tension accumulated in this love triangle

situation, in which Susana - pregnant by her husband Ramiro - cheats on him with his brother Octavio is aggravated by poor social and economic conditions and it finally explodes in a horrendous car crash. The accident destroys Octavio and Susana's liaison and indirectly conditions Ramiro's death, leaving Susana widowed and devastated by guilt. The social setting for the second plot moves from the lower class stratum to that of the upper middle class, yet it again features a love triangle. Daniel is a married man who has two children, but his love affair with Valeria pushes him towards leaving his family home in order to join his lover. The violent if random crash between Octavio and Valeria's cars on the streets of Mexico City takes place at the very beginning of her union with Daniel. The further dynamics of their interaction brings this couple to a dead end aggravated by Valeria's mutilation. The hitman and former political activist, El Chivo, is the main figure of the third narrative line, which is divided between his past (when the separation from his family took place) and his present, during which El Chivo "shadows" the whole filmic narration and rescues Cofi, Octavio's dog, out of the car crash he happens to witnesses. El Chivo is also directly involved in a sub-story that is not related to the accident, but echoes the Cain and Abel motif, crucial for Octavio and Ramiro's conflict.

The story worlds described above are brought into motion by a constant interplay between causality and casualty. Both mechanisms are essential for the plot(s) to function as such. If causal connections are weak, what are left are

chronological ones, by means of which the text becomes a mere statement of a series of events, namely, a chronicle (Tomashevsky 164). Yet, a chain of perfectly explicable causes and effects will deprive the story of the spark of intrigue, curiosity or surprise while the predictability of the outcomes will make the thrill and pleasure in following the plot fade. According to Monk, "if there is in fact no such thing as chance in narrative (…) without it there would really be no stories to tell" (10). All kinds of variations on casualty are a must for a good, tellable story and, needless to say, they are part of our daily life. Notes writer Paul Auster: "We are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence; the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity (…) from one moment to the next, anything can happen. Our life-long certainties about the world can be demolished in a single second (…) we brush up against these mysteries all the time. The result can be truly terrifying – but it can also be comical" (cited in Alford 60, 65).

If we return to Jung's model of the universe, the horizontal sphere represents the dichotomy between the constant and inconstant connection through cause–effect and synchronicity respectively. The first mechanism implies a diachronic development, a sequence where one element follows the other in time and space, while the second one implies a synchronic contiguity. The latter was interpreted by Aristotle as a convergence of two causal lines in a certain (right/wrong) place at a certain (right/wrong) time, thus conditioning a common event for two entities. This formulation of synchronic contiguity may originate at

least four types of coincidental encounters. The first one would be Jungian synchronicity, which is a coincidence between a physical event and mental association. What makes this type of coincidence special is that in terms of temporal convergence, at least as far as the mental component goes, it is not time dependent for "the physical event may occur at the same time as an experience in the psyche (an internal image), or even after this experience" (Storm 250). In addition, the psychic part of a coincidental arrangement goes beyond the spatial limitations and Storm finds it similar to a quantum effect in physics, namely *nonlocality*. Thus, in the mental or emotional coincidence time and space determinants are relativized and the causal precepts are infringed (Storm 250).

The second type would be an encounter between two objects, which might be best exemplified by a car crash. Nevertheless, it must be taken into consideration that the vehicles are driven by human agents and therefore, this kind of coincidence suits better the fourth type that embraces an unexpected interaction between two agents. The third type involves a clash between an agent and an object. The most prolific type, in terms of triggering original plot developments, is the fourth and last in which we have two independent animate entities and each one possesses a complex of mental, psychic, emotional and circumstantial peculiarities which direct their trajectories and makes the path of one interact with the other's. Importantly, coincidence could also be interpreted as a *non-convergence*, or, as Hilary P. Dannenberg puts it, a negative coincidence "in

which the intended intersection of objects in the narrative world is randomly thwarted" (90). In this case the circumstances might be perceived as hostile obstacles which haven't let a significant meeting happen or, alternatively, as benefactors since the non-convergence of two agents or an agent and an object has prevented a probably harmful sequel.

Now, the crucial question emerges: how and why do (not) two agents coincide with (out) intending to do so? Neither of the explanations given for this phenomenon seems fully satisfying, for it always leaves a gap for an enigma. In other words, there is something ungraspable in coincidence and chance what creates an intrigue in the story world and never guarantees a predictable outcome for the plot line. According to Monk, "chance (…) does not arise exclusively from our ignorance, nor does it necessarily decrease (or) disappear as our ignorance is diminished" (20). Logically, perceiving a deviation in someone's intended course may take two directions: explicable or inexplicable. The first one could fit in a system, most likely a scientific one, while the second lies in a fatalistic realm expressed by common phrases like "it was meant to happen" or is, as Jung puts it, "magical causality" (95). In her research on chance in the modern British novel, Monk brings up two fascinating examples of the phenomena derived from Epicurus's atomic theory, which, later, in genetic science have been termed as "random samples" or "standard deviations" (3). These patterns show how the accidental behavior of one element within a system leads to a qualitative change

of the whole system, the latter becoming more complex and more organized. What makes possible the development of the whole system into an unpredictable and new one is the swerve of one atom or a mutation of a genetic sequence that is absolutely the outcome of chance (Monk 22-24). If applied to fiction, a deviation in one or both causal chains might also be accidental and condition an unexpected convergence. Thus, due to the creative potential of a "naughty" atom the story moves on and "coincidence is that fundamental building block that structures narrative unfolding, even as it may be experienced as both too random and too deterministic, as both accidental and forced" (Kakoudaki 6).

From the cognitive perspective, coincidences and unexpected turns in the story instigate the reader/ spectator to follow the plot line(s), moved by curiosity about unpredictable outcomes. The psychological effect of coincidence is characterized as fascinating, astonishing, striking and intense and the further mental urge usually consists of looking for explanation or of making "sense of the bizarre and miraculous constellations involved" (Dannenberg 92; Hammond 623). Alford in his essay on chance in Paul Auster's fiction cites a passage from the author which describes how strong an impression produced by a coincidence may be: "The more I opened myself up to these secret correspondences, the closer I felt to understanding some fundamental truth about the world. I was going mad perhaps, but I nevertheless felt a tremendous power surging through me, a gnostic joy that penetrated deep into the heart of things" (67). However, the meaning of

coincidence is not that transparent. First of all, it is questionable whether a coincidence has a meaning at all. The paradox consists of the fact that to call something a coincidence is to deny that this something has any significance (Hammond 624). "It was just a mere coincidence that we met" – is a common phrase, almost a cliché, which deprives the phenomenon of all its magic and prophetic qualities. In this respect Jung makes a crucial distinction between a meaningful coincidence and a random chance grouping. The former is subjective and happens only if a "certain content in the psyche is made conscious at the time when a physical event of 'equivalence' in the real world is also made conscious" (Storm 250). In other words, two contingent and contiguous events don't carry any meaning if no connection has been made between them by the participant(s) in the situation; therefore, coincidence "is an effect of recognition, not of surprise" (Kakoudaki 16). The recognition can happen immediately or may be delayed in time, thus the meaning will be provided to a coincidence by the ability to remember. "Memory is important because it allows us to hold up two (…) non-simultaneous (…) events and see them in their atemporal connectedness" (Alford 62). The (re) view of the events post factum not only reveals the meaningful relatedness of some of them but also encourages looking for the causes for these events "lending them an air of inevitability and coherence which the actors involved in those developments could never have grasped in the heat of events" (Bell 2).

Accidents are the major and the most consequential coincidences in the films studied. As noted above, among all types of spatial and temporal convergences, the one where two agents unexpectedly run into each other has the most powerful narrative potential. And reinforced by the speed and uncontrollability of a moving vehicle, the collision leaves a little chance for the story not to change its development drastically. Four out of the six films (*Todo sobre mi Madre, Hable con ella, Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*) are stitched by the car accident while the rest (*Carne Trémula* and *Babel*) are "bundled" by gunshots. The red vertical lines on the fictional universes' matrices in the diagram label these two types of accidents. The graphical interpretation underlines the centrality of these events in each film, i.e. they have the "most coverage" or are the most influential through reaching out to almost every character and affecting or benefiting his/her life. These fictional universes may be compared to a non-linear system, the complexity of which is mostly due to the randomness and unpredictability of its behavior. Hawkins accordingly explains that "non-linear systems tend to behave in a regular, orderly way until something sets them off" and when a critical point is passed they suddenly become chaotic (x). What sets off the expected development of each story, intruding into the characters' life, is a violent event, which in all six films is absolutely unpredictable; yet the extent of its causation varies.

Among the accidents breaking fictional worlds and narratives, the one which casts Alicia into a coma in *Hable con ella* is absolutely acausal, i.e. it resists any causal linking or explanation, while the other ones could be interpreted as a result of a certain grouping of (in) significant factors or circumstances, which (in) directly push the agent towards the disaster. Seen from a post factum perspective, the chain of events and conditions preceding the accident always transmits the feeling of inevitability and calls for regretful reasoning of a "if that hadn't happened or been so, the next thing wouldn't have happened either" kind. In *Carne Trémula, Todo sobre mi Madre, Hable con ella, Amores Perros* and *21 Grams* the psychological state of the victims seem to increase the probability of the accident to a certain extent. In this case, it is possible to speak about emotional causation or, semi causality, which implies a random interplay between the causal and the coincidental. In these five cases the pre-accident stage is distinguished by characters' distress due to other, completely unrelated factors.

In *Carne Trémula*, Elena, nervous and impatient because she is expecting a drug dealer, lets Víctor in to her apartment believing him to be that person. By chance David and Sancho are the closest police patrol to Elena's house and when all of them converge there, a chaotic chain of events culminates in the fateful gunshot. The arrangement and the outcomes of these events were unpredictable and none of the participants had time to think about his/her actions. David, trying to disarm Víctor and to release Elena, faces another conflict with his co-worker

Sancho who was drunk, frustrated by his family situation, and exasperated by David pointing the pistol at him. What permits Sancho to dominate the moment is David's distraction when he and Elena mutually introduce themselves and experience a mutual attraction – a connection emphasized by the slow motion camera. Víctor may be considered a victim of the situation since his only fault lies in his pursuing Elena and insisting on meeting with her. However, his emotional behavior and Elena's unstable state triggered the fight and David and Sancho's further involvement. Elena is the one to whom things happened without her provoking them. All her actions are, in fact, reactions to Víctor's intrusive behavior and to David's measures as a would-be savior.

It is difficult to deny the random nature of the car accident which takes the life of Manuela's son in *Todo sobre mi Madre*, yet some causal precedents for it may also be detected. Despite the heavy rain that already conveys an uneasy feeling, Estéban insists on waiting for Huma Rojo to request her autograph after attending the performance of *A Street Car Named Desire*. Manuela can neither dissuade her son nor ignore his desire because it is his birthday. When Huma appears she doesn't pay attention to Esteban because she is in the middle of a heated confrontation with her lover Nina. But this doesn't stop Esteban from running after the taxi which takes Huma and Nina away. At the first intersection another car coming across hits Manuela's son. Once again, a cluster of causal,

circumstantial and coincidental factors do not necessarily trigger but push the agent towards the accident and the whole narration makes an unexpected turn.

As stated above, the car crash in *Hable con ella* is an absolutely random event. It comes from nowhere and is not even explicitly shown in the film, but is alluded to indirectly. The only explicable cause for it is Alicia's carelessness. In contrast, the second accident in the film, which leads to identical consequences, leaving Lydia in a vegetative state, appears as the product of a number of factors that, analyzed in retrospect, argue for a certain degree of causation. A few months prior to her last *corrida* Lydia underwent a painful break up with fellow bullfighter El Niño de Valencia and started a new relationship with Marco, a journalist. Some time later, unbeknownst to Marco and the spectators, Lydia goes back to her ex-boyfriend. Although she attempts to explain everything to Marco, it doesn't happen because he doesn't give her a chance. In retrospect, we may feel that Lydia's goring is at least partially explained by her emotional distraction when she enters the ring. The motives for Lydia's bravado may have been triggered by her psychological state at that moment.

One of the most shattering collisions in terms of its antecedents and consequences is the accident in *Amores Perros*. The causal-casual chain, which led to the car crash, starts with the quite innocent escape of Octavio's dog from the house and Cofi's subsequent fight with Jarocho's dog. When Octavio learns that Cofi had killed the other dog he decides to use his dog as a source of income

by entering the dogfight business. Concurrently Octavio pursues another goal – to conquer his brother's wife, Susana. Octavio's rapid and sudden enrichment helps him to seduce Susana and convince her to run away with him. But just before his last dogfight he discovers that Susana has taken all the money and left with her husband. Octavio's distress coincides with Jarocho's plan to take revenge by shooting Cofi. Octavio then stabs Jarocho and flees with his wounded dog in the backseat of his car chased by Jarocho's buddies. Octavio's speeding car collides with the car driven by the protagonist of the second story, Valeria, and the accident serves as a bridge from one story to the other. Seen from the first plot perspective, the accident is the result of a series of events that grew like a snowball and smashed the protagonist, while in the context of the second vignette such a violent intrusion occurs by pure chance.

The nature of the gunshot in *21 Grams* and *Babel* differs from the accidents described above. The only reason for why Jack was speeding and ran over three people might have been that he was running late for his own birthday party. When the crucial event occurs in *Babel*, those involved are not even in the same place and the shooter and the victim are completely unaware of each other. In fact, Yussef was aiming at an object – the bus passing down the hill -and by no means at a person. A certain duality characterizes this type of accident since on the one hand it is not accidental, yet on the other hand it is blind, i.e. anyone in the bus might have been wounded instead of Susan.

The fact that car crashes and gunshots befall the protagonists may be interpreted from different perspectives. Importantly, when there is no intelligible explanation available, those affected tend to resort to different existential paradigms, be they religious or scientific, which at times appear as explicit and self-conscious references in the films' narrative. The sources or the incentives for these explanations may vary. The author may initially conceive a story world as ruled by a certain concept or system of values. In that case, s/he may choose whether the characters will be aware of the conceptual frame they are functioning in or if it will be implied by the context and other audiovisual details. Another approach consists in not imposing rules that come from beyond. Instead, the characters deal with their lives on their own, although they may still question or analyze the unexpected, inexplicable or unknown. As applied to the work of the two directors, the second approach corresponds to Almodóvar for he stays nonjudgmental even when treating controversial, tragic and emotionally charged topics. In this regard Kakoudaki points out that in Almodóvar's usually nondeterministic secular structures, human nature is the agent that is closest to fate (27). The director's humanism and humor leave room for hope articulating the message that nobody is perfect and everybody has a right to happiness, a stance which contrasts with Iñárritu's emphasis on moralism, God, fatalism and karma. Thomas Riegler concludes his analysis of Iñárritu's trilogy by indicating that: "Guillermo Arriaga's scripts are deeply embedded in a moralistic-religious

framework, whose benchmarks are guilt, atonement and salvation. All protagonists have to follow this path, even though the majority will not succeed. This deterministic element may conflict with the plot's claim to realism, but it nevertheless charges the stories with tragic grandeur" (10). It must be acknowledged, however, that throughout his trilogy, Iñárritu progresses from a dark and apocalyptic perception of existence in *Amores Perros* to a somewhat hopeful resolution in *21 Grams* and to much more heartwarming codas in *Babel*. Importantly, when a fictional universe functions within a particular existential paradigm, the moral or the system of values it professes dictates the outcomes for the stories and significantly influences the characters' lives.

The ill-fated denouements in *Amores Perros* may thus be seen as a result of transgressions committed by the protagonists of all three dramas. For example, Sánchez-Prado offers a reading where he supports the idea that infidelity and family abandonment are judged through the lens of conservative values that are implied by the fact that none of "wrongdoers" escape from punishment. He draws attention to the fact that the impossibility of a happy ending for transgressors tells much about the morally deterministic vision exposed by the film. *Amores Perros,* he writes

> doesn't attempt to place the characters into a set of circumstances from which they measure their decisions, but rather creates an absolute moral compass that evaluates everyone using the same criteria (…) the movie makes no effort to problematize the ethical position of its characters and everything functions as some sort of divine justice in which each person

> reaps what he/she sows in terms of a black-and-white moral scale: the adulterers come to grief, the beautiful woman is left mutilated, and those who abandon their families live in the purgatory of nostalgia.
>
> (41,43)

Viewed from a less deterministic frame, the meaning of Valeria's accident remains to be seen. Is she the victim of a random event that anybody could have suffered from, or was the fatal blow directed at her (and Daniel) as a punishment? The precondition for Valeria to get into the car crash lies in the realm of chance: Daniel forgot to buy wine for their first dinner in their new apartment and she runs out to purchase some. However, there is another chain of dreadful incidents that also contributes to Valeria's miserable situation the end of her story and seems to cancel out any possibility of happiness for the couple. Shortly after Valeria enters the brand new apartment Daniel has acquired for the couple, the hardwood floor cracks. The next day after the accident, Valeria's lapdog Richie gets trapped under the floor and remains there until Valeria is hospitalized for the second time and her leg is amputated. The gaping hole and the noises of the rats and other creatures that live beneath the floor create a sinister atmosphere in the house and, in fact, all the fights between Daniel and Valeria seem to arise during their attempts to rescue Richie. Such circumstances may shift our understanding of the accident away from the blind chance of good/bad luck towards "paying the price for transgressive behavior" motives.

An eclectic mixture of three existential systems, that move the protagonists in accordance with their laws, shape the *21 Grams* story universe. In this world religious determinism coexists with unpredictable contingency forming a conflictive correlation or an unbearable internal turmoil in Jack Jordan's mind and soul. In addition, the scientific paradigm of chaos theory is brought up explicitly in Paul and Cristina's dialogue, providing a possible explanation for their meeting.

According to Allan Cameron, in *21 Grams* two notions - chance and necessity - resonate with its violent events (72). These concepts are articulated in Jack Jordan's monologue at the beginning of the film when he is preaching to a troubled teenager at a local Christian center. Jack exemplifies God's generosity and will with a truck he won in the lottery. It is noteworthy that the lottery mechanism is entirely based on chance and its results are interpreted in terms of good or bad luck for all participants in the game. In other words, the lottery equalizes everybody in terms of having the same opportunity to benefit (Bennett 13). But Jack sees this benefit differently: "It wasn't luck, it was Jesus who wanted me to have this truck." Interestingly, Jack uses lottery terminology when he notes that "Going to church, reading the Bible and believing in Jesus, brother, that's your ticket." To start practicing all these activities means to take a chance to improve your life, although the results are not guaranteed. In the same conversation Jack proves that the consequences of criminal activity can be really

severe: “Tell me what’s going to happen if you shoot a pregnant woman or an old man. You know what will happen? The guilt will suck you down to the bone.” Whether it happens or not is, once again, a question of luck. As Doob observes, “luck is a reigning goddess of lower-class society so that actual or potential delinquents from that class may believe that they are lucky when not caught by the police or, if caught, that the next time their luck will change” (19). Thus Jack unconsciously acknowledges that the probability for different outcomes doesn’t always depend on an individual’s intentions. Yet he professes that God’s will guides all that happens. “God even knows when a single hair moves on your head,” Jack rather fanatically proclaims, not knowing at that moment that when he accidentally kills three people he will be desperately trapped by his own convictions.

After the crash Jack finds himself in a dead end, unable to comprehend the meaning of the accident. His wife Marianne and his spiritual guide Rev. John try to relieve Jack of the responsibility for the awful act he unintentionally committed, by insisting that what happened was a meaningless, dreadful coincidence. Nevertheless, Jack is reluctant to accept this point of view. In his conversation with Rev. John while in jail, Jack asserts that Jesus chose him for the fulfillment of this task because Jesus wanted this pain for him. In response Rev. John tries to separate the inadvertent nature of this event from God’s will, stating that “Christ had nothing to do with this, it was an accident.” Launching a

counterargument Jack reminds his teacher, "God even knows when a single hair moves on your head." He believes that there is nothing in the universe beyond God's omnipresence and this thought makes Jack go in circles. The only intelligible explanation Jack finds for this situation is that Jesus betrayed him. Therefore, brutally tortured by guilt, he burns the cross tattoo off his arm.

The other cosmological framework imbedded in *21 Grams* lies, according to Azcona, in the realm of "the power of numbers, chaos theory and the geometrical patterns of fractals – that is, those nonlinear systems formed on the basis of the random repetition of simple designs – and the role they might play in our attempts to explain those aspects of life which defy human reasoning" ("A Time" 112). The main proponent of this approach in the film is Paul, a mathematician himself. During his first date with Cristina he attributes their meeting to a "series of random and unlikely events which lie outside human control and powers of explanation" (Azcona "A Time" 112). "There is a number hidden in every act of life, in every aspect of the universe (…) numbers are a door to understanding a mystery that's bigger than us. How two people, strangers, come to meet?" proclaims Paul, implying that all acts, happenings and convergences function in a constantly transforming system. For him, they are the result of a complex interaction between multiple causal and casual chains, whereby two elements of this system are suddenly brought together. Seen from this perspective, the significance of the accident becomes ambiguous. The crash

destroyed Cristina's life, but saved Paul's and moreover made them meet each other. This kind of ambiguity seems to be beyond moral judgment because it is impossible to admit that the accident had a positive outcome besides the actual presence of the one who gained from it. Thus, the only way to conceive such an organization of events is to consider them part of a higher order ungraspable by human logic.

Iñárritu's next film, *Babel* (2006), is free from any implicit or explicit doctrine and the concept which determines all of its segments is the lack or failure of communication. The title refers to the supposed existence of a common language for all humans before the fall of the tower of Babel. The director himself explains the project of *Babel* as an attempt to link and unify four spatially disconnected continents by emotion, emphasizing the commonness of human problems within the frame of the family (Iñárritu), as well as by air, as an invisible entity we all breathe, share and travel through (Iñárritu, cited in Pisters 5). The velocity and the omnipresence of air refer to the global world's immediate interconnectedness; the metaphorical vision of air alludes to the universality of human existence and experiences.

The disastrous event in *Babel* is characterized by its impersonality. It is not interpreted as punishment which the characters may have deserved as in *Amores Perros*. The immediate cause is Abdullah's sons' playing with the rifle he unwisely gave them. In this case, it is more appropriate to speak about the gun

itself than about the accident. This object traces a random trajectory throughout the entire film until Yussef destroys it, frenetically breaking the rifle into pieces. It enters the story as a gift from a Japanese tourist to his Moroccan guide; as an expression of gratitude it is positive and the further trade of the rifle for some goods is a business act, which is absolutely neutral. The subsequent manipulations of this dangerous object by two young brothers end up as unintentionally harmful but Yussef will later use the rifle as a defensive weapon, wounding one of the Moroccan police officers. Therefore the potentially harmful object goes from one owner to the other, leading to more and more serious consequences in a butterfly effect progression. In this respect, Hawkins notes that in chaos driven, non-linear systems, very small, morally neutral, individual effects can exponentially compound with other effects and give rise to disproportionate impacts (16). As in the case of the truck in *21 Grams*, the rifle's mission is unknown; the reason all these blows happen to different people is not even implicitly or explicitly questioned in *Babel*. In narrative terms, the rifle could be considered the causa prima, which triggers the three stories creating a global fictional world. Interestingly, Cofi, Octavio's dog in *Amores Perros*, fulfills the same function, triggering the accident and all the successive events. Cofi's escape from Susana, when she carelessly opens the front door, is an insignificant issue, which has disproportionate consequences for the whole narrative universe. A small transgression or slip conditions the development of a causal chain gradually

bringing the situation to its climax – the accident. Cofi's mission after the crash unpredictably turns into a beneficial one. The dog's survival contributes to a crucial transformation in El Chivo who abandons his former life style and seems on his way back to social belonging. In addition, Cofi is the only "protagonist" who travels from one plot to the other in *Amores Perros*, although changing his identity by the end of the film becoming "Negro."

Iñárritu's *21 Grams* echoes Almodóvar's *Hable con ella* not only in terms of structural organization, i.e. two partners belonging to different couples form a new romantic union and make two plots converge by the end of the narration. Similar to the Spanish director's film it also embeds three existential frames-- science, religion and the miraculous-- in one fictional construct, making the characters behave and make decisions in compliance with the laws inherent to these frames. Importantly, the phenomena possible within one system may be excluded within the other. As mentioned above, *Hable con ella* is divided into two worlds: "El Bosque" is the fairy-tale territory opposed to reality outside the clinic (Novoa 235). As Novoa notes "Almodóvar names the clinic "El Bosque" (…) since this is traditionally the place of enchantment, where miracles occur" (235). In this wonderland supernatural events and interventions are taken for granted and the rules of real life are not applicable. Thus, Alicia's violation is a miracle that saves and cures her rather than an actual rape, which happens in reality (Novoa 235, 237). It must be noted that the world of "El Bosque" is

wholly Benigno's creation, where he belongs and feels totally at home. Nevertheless, he is able to transmit the laws of his imagined and odd universe to the people he loves.

When the two women, Alicia and Lydia, converge in the same hospital in a vegetative state, opinions on the possibilities for their recovery occupy two seemingly contradictory poles: recovery is scientifically out of the question, but were it to occur it would be a miracle. This verdict prompts Marco into melancholy resignation while Benigno has never doubted that Alicia hears him, participates in their life together, and will one day wake up. Benigno explicitly articulates this sincere and rather childish belief in his conversation with the other nurse in the scene where both are ministering to Alicia's body. When Benigno's co-worker quite skeptically notes that if Alicia wakes up after four years in a coma it would be a miracle, Benigno confidently responds: "Pues yo creo en los milagros. Y tú deberías creer también (…) pues porque estás muy necesitada de ellos y a lo mejor te ocurre uno y como no crees en ellos pues no te das ni cuenta." (Well, I believe in miracles. And you should too…because you really need them and maybe one happens to you but because you don't believe in them you won't even notice). Benigno's logic is fascinating for it is not based on the proposition that the fact of not believing in something excludes the probability of it happening. On the contrary, the thing may happen regardless of whether you believe in it or not; but you won't be able to discern or recognize it. And against

all odds, the miracle takes place, but at the cost of Benigno's defamation and death.

Marco belongs to the world where miracles do not occur. Novoa describes him as "a man of action, he has a restless energy that put him on the path to finding what he needs to find fulfillment. Every event in the world of the hero is part of the problem/resolution/ tension that is crucial to understand his actions" (239). The apparent clarity, rationality and control of his life make Marco incapable of ignoring inexorable scientific data. Yet Marco is quite sensitive, he cries when something/one deeply moves him and we see it at different moments in the film. And this ability is the breach in the defensive armor of common sense through which he manages to enter Benigno's fairy-tale world and the latter teaches him how to find love and happiness at the end (Novoa 239).

Religion makes a brief appearance in *Hable con ella* through Lydia's family prior to the corrida and following her goring and hospitalization. However, this foothold of spirituality proves powerless in terms of overcoming the despair nor is it capable of working wonders. An altar full of icons and candles is placed at the head of Lydia's hospital bed, which for her grieving sister is an expression of the statement, "Hay que tener fe." (You have to have faith) "Pero me cuesta mucho trabajo tener fe," (But it costs me a lot to have faith) she adds, refusing to believe in miracles. Despite its absolute sincerity, the commitment to faith and to God seems to be rather mechanical and concentrated on the ritual component.

Among all the people surrounding Lidia, El Niño de Valencia comes closest to an unconditional belief that Lydia is alive and hasn't lost consciousness. But his sporadic presence isn't sufficient to bring Lydia back to life.

According to Novoa, Almodóvar's main message in *Hable con ella* is that the enchantment embodied in fairy tales has been lost in the modern world, which has also become impenetrable for primitive, irrational forces. And by making the characters operate in accordance with the rules of the mysterious universe, where the boundaries between the emotional and the rational, moral and amoral, are shifted, Almodóvar opens the possibility for a miracle and mitigates the gravity of Benigno's controversial act (225, 244).

As in *Hable con ella*, the relatively happy ending of *Todo sobre mi Madre* also originates from a miraculous event. Esteban the third - Rosa's newborn and Manuela's adopted son - neutralizes the HIV virus he inherited although, medically speaking, the probability for such a positive development is very low. In order to be granted a second motherhood, Manuela has had to go through three Esteban cycles (circling geographically as well between Barcelona and Madrid) and each of them is marked by a loss: first, she loses her husband to a change of sexual identity, then her son and lastly her adopted sister/daughter who gave birth to the youngest Esteban.

As in Iñárritu's third film, the first of the three Almodóvar films studied here is free of any kind of doctrine that predestines the course of its characters'

lives. The concept that forms the philosophical and structural basis for the story world in *Carne Trémula* is circularity. The direct and metaphorical implications of the circle are present in the film on multiple levels. Víctor is born in a bus, and therefore is given a lifetime bus pass. Twenty years later he rides the Circular bus line around Madrid on the way to his fateful encounter with Elena, which puts David in a wheelchair forever. In addition, the whole narration is set between identical scenes of women in labor, which takes place in a vehicle passing through the streets of Madrid. Víctor's monologue referring to the similar circumstances between his birth and that of his child reinforces the sense of completion of one cycle (Víctor's "sonhood") and the start of another (Víctor's fatherhood). Elena's trajectory also forms a circle since first she accidentally meets and rejects Victor, and then purposefully returns and chooses him as a husband.

The randomness of Víctor's birth is evidenced by several factors. Most likely, the unknown father of the baby was one of Isabel's clients; therefore the pregnancy wasn't a planned one. The labor starts as something unexpected for the owner of the brothel, Doña Centro, as for the bus driver called upon to provide help in the night-time street emptied by the curfew. The latter exclaims, upon Doña Centro and Isabel's entering the bus: "¡De los treinta mil conductores que hay en Madrid me ha tenido que tocar a mí!" (Of the thirty thousand drivers there are in Madrid, this had to happen to me!) Despite such a low probability, the principal character of *Carne Trémula* was born.

In the wider context of the six film universes, such major life events as pregnancy, birth and death function in the realm of chance and may be compared to a lottery, raffled off by some superior entity. Analyzing *21 Grams*, Cameron draws attention to the fact that Mary, Paul's wife, however hard she tried, is unable to conceive, whereas Cristina, Paul's lover, finds herself pregnant by the end of the film. "Mary's difficulty in conceiving and Cristina's surprise pregnancy," Cameron observes, "illustrate that the beginnings of life are as subject to chance as the endings" (73). Interestingly, for all the films except *Babel* a pregnant woman features at the end of the story and the beginning of a new, yet untold, one. Elena's contractions mark the end of *Carne Trémula*; Rosa gives birth and dies during the last part of *Todo sobre mi Madre* and Manuela takes over the responsibility for the third Esteban; the comatose Alicia is seemingly "resuscitated" by pregnancy and reappears alive and available for a new relationship in the closing scene of *Hable con ella*; and the widowed Susana is expecting her second child in *Amores Perros*, determined to name her son after her husband Ramiro. The degree of accidentality for pregnancies and births varies from story to story, yet all of them function positively as a powerful potential for new beginnings and hope. The deaths of the characters throughout the stories are mostly caused by uncontrollable factors such as disease and accidents of all kinds. For some reason, in two cases both directors decide to place a car crash on the day of the protagonists' birthday. Manuela's son dies the exact day he turns seventeen

in *Todo sobre mi Madre* and Jack Jordan in *21 Grams* kills Cristina's family on his way home where the celebration of his birthday is in full fling.

The author or director of a work establishes the ruling paradigms or concepts that are the main organizing forces within a fictional world that are the sources of causality and casualty. In the existing approaches to coincidence, chance, luck and other phenomena of this kind, fiction is seen to follow their operation in the real world. The author directly projects them from one universe to the other. The crucial difference however is that in life we are puppets of destiny, fate, God and so forth, and any manipulation of coincidence is impossible or, if intended, doesn't work as such. Meanwhile in fiction the author acts as a *Deus ex machina*. The fact that a fictional world is artificially constructed by human intellect and imagination urges us to approach spatial and temporal convergences differently, asking for whom is a certain event or meeting a coincidence and who is supposed to experience recognition or the matching of two events distant in time? The text functions or is alive through at least three participants: the author, the characters and the reader. Alford, analyzing the creative activity of the writer, points out that, for instance, a car accident, which kills one of the protagonists but lets the other find his true love, is a chance event for the protagonist and for the reader. But for the writer it is a significant event in a causal chain for it brings the two lovers together and thus creates an intriguing story. In such cases, the

accident becomes the logical and structural center of the narrative; in addition, it is the most powerful manipulator of the plot(s).

Generally speaking, a writer is free to stuff the narration with coincidences and accidents for the purpose of a good story. In serving the story, they lose their random character; "chance events in life are events outside the narrative; in literature, there are no chance events, except insofar as they appear that way to the reader" (Alford 77). The other division takes place between the reader/spectator and the protagonists. In the course of the story development, the former can be familiar with two protagonists who don't know each other yet. In this case, the recognition happens in the reader/spectator's mind, but the protagonists are as yet completely oblivious to the fact of meeting each other, which in the Jungian system would mean a random meaningless chance grouping. This type of convergence is found in both directors' textual constructs, yet the difference consists in the fact that Almodóvar has his characters meet further along in the narration whereas Iñárritu leaves his unconnected.

The convergences recognized a posteriori by the characters and the spectators or only by the latter, take place in every Almodóvar film. These "pre-meetings" usually occur in the first part of the narration. For instance, in *Carne Trémula* when two policemen – David and Sancho - are on duty, driving through nighttime streets of Madrid, they coincidentally pass by Víctor who is delivering pizza. Both parties are unaware of this meeting, but it is meaningful for the

spectator who recognizes Víctor in the crowd. This convergence anticipates the further connection between David, Sancho and Víctor. When Manuela in *Todo sobre mi Madre* arrives at the sexual cruising grounds on the outskirts of Barcelona to look for Agrado there, Sister Rosa is briefly glimpsed among the prostitutes, unknown to both the spectator and Manuela, but already known by Agrado. The next day, all three women will meet in the religious help center and, further on, develop a profound friendship. The opening scene of *Hable con ella* features the encounter between Marco and Benigno who happen to sit next to each other at a performance of Pina Bausch's "Café Muller." It doesn't mean anything to them or the spectator until they meet for the second time in the hospital. Benigno recognizes Marco as the man who cried during the dance performance and this brief episode served as a premise for their friendship. In the film's concluding sequence, Marco's coincidental encounter with Alicia and her ballet teacher Katerina takes place in the theater and is striking for Marco, Katerina and the spectator, whereas Alicia remains ignorant due to her four years oblivion and the determined efforts by her teacher and adoptive mother to protect her. The recognition on the spectator's part and the author's decision to insert the title "Marco and Alicia" suggests their union in the future.

Unrecognized convergences are also found in Iñárritu, yet they are rare and the paths of the characters belonging to different plots never directly intersect. Several chance meetings occur in *Amores Perros*. Toward the end of the first

vignette, Octavio's best friend Jorge sees Valeria on TV and expresses admiration for her. In the third part of the film, the bruised Ramiro and Susana with the baby are shot walking down the street, seen from El Chivo's point of view. The corrupt policeman happens to be in the bank at the moment Ramiro and his buddy assault it. A similar coincidental encounter happens in *21 Grams* during the transplantation of Michael's heart to Paul's body. While Mary is waiting in the hospital lobby, Cristina comes out with her sister and father carrying her deceased husband and children's clothes. Neither side registers this encounter despite Mary's long look at the group passing by her. These coincidences are meaningful only for the spectator for they provide a link between the plots.

Almodóvar uses coincidence widely as an instant connector or a meeting facilitator which magically brings people together and triggers the further plot(s) development. During his imprisonment Víctor in *Carne Trémula* accidentally learns through television about Elena's marriage to David and that the latter has become a member of the national paraplegic basketball team. One of the first things Víctor sees after his release from the prison is a billboard showing David's success as an athlete, a scene that could be interpreted as an anticipation of the meeting with his rival in person. Víctor visits his mother's grave exactly the day and time of Elena's father's funeral at the same cemetery. He picks one bouquet out of many which contains a card with Elena's workplace name and address. And he meets Clara there when she comes late for the funeral. Their encounter

will start another affair for Clara (since her marital life is still as unhappy as four years ago), which will enrich Víctor with the sexual experience he desperately lacks. This chain of unlikely convergences, spatially united by the cemetery, serves as a point of re-connection to Elena and David after Víctor has been absent from the scene for several years. In addition, another connection is established – a direct one with Clara and an indirect one with Sancho. While steadily pursuing his goal to conquer Elena, Víctor is also favored by a numerous coincidences. Curiously, Iñárritu also chooses the cemetery as a space for coming back from the past in the case of El Chivo in *Amores Perros*. However, this appearance instigated by a desire to re-connect is absolutely causal. Although El Chivo learns about his wife's death and the place, date and time of the funeral by chance, when leafing through the newspaper, his presence at the cemetery is purposeful. El Chivo's moves are motivated by the goal to rather forcefully become part of the family he betrayed two decades ago. A short dialogue between El Chivo and his sister-in-law echoes the one between Víctor and Elena in terms of the bewilderment both women experience when facing people who suddenly materialize from times buried in memory.

In *Todo sobre mi Madre* after Manuela's flight from Barcelona eighteen years earlier, the chance to find people from her past on her return there would seem very slim. However, as we noted above, the author provides her with an easy and fast way of finding Agrado in the outskirts of Barcelona where the

prostitutes of all kinds meet with their clients. Manuela happens to witnesses a cruel beating and helps the victim, in a few moments recognizing in the assaulted prostitute her old friend Agrado. Later in the film, Almodóvar brings the theater company that performed "A Streetcar Named Desire" in Madrid to Barcelona. This circumstance gives Manuela an opportunity to re-connect to the theatrical world, while it provides a certain relief of her trauma.

Manuela's and Rosa's pregnancy by Lola is one of the most powerful coincidences that provides the story with continuity even after it is over. Not only does Manuela accept and take care of Rosa when she finds out that the latter is a victim of Lola's selfishness and irresponsibility. She also receives Estéban III as another son, based on two premises: Lola's fatherhood and the closeness she develops with Rosa during the short time of their mother–daughter relation.

Toward the end of the film, two important coincidental encounters define Rosa's relationship with both of her parents. The first one takes place on Rosa's way to the hospital to deliver her baby. She asks to drive to the area close to her house and sees her mentally ill father accompanied by their dog Sapic. Actually, the dog serves as a bridge between the father and the daughter for the former is unable to recognize Rosa. Their dialogue is one-sided and is meaningful only for the daughter. Rosa's farewell to her father takes place the day she dies in childbirth. The second meeting occurs when Rosa's mother happens to see her grandson Esteban in Lola's arms in a bar with Manuela. She is stupefied by the

fact that “esa mujer es su padre” (that woman is her father) and she attributes a fatal mission to Lola: “es el monstruo que ha matado a mi hija” (the monster who killed my daughter). On the other hand, this revelation helps Rosa’s mother come to a better understanding of her daughter who has been an “extraterrestre” to her since she was born.

Multiple spatial and temporal convergences in *Hable con ella* have a progenitive function for its stories. They create or, better, make possible the intrigue, which conditions unexpected connections and turns of the plot. For instance, the spatial contiguity of Benigno’s house and the ballet studio, which Alicia used to attend, conditions, the fact that he sees, becomes obsessed and constantly spies on her. The chance to approach Alicia falls into Benigno’s lap in the form of a wallet, which Alicia carelessly drops. After the accident Alicia happens to enter the same hospital where Benigno works and where Lydia is brought four years later. The fact of sharing the same space, the “El Bosque” clinic, connects Marco with Benigno and Alicia. When Alicia’s rape is investigated in the hospital, one of the nurses happens to witness the conversation between Benigno and Marco in which the latter expresses his desire to marry Alicia, testimony that confirms Benigno’s guilt and predetermines his end.

Almodóvar spices up the story logic by creating a double intrigue in *Carne Trémula*, representing its central event as a coincidence and demystifying it later in the film. In their debates regarding the aftermath of the gunshot David and

Víctor raise the topic of casualty, each seeing the other as benefiting from it. David comes to Víctor's house to accuse him of spying on his wife Elena, thereby positing a causal explanation for Víctor's actions. However, the latter debunks his rival's logic by a counterargument: "Mi madre se murió mientras estaba adentro. ¡Me encontré con vuestro puto entierro por casualidad!"(My mother died while I was in prison. I happened upon the damned funeral by chance). In response David observes: "Tú siempre estás donde no debes por casualidad" (You are always where you shouldn't be by chance), an interpretation of the coincidence as negative, i.e. being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Víctor in turn sees David as a beneficiary of the accident by concluding: "Es verdad, no tengo tanta suerte como tú. Hasta en los peores momentos sales ganando." (It's true. I am not as lucky as you. Even in the worst situations, you come out ahead). Víctor's fixation on Elena makes him blind to the fact of David's physical impairment; for the latter being considered lucky sounds bitterly ironic. During their next confrontation, which takes place in Elena's office at "El Fontanar," David describes his miserable condition as a disabled man implying that Víctor's accidental gunshot put him in the wheelchair. What follows is a re-creation, initiated by Víctor, of the six-year-old situation and the accident is redefined as a willed and trivial act of jealousy. Hence causality replaces casualty.

Another instance of misinterpreting the characters' actions and motivations is found in *Todo sobre mi Madre* when Manuela enters the theatrical

world. Her need to see Huma in order to share her grief results in a chain of accidental events. Chasing Nina on the city streets, leaving her purse in Nina's car and coming back to the theater next evening to retrieve it, brings Manuela a job as Huma's assistant. The seeming coincidence of Manuela's appearance in Huma's dressing room is questioned few months later when Nina confronts the former after she has substituted in Nina's role as Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In her accusations Nina draws on the plot of *All about Eve* (the last film Manuela and Esteban watched together), assuming that, Manuela, as Eve Harrington, wormed her way into the theater to gain Huma's trust in order to replace Nina and become an actress. In fact Manuela didn't accidentally approach Huma, but the explanation lies elsewhere. As she explains, "Streetcar" has played a significant role at various moments in her life. She tells Huma about her son's death following the performance in Madrid and Huma's indirect and unaware involvement in the tragedy. Manuela's decision to leave Huma's employ doesn't weaken their connection, which instead becomes reinforced by the memory of Esteban.

The interplay between the causal and the coincidental takes a peculiar form in the context of the complicated dynamics of Paul and Cristina's interaction in *21 Grams*. In contrast to *Hable con ella*, the inter-plot linking is generated by the protagonist's will and is not facilitated by a coincidental encounter. After receiving a new heart, Paul feels the need to learn who gave it to him and is

brought to Cristina by this impulse. Paul's initial desire to know the circumstances of the heart donor's death transforms into romantic interest and attraction to Cristina. Thus the causal chain of Paul's actions in pursuing one goal brings him to another. Falling in love with Cristina is an absolutely unexpected circumstance. "I wanted to thank you. I wanted to help in some way (…) and then I saw you…that day. And now I can't be away from you," Paul confesses and a romance in the middle of emotional and physical devastation grows as a rare flower.

Among other types of coincidences, Almodóvar also uses ones that function as anticipations or warnings. For example, in *Todo sobre mi Madre*, when waiting for her son in front of the theater prior to the performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she sees him nearly hit by a car while crossing the street. The episode seems quite insignificant for this kind of situation is very common in the chaotic dynamics of a big city. It seems unconceivable that in several hours a more serious variation of the same scenario will play out again, this time with a fatal outcome. The spectator and Benigno are warned about the possibility of a car crash in *Hable con ella* in similar fashion by Alicia's precarious crossing of an extremely busy road after her first and only conversation with Benigno. As these anticipations are part of fiction, i.e. constructed artificially, the intention of the author may be interpreted differently. They may be inserted to warn the characters (unsuccessfully) about the fatal blow or to create a special intriguing effect for the

spectator who, by making connections between a little incident and the huge accident in retrospect, will feel even more stupefied by the drama.

Both directors resort to a similar means to set their stories in motion, yet in very different ways. Almodóvar eschews extreme fragmentation and his treatment of temporal and spatial convergences is closer to the 19th century novelistic tradition. Referring to a Dickensian use of abundant coincidences, Barnes calls them the author's benefactors. For instance, they can conveniently tie up the story and provide a happy family reunion (cited in Hammond 623). I define this type of coincidences as "instant connectors" or "meeting facilitators" in the analysis of the films presented above. Almodóvar sets his dramas in the frame of a small world within which, according to Bordwell, the "characters will intersect again and again, especially if the duration and locale of the action are well circumscribed" (Bordwell, "The Way" 98). Besides these structural and narrative functions, Almodóvar's use of coincidence has "epistemological and political ramifications: it presents a wish for the formation and retention of common histories among strangers, in effect revealing a utopian desire for a sense of community that is political and emotional" (Kakoudaki 4). This utilization makes coincidence a source of resistance and an alternative to the structures of alienation that affect contemporary life (Kakoudaki 34). In this aspect, Iñárritu echoes Almodóvar only in *21 Grams* while in *Amores Perros* and *Babel* the coincidences are merely structural: in other words, they serve to connect the stories causally

and casually in order to knit the multiple plots together. Almodóvar's accidental encounters make his protagonists develop deep interpersonal relations without which each plot would be incomplete and couldn't, in fact, have moved forward. Iñárritu's characters converge through the accident but the plots within which they operate remain self-sufficient. Beyond questions of structure, the hermetic nature of the stories in *Amores Perros* and *Babel* "emphasizes the social, cultural and economic distance that is unbridgeable except through violent means like car crashes and gunshots."[8] Two statements made by Despina Kakoudaki and David Bordwell summarize and reveal the opposition between the two directors' approach to contingency. The former asserts that coincidence is a signature element of Almodóvar's work (3), while the latter points out that a signature brand for Iñárritu is the network narrative (Bordwell, "Poetics" 243). This opposition shouldn't be interpreted as: Iñárritu builds networks in his films and Almodóvar doesn't. In terms of structure and relationality dynamics, both directors do. Yet, coincidence, as applied to Almodóvar's work, implies bonding that transforms into kinship; whereas the network, as the main concept characterizing Iñárritu's texts, translates into the mere fact of sharing the same space, which may be the characters' only incentive for interacting.

The network or converging fates narrative (Bordwell "Poetics" 199) is a recently theorized trend in cinema. A number of film critics have stressed the fact

[8] K. Vernon's reflection.

that in this type of textual construct the balance between the cause-effect and the coincidence mechanisms has changed, when compared to a conventional, one plot narration. Bordwell identifies some of the distinguishing features of the genre, among them the preponderance of unrelated characters: “When the characters aren’t all familiars and they don’t participate in a causal project, the action is usually triggered by coincidence. In a plot populated by strangers, contingency replaces causality” (“Poetics” 204), as a result of which, “To a large extent the movie’s narrative structure rests upon the perpetual commingling of characters, so the prospect of recombination vies with causal logic as the impetus for the action” (“Poetics” 199). He points as well to the role of coincidence and unexpected convergences: “Convergences, minor or major, can become as important as the events in the separate story lines. The plot structure therefore must find ways to isolate or combine characters in compelling patterns that will replace the usual arc of goal directed activity. The principal source of these patterns, as we’ll see, is chance” (“Poetics” 199). An expert in the multi-protagonist film genre, Azcona, suggests that due to the growth in the visibility and the narrative relevance of coincidence in films with multiple protagonists, “causal linearity may be said to have gone into crisis” (“A Time” 144).

On the diagrams elaborated out of the Jungian vision of how different forces operate within our universe, the vertical “cuts” form a series of kaleidoscopic arrangements, reflecting the convergences of the characters’ fates.

"As characters' paths converge, crisscross and then drift apart, it is difficult to predict whose paths are going to converge next, what the consequences of a coincidental encounter will be, or the ultimate link between those characters that for most of the narrative, have had no connection whatsoever" (Azcona "Love" 6). These arrangements are mostly contingent and unpredictable, yet Azcona indicates that in a multiple plot complex, they become the main structuring principle behind the action and the actual focus of the narrative (Azcona "Love" 6). Importantly, the series of constantly changing combinations never stays still. Networks exist by interacting "and they are dynamic because they evolve and change in time, driven by the random activities or decisions of their very components" (Watts, cited in Everett 162). The moving randomness may give an impression that the reality it pictures is disjointed. It may be so. However fragmentation doesn't equal disconnectedness. The chance events that structure each film are still part of the network where not a single action, however casual or trivial, passes without wider consequences (Everett 167). In other words, a multiple plot structure is still holistic.

It must be noted that despite the growing role of contiguity, parallelism and contingency, causality still has a strong presence in a multiple plot structure. The diagrams show that the linear cause-effect chains, represented by horizontal lines, lead one convergence to the other. In every fictional system, coincidental encounters and accidents are explosions that drastically change the present state

of affairs. Nevertheless, causality (in the form of goals, plans and desires) is the force that moves the characters towards new convergences. What contributes to the impression that contingency and randomness prevail over causality is the formal organization of the films, characterized as shuffled, scrambled and non-linear. This aspect will be explored in depth in the third chapter of this dissertation. The polyphonic functioning of a multi-layered text may also obscure the cause-effect connections in each plotline. In addition, the implications of such theoretical frames as fractal or modular narrative along with chaos theory reinforce the perception of a multiple protagonist film as fragmented and disconnected. However, as the detailed treatment of each plot has shown, all of them are coherent and comprehensible, for every single story still obeys the laws of the orthodox plot. No doubt coincidence is creative, surprising and resistant to any explanation while causality is "boring" but one can't do without the other. Interestingly, story-building activities have proved more successful in comprehending and reflecting the complex nature of reality in its own randomness and unpredictability than religion, science and philosophy that have neglected coincidence and chance for centuries. The author-God's mind and imagination intuitively creates a chaosmos where causality and casualty are harmoniously at work.

Chapter 2

Textually Embodied Violence

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.
(Elizabeth Bishop*)*

We're undone by each other and if we're not,
we're missing something.
(Judith Butler 23)

The "age of mindless, brain dead violence" (Kinder 258) is the best and the main trope for the films which are the focus of this work. In this regard recent data from medical science seems quite significant and not coincidental at all. One aspect concerns the physical body; as Margaret Lock points out in her exhaustive 2002 analysis of the technical, ethical and social aspects of organ transplantation, "only during the past twenty years have medical knowledge and technology advanced sufficiently for organ transplantation to become routine, with surgeons performing thousands of operations each year" (1). The container from which healthy, working parts are extracted is the body of a "living cadaver" whose brain death has been caused by an automobile or motorcycle crash, a drowning, smoke inhalation, a major blow to the head, a stroke or an act of violence, such as a gunshot wound (Lock 1). In the realm of the mind, the field of psychiatry was marked in1980 by the acknowledgement of a new illness - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - that includes persons

> confronted with an experience involving actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a physical threat to the physical integrity of the self considered to be outside the range of normal experience. Individuals who experienced wars, disasters, accidents or other extreme 'stressor' events seem to produce certain somatic and psycho-somatic disturbances.
>
> (Luckhurst 1, my emphasis).

The "integrity of the self," physical or psychic, seems not to be attainable per se. As Judith Butler observes: "One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel" (23-24). Extending the concept of the "touch" or the individual's contact with the world, Butler comes to the conclusion that: "Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another" (28-29). One's integrity is even more deeply compromised in the context of extreme and unaccountable violence that may lead to the loss of personal boundaries or self-disintegration to such a degree that the organs travel from one body to the other mixing, crashing or creating identities.

Echoing those thirty years of medical advances (since the 1980s), cinema has developed a structural and aesthetic tendency towards shuffled, incoherent, "dismembered" narrative (Bordwell) that could be interpreted as a disintegration

or disfiguration of the body of the text. In addition, a proliferation of films, which feature the car accident or the gunshot as a central and fundamental plot event, called for distinguishing them as a new (sub) genre. In one exploration of the phenomenon Amit Thakkar proposes the term "cine de choque" defining the *choque* aesthetic as "representative of a trend in (…) cinema, in which the *choque* (as 'crash', 'shock' or 'clash') is exploited both as a plot device and as a linguistic motif which informs that aesthetic" (19-20). Thakkar distinguishes between "choque" and trauma, noting that "*choque* is reliant on that immediacy for its effect, instantly confronting its subject" while trauma has a deferred or belated action and is a prolonged painful experience (24). As we will see, Almodóvar's films correspond to his definition of trauma films while among Iñárritu's films *Amores Perros* is the closest to the "cinema of shock" conceptualization. The Mexican director himself offers another metaphor that echoes the concept of "choque" and its implications, describing *Amores Perros* as a shout – "un grito" that lasts for two hours (cited in Smith 59). In his later films Iñárritu coincides with Almodóvar in fitting the "trauma film" frame. Both *21 Grams* and *Babel*, along with *Carne Trémula, Todo sobre mi Madre* and *Hable con ella*, deal with the aftermath of a shocking event and feature the healing process, extended in time and suggestive of a continuity between all kinds of interpersonal relations and contacts de/constructed by violence.

In terms of an accident driven type of narrative, Thakkar's proposition is echoed by Robert B. Heilman's elaboration on tragedy where he draws attention to a subgenre – the "disaster drama" – that is ontologically different from tragedy in its proper sense. Disaster refers to "fatal accidents, mortal illnesses that strike (we think) before their time, the destructive blows of a nature not yet quite tamed, and all the murderous violence that comes directly or by ricochet from the envious, the hostile, and the mad" (21). What makes the disaster drama different from tragedy is that the characters do not make a choice. They are passive beings and something just happens to them without an explanation or understanding on their behalf (Heilman 19). Such events and occurrences are pretexts for victimization and loss of agency, but at the same time, the subject is free of responsibility or guilt for what has happened. "In disaster," Heilman opines, "what happens comes from without; in tragedy, from within. In disaster, we are victims; in tragedy, we make victims, of others or of ourselves. In disaster, our moral quality, though it may be revealed, is secondary; in tragedy, it is primary, the very source of all that happens" (Heilman 28). Importantly, both – tragedy and disaster drama – depict suffering and the individual dramas do not always "fit conveniently into one category or another; the more complex they are, the more likely they are to intermingle the tragic and the disastrous" (Heilman 33). Even more important, the character's reaction to a blow may be different: either s/he chooses to drift, wait and (not) hope, or the accident serves as an incitement to

self-discovery (Heilman 33). Then agency is restored and the character moves on and tries to derive a meaning if not from the accident per se, at least from what the loss implies and where it may bring him/her. For example in *21 Grams* Jack perceives the accident as something that happened to him as well as to his victims. He didn't make a decision to kill these people and the hell he is submerged in is absolutely equal to Cristina's lonely unbearable existence. Paul, who hasn't made a decision to die either, brings both Cristina and Jack back to life and chooses to die as a hero completing several missions. In fact, Paul saves *21 Grams* from being a disaster drama and elevates it to a tragic scale.

It is apparent that Almodóvar and Iñárritu's characters function "outside the range of normal experience" which means that all of them are traumatized and definitely are in a victim status - if not as the primary victim, then in a secondary role as "witnesses, bystanders, rescue workers, relatives caught up in the immediate aftermath (…), receiving news of the death or injury of a relative" (Luckhurst 1). Significantly, not only the affected ones but also those who inflict violence (voluntary or involuntary) are traumatized as well. The most prominent figure of such a sufferer is Jack Jordan (*21 Grams*) who accidentally killed three people and is unable to lead a normal life. The shock and subsequent trauma estranges him from his family, shakes his sincere and rather fanatical faith in God and pushes him towards a suicide attempt.

In this chapter the effects of violence on the body and psyche will be examined from the perspective of their narrative potential in the specific context of, as Roger Luckhurst puts it, "contemporary trauma culture" (2). Basing his argument on the work of other trauma studies experts,[9] Luckhurst states that the 20th century in Western cultures is marked by constant convulsions around iconic traumatic events the psychological impacts of which have percolated into many different contexts. (1-2). "Concentration camp inmates, Vietnam and Gulf War veterans, victims of atrocities, traumatized parents and survivors of disaster" along with "domestic violence, rape, war atrocity, terminal illness, family deaths" are "the subject of intensive political, sociological, biological, psychiatric, therapeutic and legal investigation and dispute" (Luckhurst 2). Departing from the etymology of the term "trauma" (which originally was limited to a bodily injury but was gradually expanded from the physical to the mental realm), Luckhurst developed a point essential to understanding the effects of trauma I explore in this chapter, noting that: "Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication." He continues:

[9] Santner, Kaplan, Butler, Eyal.

> Trauma violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound. Trauma also appears to be worryingly transmissible: it leaks (…) between patients, between patients and doctors via mysterious processes of transference or suggestion, and between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood.
>
> (3)

What follows from this reflection is that trauma transcends the mere happening or event. It impregnates the existence of all those affected, driving individual destinies while reshaping collectives fates. It also creates a certain atmosphere, dominates the environment and permeates the air everybody breathes. The notion of trauma culture as theorized by Luckhurst and others seek to describe and illuminate something essential about the world and human experience. Paraphrasing Butler, in this world nobody stays intact and "despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch" (23) by violence and by victimization.

Trauma provides a common ground for the six selected films in their task of conveying "the experience of traumatized subjectivity" (Luckhurst 178) that is the result of an unprecedented act of violence - a car crash or a gunshot. These accidents irreversibly change the characters' lives, dividing their whole existence into *before* and *after.* The blow disturbs the given state of affairs and creates an after which is marked by victimhood and what moves the narration forward is the overcoming of trauma, that is, the task of grieving and mourning. It is noteworthy

that the fictional universes created around the millennium do not offer stability or relative normality even during the pre-accident stage since in each film the protagonists find themselves in situations which are already charged with stress and needing of solutions. Instead, a bewildering, fatal, unexpected event befalls them and makes their lives and being unbearable. Eventually, the intensity of the classical narrative formula (exposition – tension - climax – denouement) is exacerbated and in some instances reaches the verge of absurdity.

In the case of *Carne Trémula* all five protagonists converge in the gunshot scene already carrying their own traumatic baggage. Sancho is paranoid about his wife's infidelity, which pushes him towards alcoholism and makes him unstable psychologically. David feels guilty about sleeping with his friend and co-worker's wife. Elena is dependent on drugs and leads a loose life without any direction. Víctor is the son of a prostitute and is mired in a dead-end job. And Clara is constantly going in circles in search of an outlet from her unhappy marriage. The accident makes things worse, putting Víctor in jail for four years and David into a wheelchair forever. Although Elena finds direction in life through marriage to David, she has to cope with sexual dissatisfaction while performing the task of a caring wife-nurse. For their part, Clara and Sancho keep torturing each other only to finally arrive at another, terminal gunshot.

At the opening of *Todo sobre mi Madre* Manuela seems to have achieved a certain stability in life for she has a job and a beloved son whose 17th birthday

she is about to celebrate. Later it becomes known that her settling in Madrid was a result of an escape from a self centered, transgressive and transgender husband whom she considered unacceptable as a father for her son. Instead of being rewarded with a peaceful life for having been able to raise a child and become a nurse, Manuela is devastated by the accidental death of Esteban and the rest of the film is dedicated to how she deals with her trauma.

The initial scenes of *Hable con ella* depict the leading couples in relationships which do not function quite properly. In case of Marco and Lydia, both are overcoming a painful break up and find emotional support in each other. But later, after Lydia is gored by a bull Marco learns that she had intended to go back to her former lover, El Niño de Valencia. Marco thus loses Lydia twice; most immediately through her coma (and subsequent death) and also upon learning she planned to leave him. Therefore, both men related to Lydia have to cope with an irreplaceable loss.

Benigno and Alicia represent a one-sided love story in which Alicia is involved without her consent. Before the car accident that put the young woman in a coma Benigno already represented a troubled young man who was in need of psychological treatment due to his unusual childhood and adolescence. Because of the accident, Benigno never went to the second appointment with a therapist (Dr. Roncero, Alicia's father) and had to deal with the burden of solitude and virginity on his own. After the accident he cared for the comatose Alicia in the

hospital and created an illusion of a happy relationship. Pushed and self-justified by this illusion, Benigno commits a sexual act with the unresponsive body, which constitutes the strongest shock in the film. Benigno is irreversibly affected by the violence he inflicted and has to pay a high price, in some sense giving his life for Alicia.

In Iñárritu's trilogy car accidents and gun shots similarly disturb each story line and bring them to unexpected and even unthinkable aftermaths. In *Amores Perros* Octavio, Susana and Ramiro are, from the outset, already locked in a tense and unhealthy situation of brotherly rivalry for Susana's heart and body. The crash "releases" the tension without providing any happy coupling but leaves Octavio wounded and lost, Susana – pregnant with her husband's child -without good prospects as a single mother with little or no family support, and Ramiro dead by gunshot in a botched bank robbery.

In the second story Daniel and Valeria start a new life and a new home carrying a negative emotional baggage. The former is obliged to betray his wife and children and the later is shown as having no consideration for this fact, selfishly pursuing her goal of being with Daniel. This new-formed union is not given a chance to solve these issues; on the contrary, their co-existence is made impossible by Valeria's mutilation, caused by the accident she gets into the very day she and Daniel come together in their new apartment.

It is noteworthy that Iñárritu has chosen to deprive Valeria of any personal story that might have made her a more sympathetic character. For example, the fact that she has had to abort Daniel's child was initially included into the film's script, but this information is not disclosed in the narration (Smith 34). The reasons for making this character seem more superficial may derive from the intention to develop Valeria's "image-likeness" to a greater extent. Such a treatment makes this character work in the film more as a glamorous icon of the society segment she belongs to and that disposes of her as soon as Valeria's good looks have been disfigured.

21 Grams shows a very fragile stability in the protagonist's state of affairs before the accident that takes Cristina's husband's and children's lives. Although Cristina's family may be considered exemplary and happy, through several short sequences it becomes clear that she had problems with drugs and alcohol before her marriage and after the tragedy she goes back to them. Jack Jordan has only recently started a life of a good Christian after being in and out of jail since he was sixteen. His wife Marianne is making a constant effort to keep their family peaceful and loving although she doesn't share Jack's total devotion to the local religious congregation. Paul is dying from a terminal heart disease in the arms of his wife Mary whom he apparently doesn't love anymore. They argue constantly about her desire to have a child since Paul wouldn't be able to live long enough even to meet it. Jack Jordan's truck runs over three families including his own and

a relative stability comes back only at the cost of Cristina's total loss and Paul's death.

The central couple (Richard and Susan) appears in *Babel* at the moment of a family crisis caused by their infant child's death. They are trying to overcome it through a vacation in exotic Morocco. Alone with her husband, having left their two other children with their longtime nanny, Susan is seen as tremendously stressed and unable to enjoy anything on the trip. When a stray bullet strikes her as they travel by bus, she is put on the verge of life and death and Richard makes inhuman efforts to save her. The solution to their personal drama comes at the cost of a dead Moroccan child, Ahmed, their own children's possible death in the desert and the deportation of their Mexican nanny Amelia from United States.

In all six cases the violent act disturbed already traumatized lives and, in addition, it damaged or took away a loved one – a loss that is non recoverable. In this connection, it is fruitful to question what it is that violence destroys. What do we and the protagonists lose? And, paradoxically, quoting Paul's pre-death monologue in *21 Grams*: "How much is gained?"

In her chapter titled "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Butler questions the notion of a successful mourning or grieving which, taken simplistically, implies that "one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place" (21). Butler argues that this kind of replacement doesn't work since the loss goes beyond just losing a favorite/beloved object. "When one loses," she

reflects, "one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss" (21-22). The trauma faced by the person experiencing the loss, not only consists in missing someone loved and feeling empty. It also involves the revelation of the fact that one becomes incomprehensible to oneself. As Butler puts it: "Who 'am' I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do" (22). Therefore, the nature of the destruction is not that straightforward. Besides the actual physical absence of a loved person, lost to a violent act or event, what is also affected is the relation of one person to the other. That is, the person is missing in our lives and we miss the person, or better to say, we are missing something, we are not complete. "Violence," Butler reflects, "is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies outside ourselves and for one another" (27). This impossibility of being autonomous and always in control, on the one hand makes one extremely vulnerable and exposed to any kind of attack, but on the other hand, the inevitable relationality of bodies and souls provides us with an opportunity to overcome the trauma and bring grieving to a certain success through becoming someone else. "Perhaps, rather, one mourns" – Butler suggests – "when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in

advance. There is losing (…) but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned" (21). Building on Butler's premise that "we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well" (24), it may be concluded that relationality is a network-like system, which is in a constant movement of rise and fall. It constitutes, dispossesses and transforms and the sense of this dynamics is hidden from us, seeming incomprehensible, cruel, unfair. But, importantly, only through relating to each other through a human tie or community, a transformation is possible. Successful grieving is not recuperating a loss, nor getting a similar replacement. More likely it is a drastic change of one's self, an ability to get back to an understanding of "who I am." The transformative process has a healing effect that is not fully understood at first since not only is the loss irreplaceable but also becoming one's old self is undoable.

The network structure of each film also represents a multi-layered interaction where the repercussions of the tragedy, which crashes into each plot, are characterized by a certain ambiguity. The question "How much is gained?" by the death/loss of someone, however contradictory it sounds, remains a meaningful one. Analyzing the masculinity crisis in Almodóvar's oeuvre Dean Allbritton points out, for example, that the seemingly negative or even pathogenic effects of male behavior and masculinity itself must not be read exclusively as "bad" or purely destructive. They may have creational capacities and the birth of suffering

not only implies loss of/for one, but also the gain of another (234). The interplay between the components of such dichotomies as losing - gaining, giving - taking, lacking - having is much more complex and unpredictable in the kinds of postmodern tragedy witnessed in the films under study in their non-graspable fluidity and hybridity. Loss is so intrinsic to life that we become constituted and reborn by it, a fact which is epitomized by Iñárritu's postscript to *Amores Perros*: "También somos lo que hemos perdido." This motif prevails in all of his films and it equally applies to Almodóvar's vision of human existence articulated in his work. This paradoxical understanding of the interconnectedness of loss and gain is born out in the conclusions to both directors' films. It would be wrong to assert that the ending of each film is entirely bereft of hope or any optimistic prospects. In this connection the creational (positive) potential of the accident and the suffering it incurs deserve a closer look. Generally speaking, the characters who have gained are also the ones who have lost and the transformations they have undergone weren't deliberate or even conscious.

Despite the darkness and pessimism of *Amores Perros'* codas, the former revolutionary, el Chivo, goes out to the black desert renewed and revived. A chain of ill-fated events unrelated to this man, who "cynically renounced all love and hope for his fellow humans in the wake of his defeat by repressive proto-liberal forces" (Reber 287), brought him back to life from a kind of nowhere space. El Chivo voluntary excluded himself from the community he used to belong to,

pronouncing himself dead to his daughter. He took refuge in an autonomous, hermetic state, which kept him safe from emotional ties and allowed him to take others' lives with a "nothing personal" attitude. The first sign of any relation to the other appears when he bursts into tears seeing his wife's obituary in the newspaper. However, to assume that el Chivo existed beyond any kind of relationality would be also wrong. As Reber insightfully observes, "el Chivo has rechanneled this love and idealism into his family of dogs. In fact, it is this very unflinchingly selfless and self-sacrificing 'paternal' care that sets the entire storyline in motion" (287). The car crash, which disfigured Octavio and mutilated Valeria at the same time destroying their current relationships, brings the miraculously surviving Cofi to el Chivo's house. Becoming an adoptive father for this dog marks "the moral turning point that will put an end to el Chivo's own flimsy justifications of murder" (Reber 288). It is noteworthy that Chivo's metamorphosis and the steps he takes toward reestablishing contact with his daughter are paid for by the death of his canine family. They are slaughtered by Cofi who has been trained to do so. But the revelation that the killer has taken in a killer renders el Chivo unable to pull the trigger and shoot into Cofi's innocent eyes (Reber 288). Importantly, the transformation or new self is absolutely unforeseen and the possibility of such is often independent of the agent's efforts. In other words, there is no way of knowing what circumstances will drive the affected one towards recovery.

Grieving or mourning may take different forms. The spectrum varies from passive introspection to anger at the whole world and an inability to accept what has happened. When grief catches us, these are the moments "in which one undergoes something outside one's control and finds that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself" (Butler 28). Cristina in *21 Grams* and Manuela in *Todo sobre mi Madre* are found in this state almost from the beginning of the films when the car accident sweeps away their families. The rest of the narration is dedicated to how they manage their lives further on. Unlike Manuela, Cristina experiences her grief as alienating and rejects any connection with the world. The best visualization of her state would be a shot of her body floating in a swimming pool. (Figure 1)

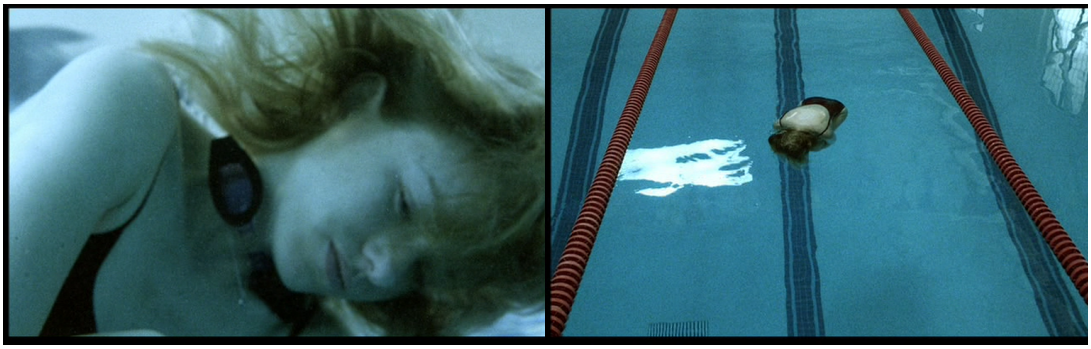

Figure 1

In this apneic suspension she can feel safe since even breathing, as a minimal requirement for life, is painful for her. This fetal position offers an illusion of getting back to the womb protected by its waters, blind, deaf and pre-born, on the threshold between death and life. Drugs and alcohol help Cristina to

maintain this state of profound, incommunicable anabiosis. And indeed, why wake up? What for?! She refuses her father's wise proposition that "Life goes on" considering it a lie; "Life doesn't just go on!" - she replies. Nor does she press charges against Jack since nothing will bring her family back, no matter what she does. It is Paul who delicately makes the first intrusion into her torture chamber, thus initiating Crisitina's coming back. And there wouldn't have been any other possible way but establishing a new, albeit very fragile human tie. As Butler asserts: "Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation (…) But I think it furnishes a sense of (…) community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (22). When Cristina moves to an active phase in grieving, she becomes able to act. In this sense Cristina comes to resemble Manuela whose psychical response to the trauma was opposite from the inception. She refuses to be victimized unlike Cristina who rejects all and everything but her grief, thus accepting her designated role as sufferer (Stewart 64). Almodóvar characterizes Manuela as "a devastated woman – as damaged as if she'd been struck by lightning, ravaged by fire. And it's because she is so utterly desperate, a zombie, her soul gone, that she starts to relive. From the depth of her despair Manuela is more open to others, for her own life is no longer of interest to her. She no longer has anything to fear, because she doesn't have anything more to lose" (cited in

Strauss 187). Through this self-abnegation, Manuela manages to move on and proves stronger than the tragic circumstances she finds herself in.

Both women, Cristina and Manuela, share the fact of visiting the place where their loved ones were still alive for the last time, thus ruminating and trying to comprehend the loss. The former follows her husband and children's last itinerary – the restaurant, the walk through the street and the intersection where they were run over by Jack's truck. The latter returns to a performance of *A Street Car Named Desire*, keeping an empty seat next to her where Esteban is still spiritually present. At the same time, both women are unable to talk about what happened to them. Significantly, Manuela rushes to Barcelona in search of the ties that connected her to the community where Esteban was conceived, although it would be travelling against time, to a past world that might not exist anymore. The presence of her husband (Lola) and his knowing about having had a son becomes Manuela's goal, and vital necessity for establishing this maybe imaginary or one-sided relation still brings sense to Manuela's being following the tragedy. Although the actual meeting with Esteban's father takes place at the stage when Manuela is well advanced in her transformation and has constructed and reconstructed a set of new ties in Barcelona, Lola, or better to say, Lola's figure motivates and overshadows the whole process of Manuela's quest. Ultimately, she discovers or reincarnates into a new self, able to reconcile with the past and build a future.

With Paul's appearance Cristina is pushed towards a life with a slight possibility of happiness. However, her awakening is characterized by aggressiveness and anger for she gradually articulates an intention to take revenge and to kill Jack Jordan, thus seeking a resolution for grief through violence. In her raging monologue she casts all the blame for her "paralyzed state" on Jack but despite the intensity and the negative charge of this pronouncement it is still a moment of relief – this is the first time Cristina talks about the accident. What saves Manuela from anger and desperation is her opening to the world and assuming a "mother of everyone" mission. Manuela is grieving without pressing charges and her moment of releasing or talking the trauma out (to Huma and Nina in their dressing room in the theater in Barcelona) is more pacific but no less painful. Manuela is wiser and intuitively closer to the comprehension of life and death, love and hatred, yet her understanding is reduced to a very simple formula. "No pienses en eso," she advises Rosa's mother who is perplexed after having seen Lola, the monster who killed her daughter Rosa.

In terms of the networking system, which constitutes both films' universes, the way out or new perspective on life that these women are granted demonstrates the fluidity or hybridity mentioned above. Manuela and Cristina become mothers: Manuela to the third Esteban, the son of Lola and her adopted sister/daughter, Sister Rosa, while Michael's heart and Paul's body have impregnated Cristina. The boundaries of integrity, identity and mortality become

blurred as an appraisal of how much is lost or how much is gained proves ambiguous.

Two of the story lines in *Babel* present a "de-traumatizing" scenario as an alternative to passivity and an active, heroic coping as a way of neutralizing or moving on from an emotional wound. Susan has lost her third child and the pain is aggravated by her husband's betrayal. She appears in a rather obsessive-compulsive state, unable to successfully communicate with Richard and feeling bitter and helpless at the same time. In a parallel narrative strand, the deaf-mute teenager Cheiko is afflicted by a complex of factors, the gravest of which is her mother's recent suicide. The girl is tormented by loneliness, sexual anxiety and the inability to fit in among her peers. However cynical or post-moral it might sound, the gunshot that resounded in Morocco benefited both, driving them out of the states they were stuck in.

In Susan's case the physical wound and a life-threatening situation have replaced the burden of the previous stress. Another blow has made the earlier one less significant. In other words, the prospect of dying and leaving her children alone restores the loving tie with Richard. "Don't you ever leave them again," she pleads and what follows is a reconciliation scene where both are able to talk about their loss. Both express the fear and guilt they felt at the moment of their baby's death but at the same time a declaration of love, and a passionate kiss crowns the scene.

Following the trail of the rifle that fired the shot that injured Susan brings the young detective to Cheiko's apartment in Tokyo where the girl spends long hours alone trying to find an outlet for her intense and mixed feelings; thus the unknown man becomes a target for Cheiko's emotional outburst. Immaturity and sexual tension don't let her see any other way of breaking out of her angst than offering herself to a stranger after several failed attempts to do so with other men. But a human, heartfelt hug brings Cheiko to a critical point and makes her cry out loud. Minutes later, it is a new, relieved and grown up Cheiko who stands naked on the skyscraper's balcony in the final scene of *Babel*. Here, as in *Todo sobre mi madre* with its multiple allusions to *Streetcar*, relationality also stands for always relying on the kindness of strangers.

By having widened its signification, the term "trauma" nowadays focuses as much on a an affected psyche as on a physical wound and the two phenomena remain interdependent and mutually influential. An intricate interoperation of physicality and psyche is accentuated in all the films under study, proving how complementary and inseparable they are. In several cases the initial wound (trauma) is done to the body and the recuperation comes through it as well. For example, Clara in *Carne Trémula* is regularly beaten by her husband but she seeks therapy in giving her body to other men. Alicia's body in *Hable con ella* becomes motionless because of the accident, but is brought back to life through a controversial sexual contact with Benigno. Cristina in *21 Grams* makes her first

step towards recuperation when she makes love to Michael's heart and Paul's body for the first time. In *Babel* both trauma-relief scenes are extremely corporal. Susan and Richard reconcile when the former, covered with blood and dirt, urinates into the pan that the latter holds for her. And Cheiko, naked, clings to a young man at the same time forcing him to touch her breast.

It is essential that in these particular texts and in trauma-based fiction in general the body becomes one of the main expressive and narrative devices: bodies speak, bodies scream, bodies have started living their own lives, in some cases, independently of minds.

The unremitting attempts to classify human beings and bodies have always been based on constructing oppositions that originate from Cartesian *dualism*. Within this paradigm and the ones adhering to it, the mind, being also commonly attributed to the masculine domain, has been associated with reason, sense, matter, psyche and so forth; whereas the body, perceived as belonging to the feminine realm, purported passion, sensibility, form and physiology (Grosz 4; Urios-Aparisi 183). For centuries the components of these binaries have been considered mutually exclusive and incompatible, but at the same time the need to reconcile or overcome this artificially imposed division has preoccupied any number of thinkers. Opposed to such dualism, Spinoza's *monism* offers a notion of the body "as total and holistic, a completed and integrated system" which possesses a soul, understood as "the correlate idea of an actually existing body"

(Grosz 13). In case of an assumed disconnection between body and mind two inconsistencies become patent. Firstly, how can something that inhabits space (body) affect or be affected by something that is non-spatial (mind)? Secondly "the existence of other minds must be inferred from the apparent existence of other bodies" (Grosz 6); therefore the manageability of human interaction directly depends on the coordinate functioning of both entities.

As Elizabeth Grosz points out, both paradigms - dualism and monism - are not sufficiently flexible to embrace the connection between the body and the mind as well as to discern its "wonderful ability, while striving for integration and cohesion, organic and psychic wholeness, to also provide for and indeed produce fragmentations, fracturings, dislocations that orient bodies and body parts toward other bodies and body parts" (13). The observed fluidity within a single body and between the bodies may be seen positively, from the perspective of its productive potential, which is mostly pronounced in *Todo sobre mi madre, Hable con ella* and *21 Grams*. What is claimed here is that the wholeness and integrity goes beyond one body and each body is a part of a system that, as Paul asserts in *21 Grams*, "is bigger than us." This kind of vision or approach raises another set of questions, such as the uniqueness of body and mind and the relation of a human being to his/her own body. As Peter Brooks reflects in this respect: "Our bodies are with us, though we have always had trouble saying exactly how. We are, in various conceptions or metaphors, in our body, or having a body, or at one with

our body, or alienated from it. The body is both ourselves and other, and as such the object of emotions from love to disgust" (1). One of the most natural and, at the same time, impossible claim is the ownership over our own bodies. Although we struggle for the rights over them "the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own" (Butler 26). "The body has its invariably public dimension," Butler continues, "constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life" (26). The exposure and vulnerability of the body in the public sphere means sharing it involuntarily, thus losing possession of it but establishing a relational tie at the same time.

Owning or being owned by others translates into perceiving the body as a subject or an object. According to Peter Brooks, the body as an object may be addressed in different modes: as a biological entity, psychosexual construction or as a cultural product (xii). As one of the main tropes in visual representation, the body has been objectified as a model for artistic interpretation in ways that reflect its role as a passive recipient of social and cultural influences and pressures.

> The body mirrors the individual journey towards the articulation of a personal narrative in relation to cultural constructs. Both the passive and disciplined body, as well as the conflictual and restless one reveal the subject's position regarding normative social and cultural prescriptions. The manner in which the body is represented becomes therefore emblematical for the agenda of a certain cultural product.
>
> (Piersecã 112)

The body speaks for its subject and, in fact, has a narrative capacity per se. In this respect, the body – text conceptual interplay is worth attention. Brooks, in his exhaustive analysis of the body's narrative potential as an object of desire, approaches fiction as "stories on the body" as well as "the body in the story" (xi). The main tendency in modern writing, observed by Brooks, consists of the fact that works "appear to produce a semiotization of the body[10] which is matched by somatization of the story: a claim that the body must be a source and a locus of meanings, and that stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations" (xii). The perception of the body as signifying and signified is a break from the dominance of verbal discourse, traditionally considered as a voice-instrument for the expression of a phenomenal world. Cognitive value was assigned to the immaterial mind by philosophy and science and usually disregarded the corporeal, rendering the body an exclusively representational function. However, in recent years the body has moved to the center of critical discourse and becomes a key-organizing element in narratives (Gutiérrez Albilla 48; Brooks 47).

Needless to say, visual narrative is unable to function without bodies; otherwise who would inhabit the frame? The corporeality of cinema is obvious

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[10] *Hable con ella*, offers an intricate version of body semantization. The two motionless and unconscious bodies, Lydia and Alicia, "are faithfully attended by verbal men who love them" (Kinder 254) and, actually, can only exist through words. In fact, Lydia dies because Marco fails to communicate with her; meanwhile Benigno, talks to and speaks Alicia's body, which is the only way she can tell her story, keep living, albeit in a coma, and wake up after four years.

and, in fact, cinema is a "corpo-reality" the density and the power of which is, at times, overwhelming in Iñárritu and especially in Almodóvar who, as Allbritton puts it, creates a cinema of the flesh (225). Almodóvar celebrates the body, treating it in a revolutionary way from his very first feature film. The fluidity between genders and limitless sexuality in Almodovarian narrative gives the body a hedonistic tone. This director "creates a 'body of love' by using intertextual references to other films and camera work and by reembodying the conceptualizations traditionally assigned to the body parts in bodies that do not coincide with their traditional assignation, and by depicting the body as part of a natural environment that avoids the glamorization of the sexuality" (Urios-Aparisi 196). Iñárritu speaks through the body as well, but in a different if not opposite fashion. Sexuality and pleasure per se are the least of his preoccupations (it would be enough to recall the "moribund" bed scenes in *21 Grams*). Iñárritu is in search of a body function that is beyond the body (or flesh). Through corporal acts that are included in the narration, this auteur questions the mission of the body in terms of its human and ethical value.

As Brooks testifies, the literary (and by extension, cinematic) body has historically taken many types: heroic, sacred, suffering, tragic, carnivalesque, desiring and desired, pornographic and even moribund "since the primacy of the body may be most dramatically felt in its failure: the deathbed is a privileged literary place" (5). Since the conceptual framework of my analysis is violence,

which first of all inflicts a physical trauma on the agent, it is preferable to reduce the classification of body states to just one binary: an active, healthy body versus one that is passive and sick. Brooks' emphasis on the body close to death and its significance originates two important ideas to be developed further in this work. First, the wounded, incapable or sick body is more readable and speaks more clearly. Medicine was the first to discern the semiotic quality of the body that allowed doctors going back to Hippocrates to read the story of an illness through its symptoms or signs (Brooks 38). In modern fiction, the context of dense violence and vulnerability brings a disintegrated/disfigured body to the fore. "The disabled are defined by their bodies," states Petra Kuppers, they "carry the stigma of their personal histories as readable signs of their bodies" (198, 186). Mãdãlina Piersecã describes the readability of a damaged body when it becomes "the surface where the narrative is physically inscribed" as "corporeal geography" (114). Secondly, expanding Allbritton's idea beyond the limits of Almodóvar's fiction, death, loss or absence is, paradoxically, a more prominent presence.

A healthy, active body is usually moved by all kinds of "I wants" and the drama develops fueled by the energy of protagonists' desires. What takes place in a trauma-driven story is that one or more protagonists are injured by a violent act and often, when facing an irreversible aftermath, the initial intentions of the agent stop making sense since the whole worldview has changed. In all six films the damage done to the other's body is targeted or random, but beyond the four

central car crashes (*Todo sobre mi Madre, Hable con ella, Amores Perros, 21 Grams*) and two crucial gunshots (*Carne Trémula*, *Babel*), the abundance of handguns in all the narratives gives the impression of a general state of emergency where violence is never dormant. Another cause of disintegration and death is disease, which gradually kills several protagonists: Isabel in *Carne Trémula*; Lola in *Todo sobre mi Madre*; Paul in *21 Grams*. The body may also succumb to a kind of voluntary harm as a result of an inability to live in the tragic reality in which the character is immersed. Alcohol and drugs (Cristina in *21 Grams*; Sancho in *Carne Trémula*) make their existence seemingly bearable, albeit never lead to a profound change or cure.

In her discussion on disability, trauma and narrative, Kuppers bitterly acknowledges that:

> Paralysis (and blindness, and "crippling", and amputation, and abortion) – these words resonate beyond the "abstract", and have meaning in the order of bodies and the psyche. These meanings are reiterated in discourse and practice through the use and re-use of their negative connotation in communication, for instance, in film narrative. This marking of disability as negative within the cultural narrative economy undermines social attempts to revalue disability and to bring disabled people out of the ghetto of abjection.
>
> (185)

I would dare to argue that, at least in the films presented in this work, the traumatized body moves from the margins to the center. Various forms of human and technological assistance for damaged or impaired bodies are realistically

displayed and the action often moves to a less conventional space such as a hospital.[11] (Figures 2-6)

Figure 2 *Carne Trémula*

One of the main characters, David makes his way to Víctor's house.

Figure 3 *Todo sobre mi Madre*

The opening shots introduce Manuela, the protagonist of the film, in the hospital setting where she works as a nurse.

Figure 4 *Hable con ella*

In the fifth minute into the film we see a scene, which represents Benigno and Alicia's special relationship.

[11] In "To the Health of the Author: Art Direction in Los *Abrazos Rotos*." John D. Sanderson dedicates a section, where he looks specifically at the use of hospital spaces in Almodóvar, which is indicative of the tendency for the medical institution to become the main locus of the accident-driven drama(s).

Figure 5 *Amores Perros*

Valeria cruises through her new apartment after the accident.

Figure 6 *21 Gram*

A rather violent scene where Paul holds and sees his failed heart after he has been given a "new," healthy one.

Not only do the settings in a trauma film become more "medical," but an ontological change also takes place in the types of interactions and relation among the protagonists. In almost all of the primary relationships a functional division is observed which consists in either taking care of somebody or being taken care of. In addition to the presence of professional nurses as protagonists (Manuela in *Todo sobre mi Madre*; Benigno in *Hable con ella*) in every other film a temporary or extended caring or nursing for one or more of the characters takes place. In *21 Grams* Mary has to attend to her terminally ill husband who is no longer able to

work and is stuck at home courageously awaiting the end. The gunshot in *Babel* puts Richard in an emergency situation where he has to nurse Susan until professional medical care arrives.

The relationship of David and Elena (*Carne Trémula*) is marked by inequality, despite all the efforts of the former to be a successful man. David depends on objects and machines and is sexually impotent. Before finally leaving him for Víctor, at the climax of their triangle drama, Elena articulates her initial intention to stay with David in a rather offensive way: "Porque me necesitas más que él." Love in this case is more of a sacrifice. Another protagonist in a wheelchair, Valeria, appears in the second vignette of *Amores Perros* after she is badly hurt in the car crash. Thus, her "honeymoon" with Daniel turns out to be a series of painful visits to the doctor - new pieces of sinister equipment added each time - which for some reason reduce the hope for Valeria's convalescence. Within the domestic space, Valeria is virtually immobilized and the risky moves she makes when getting up to search for Richie emphasize the fragility of her body, the physical integrity of which is maintained by a sophisticated metal exoskeleton. Compared to David, Valeria's incapacity (that in fact, was expected to be temporary) destroys her psychologically and brings her to inexistence since from her first appearance in the film, where she seductively poses from a huge billboard, it becomes clear that body is all she is. "Valeria is plainly set up (in all senses) as superficial, ripe for a fall. Unable to cook (…) she seems barely able to

eat…" (Smith 46). After the accident we see Valeria covered with "jagged stitches that deform her leg and the cumbersome brace which turns her into a kind of cyborg, half woman, half machine" (Smith 46). As Smith reports, Iñárritu consciously made Valeria's personality "flat" choosing not to include her back-story in the filmic narration, a decision that might be interpreted as an intention to make the body speak more than the actual person. And eventually this body doesn't speak for itself; it speaks for the society it inhabits and for its values.

The comparison of Valeria to a cyborg and a "half woman, half machine" construct may be associated with the metaphor of a hybrid applied by Lock in her description of a brain-dead human being in transition from life to death. Such an individual is both "a person and nonperson, entirely dependent on a machine for existence. Technology – principally the artificial ventilator, but also other life support equipment and procedures – is indispensable in the creation of living cadavers. Without them the machine-human hybrid could not exist" (Lock 40). Bodies in a transient state from life to death (or vice versa) become the center of narration in *21 Grams* and *Hable con ella* and this type of protagonism changes two quite conventional modes in fiction. First, the characters heavily depend on a medical institution, which becomes one of the crucial spaces where their fates are determined. Secondly, the passive body (even a comatose one) moves the action, exploiting the old and establishing new relational ties. And if in *21 Grams*, *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Amores Perros*, the hospital spaces (where a patient

undergoes a surgery or is placed in the ICU) appear sporadically, the two parallel plots of *Hable con ella* almost entirely unfold in *El Bosque* where Alicia and Lydia temporary reside. Marsha Kinder, in her comparative analysis of *La Flor de mi Secreto, Todo sobre mi Madre* and *Hable con ella* concludes that in the later film Almodóvar places the brain-dead case center stage, instead of on the margins or prologue; and this move "enables several other narrative and emotional strands from earlier Almodóvar works finally to be pushed to their limits" ("Reinventing" 254).

The hospital always produces a rather thrilling effect for it is a place where the human body and, in fact, life is entrusted to omnipotent doctors (Gods) and selfless nurses. As J. Francisco Montes-Jiménez – a nurse and a sociologist himself – reports, nursing is first of all a profession based on the contact with people and, most of all, with people who are sick. While the doctor has access to the patient through the disease, the nurse approaches the disease through the patient (31). The daily monotonous routine is ruled by the first and carried out by the second. The subordination of the treated to the ones who treat is unbreakable and the bodies are manipulated according to their medical needs. The hospital is a space where the lives of its inhabitants are suspended and it produces a sensation "like the feeling that we experience when travelling, where the present is linked to a condition of a perpetual non-site (locus)" (Gutiérrez Albilla 54). The non-spatiality of the interior world in a medical institution echoes its non-temporality.

Although the calendar is accessible there, time is perceived differently in this hermetic space. It goes in cycles of pre-ops, post-ops, improvements, aggravations, deaths, convalescences, daily procedures and so forth. In other words, temporal markers like hours, days and months are less significant than any kind of physical and psychological change[12]. In this regard, what is paradoxical about *Hable con ella* is that the two female protagonists' bodies are absolutely motionless and, according to scientific prognosis, won't ever change. Instead, the changes happen in people surrounding them. Alicia and Lydia open new perspectives for Benigno and Marco and finally the first and the last are facing a future, which is indefinite if hopeful.

The medical settings that almost inevitably follow the accident not only serve as a new stage for postmodern dramas, but also give origin to an intermediary (hospital) discourse, which connects sick or dead bodies to the ones that are healthy and yet alive. In *Amores Perros* when the surgeon who operated on Valeria explains her physical condition to Daniel, an abundance of medical terms leaves the latter perplexed until the terrible verdict emerges clear and implacable in its comprehensibility: "y tuve que amputarle la pierna." (and I had to amputate her leg). This verdict sentences Valeria to life lasting disability and, as Paul J. Smith puts it, pronounces her as socially dead (48). Similar scenes recur in *Todo sobre mi madre*, *Hable con ella*, *21 Grams* and *Babel* and may be

[12] This kind of time perception echoes that of "organic" or "private" time which I explore in the next chapter.

categorized as “the doctor coming out of the operating room.” Usually the tension of the family or friends’ helpless wait reaches its climax but the hope lasts until the doctors start speaking. The breakdown follows immediately and the ones who are left alive are faced by a paralyzing question: now what?! This type of scene may be already considered as a crucial dramatic device found in a number of accident driven plots. (Figures 7-11)

Figure 7 *Todo sobre mi Madre*

Manuela is informed about her son’s brain dead condition.

Figure 8 *Hable con ella*

Lydia's family is informed about the vegetative state she is in and leaves after three weeks of desperate waiting.

Figure 9 *Amores Perros*

Daniel is informed about Valeria's leg amputation.

Figure 10 *21 Grams*

Cristina is struck by the news about the death of her whole family.

Figure 11 *Babel*

Richard is awaiting the results of the operation Susan is undergoing.

The technological advances in medical science have made the hospital a place where, as Paul admits in *21 Grams*, one can die better. At the same time the limits of life have been extended to in-between states such as that of living cadavers in which a body in an irreversible coma is kept alive by life supporting machines. This already mentioned hybridity of the body is not unanimously celebrated or seen positively in either science or art but rather "incites moral dispute, doubts, and angst" (Lock 40). The uneasiness over these issues is also expressed in fiction, where the hospital space has acquired a role as a major stage and the possibility of "life prolongation" lies at the basis of a new type of plot.

Life and death are seemingly well-defined conditions that are usually separated by mutual exclusiveness. But, as Lock asserts, "the distinction between life (associated with culture) and death (associated with nature), although usually regarded as unproblematic, is necessarily blurred" (14). It must be acknowledged that the traditional binaries (life – death; mind - body; brain - heart etc.) obstruct the recognition of other, alternative human existential conditions such as: death in life, life in death, neither life nor death (a space in the middle), new death, new life and new self. These definitions attempt to embrace the whole palette of possible states of being and each of them is difficult to label as positive or negative and, as a matter of fact, it is unnecessary to do so.

The perception of death as something tragic is persistent and quite common, but the degree of how tragic it is varies. "Natural" death, when a certain age is reached and the person is ready to peacefully pass away is a loss, but not a tragedy. However when death strikes us and undermines the fragile security and certain predictability we live in, it becomes tragic. The accidental, untimely, or repugnant death is a universal, age-old preoccupation. "Technologically orchestrated deaths appear intuitively to many people to be unnatural" (Lock 75). They cause anxiety and they don't make sense. The attempts to derive meaning out of a premature death usually take two directions. The first interprets the loss as a source for transformation and rebirth for the ones who remain alive; and the

second lies in the purely corporeal realm and consists in giving an opportunity for someone else to continue living.

> In modern society, "accidents" have no satisfactory explanation and are particularly disturbing because they represent a loss of control. The argument that organ donation can make something worthwhile out of an apparently senseless death is therefore a persuasive one. Through the "gift of life" – the ultimate act of altruism – control is to some extent reasserted and the disruption created by the accident is partly corrected, making nameless strangers into heroes.
>
> (Lock 10)

In her interdisciplinary research, Lock discusses the problematics of the so-called new death, which defines an entity as organically alive but never conscious again (75). The terms associated with this condition are "irreversible brain-death" or "irreversible coma" and describe a "hopelessly unconscious patient" who is characterized by "complete unreceptivity and unresponsiveness, an absence of movements, of spontaneous breathing, and of reflexes" (87, 89). It is noteworthy that the resuscitation and holding back from the grave of a patient with severe brain damage has become possible due to the development of equipment that can maintain other vital functions (breathing, blood circulation, digesting etc.) and life itself independent of its quality. Thus, a living cadaver, brain-dead, a neo-mort is wandering through a sort of heterotopia. "And across this bleak and contested space the corpses stream, on their way to becoming dead, for the most part, but sometimes taking up residence in it, or heading back to make new contact with the living" (Baglow 225). The main moral dilemma is

whether to continue providing "life" to the body? If not, the door for return will be shut forever but who has the right to shut it? If yes, the persistent vegetative state may last for years without any guarantee that the journey of the brain-dead patient will ever go in the opposite direction, that is, towards consciousness. Indeed, the rare cases of such returns to full awareness are only explained within the non-scientific frame of a miracle.

In *Hable con ella* Lydia and Alicia have involuntarily taken these journeys and only the latter makes it back to communication and motion, but through a medium – Benigno. Seen as an archetype (as in drama, legend or even myth), Benigno could be interpreted as a figure endowed with supernatural capacities placed into a postmodern context. His social awkwardness, prolonged virginity, seeming innocence and solitude mark him as different, and, after he is known to have abused Alicia's body – abnormal. However, these "deficiencies" might be compensated by the powers that others lack. Through the whole narration Benigno's ability to see, to hear and to feel what others cannot provokes distrust and even suspicion on the part of his co-workers and Alicia's father. But seen from another perspective, Benigno surpasses our limited understanding of things without even being aware of it. His *naïvité* lets him perceive things intuitively and with a much higher degree of sensibility, as children do. Benigno doesn't deny life to Alicia's body and mind, considering her just deeply asleep or "un poco perezosa" as his mother, he thinks, was. He dresses and undresses her, washes her

body and cuts her hair and nails; he tells about what he did during his days off and reads and shows magazines to her. Benigno's conviction is contagious. Katerina, Alicia's ballet teacher and adoptive mother, visits her in the hospital and seems to share Benigno's certainty that "Alicia se acuerda perfectamente" (Alicia remembers everything perfectly) about everything she is told. Despite Marco's reluctance and inability to talk to Lydia, because of his firm belief that the vegetative state is impenetrable and could be barely classified as life, a change in this "normal" attitude is still noticeable towards the end of the story. Contradictory to himself, Marco comes to say goodbye to Alicia before departing for Yemen. Yet during the heated conversation with Benigno which immediately follows, Marco brings up the most important point regarding Alicia's "non-person" status, that is, the absence of volition. Reacting to the absurdity of Benigno's wish to marry Alicia, Marco denounces it as impossible: "Por que la mujer está en coma. Porque Alicia con ninguna parte de su cuerpo puede decir que sí quiero." (Because the woman is in a coma. Because Alicia with no part of body can say yes, I want). "Alicia está prácticamente muerta," Marco continues, "¡No puede decir nada ni por ti ni por mi ni siquiera por ella!" (Alicia is almost dead. She can't say anything for you, for me, nor even for herself). Thus Benigno violates the right to control over one's body at the same time as he disregards Alicia's will to do (or not do) something. But instead of admitting that, Benigno attacks Marco: "tú a ella también le gustas" (she likes you too) – he jealously

notes, once again, endowing Alicia with undoubtful agency. Interestingly, every time that Alicia's consciousness is questioned (mostly during Benigno, Alicia, and Marco's conversations) the camera focuses on an extreme close up of Alicia's head, an image that poses an impenetrable enigma offering the spectator a choice: you believe or you don't. (Figure 12)

Figure 12 *Hable con ella*

As we have seen, brain death doesn't cancel out other bodily functions and Lydia and Alicia are not even in need of life support machines. In the very first scene where two nurses manipulate Alicia's body, the continuation of natural functions, in the form of her menstrual period, is made obvious. It means that the lower part of woman's body where conception and reproduction take place doesn't need a brain to manage these processes. The power of re/procreation doesn't come from the mind; it seems to have its own intelligence and a new life can originate there on its own. Could it be that Benigno, by pure intuition, has

done the exactly "right" thing to bring Alicia back to life? Could it be that the way to the *ego* might also lie through the *id*? Significantly, Lydia's feminine cycle has stopped and she never wakes up. Her capacity to engender a new life has ceased while a magic chemical reaction (visualized in the shots of a lava lamp on her bedside table) has occurred in Alicia's body and made her mind turn around in its journey into the beyond.

A coma as a totally unresponsive state may also be perceived as a protective one for it supposedly doesn't let any information penetrate the body nor the mind (heart). A person in a coma is immune to harm since s/he is unable to comprehend, process and react. Kinder in her analysis of Almodóvar's "brain-dead trilogy" characterizes one of the protagonists- Leo, in *La Flor de mi Secreto* - as "figuratively comatose" in a "death in life condition" (249). This metaphorization is indeed illuminating since it reveals that the precious and highly valued gift of life in many cases may turn out to be something not really desirable. In response people avoid being alive and voluntarily put themselves in a kind of emotional "coma." The cause for such a defensive reaction against the world lies in a traumatic past, an accident that didn't annihilate the body but scarred the soul.

One of the most eccentric figures in Iñárritu's corpus, El Chivo has been "comatose" for 20 years after his attempts to fix the world failed. Ironically, he is a professional assassin and he finds this job an easy one because he couldn't care

less about his own life. “He seems virtually emotionless and not to care for his physical body (…) Precisely because we glean from el Chivo’s back story that he once embodied the vitality of revolutionary 1960s-era hope, we comprehend el Chivo’s current mien of living death as the embodiment of global–era revolutionary defeat and the apparent loss of his former ideals” (Reber 283). El Chivo is the only character in *Amores Perros* who is given another chance. He wakes or is woken up, a fact that is reflected through the domestication of his body and restoration of his moral vision (Reber 289). El Chivo’s corporeal geography extends his personal degradation, evident in his unkempt and unhygienic state, to stand in for a particular historic moment in 20th century Mexican history; at the same time el Chivo’s final self-grooming could be read as encountering a new way for him and, possibly, for the country. In this sense, Valeria’s initially over cared for body that becomes mutilated by the end, symbolizes the opposite; it diagnoses the collapse of the virtual world “predicated on the image of socially prescribed beauty, and a consumer culture world of glitz and advertising” (Reber 287).

In *21 Grams* Jack and Cristina are going through hell for the former killed the latter’s family. Both are left alive and Jack is even released from jail, but they would rather die rather than being permanently tortured. Temporary release from pain is achieved through making the body senseless and the brain unconscious by drugs and alcohol. After a failed attempt to hang himself in the prison bathroom,

Jack stays with a life that he can't bear. Despite the total absolution from his loving family he escapes to a remote area where he loads himself with heavy physical work, but when a chance presents itself he breaks into Paul and Cristina's motel room and pleads for death. Cristina's automatically performed daily routine (the swimming pool during the day and cocaine and vodka during the night) buries her deeper and deeper into a nearly suicidal dead end. She is stuck listening over and over to her husband Michael's last voice message and is unable to enter her daughters' room, where everything is left as if they have just been there. "I can't just go on with my life, I am paralyzed here, I am a fucking amputee, do you see that?" – she screams to Paul when she breaks down. Significantly, her emotional crisis is expressed through the inability of physical movement. Both Jack and Cristina mercilessly mistreat their bodies because there is no reason to take care of them and by making them numb, they are trauma free, dead in life, asleep.

The fluidity between two (or more) bodies mostly consists in sharing them and this sharing may take different forms. Making love or having sex, prostitution or even carrying and having a child is based on sharing one's body with others. These processes are so natural that they probably are not thought of this way. Sharing is intrusive but not threatening because it is based on the person's consent and volition to do so. However a utilitarian use of the other's body is a violation of the individual's right to dispose of it. In this case, any kind of intrusion is not

desirable and the physical, personal and social integrity of a human being is undermined. In the case of Alicia in *Hable con ella* an unlawful intrusion took place and the reason for it was her inability to put up any resistance or express consent. The bodies that are found in similar situations are dead bodies, which turn into prey for they still offer something valuable to extract. This kind of sharing (namely organ transplantation) is one of the most controversial topics in science, the humanities and religion, for the right to die must be respected to the same extent as the right to live; and none of the fields has been able to definitively define the boundary between life and death. When does the body become an object and once it does, to whom do the rights over this object consequently pass? Evidently even nowadays not many feel completely at ease when asked to share or donate for the benefit of another unknown body in need. Baglow speaks of the desacralization of the corpse, depriving it of "passive" rights, which are rights nevertheless. "The social corpse is imbued with presence and personhood," John S. Baglow insists, "Hence, until its journey to the next world is done, until it is conveyed by ritual of one kind or another to the realm of 'the dead' the corpse remains to some degree a member of the living human community" (224). But there is no time for a decent farewell and no respect for the one who believes that the soul adheres to the body for several days, still constituting the personhood and identity of the body which is about to discompose.

The moral and spiritual concerns of this kind seem to be neutralized by the official recognition of a new death, which translates into "low or no brain activity." The death of the brain cancels out the cognitive function and means the end of a meaningful life (Lock 33). Thus the human being becomes an ex-person since s/he no longer has an individual interest, in other words, a dead brain cannot make decisions anymore. Nevertheless, the counterarguments to this logic are strong. "Dying," as Lock testifies, "is widely understood as a process, and cannot therefore be isolated as a moment. What is more, the cognitive status of the patient is of secondary importance for most people. If biological life clearly remains, even if an individual suffers from an irreversible loss of consciousness, many people do not recognize that individual as dead (8). The supposed "absence" of a person in a brain dead body indulges the immediate procurement of fresh organs making a neo-mort newly vulnerable to having its parts snatched away on their passage from this world to the next (Baglow 225). This type of "harvesting" has received all kinds of appreciations and judgments: from positive and laudatory of medical heroics to negative and condemning of the capitalist market. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes laments:

> The concepts of the integrity of the body and human dignity have given way to ideas of the divisible body and detachable organs as commodities. Conventional medical ethics obscures the ancient perception of virtue in suffering and dying, while bioethics creates the semblance of ethical choice (e.g. the right to buy a kidney) in an intrinsically unethical context. The transformation of a person into a "life" that must be prolonged or

> saved at any cost has made life into the ultimate commodity fetish. This idea erases any possibility of a global social ethics.
>
> (78)

Such a threatening turn "points to the demise of classical humanism and holism" (Scheper-Hughes 78), the danger lying in the dominant approach of the "modern" world which argues that "nature, including the human body in life and death, functions according to scientific laws and is, therefore, autonomous and independent of social context and the moral order" (Lock 33). To summarize, the debates around organ transplantation have been interpreted in several ways: "as a blend of altruism and commerce" or as "neo cannibalism" (Scheper-Hughes 62, 65) and as an act of solidarity which breaks through death towards immortality (Baglow 228).

Naturally, this topic has been picked up by fiction, reflecting the problematics of this specific relation between the two bodies. This complex dynamics originates existential dramas that push the boundaries of life and death towards reincarnation (which organ transplantation made possible although in a straightforward, sort of butcher's way). What is explored in *Todo sobre mi madre* and to a greater extent in *21 Grams* is the journey of the vital pump that makes affection and life circulate. The exploration of this trajectory makes us question again the gains and the losses. In addition, another binary must be addressed, that is the relation of the *heart* to the *mind* (brain).

In “Matters of the Heart,” a retrospective historical research, Fay B. Alberti traces the gradual tendency toward prioritizing the brain as a center where the principle of life is located. “The transition from heart to brain at the level of theory,” she states, “took place under the influence of processes that we might broadly associate with modernity” (22). A shift from *cardio-centrism* to *cranio-centrism* has been propelled by the rise of the mind sciences (psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience) and “the brain has come to be the organ par excellence of modern conceptions of interiority and selfhood” (Alberti 22, 221). In other words, selfhood equals “brainhood” which means the “property or quality of being rather than simply having a brain” (Alberti 21). The fact that the brain is exclusively endowed with capacities of cognition and volition makes it irreplaceable and unique in terms of personhood and identity. As Alberti reflects, the idea of a head transplant would be perceived as anathema, although the first heart transplantations met similar philosophical, spiritual and practical challenges (222). Importantly, popular anxiety grew much wider regarding heart transplants (after 1967) while, for example, kidneys, livers, eye retina, etc. had been transplanted without such a massive resonance (Alberti 15). Why have such issues as personality transfer and identity theft only been associated with sharing or giving one’s heart to the other body? And why doesn’t receiving a new heart let the recipient live in peace? The realm of emotions, passions and feelings has

always been the realm of the heart, if no longer scientifically at least symbolically and culturally. The heart feels, the heart fears, the heart loves and the heart knows.

In both *Todo sobre mi Madre* and *21 Grams* the protagonists are facing a situation where loss is inevitable, but a certain "bonus" should mitigate the characters' grief since death will not be completely in vain. In a sense, this is a "win - win" situation since the family of the dead might find consolation in giving a second chance to a stranger who otherwise would have died as well. Nevertheless, the anonymity involved as a rigorous requirement in the process of organ transactions leaves the donors as "nameless ghosts who haunt the transplant world" while the survivors are considered heroes (Lock 99). Manuela breaks the anonymity and follows the heart of her dead son from Madrid to A Coruña, though without disclosing her identity to the recipient.[13] This is the first time she is denied access to the organ database but she finds it impossible not to know which body will become a new home for the beloved heart. In his approach to the organ transplantation topic Almodóvar gradually contextualizes the grief for the protagonist and the spectator, finally rescuing the "life giver" from oblivion. At the beginning, we are shaken twice by the scenes of a painful dialogue between the doctors and the wife of a brain dead man, as they try to persuade her to donate his healthy organs. But the disclosure that immediately follows throws us back to the "comfort zone": the scenes are not for real. After getting to know Manuela

[13] An interpretation of Manuela's travels through the "body of Spain" metaphor is offered by Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz in his "The Body and Spain: Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother*."

and Esteban and establishing familiarity with the characters, the fatal accident that takes his life hits right in the heart and the third scene turns out not to be a fake. Not only does the spectator take Manuela's drama personally, but Esteban's death as well as the fate of his heart are contextualized in the settings of the hospital where Manuela worked. As Fiona Jenkins observes: "In the wake of Manuela's son's accident, all the events surrounding the business of transplantation are reconfigured (…) The nurses and administrators must admit that this is not a statistical death but one that confronts and addresses them directly as the death of Manuela's son, whose own undoing now enfolds them" (8). The whole sequence that shows how the heart is procured, put into a container, transported and implanted into a new body is not a training video anymore. We all know that this is Esteban who makes his last journey before he stops being Esteban and becomes someone else. Breaking the anonymity and disclosing the heart's identity emphasizes "humanity's interconnectedness on the basis of death and loss" making it evident that "there must be a violence committed somewhere else" in order for another life to be saved (Allbritton 231). The anonymity not only erases the traces of the death which prolongs someone else's life but it also transforms and decontextualizes the organ, making it a utilitarian object. Its previous social history is wiped out, and its value is assessed solely in terms of its quality as an organ for transplant - healthy and fresh (Lock 49).

So were all previous hearts, kidneys and livers processed by Manuela, who used to make calls to the transplant coordinator, until her own son's heart had to follow the same statistical routine. Manuela escapes the hospital in search of the origins of this heart and the hope that the father's learning about Esteban's existence might resuscitate him, in a sense.

It is noteworthy that transplanted hearts don't get easily de-contextualized. Research on heart transplant survivors demonstrates that the recipients sometimes incorporate "fantasies, that is the belief that certain traits of the donor passed to them with the muscular graft," and that "of all currently transplantable organs, the heart engenders incorporation fantasies more than other grafts, due to its cultural-symbolic connotation" (Inspector et al 162, 171). The psychological impact on the "lucky" ones ranges from feelings of gratitude to guilt, curiosity, and a sense of debt. As Lock states: "many recipients experience a frustrated sense of obligation toward the family of the donor for the extraordinary act of benevolence that has brought them back from the brink of death (…) The 'tyranny of the gift' has been well documented in the transplant world" (319). And this kind of tyranny urges Paul in *21 Grams* to disclose the donor's identity and, in pursuing that, he goes much further than Manuela. The difference between them consists in the fact that she lost and he gained, but, in fact, Paul is traumatized (or victimized) by the new heart. His prolonged life is a loan, which is paid for by the life of a young man. Paul is unable to accept such an expensive gift and cannot assume possession of a

precious graft. Not only does he ask the surgeon who operated on him to bring his failed heart after he is implanted with a new one but he also wonders: “Whose heart do I have?” “I can’t tell you,” the doctor replies, “This is your heart now.” Despite the smooth recuperation, rapid convalescence and celebration of “the first day of my new life” with friends and family, Paul continues his investigation and finally gets the whole picture of a family tragedy out of which he got the heart. The initial impulse, which pushes him towards the only survivor –Cristina, a widow diminished by grief -, was to thank her but the motivation and intensity of Paul’s further involvement definitely transcend gratitude. Paul comes with a mission and it seems that there is no other way for him to handle the heart he inherited from Michael. “Paul tries to repay Cristina in at least three ways: by avenging her husband’s death, by saving her from self-destruction, and by giving her his love and himself in the form of the child” (Stewart 52). It must be noted that besides Paul’s coincidental and magic falling in love with Cristina, there were other factors that encouraged the completion of this mission. According to heart recipients’ testimonies, what changes in their life perception after the operation is a shift in life priorities from achieving to experiencing (Inspector et al 170). Paul borrows a life from Michael (which is shortened by the rejection of a new heart and a perspective of his fast approaching death) and thus he choses to be true to himself since there is no time for hypocrisy and lies anymore. Paul breaks up with an unloved wife and follows his feelings. The mutual attraction between him and

Cristina is transformed into a condensed corporeal and emotional interaction that is always marked by mourning, which totally obscures sexual pleasure. Paul's new self contributes to the sensation that there are always three of them – Paul, Michael and Cristina – whenever the two are together. Paul doesn't let Cristina proceed with sexual intercourse until he confesses that he carries her husband's heart and when, next morning, the intimacy takes over, Cristina caresses the huge scar bisecting Paul's chest. The house is full of Michael's presence embodied by family pictures and the clothes poking out of every closet. During one of her breakdowns Cristina outrageously blames Paul for having Michael's heart and that makes Paul not Paul anymore. There is a certain identity mix, which confuses him. These kinds of psychological consequences are not uncommon among new heart recipients. Feelings like, "I still think of it as a different person inside me (…) and it's not all this other person either" (Lock 323), are expressed by many of Paul's prototypes. Importantly, not only is the ownership of the heart problematic and insoluble for Paul, but his identity and selfhood are questioned as well. "Mary, I want to know who I am now" – he cuts his wife off when she tries to dissuade him from searching for the donor's information, incapable of understanding that Paul is in search of his new self.

Paul dies in a "pre-corpse club," fully conscious with his heart giving the last beats supported by artificial life equipment. In his last monologue Paul brings up the concept that has also been disregarded by modern science, but not by

theological and metaphysical paradigms. The 21 grams that everybody loses at the exact moment of death is a reference to the soul since all other human parts and particles are physically embodied and measurable. Through this inexplicable phenomenon Iñárritu addresses the ambiguity of losses and gains. While Paul brings up a set of eternal questions in voice over - “How many lives do we live?”, “How many times do we die?”, “How much fits into 21 grams?”, “How much goes with them?” and, most essentially, “How much is gained?” – the dead (Michael and his daughters) and the living (Cristina and her sister, Jack Jordan and his wife) appear at the same time in a range of short sequences. The shot that features Cristina, expecting Paul’s child, proves that his courageous dying was productive but the unique and beautiful 21 grams gone with him are forever out of our reach.

Chapter 3

Accidents, De-Temporalizing the Form

Impossible constructions do exist in cinema.

(Christian Metz 211)

At the midpoint of the 20th century when the then youngest of the arts – cinema – was already prolifically developing its forms and modes, Rudolf Arnheim critically asserted: "It must be admitted that most film directors do not make much original use of the artistic means at their disposal. They do not produce works of art but tell the people stories. They and their employers and audiences are not concerned with form but with content. Nevertheless there are plenty of examples to show that film is capable of better things" (133). Hoping for better things, the art theoretician foresees that artistic film "will very soon reach a stage when quite exclusive films will be created" and "whimsical, fantastic products will appear, compared with which the wildest futurism of the twenties will seem like innocuous ornaments" (114). Nowadays, that prediction is reality. A huge range of visual texts that exploit the formal potential of the moving image to its extremes, has grown in the cinematic soil, showing how boundless the means of arranging the plot could be. The works of directors Pedro Almodóvar and Alejandro González Iñárritu are undoubtedly a significant contribution to this "new" group of formally inventive films.

The increasing tendency towards other ways of storytelling does not originate solely from a desire to create art for art's sake. Opting to go against the conventional structure may be pushed by exploratory narrative intention or may originate from the manner of understanding the story that is best aligned with the author's approach (Dancyger & Rush 8, 200). As Dancyger & Rush's alternative scriptwriting manual instructs: "there is no single way to tell a story, no right way, because the choice of form is a creative decision" (31). However, the choices the author makes in terms of form are inextricably linked to content (Dancyger & Rush 31). The sensibility (and, by extension sensitivity) of the film director translates into his/her personal vision of how to express a certain content better.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the content of the films under study grows out of violence: accidents cross through all the narrative strands of Almodóvar and Iñárritu's stories. These events and their repercussions are similar, in a way, since all the characters are marked by a loss to a greater or lesser extent. Both directors represent a world where people are hurt and this common circumstance deforms or transforms their lives. I would suggest that the most effective (or sensitive) mode to convey the stories of the damaged consists in a kind of damaged and damaging form that disrupts the harmony and the comfort of the habitual narrative pattern through the fragmentation of the plot and re-ordering of its elements. A priori, such cinematic techniques would always affect the temporality of the narration since "every film orders time in some fashion or

other, and the privileged role that time plays in cinematic art distinguishes film from all other arts" (McGowan 4).

In *21 Grams* Iñárritu has recourse to a kind of damaged or broken narrative time that dislocates both the characters and the spectator as a correlative for the functioning of a traumatized psyche. As Todd McGowan explains, "by placing a traumatic event so clearly in the position of the navel of the film and foregrounding this event, Iñárritu creates a narrative structure that reveals how trauma distorts and reshapes our sense of temporality" (139). Roger Luckhurst connects the use of such techniques to the expressive arsenal of trauma culture, asserting that: "cinema has been particularly effective at developing formal conventions in which the disordering of narrative presages the revelation of a traumatic secret, one that retrospectively reorders the fractured elements of plot into a new kind of story" (178). Luckhurst stresses that trauma in its nature urges a constant return, thus generating "the manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explicate it" (79). What distinguishes trauma films in general and a group of select accident-driven films in particular, is the emphasis on the past that conditions the protagonists' present and future. Therefore, the broken time here is mostly a reflection of memory work, which doesn't let the pain go, but without which healing is impossible. In this chapter, I aim at analyzing how Almodóvar and Iñárritu treat (organize) time and form in their plots impacted by violence and impregnated by trauma. I must note from the start

that my readings of the films are, in fact, re-readings, i.e. the meanings I discern and derive become visible only in retrospect.

The inescapable linearity of narration, as a discourse unfolding in time, constitutes considerable restrictions for experimentations with narrative form. Nevertheless, the most powerful creative potential in visual fiction grows out of playing with order, chronology and temporality. In this connection, the film *Time Code* (Mike Figgis, 2000), which is a curious attempt to narrate in a non-linear manner, is worth mentioning. The director tries to break the linearity of the visual and informational flow by splitting the screen in four quadrants yet this workaround functions only partially since the verbal constituent (mostly dialogue) jumps from one sub screen to the other, thus re-creating the linearity of the discourse. All sequences in the film are unedited long takes intended to represent the development of the events in a natural manner, i.e. as if the camera wasn't there. As for the spectator's perception of the film, the story doesn't flow and there is little involvement with the events portrayed that would abstract us from the rest of the world for a couple of hours. Although the plot is still retrievable by the end of the film, the climax of which bursts out with a gunshot, the spectator's attention and concentration is dispersed in the process of following the four screens and the whole piece itself is more of an enunciation of filming than a finished film. Not only is the story about a film project - its drama developing around the actress who came in for an audition - but also one of the central

monologues is about montage techniques where Sergey Eisenstein and the Russian formalists are brought up.

This brief examination of *Time Code* offers several important considerations. First, creative/experimental approaches may also aim to bring the spectator closer to reality but this is achieved at the cost of illusion, or, as Edgar Morin calls it, "the sense of wonder" (cited in Metz 4). Cinema has been a wonderland since the first projections by the Lumières and this is what the viewer longs for before anything else. Secondly, films are the outcome of a complex production process. They must have "a certain configuration, certain fixed structures and figures," albeit "the fact of film is too often taken for granted" (Metz 3-4). To artificially create the effect of unfolding reality with no interruptions requires the assembly of multiple fragments of interrupted images and scenes. As Andrei Tarkovsky observes, "the point is to pick out and join together the bits of sequential fact, knowing, seeing and hearing precisely what lies between them and what kind of chain holds them together. That is cinema" (65). *Time Code* is, in a way, a negation of cohesive narrative techniques, however different they may be, and this negation or deconstruction deprives the narrative of its representational and illusional qualities. Furthermore, when the narrative intends to undermine the temporal and spatial continuum, it requires an even more complex organization where "construction is more important than anywhere else" since "reproducing disorder is not a matter of writing in a

disorderly fashion"(Mitry 204; Dancyger & Rush 32). Almodóvar and Iñárritu's work is characterized by the way in which they achieve both – illusion and representation - while bending the linearity of the discourse and defying the conventions of formulaic narration.

The previous chapter discussed human ties formed around the accident as a central tragic event in all six films, mostly focusing on their mutual vulnerability and their resuscitating power through the prism of Judith Butler's existential notion of relationality. Very relevant to this chapter's focus, McGowan offers an interpretation of the same concept seen through the lens of temporality. "The encounter with the other (…)" – he reflects – "makes us aware of ourselves as incomplete and thus existing in time (…) The other and the future are existentially akin insofar as they force us out of our self isolation and require our self-transcendence. One's attitude toward time is at once one's attitude toward the other" (4). Tarkovsky adds insight to this line of thinking: "What is known as the moment of death is also the death of individual time: the life of a human being becomes inaccessible to the feelings of those remaining alive, dead for those around him. Time is necessary to man, so that, made flesh, he may be able to realize himself as a personality" (57). The assertion that one is defenseless against time yet is alive only through time and connects to others in time opens new perspectives on the ways of embracing the relationship between the individual and time in fiction. The chronological twists in the representation of the story and

the saturation of the narrative structure may not only produce a "confusing" effect, but also get closer to the essence of temporal existence with its relativity and contradictions that have been drastically re-thought in the course of the 20th century.

Analyzing time and tense in film Alexander Sesonske describes a comprehensible and "comfortable" conception of time in the familiar metaphor of the river that is a continuous, linear, one-directional flow:

> Rivers run down the hill; time runs from the past toward the future, with the fleeting moment we call "now" marking the location of the present within the flow – the point where past and future meet (…) Time is continuous and directional. "Continuous" means that every point in time is connected with every other one via intervening points (moments) and that we can get from one moment in time to another only by passing through the intervening moments.
>
> (419)

This somewhat poetic exposition raises two questions. Firstly, how has this harmonious picture been distorted by the tempo and rhythm of contemporary life? And secondly, how does this perception of time apply to the process of narrative unfolding? Obviously, both of these questionings are closely interrelated.

Contemporary critics of cinema and literature unanimously emphasize that the preoccupation with time has become a predominant one. McGowan testifies that although "time played a role in art, science, and philosophy prior to the twentieth century, it often remained in the background, whereas the twentieth century would insist on its absolute theoretical centrality" (1). Constantinos A.

Patrides seconds this statement by pointing to the 20th century obsession with time (1) and Adam A. Mendilow concludes that: "never perhaps have our feelings about time changed so radically and assumed such importance in our eyes as in this century" (69). Ursula K. Heise has described the reconstruction of time with the term "chronoschisms," the title of her thought-provoking study of postmodern time(s) and narrative. In the world's rush towards the third millennium she observes a tendency towards a vertiginous "speeding up of temporal experience that tends to erase historical differences and to open the present up to a multitude of historical moments" (12). This process flattens out the hierarchy among events and permits or even causes their fragmentary perception thus violating norms of cohesion and order. The increase in speed is commonly attributed to technological advances that have made spaces and information accessible in a matter of seconds. Thus the experience of waiting, anticipation, contemplation and thought has been devalued, which, in fact, is equivalent to the devaluation of time. An experience of "global simultaneity," according to Heise, immerses the contemporary individual in the "hyper-present" where a "hyper-intensified immediacy (…) focuses the user's attention on a rapid succession of micro-events and thereby makes it more difficult to envision even the short term past or future"; the present is thus experienced "as cut off from succession in time" and "is lived as a state of heightened perception" (24-27). The impression of living in an eternal present, conditioned by the immediacy of contemporary life, has been also

interpreted as the "absence of any experience of time" or as "atemporal existence" (McGowan 26, 232). Yet McGowan notices that while the digital revolution creates a viable image of a world in which time ceases to be a central point of reference, it doesn't eliminate temporal decay and death (232). The latter are absolute constants - the doors to eternity, which the illusion of a permanent present is unable to cheat. On the one hand, time has become overrated. As McGowan points out: "Under capitalist relations of production, one ceases to live time and begins to have it. Workers have their time that they sell, while consumers have their time free to purchase commodities, and everyone spends their time" (21). But on the other hand, time has become non-existent through its speeding and shrinking.

Turning to the role of time in narrative art, Heise indicates: "theorists of narrative generally agree that time is one of the most fundamental parameters through which the narrative as a genre is organized and understood" (47). First of all, a story develops in time and requires some time to be read, listened to or watched. In addition, the events recounted may take place in any epoch (ranging from the farthest past to the most distant future) thus involving the reader/spectator into other times. And the work of fiction may have been produced recently or may have centuries' distance from the moment when it is being perceived. Specifically, cinema from its inception and in its essence is inextricable from the experience of temporality since, unlike in literature, the

duration of projection/screening is unchangeable and not managed by the viewer. What distinguishes the perception of a cinematic work is that the viewer is situated inside the fictional time; in other words, his/her point of view "is within the filmed world in which the action occurs" (Sesonske 420). McGowan interprets this "within-time-ness" (Ricoeur 170) as the spectator's submission to time movement highlighted by the film. While watching it the viewer experiences the temporal flow in all its inexorableness (6). Tarkovsky sees time as a main necessity in the process of film consumption, even comparing it to a drug. "I think," he reflects, "that what a person normally goes to the cinema for is *time*: for time lost or spent or not yet had. He goes there for living experience; for cinema, like no other art, widens, enhances and concentrates a person's experience – and not only enhances it but makes it longer, significantly longer" (63). This longing for "catching up" with time may be interpreted as resistance to its compression. The meaningful, fully lived moments devalued for the sake of getting everything done on time are partially restored through submerging ourselves in the temporality of an illusionary world. The fact of being that ontologically fused explains the high sensitivity of the narrative to contemporary shifts in time perception.

The "river metaphor" has been an ideal model into which the narrative flow (as a sequence of words and sentences or shots and sequences) in story-telling activities tended to fit, corresponding to the constant unidirectional

movement where a certain location of "now" is indicated. Movement in one direction towards the end is a maxim, which in a wider sense reflects the common conception of life, at least in the Western tradition. As Patrides informs us, both time and history have been conceived as "an experience directed by Providence and oriented toward the future until the rivers of time are to tumble at last into the vast ocean of eternity" (2). It is noteworthy that in written discourse the reader navigates or moves through the text while visual narrative moves by itself. The movement of discourse is conventionally considered as possible only in one direction - "forward" - no matter whether the events are shown in a reversed or shuffled mode. One shot follows the other forming a continuous, although not necessarily a coherent, flow. All these factors are immanent and immutable to a verbal or visual sequence and, in narrative terms, they favor a fictional text where one plot develops in chronological order. When several narrative lines are at work, certain compromises need to be made in representing simultaneous events, since there is just one channel at the author's disposal and one event will be inevitably told/shown before or after the other regardless of the fact that in "reality" they took place at the same moment. If switching from one plot line to the other is used, both of them will have to be broken or interrupted.

The one aspect of the temporal "river metaphor" that is manipulable by narration lies in the ability to get from one point in time to another by bypassing an intervening point which connects them. Unlike real life, literature, and, to a

greater extent, theater and film permit of jumps in time and space. As Arnheim indicates: "on the stage, it had been the custom for hundreds of years to show sequences of scenes that had no connection in time or place" (89). One tendency in the dramatic organization of plays, testified to by Arnheim, dates back to Shakespeare and, in fact, can be seen as a precursor of shuffled narrative! "The scenes were cut up and the various parts mixed in with one another – that is, the action was suddenly interrupted, quite a different scene was played, then this was interrupted and the first continued, then second again and so on" (89). Importantly, in film, this procedure is much easier to implement for there is no need to reset the scene on the stage and one scene can follow the next in a smooth rapid sequence. This uniquely cinematic capacity permits the spectator to be, say, in Sydney and, a few moments later, witness action in Boston (Arnheim 21, 89).

The temporal orientation inside the visual text is viewed as problematic or deficient since, unlike written narrative, cinema lacks a built-in tense system. Consequently, "events in cinema are always taken to be occurring in a continuous present, with cinema having no formal means of indicating relations of before and after except by the order of the images in screen-time" such that "the order of events (…) is taken to be identical with the order in which they are described" (Sesonske 423-424). Interestingly, regarding verbal and written speech where temporality is classifiable and measurable, Sesonske considers it possible to reduce the time reference to three basic relations--before, after and

simultaneously-- for the concept of time functions usefully or sensibly only in these three coordinates (420). These deficiencies in visual narrative have been somewhat successfully overcome by various means of filmic punctuation, including dissolves, fades, titles, superimpositions, voice over indications, monologues and dialogues. But what is fascinating about film is that the absence of temporal markers (grammatical or lexical) provides freedom and paves the way for experimentation with chronology, order and cohesion. In terms of the reader/spectator's cognitive activity, the loosened determinism of narrative organization stimulates freedom of interpretation of the story. An example given by Gérard Genette, when analyzing the aspect of order in Proustian prose, supports this proposition very well. The French narratologist indicates that "on a first reading the difficulty of this text comes from the apparently systematic way in which Proust eliminates the most elementary temporal indicators (once, now), so that the reader must supply them himself in order to know where he is" (38-39). This is indeed an invitation to participate in the (re) construction of the order of the events in the story; and this activity contributes to opening other temporal and, by extension, spatial horizons. Hence, the lack of organizational/orientational devices in the cinematic "language" turns out to be an advantage. What takes place in such narrative patterns as achronological, shuffled, network, and hyperlink films is an extreme exploitation of time and space manageability inherent to the medium. And the great paradox of atemporal cinema pointed out

by McGowan consists in the fact that "the aesthetic expression of atemporality occurs in the one art form inextricable from temporality. But it is precisely the temporal nature of the cinema," he concludes, "that facilitates the cinematic discovery of atemporality" (236). Paradoxically, abolishing time within the film in terms of the plot (content) draws more attention to the formal aspect of its temporal organization. As Maureen Turim observes "manipulations of narrative temporality can serve to self-consciously expose the mechanisms of filmic narration, the artifice through which time becomes an expressive element of narrative form" (16). In other words, the sophistication of editing and the director's choices in the arrangement of sequences have acquired an independent artistic value and in some cases may even be appreciated more than the story itself. Temporality in these cases may have transcended or abandoned its primary function - that is, to guide the spectator through the plot's order or story's chronology.

In *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*, Genette develops a system of concepts and terms, which will, further on, nourish my analysis of the films' formal aspects with emphasis on their temporal organization. The fundamental basis for Genette's analysis (mostly exemplified by the works of Proust) is the *story – narrative* dichotomy where the term "story" defines "the signified or narrative content" and the term "narrative" defines "the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself" (27). What I call "reality" or "real" time of

events, in fact, corresponds to Genette's "story" or the Russian formalist's "fabula" while "representation" corresponds to the "narrative" or "syuzhet" respectively. One of the most prolific sources for formal experimentation originates from the interplay between the time of the story and the pseudo-time (Genette 35) of the narrative. As Christian Metz elaborates in this respect:

> There is the time of the thing told and the time of the telling (the time of the significate and the time of the signifier). This duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives (…). More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme (…) the narrative is, among other things, a system of temporal transformations.
>
> (18 - 19)

Genette follows on this elaboration stating that a perfect temporal correspondence between story and narrative is more hypothetical than real but the degree of the discrepancy may vary. The story order and time may be "explicitly indicated by the narrative itself" or be "inferable from one or another indirect clue"; or the reconstitution is impossible and becomes useless "where temporal reference is deliberately sabotaged" (Genette 35-36). Genette also dedicates a chapter to such temporal aspects of the text as *duration*, which is also characterized by duality. The duration of the story measures the period of time that covers all the events while the duration of the narrative measures how long the actual recounting of these events lasts (86-87). In film, the duration of the narrative is fixed and unchangeable. As for the duration of the story – once again, it depends on the

author's will how much information needs to be disclosed about when, where and for how long the action(s) took place.

Almodóvar and Iñárritu locate the spectator in a certain time frame in different, if not opposite ways. The former tends to be explicit and helpful in guiding the spectator, while the latter almost ignores the need to be oriented, not only in a particular day or year, but even in relative terms of before, after or simultaneously. As indicated above, cinematic language offers an opportunity for timeless narration without the purposeful omission of temporal determinants that Genette detects in the texts of Proust. And Iñárritu takes full advantage of this capacity of the medium, achieving the greatest degree of temporal sabotage in *21 Grams*. Interestingly, the first film in my selection (*Carne Trémula*, 1997) is the most clear, in terms of its reference to the time and the place of events. It is the only film where, at the beginning, the spatio-temporal placement of the spectator is complete. The first titles inform about the political situation in Spain and that it is January 1970 in Madrid[14]. This kind of introduction to a visual narration is distinguished by a strong verbal support, probably due to the fact that *Carne Trémula* is loosely based on a written fictional work and that may explain the extra effort to compensate for cinema's deficiencies in terms of expressing order

[14] It must be noted, however, that Almodóvar gets the date of the "estado de excepción" and M. Fraga's speech wrong. The historical factual referents for these filmic citations took place in 1969.

and time[15]. Almodóvar consistently informs us about time "jumps" through the use of titles or references in the dialogue. The director is overprotective of the viewer in terms of not letting us get lost in time and assuring that we follow the chronology of the story correctly. However, a tendency towards loosening the certainty of time location is observed in *Hable con ella* in which the exact duration of the story is harder to infer due to a more intricate representation of the order of events, multileveled flashbacks and an *in medias res* beginning. In contrast, at the end of *Carne Trémula* Víctor talks to his soon-to-be-born child and mentions that "Hace 26 años yo estaba en la misma situación que tú, a punto de nacer" (Twenty-six years ago I was in the same situation as you are, about to be born), thus informing us that we've just seen a period of 26 years which is basically all Víctor's life. Almodóvar uses the length of human life as a reference point in *Todo sobre mi Madre* as well. Manuela's son is killed by a car accident the day he turns 17 and then, in her confessional monologue to Huma and Nina, Manuela informs them and us that she met her husband 20 years ago. It must be noted that this period of time is mostly left out of the filmic narration, but it is essential for the understanding of the story. Rosa's pregnancy and the fact that the third Estéban is two years old by the end of the film gives the spectator an idea

[15] *Live Flesh* is a psychological thriller written by British author Ruth Rendell and published in 1986. All other films are based on the scripts written by P. Almodóvar (*Todo sobre mi Madre* and *Carne Trémula*) and Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perros, 21 Grams* and *Babel*).

that the period actually embraced by the narrative, i.e. what is shown, is around three years. Almodóvar provides a hint, which ties the characters' time to a historical and political reality, only once and it happens close to the end of the film. During the last conversation between Rosa and Manuela in the hospital (which actually becomes their farewell), while preparing for the C-section, the latter remarks that it is a great day for Rosa's son to be born since "they've put Videla in jail." This reference reminds us about Manuela's Argentinian origin and locates us in the year of 1998.

In *Hable con ella* "real" time is measured by the periods Alicia and Lydia have been in a coma. Despite the regular appearance of titles marking the passage of time (e.g. "varios meses después" after Marco and Lydia first met or "tres semanas después" after Lydia was gored by the bull or "un mes después" after Benigno's rape of Alicia), the information that Alicia has been in a coma for four years, which is repeated several times during the film, is the main point of temporal orientation in the narrative. Firstly, it marks the beginning of the whole story. Secondly, this is the moment when Lydia enters the hospital "El Bosque" where Marco and Benigno meet. From there, the spectator will learn that Lydia spent two month in a vegetative state accompanied by Marco and she dies eight months later. Thus, the approximate duration of the *Hable con ella* story is five years.

Almodóvar faithfully indicates the spaces where the action takes place and advises about geographical switches that occur with greater frequency and significance in *Todo sobre mi Madre.* Living initially in Madrid, Manuela travels to A Coruña to see her son's heart recipient and later journeys back and forth from Madrid to Barcelona. The setting for all of *Carne Trémula* is the city of Madrid and *Hable con ella* balances between life (Madrid) and "para-life" ("El Bosque") with a short escape to Jordan where Marco works as a journalist for a travel guide magazine.

Curiously, the temporal and spatial orientation is most explicit in Iñárritu's *Babel* yet he never uses any titles to indicate the location or time period which separates one sequence from the other. The four countries (Morocco, USA, México, Japan), where each plot develops independently, are quite easily detected by the scenery and through the characters' dialogues. The only hint about the duration of all four stories is given at the very end of the film through a television news program in a Japanese bar: "Susan Jones, who was wounded in a terrorist attack in Morocco was discharged from a Casablanca hospital this morning, local time. The American people finally have a happy ending after five days of frantic phone calls and hand wringing. In other news…" This episode may pass unnoticed by the viewer due to its shortness and background nature. In addition, multiple switches from one space to the other undermine the sense of time passage and make it almost irrelevant. This effect is intensified in *21 Grams* by a

more frequent change of scene, but the location remains the same through the whole narration although the name of the North American town is never disclosed. In *Amores Perros* the setting in Mexico City is never explicitly indicated, but is self-explanatory while the "real" length of each vignette is indecipherable. Thus, the duration of the stories in Iñárritu's first two films is impossible to detect. The only temporal coordinate in both cases is the accident, which permits us to infer at least what happened before or after it. This temporal indeterminacy seems to be one of the means to bring this event forward, to centralize it by freeing the spectator's attention from the need to allocate a certain amount of time for each happening. In such a way, the dependence of all the events on the accident is revealed with much greater clarity. The duration of the story per se may not be that important, but an attempt to calculate it shows that making it less significant, or omitting it altogether, rescues the story from an automatization of clock time measurement and brings us to a more essential temporal scale.

Another factor, already noted above, which contributes to prioritizing one event over the other and may redistribute the meanings into a different hierarchy in the spectator's mind is the order in which sequences (scenes, shots) follow one another. As Tarkovsky states: "One of the binding and immutable conditions of cinema is that actions on the screen have to develop sequentially, regardless of the fact of being conceived as simultaneous or retrospective or what

have you. In order to present two or more processes as simultaneous or parallel you have necessarily to show them one after another, they have to be in sequential montage" (70). Despite this restriction, there still exists a rich field for all kinds of variations in organizing the narrative flow. The trick consists in constantly defying this same restriction by effects that work against our conditioned response to narrative patterning. In other words, challenging our habits of thought by disruptions in chronology redirects the spectator towards unfamiliar ways of linking the narrative pieces that transcend chronology, consecution and causality. It is noteworthy that if there are no indicators of a break by means of filmic punctuation "we assume that in film as in life time flows forward at its regular pace" (Sesonske 421). Turim adds in this respect: "the notion of chronology is marked as a culturally determined means of representation" (14). And Paul Ricoeur concludes that "both the theory of history and the theory of fictional narratives seem to take it for granted that whenever there is time, it is always a time laid out chronologically, a linear time, defined by a succession of instants" (171). The need to connect things logically, temporally and spatially leads to a sense of cohesion between the units of the sequence, no matter whether the narration has been intended as coherent or not. In his analysis of narrative structures Jean Mitry develops an argument pointing to the perception of logical and causal relationship between two successive terms based only on their temporal contiguity. "In events presented successively by film," he observes, "our

minds look for the causal link. They do so because they recognize – *think* they recognize or *want* to recognize – the image of the organizing patterns by the causal links" (182). In the case of shuffled narrative immediate gratification is not provided for the sake of a deferred one. According to McGowan the initial failure to connect the units of discourse one after another is rewarded by a "redefinition of successful spectatorship" by the end of the screening; in other words "the structure of the film demands an initial misunderstanding that later information will correct" (137).

In the case of films where coherence and chronology is not undermined, editing serves the goal to make the narration run as smoothly as possible. But, strictly speaking, every cut is an interruption or distortion that is implicitly present in every film (except the unedited ones) as editing takes time apart and reassembles it (McGowan 80). The power of montage permits gaps in time or space, juxtaposing things that have no connection at all in real time and space – a fact that doesn't necessarily disturb or seem awkward to the spectator (Arnheim 21, 26-28). In filmic narrative "the spectator perceives images, which have obviously been selected and arranged" (Metz 21). But, importantly, these procedures, beautifully metaphorized by Tarkovsky as "sculpting in time" (63), are not always that obvious and often pass unnoticed. The cuts become explicit when, during the switches from one sequence (scene or shot) to another, the relation (temporal, spatial or logical) between them is not rapidly or easily

established. This relation may be detected at some later moment of narrative unfolding or it may never be perceived. From the perspective of the fictional work as a whole this type of switch appears as distortions in order. Nevertheless, it must be noted that order per se can't be distorted since it is something given. Deformations or deviations in order are themselves conceptual products of human subjectivity, which imposes the regulations of "normalcy" on the process of sequencing at all levels. Roland Barthes, analyzing the formal (constructive) aspects of narrative, borrows from linguistics and extrapolates the phenomenon of *dystaxia*[16] to discourse. The conclusion Barthes makes is that "in narrative the units of a sequence, although forming a whole at the level of that very sequence, may be separated from one another by insertion of units from other sequences" (118). McGowan describes these interruptions in narrative flow as "detours along a linear chronological path that moved toward the future" (8). Genette systematizes the infidelities to chronological order, its alteration, distortions in linking and embedding different lines of action into each other, and deems them *anachronies* (29, 34).

All happenings embraced by a fictional work are always framed by absolute temporal constants, namely the beginning and the ending of the story and of the narrative. Needless to say, the narrative may start from the middle or the end of the story and the duality or non-coinciding of beginnings and endings is

[16] "Dystaxia occurs when the signs (of a message) are no longer simple juxtaposed, when the (logical) linearity is disturbed (predicate before subject for example" (Barth 118).

very common in "disordered" structures. However, it is important to note that the endings[17] of the story and the narrative coincide more often than beginnings due to the greater cognitive and even existential weight of the end. Heise compares it with the notion of mortality and sees a possibility for readers to "live through a moment in time that they cannot experience in their own lives: the moment just beyond death, which reveals life's final pattern"(48). The end of the story is also its enclosure – a certain point of arrival where the questions of meaning aroused during the narrative unfolding must be answered. According to McGowan "even films that violate the norms of narrative structure by moving in a nonlinear fashion cannot avoid creating spectator knowledge where there was a lack of knowledge"; in other words the end of the film necessarily brings information that was previously withheld (137-138). Generally speaking, besides the fact that in a contemporary globalized society time horizons are shortening, long-term historical coherence is becoming compressed and, consequently, the present moment dominates and forces itself on individuals' being (Heise 26), the end (or death) remains a point from which the (re) appreciation of the past becomes possible. What happens in a non-formulaic, randomized narrative is that it functions in an apparent non-temporality, accumulating uncertainty through each episode, and is left unsolved until the end, when upon looking back the "story" finally starts making sense.

[17] I am not including in the discussion the cases of open endings or multiple endings present, for instance, in bifurcating structures.

The manner, in which Almodóvar and Iñárritu order events in general and, particularly, place the accidents in their narratives, is marked by a difference in their approaches to chronology and cohesion. As observed above, the former is, in a sense, "spectator-friendly" since he secures almost each switch with verbal support to prevent disorientation in logic, time and space. In Almodóvar, the two most frequent means of delivering information not covered by visual narration are firsthand accounts of the protagonists' past, carried out directly or in a voice over, and written sources such as letters. For example, in *Carne Trémula* we learn about Víctor's mother terminal illness through her letter, which is heard in off via Víctor's voice, while he writes a response from jail, and his response also functions as a summary of what he has achieved during the four year long imprisonment. Manuela in *Todo sobre mi Madre* refers to Esteban's father in a voice over when she heads to Barcelona in search of Lola; later in the film, she tells Rosa the story of her marriage, although in third person; and then, in her confession to Huma and Nina, the whole picture of her arrival from Argentina and new life in Barcelona is restored from Manuela's memory. When she escapes to Madrid again, taking Esteban the third with her, the spectator learns about this fact and the reasons for doing so from the letter Manuela attaches to the flowers sent to Agrado and Huma. In *Hable con ella* verbalization is inherent since Benigno puts the whole world in words for Alicia. In addition, Benigno and Marco introduce two flashbacks by starting to retell their life stories before the

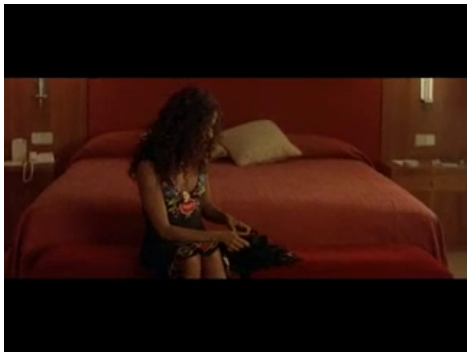
accidents struck them. Finally, Benigno's departure from this world to the one he believes Alicia inhabits (the coma), is announced through a voice message and a letter left for Marco.

Iñárritu, on the contrary, never uses voice over or any written sources to satisfy the spectator with a clear understanding of the characters' circumstances. This information is always given by bits and must be inferred from dialogues or other verbal/visual hints. The protagonist's back-story is fully provided only once - when the corrupt policeman outlines El Chivo's profile at the beginning of the third vignette in *Amores Perros.* In all other cases Iñárritu seems to intentionally provoke a (chrono-) logical and factual disorientation, which reaches maximum expression in *21 Grams* to the extent of not distinguishing the narrative threads as such.

Through his three consecutive films Almodóvar moves towards a greater complexity in ordering the events in the story representation. In *Carne Trémula* the temporal and chronological frame of the story and the narrative coincide perfectly while in *Todo sobre mi Madre* a certain relativization occurs since there is only one passing reference to a particular year in historical reality and time is mostly measured by the periods before and after Esteban's death. *Carne Trémula* starts with the long sequence of Víctor's birth (roughly 6 minutes) and, after an ellipsis, continues with his life some 20 years later. *Todo sobre mi Madre* opens in a hospital setting where technical equipment, represented in a

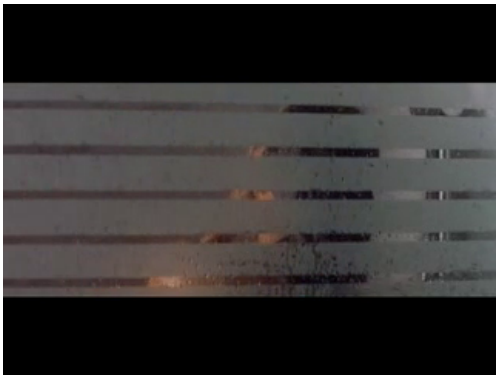
rather shocking abundance, announces an anonymous death and possible organ donation handled by Manuela. This is indeed an atypical introduction (or first appearance) of a protagonist. Putting this episode at the very beginning, which is one of the strongest positions in the discourse, implies the priority of the death–rebirth motif that unites the characters' personal dramas. The consecution of events is nevertheless not broken in these two films unlike in the third. *Hable con ella* interweaves two stories through two tragic events which are brought closer by the director's choice to start the narrative from the point where Lydia's "before" and Alicia's "after" merge. Until 36 minutes into the film – the moment when Benigno and Marco actually get to know each other in "El Bosque"- the shifts from one story to the other are not announced to the viewer. And only from this point is the spectator able to relate one story to the other. The preceding section of the film consists of several sequences. The narrative starts with the preamble in the theater where during the performance of Pina Bausch's *Café Müller* Benigno sees Marco cry. The fact of sitting next to each other alludes to a probable future connection between these two men and the nature of the dance they witness, representing two somnambulistic women making their way through obstacles they don't see, implies that Benigno and Marco's bonding will be based on (in) communication with the female body. Afterwards, the place of action transfers to the hospital room where Benigno retells the recently seen performance to an unresponsive Alicia, thus providing a thematic bridge from the previous sequence.

But several minutes later, a sudden shift to Marco's apartment shows his first "meeting" with Lydia, as he watches her in a sensationalistic TV interview. What follows is the development of their relationship until Lydia's last corrida and her subsequent arrival at "El Bosque" in a vegetative state. This long fragment is interrupted only once by an intercalated scene which returns to Benigno and his daily routine. This interruption is managed quite smoothly since in the previous scene Lydia and Marco are going to bed in a hotel, but the next morning comes with the alarm already sounding in Benigno's bedroom. (Figures 1-4)



After a short scene, where Benigno and the other nurse wash and cut Alicia's hair, an abrupt cut brings us back to the hotel where Lydia has just gotten out of the shower. (Figures 5-8)






Thus, the contrast between impotence and dependence on others and strength and agility in the case of two female bodies is made. In addition, this intercalation may serve as a premonition since Lydia will share Alicia's fate later. As indicated above, only when Marco and Benigno meet in "El Bosque," is the location in a certain point of "now" established and are the other leaps back and forward in time announced.

What distinguishes *Amores Perros* among all six films is the preeminence of the accident, not only in terms of its tragic repercussions within the three stories, but also in structural terms. The narrative starts with a frenetic chase sequence, which results in a horrific car crash, where Valeria, stuck in the car and bleeding, appears for several seconds. After an abrupt fadeout the Octavio and Susana vignette is announced and it proceeds with several short and yet unclear visual interruptions, representing the bits of other stories, until the same chase (slightly abridged) takes place on the streets of Mexico City, although the actual crash is omitted this time. The choice to pull the spectator into the film in such a bewildering way transmits the shocking effect of the accident that appears as senseless, causeless and violent. And this is the way (similar to *Todo sobre Madre* and *Hable con ella*) in which the main motif for the whole film is set at the very beginning. The destructive event also alludes to the failure or impossibility of positive outcomes for both couples from the very inception of their affairs. The crash also serves as an organizational device in the whole text since it separates the first story from the second. After the introduction of Valeria and her life circumstances, the accident is shown for the third time, now from her perspective followed by a fade to black and the "Daniel y Valeria" title. The fourth and most merciless representation of the car crash doesn't strictly match the beginning of "El Chivo and Maru" vignette but marks El Chivo's awakening from a cynical lethargy and his further humanization.

All three plotlines, once announced, unfold in a coherent and consecutive mode. But as with Almodóvar during the first 36 minutes of *Hable con ella*, Iñárritu inserts short intercalations from other stories extending this technique to the length of the whole film. The cognitive effect consists in a gradual familiarizing with all the characters although they belong to different contexts (broadly speaking to different worlds) that never intersect outside their violent coming together in the car accident. Following Octavio's family drama we sporadically see El Chivo wandering the streets with a pack of dogs, then at his home, preparing the gun and looking at the picture of an unknown man whom he will shoot a short while later. Afterwards, the scenes where El Chivo, already recognized as a hit man, learns about his wife's death and starts stalking his daughter, unexpectedly intervene in the dominant narrative thread, which meanwhile switches from Octavio and Susana to Daniel and Valeria. The full understanding of all previously seen episodes is provided only when El Chivo's line starts. In fact, the interplay between the three plots threads through the whole narrative structure. Daniel and his family situation are introduced through four random appearances in short sequences in the first part of the film mainly dedicated to Octavio, Ramiro and Susana. The last part, in which El Chivo becomes the protagonist, features several conclusive episodes for the first story, informing us that Ramiro has been killed, Susana and Octavio's romance destroyed and that the latter is left alone at the bus station. These bits, dispersed

along the whole narrative, also work as a stitching mechanism preventing the multilayered text from falling apart into three separate films. In addition, this is the only way to express simultaneity and contiguity in a one-channel, linear sequence – the only way to embrace México City as a common scene for all the characters who belong to different social strata, but, at the same time, form an integral part of the megapolis. The dispersion of the narrative pieces transmits a feeling of unity of this urban space. In his analysis of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Joseph Frank builds an interesting argument, which seems very relevant to the visual text in question. Frank observes that in *Ulysses* "all factual background – so conveniently summarized for the reader in an ordinary novel – must be reconstructed from fragments, sometimes hundreds of pages apart, scattered through the book. As a result, the reader is forced to read *Ulysses* (…) continually putting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind until (…) he can link them to their complements" (234). What Frank concludes, in regards to Joyce's choice of such a narrative organization, is that the author intended "to build up in the reader's mind a sense of Dublin as a totality" including all the relations of the characters and the events to one another (234). "As the reader progresses through the novel," Frank elaborates, "connecting allusions and references spatially, gradually becoming aware of the pattern of relationships, this sense [of totality] was to be imperceptibly acquired; and, at the conclusion of the novel, it might almost be said that Joyce literally wanted the reader to become a Dubliner" (234).

Employing a similar technique of fragmentation and accumulation in *Amores Perros*, the filmmaker would seem to create in the spectator's mind the sense of becoming a Mexico City dweller, or at least the illusion of having been to this city.

Elaborating on this tendency, Iñárritu resorts to extreme fragmentation in *21 Grams* thus not simply undermining chronology and consecution, but, as Heise puts it, diminishing them as a medium of narrative meaning (51). Allan Cameron describes the film as a "bewildering array of scenes, darting backward and forward in time to offer a series of narrative segments from before and after the accident. As the film goes on this temporal oscillation between past, present, and future stabilizes, so that all the connections are eventually resolved" (67). It is hard to speak about order in a narrative, which consists of more than 100 switches between sequences, scenes, and shots that do not belong to one plot and thus do not offer any kind of continuity. As we have seen, however, order is an authentic feature of every text and there are no texts that have no order; there is simply order of a different kind. In *21 Grams* a habitual temporal matrix is neglected by restructuring the text in spatial terms. According to Cameron, temporally discontinuous segments in this text "are linked largely via camera movements that provide the illusion of spatial contiguity either by so blurring the shot that the transition is made invisible or by making the transition on a common visual element, for example, a light" and "this technique creates a disorienting sense of

time" (67). From a cognitive point of view, Frank's conclusions regarding Joyce's "unbelievably laborious fragmentation of narrative structure" (235) in *Ulysses* may apply to *21 Grams* as well. "Although the burdens placed on the reader by this method of composition may seem insuperable," Frank reflects, "the fact remains that Joyce (…) proceeded on the assumption that a unified spatial apprehension of his work would ultimately be possible" (235). Flattening the sense of anteriority or posteriority among all the episodes in the film leaves the only possible mode of perceiving them - all together – which is a priori spatial.

The breaks of coherence that occur throughout *21 Grams* almost every 30 seconds do not let the spectator identify with a point of temporal departure from which the account of events starts. But inside the sequence, however short it is, the cognitive need to make connections takes over. The artistic "deformation" of the text doesn't affect its basic logical units, which, according to Metz, are the events of the story (24). And in narrative terms, Arnheim asserts that: "within the individual scenes the time continuum must never be disturbed" (22). Thus, the comprehensibility of each segment, albeit structurally distanced from the other (chrono-) logically preceding or following ones, rescues the text from becoming nonsensical. At the same time, the multiplicity of plots "chopped" in bits in 21 *Grams* "dethrones an absolute conception of time and grants each locality its own valid time" (McGowan 3). Even the accident in this film is alluded to several times at different moments in the narrative, but is never shown explicitly in order

to avoid any structural centrality that would help the spectator to stabilize his/her temporal location. The experience of navigating through *21 Grams* is characterized by a constant alternation between frustration (produced by deviations from conventionally accepted order) and normalization (established within each segment) – thus mirroring the instability of contemporary existence.

The cinematic and narrative spatialization of *21 Grams* takes on a geographical form in *Babel*. Iñárritu approximates more conventional narrative anchoring by defining the place(s) of action, but at the same time he tricks the spectator by playing with chronology. The sequences dedicated to each story are coherent and are longer than in *21 Grams*, but unlike in *Amores Perros*, in *Babel* none of the plots takes a dominant role at any moment in the narrative. They are equally distributed throughout the length of film's 143 minutes and the narrative artifice consists in the fact that until the reverse perspective of the call that Richard makes to Amelia from the hospital in Casablanca is shown, the spectator assumes that the crosscutting occurs between the stories developing simultaneously. In fact, everything that happens in the US and Mexico to Amelia and Richard and Susan's children is chronologically posterior to the life-threatening situation the American couple underwent in Morocco. Iñárritu's artistic choice in arranging the plots in this exact order creates an effect of dramatic accumulation around the gunshot. By doing so, the introduction, development and climax of all four stories coincide within the cinematic

temporality. By arranging the action lines in this particular way, the impression of the disaster as a nucleus from which all the tragic consequences radiate in different directions is created. In this manner, the linearity of the narrative deployment is suppressed and the narrative is structurally perceived as a "spider's web."

The last half hour of *Babel* is actually a series of climaxes and denouements that follow one another leading to the general closure of the whole film. The first climax takes place in Cheiko's apartment in Japan when she bursts into tears in the arms of the police officer.[18] Right after the shooting in Morocco occurs Ahmed is killed and Youssef turns himself in.[19] In the following sequence Amelia is desperately seeking help in the desert in California and gets arrested by an immigration officer.[20] Finally Richard and Susan reconcile, declaring their love to each other in the house of the Moroccan tourist guide.[21] In the next narrative block, Cheiko, calmed down and relieved, lets the detective go[22]; Amelia is deported from the US and arrives in Mexico meeting her son there[23]; Ahmed's body is carried to the Moroccan police cars[24]; the helicopter arrives and Susan is transported to the hospital in Casablanca where she is operated on.[25] What

[18] 101 minutes
[19] 103 minutes
[20] 104 minutes
[21] 113 minutes
[22]117 minutes
[23] 119 minutes
[24] 122 minutes
[25] 123 minutes

separates these individual plot closures from the film's overall coda is the reverse perspective of the already mentioned call made by Richard to Amelia. After unveiling the chronological inconsistency in the stories' representation, Iñárritu finally discloses the origin of the rifle, thus encouraging the spectator to trace all the events back. At the end of the global saga of *Babel* Cheiko's father finds his daughter standing naked on the balcony. The camera slowly moves away, framing the Tokyo skyscrapers which dissolve into myriads of lights, looking like a galaxy where the father and the daughter are left as particles of a huge Universe. The choice to present the parallel development of all the dramas that ends in a series of closures transmits a feeling of having lived a very long and hard day. And the night falling on Tokyo promises a deserved rest.

One of the most intriguing properties of filmic discourse consists in the ease with which the narrative may travel back and forth in the temporal and spatial continuum. As Arnheim notes: "the time relationship between scenes that occur at different places is undefined in principle so that it may be impossible to tell whether the second scene takes place before, during, or after the first" (23). Being "tenseless," the visual codifying system of cinema gives the director/editor a freedom of choice to use or not use verbal temporal markers. And if in classic, conventional one-plot films, the reliable points of time reference tend to be retained, in works that experiment with multiple realities, a tendency not to determine time localities is observed. The deliberate lack of temporal reference

points is complicated by the fact that within a multilayered narrative structure the development of several plots also means that several timelines are at work, but all of them are fit into one discursive channel. This operating condition requires the spectator to constantly switch and immediately relocate and adjust to the "local" time (and, often space) of each story. Such a way of perceiving information is, in fact, an example of multitasking, which, as opposed to monotasking, echo two conceptualizations of time formulated by Edward T. Hall in his cross-cultural anthropological studies. By *monochronic time* Hall means "paying attention and doing only one thing at a time" while *polychronic time* means "being involved with many things at once" (13). Within monochrony "time is experienced as used in a linear way – comparable to a road extending from the past into the future"; whereas polychrony "is characterized by simultaneous occurrence of many things" and is the antithesis of monochronic systems (13-14). What is observed here is that the type of texts that has flourished in the last three decades actually mimics the way a (post) modern individual processes information and, in a broader sense, works and lives. It would be enough to mention the number of gadgets one carries and constantly uses daily. In its embrace of the pattern of multitasking, narrative, besides being characterized as "achronological" or "atemporal," may be also seen as "polychronic."

In a text, whether mono- or polychronic, which breaks narrative continuity, a constant falling out of one temporal line and falling into another

occurs. These "jumps" are usually based on the relation between the "first narrative" (Genette 48) and other segments of the text that deviate from it. Genette terms them *anachronies* and characterizes them as reaching "into the past or the future, either more or less distant from the 'present' moment," that is, "from the moment in the story when the narrative was interrupted to make room for the anachrony," and as subordinated to the narrative into which it is inserted or onto which it is grafted (48).[26] But, of course, Genette notes, "the embeddings can be more complex and an anachrony can assume the role of first narrative with respect to another that it carries; and more generally, with respect to an anachrony the totality of the context can be taken as first narrative" (49). These complications in the text's (chrono-) logical order are generally not found in the works under study, with the exception of *Hable con ella*. There is also a very short flashback in *Babel* at the moment of Ahmed's death where two brothers are standing on the hill leaning against the blowing wind. But the notion and the nature of anachrony (in Genette's sense) is a productive point of departure for the analysis of a polychronic text like, for example, *21 Grams*. Genette seems to be leading toward polychrony in his analysis of the case when the analeptic character of a section of narrative is forgotten and that section is prolonged more or less indefinitely on its own account without paying attention to the point where it

[26] Genette terms the anachrony that represents the event in advance as *prolepsis* and any evocation of past events as *analepsis*. The other commonly accepted terms for these narrative phenomena are *flashforward* and *flashback*, respectively.

rejoins the first narrative (66). He proclaims it to be the author's "boldest avoidance" albeit based on pure negligence (Genette 66). In the case described, the predominance of the first narrative is undermined, but an even bolder avoidance would be canceling it out at altogether, i.e. creating a text where each plot line is a first narrative or none is. The first narrative is distinguishable because it occupies more time than other segments of the text and it clearly declares the beginning and the ending of the story to which the anachronies adhere. However, when the distribution of time and content "weight" is equal, the primacy of one story over the others gets lost or becomes irrelevant. And so does the flashback or flashforward. In obliterating the last anchors of chronology or succession in the story "the spectator has no temporal markings of anteriority for the events depicted, and should a spectator begin watching the film in the middle of the flashback, he or she would never know that the flashback segments were actually meant to depict the past" (Turim 15). What emerges through these theoretical observations is another approach to the perception of time that is less determinative and, importantly, more flexible and reflective of the human experience or the experience of a human as a psycho-emotional entity. Such dimensions as internal, organic, private and emotional time are brought out at the cost of neglecting clock time.

In reference to the re-conceptualization of time in the high-modernist novel Heise indicates that "psychological or 'organic' temporality deviates from

the linearity of mechanical and industrial time" (36)[27] and the innovative narrative strategies deployed there enabled "writers and readers to explore individual and psychological temporality, whose peculiar sequential logic could be held up as a counter-model to what were perceived to be repressive implications of official history and public time" (7). The linearity of clock time presupposes passing by/through the moment and leaving it behind, thus keeping in focus only the present and making the past "fade." A conventionally arranged narrative achieves the same perceptual effect. However, by internalizing time experience, past, present and future become experiences within the individual's mind where they somehow coexist (Patrides 5). And for the narrative to be as omnitemporal as human consciousness, sequential and linear time needs to give way to, as Ricci puts it, elastic temporality, i.e., "an integration of time that reveals a holistic temporal structure in which the aspects of time are equally accessible" (Ricci xi). In such a structure the coexistence of past, present and future permits the plots to work against the flow of time (which is believed to be irreversible); and, importantly, an intrinsic kind of unity is created or kept alive, overshadowing and reshaping the constraints of pure temporal linearity (Frank "Spatial Form: an Answer to Critics" 246). In addition, the focal point may shift from the present to the past or to the future.

[27] Heise, among others, considers high modernism in literature as a precursor of the kinds of narrative experimentations that have exploded during the last three decades.

In this respect Tarkovsky emphasizes the determining role of the past upon the present. The meaning of the "passed" for him bears all that is constant in the reality of the present, of each current moment. "In a certain sense" – Tarkovsky asserts – "the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection" (58). These reflections directly link to the fundamental precondition for the ability to internalize time in general, and, in particular, to build a meaningful relation between its three coordinates. Time doesn't exist without memory and, actually, goes forward only by forming new memories. In a narration, the switches to the past as "passed," in the sense that there is already a certain distance that reveals the posterior signification of what happened, are managed by the flashback. And it is noteworthy that this formal device is exclusively cinematic, i.e. barely possible in other narrative arts, once again, due to the freedom of the visual discourse from "grammar."

Turim singles out the flashback among other cinematic devices as a privileged moment in a narration, which juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference – present and past - noting that the main concepts implied in this juncture are memory and history. In the context of a given film, a flashback serves to convey subjective memories, dreams or confessions or to deliver missing information that has hitherto been omitted (1, 6, 7). From the cognitive

point of view "flashbacks directly involve a quest for the answer to an enigma posed in the beginning of a narrative through a return to the past" (Turim 11). This enigma is something we didn't know, or rather, that the author didn't want us to know and by disclosing the information not provided in a timely manner, the flashback invites us to re-conceptualize the present moment. The sense of enigma may also consist in not knowing the reasons for event(s) that may be given later from one or several perspectives. This case also implies a return, which, according to Genette "retroactively confers on the past episode a meaning that in its own time it did not yet have" (56). The recall modifies the meaning of past occurrences after the event, marking as significant what was not so originally or refuting a first interpretation and replacing it with a new one (Genette 56).

Seen from another perspective, the enigma may persist when the event seems causeless and senseless but its effects are disastrous yet meaningful. A case in point is the accident that is always followed by haunting questions: "Why?!" or "What for?" According to McGowan those films with sabotaged temporality and driven by trauma introduce spectators to an alternative way of experiencing existence in time and memory functioning. Instead of a different future, time brings about an incessant repetition and despite the generic and thematic diversity, "the distortion of chronological time in these films has a shared motivation: in each case, they distort time not simply because of the exigencies of plot but in

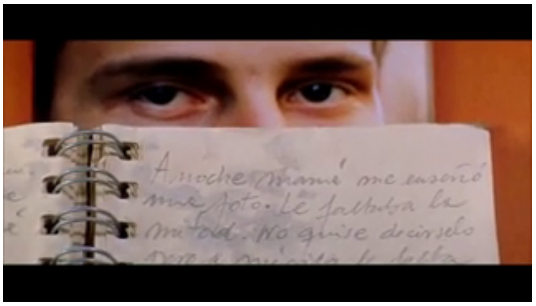
order to reveal the circular logic (…) in which narrative is oriented around a foundational moment of traumatic loss" (10).

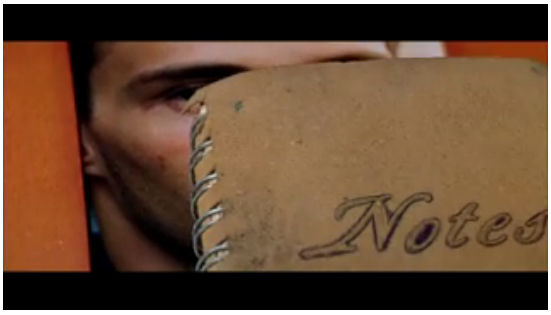
The presence of enigma and return, ascribed to flashback, may manifest itself in other ways as well. As indicated above, out of the six films examined only one is structurally based on a series of flashbacks (*Hable con ella*) but the work of memory, or rather, wounded memory, which demands recalls and repetitions is present in all of them. Painful remembering implies physical or psychological damage inflicted by the accident and this is the past that conditions, influences and overwhelms the present. In other words, the necessity for protagonists to go back in time (through memory) is intensified by the fact of being affected.

In narrativizing the function of memory and return Almodóvar and Iñárritu generally eschew flashbacks in favor of a reverse perspective on crucial events or circumstances which have already taken place in the story and in the narrative but are referred to again later in the narrative. In *Carne Trémula* the revelation that the gunshot was intended as an act of revenge targeted at David comes some two thirds of the way through the film. Víctor initiates the reconstruction of the scene using a toy pistol, thus bringing back the actuality of the real happening, which radically changed everybody's life six years ago. Making David and Elena know the truth about the past changes the redistribution of guilt, love and forgiveness in the love triangle in which all three are presently

involved. Furthermore, the six year old truth conditions the future for all the characters in the drama, in a sense, removing a block and letting everybody move on, whether towards death or life.

Todo sobre mi Madre is haunted by the past from its very inception. The enigmas surrounding the father of Manuela's son are announced by Esteban's questions that are answered only after his death. Nevertheless, Esteban keeps asking through his diary, which is sporadically read in voice over. In fact, the notebook itself becomes a sacred object of memory for Manuela since Esteban is still alive in it and able to communicate with his father at the end of the film. (Figures 9-10)





The passage quoted during Manuela's last meeting with Lola is actually the last thing Esteban wrote before his death: "Anoche mamá me enseñó una foto. Le faltaba la mitad. No quise decírselo pero a mi vida le falta el mismo trozo…" (Last night mama showed me a photo. One half was missing. I didn't want to tell her this but my life is missing this same half.) This scene retells the episode

shown shortly after the film starts but from the perspective of Manuela who imposes a veto on everything related to her husband. Esteban's feelings are voiced only when we know who and what Lola is and when Manuela is finally ready to introduce her son to his father.

Hable con ella features two accidents, but the first, Alicia being run over by a car, is left visually unnarrated, while the second is not only shown but also given double attention in terms of Lydia's emotional state before she was gored. The sequence in the car with Marco, in which she insists on the need to talk to him, is played twice: the first time in the first narrative and then, much later in the film, in a flashback. Both times these episodes are, in a way, false leads since they give the impression of a possible future together for Marco and Lydia. But as soon as the flashback is over, Marco learns about Lydia's true feelings from El Niño de Valencia whom he meets in the hospital and realizes that she wasn't crying for him during Angela's wedding. As in *Carne Trémula* the pre-accident state of affairs is misinterpreted for the protagonists and for the viewer and disclosing the truth influences the further development of the plot(s). Marco feels free to go and El Niño de Valencia free to stay with Lydia.

The deferral of clarifications and explanations that change the character's trajectories has a bigger meaning than just keeping the viewer intrigued. The revelations happen at the moment when the protagonists have gone through an experience necessary for their spiritual growth, in other words an

essential piece of life which wouldn't have been possible if they had known the real circumstances of the "passed" earlier. By the time Víctor and Elena meet again, he has had to spend four years in jail, where he earned a university degree, and two years out building his life from scratch; meanwhile Elena has radically changed her priorities, having taken responsibility for orphan children and caring for David. Probably, this was the most appropriate stage in their lives to re-evaluate their past and continue on together. In *Hable con ella* Marco spends two months in the hospital as Lydia's boyfriend and gets involved in Benigno and Alicia's situation, an experience that moves him deeply and widens his understanding of human existence. In addition, Marco learns that Lydia has decided to leave him for El Niño de Valencia only when the latter is back from his Latin American tour, so the deferred unveiling of the truth keeps Marco beside Lydia for the time necessary for El Niño de Valencia to come back.

Iñárritu's films are much less rooted in chronology or consecution than those of Almodóvar; therefore, the return to the past in his work obeys another logic which is not linear but circular. Analyzing *21 Grams* McGowan notes that the accident "exerts a gravitational force that pulls the narrative back and never allows it to move beyond the essential trauma"; the repetition of a loss, he continues, "occurs without regard for the forward movement of time; it is a repetition that we cannot anticipate or calculate" (138, 141-142). These assertions are also applicable to *Amores Perros* since this film begins by running straight

into the accident and returns to it three more times, thereby giving an impression of a dreadful inescapability. The first time it hits the spectator without any reasons for it given; in the second occurrence it is fully explained, featuring Octavio's case and cause; and afterwards the car crash keeps appearing in the narrative and thus impedes any temporal or psychological distancing from it. Different from Almodóvar who bases the recall on actualizing the past which has "faded" through time, Iñárritu makes the accident permanently present, no matter whether it takes an explicitly visual form like in *Amores Perros* or remains unnarrated as in *21 Grams*. There are no other enigmas posed except the incomprehensibility of the car crash itself. McGowan points out that in *21 Grams* the absent accident occupies the central position and the subsequent events in the narrative revolve around it (138). The redundantly present accident in *Amores Perros* also functions as an attractor for all three plot lines. The traumatic event exists on a different temporal plane than all of the other events (McGowan 139) and this factor conditions its omnipresence albeit at the cost of diminishing or breaking the chronology.

In Iñárritu going back in time functions only on the level of the narrative for it is the spectator who is made to process the same event more than once, but not the characters. In other words, they don't internalize past, present and future as they do in Almodóvar's stories. For example, in *Amores Perros* the accident is shown four times with stylistic variations and from a different point of

view (Octavio's - twice, Valeria's and El Chivo's); however it doesn't involve the protagonists in re-conceptualizing the past. And since there is no memory work, there is no time. It doesn't pass. Significantly, only El Chivo's plot line is distinguished by the presence of a back-story and a longstanding trauma (which is left out of the narrative) and, by overcoming it, he moves on and in time.

As suggested above, among the other films, *21 Grams* reaches the maximum point of polychrony since its "atomized narrative" depicts "not only different people at different periods of their lives, but effectively different people from shot to shot" (Romney & Smith). The film is structured by an intense rush of narrative fragments that proceed elliptically showing the present and the future and only verbally alluding to the past, making the spectator at once "aware of the multiplicity of disparate parts and of the elusive, shifting shape of the whole" (Romney & Smith). However, this extreme fragmentation is not merely aimed at destroying traditional temporality. By merging past, present and future into one another, *21 Grams'* narrative structure emphasizes the emotional connections between characters and situations (Azcona "A Time" 117). Iñárritu himself clarifies that the arrangement of the scenes in the film is meant to contribute to the awareness of the emotional order of the facts (Romney & Smith) and Azcona interprets the emotional order as emotional time for the sake of which chronology is almost abandoned (Azcona "A Time" 117). The visualization of the emotional realm may be compared to the verbalization of sensory experiences in modernist

texts. Both cases are characterized by intensity of feelings in pure form, which dominates the text, submerging the reader/spectator in its fullness.

Significantly, the understanding of an episode as passed is possible only when, at least, the relations of "before", "after" and "simultaneously" are perceptible. That is when a return functions as such. As Romney & Smith indicate, "a brief run-through of just the film's first five minutes shows how many enigmas are presented in quick succession" and these enigmas are, once again, created through the particular order of the segments, which means through form, not content. What the spectator seeks is simply a clarification of what's going on. Yet closer to the end, this question is waived since the consecution of events is still inferable from the complex web of plots and everything finds its rightful place in the viewer's mind. In fact, from the moment when Cristina finds Paul outside of the motel, after he fired several shots at Jack Jordan (roughly thirteen minutes from the end), the rest of the film is absolutely congruous. Jack breaks into Cristina and Paul's room pleading for death; the climatic scene, where Paul shoots himself in his chest while Cristina mercilessly beats Jack with a floor lamp, follows; Jack drives Cristina with Paul bleeding in her arms to the hospital; and Paul recites his premortem monologue from the ICU. Only at this stage does the identification of the present and its relation to the past and to the future becomes possible. During Paul's profound questioning about life's value a series of short sequences flashing on the screen refers to the crucial moments in all three stories.

We see Michael and his daughters leaving the restaurant right before they die in the accident; Jack getting into his truck right before he runs over Cristina's family; and Cristina leaving the swimming pool in a hurry to see her loved ones who will never come home. The mute scene when Jack and Cristina look into each other's eyes implying, if not forgiveness, at least resignation, is a present juncture point which marks the tragic past as passed but not forgotten. Finally, the scenes of Jack's return home to his abandoned family and of the pregnant Cristina sitting in her children's room, trace their future, while Paul's lifeline on the respiratory apnea alarm becomes flat. He is out of time.

In *Babel* versions of the same episodes seen from different perspectives are placed twice in the narrative and both times they accentuate the accident. Iñárritu chooses to show the gunshot two times and during the second representation "it is completely unexpected for everyone on the bus. But for the spectator who has seen the film's opening, this unexpected event stems from the activity of the boys" (McGowan "The Contingency" 407). This repetition, nevertheless, doesn't fold itself into an inescapable circularity, as it happens in *Amores Perros*. Rather it is a means to present several plot lines consistently since the scene, where Susan is seen bleeding in the bus is supposed to immediately follow the one where Yussef and Ahmed shoot from the top of the hill. And in that case the spectator would not yet have been introduced to the American couple and their family back-story. In addition, the two representations of the gunshot are

separated by a sequence that takes place in the US where the story of Amelia and the kids entrusted to her starts. What is common to both *Amores Perros* and *Babel* is the visual segmenting of one event in order to show how the protagonists belonging to different plots become involved in or "arrive" at the accident. In this respect, a curious parallel to the pre-editing stage in cinema may be traced. An example given by Mitry illustrates the narrative sequencing:

> In *Le voyage à travers l'impossible*, Professor Mabouloff's car travels across (…) the mountains of Switzerland. Suddenly it starts down a very steep slope. Right at the bottom, Mabouloff misses a corner and crashes into an inn, knocking down its walls. End of the tableau.
> In the next tableau, we are inside the same inn. Naturally, none of the above has happened yet. Diners are sat at their tables, merrily chatting away. Suddenly, to everyone's great alarm, the car smashes through the walls of the dining room and knocks over the serving table.
>
> (4)

As Mitry explains, the absence of linking mechanisms produces repetitions in the narrative when the director's intention is to present different aspects of the same action. Later on in the development of cinema, montage techniques would enable the event to be seen from two different points of view within the same unity of movement (3-4). Apparently, Iñárritu breaks this unity and splits the same moment in time into two (or more) separate sequences. This is the only way to give a full account of the actions happening simultaneously in a linear narrative

flow.[28] When Almodóvar encloses the repetition in a flashback (in *Hable con ella*) and the reverse perspectives in a verbal reference (in *Todo sobre mi Madre*) or a situational reconstruction (in *Carne Trémula*) the temporality is not broken since the recalls happen later and have their own location in the story time. In contrast, Iñárritu multiplies one event into various versions and places them throughout the narrative. By doing so, he sets up the narrative against the physical properties of the world since in "reality" there is only one timeline to which all the happenings are tied. Turim considers such a deviation as a formal workaround for the sake of highlighting the conceptual key points of the content (11).

What frames the intertwined narrative strands in *Babel* is the phone conversation between Richard and Amelia, portrayed first from the perspective of the latter shortly after the film starts and later from that of the former towards the end of the film. Thus, either everything that happens after the first representation of the call is an enormous flashback in which Amelia's drama temporally stands out; or the call and the US-Mexican plot line is a huge flashforward narrated concurrently with all other story lines through cross-cutting. These attempts to systematize *Babel* in terms of a first narrative and anachronies subservient to it are obviously awkward. It would be more appropriate to apply the concept of "floating temporalities" offered by Turim who indicates that the innovations with

[28] As K. Vernon observes, this example seems to show that the history of cinema techniques development is not linear. In other words, the broadening of expressive possibilities of the medium does not always go hand in hand with the enhancement of its technological capability.

the flashback reconstruct narrative time and space to the extent of dismantling the points of reference necessary to the flashback as a device (246). And in the space of floating temporalities, time, in its conventional understanding, doesn't provide a meaningful way of organizing the narrative. Thereby *chronos* definitively cedes the fictional kingdom to *kairos*.

Conclusions

It is hard to grasp the narrative of timeless time in a space of flows and build steady arguments about it without falling into constant hyperlinking. This is especially the case in a theoretical environment in which conventional notions of both time and space are seen to be in crisis (Heise 2), and where critics have responded with a range of terms for new temporal organization of (our) reality and fiction. It is claimed that we live and function in a multitasking system of polychrony (Hall) as well as in atemporality (McGowan), whereas authors tend to organize their fictional worlds in the frame of "omnitemporality" (Genette) or "achrony" (Bal).[29] All of these terms coincide in embracing and emphasizing simultaneity and instantaneity which, according to Heise, are two temporal values foregrounded by an unprecedented development in transportation, communication and information technologies during the last 30 years (23). Both factors (simultaneity and instantaneity), by becoming essential to the experience of

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[29] Genette coins the term *omnitemporality* when describing a narrative strategy applied by Proust in his *In Search of Lost Time* novel. "Ever since the day when the narrator in a trance perceived the unifying significance of his story", Genette writes, "he never ceases to hold all of its threads simultaneously, to apprehend simultaneously all of its places and all of its moments, to be capable of establishing a multitude of 'telescopic' relationships amongst them: a ubiquity that is spatial but also temporal, an 'omnitemporality' perfectly illustrated by the passage (…) where the hero (…) reconstructs in a flash the network of [entangled] memories" (78). In my opinion, this analytical elaboration perfectly describes the work of temporality in multi-protagonist films as Iñárritu's *21 Grams*.
Mieke Bal in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, defines *achrony* as "a deviation of time that can not be analyzed any further" due to the fact that, "although we may see clearly that we are dealing with a deviation, either the information cannot be sorted out, or there is too little of it" (96). This case would correspond to a temporal sabotage when the flashback loses its relevancy as relocation to the past within the story.

contemporary life, have also contributed to a reconceptualization of time and space in culture which extends rather in space than in time and, particularly, narrative expresses a predilection for spatial metaphors (Heise 1-2).

The elements of a "spatialized" text become connected exclusively by their contiguity while chronology and consecution are suppressed and this model is, in fact, a projection of a cyberspace where networks are constantly growing. This process of mimicking virtual space (where many of us dangerously prefer to exist) by visual-narrative texts that aim at multiplying realities has served as a premise for coining and developing the term "network narrative." Nevertheless, film theorists and critics have also displayed certain pluralism when applying other terms borrowed from science to similarly structured texts. Films featuring multiple plots and characters have been variously categorized as: fractal, modular, hyperlink, database, mosaic, six-degree separation, converging fates narrative and so forth. This uncertainty in defining similar phenomena means that we are still in the phase of genre formation, although Azcona has already granted this type of films the status of such. In her study, *The Multi-Protagonist Film*, Azcona argues that "multi-protagonist movies have developed a versatile and multifaceted narrative structure" as well as "a number of common narrative and stylistic

characteristics" and that this type of "narrative structure gradually acquired the status of a genre" (1)[30].

Generally speaking, in my analytical approach to this newly born genre, exemplified in the works of Almodóvar and Iñárritu, I have attempted to clarify what has really changed and what only seems to have changed in storytelling techniques, compared to more conventional, formulaic plot structures. Despite the vagueness and lack of agreement as to terminology when referring to multilayered texts, all of them are indicative of a "broken" narrative. Films unfolding without respect to chronology and continuity and constantly jumping from one timeline to the other give an impression of being non-linear, scrambled or randomized and these reconfigurations in the way content is delivered have been proclaimed as the "collapse of the continuous narrative" (Coates 27). Such a bold pronouncement must be interpreted very carefully. Back in 1974, in a discussion on experimental cinema and narrativity, Metz evokes the notion of the "breakdown of narrativity" in the claim that "the 'young cinema' or 'the new cinema' has developed beyond the stage of the narrative, that the modern film is an absolute object, a work to be read in any direction, and that it has thrown off narrativity, the earmark of the classical film" (185). Metz raises a number of objections to this argument, stating that, on the contrary, modern film is more narrative than ever and that "the main

[30] It should be noted, however, that the multiple plot structure is not a recent invention and its first realization is dates to 1916 (*Intolerance*, D. W. Griffith). What draws contemporary film critics' attention more closely is how extensively this genre (Azcona) has flourished since the 1980s and how diverse the variations and complications of this structure have become.

contribution of the new cinema is to have enriched the filmic narrative" (208). In this regard, another film theorist, Dudley Andrew affirms that "while literary artists may work in non-narrative modes, the cineaste seems condemned to some form of narrative just to rein in galloping connotations of images" since "narrative competence holds our significations in place to give them order and thrust" (76). Thus, "the collapse of the continuous narrative" means rather a collapse of continuity or habitual order than that of narrative itself.

For the purpose of exploring this development of altered but enriched narrative possibilities, I devoted two chapters (one and three) to a structural and formal analysis of the six films. This procedure allowed me to definitively conclude that despite the fact that Almodóvar and Iñárritu's films are constructed as "discontinuous" to a greater or lesser extent, their narrative function is not undermined. In other words, their stories lose nothing to formal "deviations" of the narrative but rather are enhanced. Essentially, the logic of the story stays intact despite the order in which events are recounted. In this connection, Barthes points out that consecution doesn't always equal consequence and therefore he questions whether there is "an atemporal logic lying behind the temporality of narrative?" (98). Supporting his argument with Lévi-Strauss's proposition that an atemporal matrix structure absorbs the order of chronological succession, Barthes states that: "temporality is only a structural category of narrative (of discourse), just as in language (…) temporality only exists in the form of a system; from the

point of view of narrative, what we call time does not exist, or at least only exists functionally, as an element of a semiotic system" (99). Hence the logic of the story is separate from the temporality of the narrative and interrupting the latter doesn't necessarily mean destroying the former. This explains the fact that the content expressed in a "shuffled mode" is still comprehensible and permits the restoration of chronology and consecution in the spectator's mind.

The network-like diagrams elaborated in the first chapter vividly illustrate that the level of deep structures in all six films is not affected although the atypical unfolding and multiplicity of the plots obscure the logic of the stories. Even a short glance at my diagrams reveals the polyphonic nature of text development as a totality where each line/life crisscross and separate with the others. Sergei Eisenstein defined such a simultaneous advance of a multiple series of lines where each line maintains an independent compositional course and also contributes to the total compositional course of the sequence as "vertical montage" (cited in Eagle 35). Unfortunately, the polyphony of a fugue is only a beautiful utopia for a visual text, due to the restrictions of the linear unfolding of discourse, and may only be achieved graphically through the schemes where the events of the films are chronologized according to a hypothetical "reality." The paradox consists in the fact that this reality has never existed while the texts are real; they exist, but their events and actions cannot be represented the way they "happened."

The dissection of several multilayered universes has clearly shown that new "disjunctive techniques are situated within an orthodox plot" (Bordwell "The Way" 76); i.e., within the text where several plots are knitted together each separate strand still follows the classic rules of causal transformation (McMahan 148). Therefore, causality doesn't entirely give way to casualty when ruling the story worlds. The preeminence of coincidence may be felt more due to the presence of more than one centralized character and plot. The mere fact of having more than one story implies more agents and, consequently more actions and events. As a result coincidences and other kinds of mutual influence and interaction are more likely. As Ryan points out, the text with more than one line of action works as a multitasking computer: "a process may start another process, interrupt it, terminate it, slow it down, or speed it up" (128). The computer metaphor, once again, underlines the similarity between the operation of informational technologies and that of millennium texts.

Another factor that reinforces the influence of the accidental in a multiple plot film is that the characters form and break connections in accordance with the dynamics of networking, which nowadays is one of the predominant – and seemingly preferred - forms of interaction between people in both virtual and real life. These connections may randomly emerge from a mere temporal and spatial convergence. Within the network everybody and nobody is related to each other and this kind of relationality increases the unpredictability of encounters and

interactions between people (or characters). Not only are the encounters themselves unpredictable, but also their effects on every participant. They are as likely to kill as kiss. Violence often appears with a nothing-personal attitude while help often comes from nowhere and the reliance on the kindness of strangers is more common.

In the films analyzed in my dissertation, the disastrous event and human relationships developing around it provide the glue for the plots, although they function differently in Almodóvar and Iñárritu. In the works of both directors, family and friendship ties, which undergo reversible and irreversible changes due to the accident, are central. But gunshots and car crashes work in an opposite manner. In *Carne Trémula, Todo sobre mi Madre* and *Hable con ella*, the blow brings people together. In other words, it works as a centripetal force and in each film the director creates the feeling of an enlarged family or community united by love but also pain. Even if the films' endings imply that each character will follow his or her own path, the past they have lived and the tragedy they have undergone together will never let them become strangers. In contrast, in Iñárritu's trilogy the accident is definitely centrifugal, blowing all those affected in different, unpredictable directions, like billiard balls. The ties between the characters are much more fragile and vulnerable than the ones built by Almodóvar, and no suggestion of possible community is drawn. The small worlds created by Almodóvar stand in contrast to the global one of Iñárritu where feelings of

isolation and loneliness are predominant. If in Almodóvar it is possible for strangers to become family, in Iñárritu, on the contrary, families become strangers.

As stated at the beginning of the third chapter, the choices in the particular organization of the narrative are influenced by the author's vision of the content s/he intends to express. With reference to contemporary filmmakers who choose to narrate in a non-linear fashion James Schamus observes that these directors aim to target the audience "with a rhetoric and a narrative style that speaks very emotionally to their present spiritual needs" (cited in Debruge). Bordwell suggests in this regard that "violations of classical conceptions of time and space are justified as the intrusion of an unpredictable and contingent daily reality" ("Art Cinema" 97). As I also proposed in the same chapter, violations of the text mirror the unprecedented presence of violence in the real world, implying a general state of instability, insecurity and vulnerability. In addition, the narrated trauma, as the prolonged aftermath of the accidents, mimics the temporal fragmentation of traumatized subjectivity, which also requires an emphasis on the past. Almodóvar manages the returns to the crucial tragic event through distancing accompanied by a constant re-evaluation of the original occurrence whereas Iñárritu renders distancing impossible. By making the past and the future meet in an inescapable present he submerges the spectator in "historical moments of intemporal significance," which, according to Frank Kermode, is *kairos* (cited in Frank

"Spatial Form" 245). The intensity of the traumatic experience supplants chronology and the absence of temporal orientation in Iñárritu's films brings the accident forward, almost halting the passage of time.

Naturally, the multiplication of plots and realities goes hand in hand with distortions in filmic temporality and, consequently, its formal organization. On the one hand, these distortions may be a result of a struggle to fit all the stories into one discursive channel and to create an impression of a totalizing fictional universe inhabited by all the characters. On the other hand, the breakages in coherence may be purposeful in order to reflect the disjunct nature of human existence in the global age. Almodóvar seems to tend toward the first narrative strategy in his films while Iñárritu pursues both.

Along with other revolutionary changes in the field of informational technologies, biology, medical science and psychiatry the one in visual storytelling is best described as "something particularly transformative and jarring" that "occurred in cinema's montage of disparate temporalities" (Turim 4). Time and space travel through such fictions has become rough, but in such a way that might best suit the network mind.

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Appendix

Each diagram represents the story world of one of six films. The first three schemes correspond to three Almodóvar films while the last three - to ones by Iñárritu. Their order is as follows: *Carne Trémula* (1997), *Todo sobre mi Madre* (1999), *Hable con ella* (2002), *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006).

Legend:

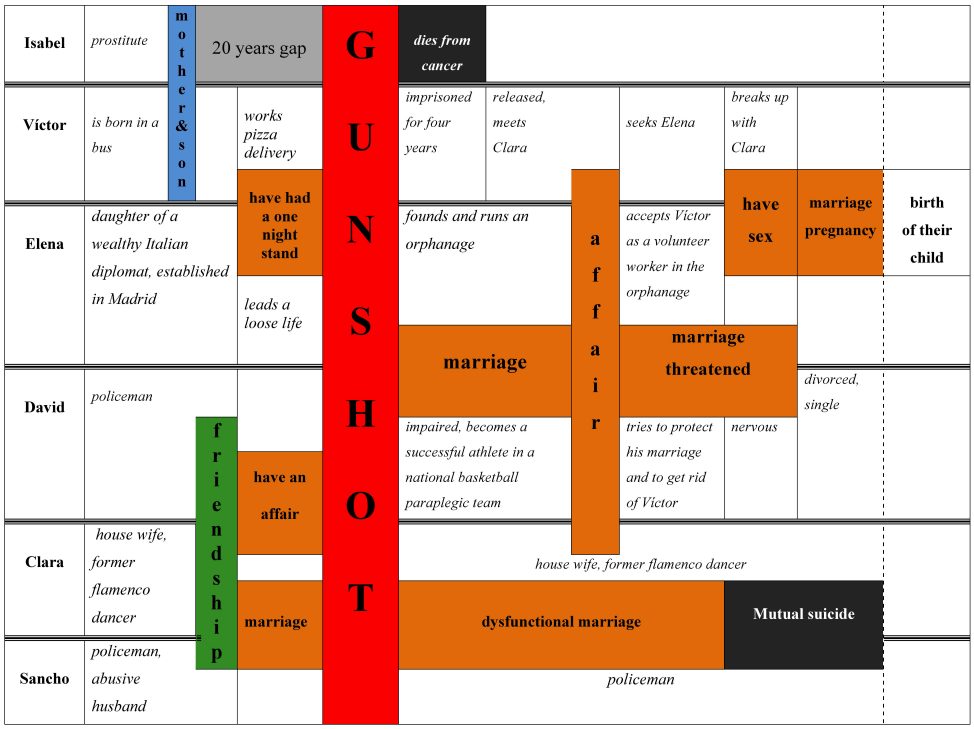
accidents

romantic, sexual, marital unions or liaisons

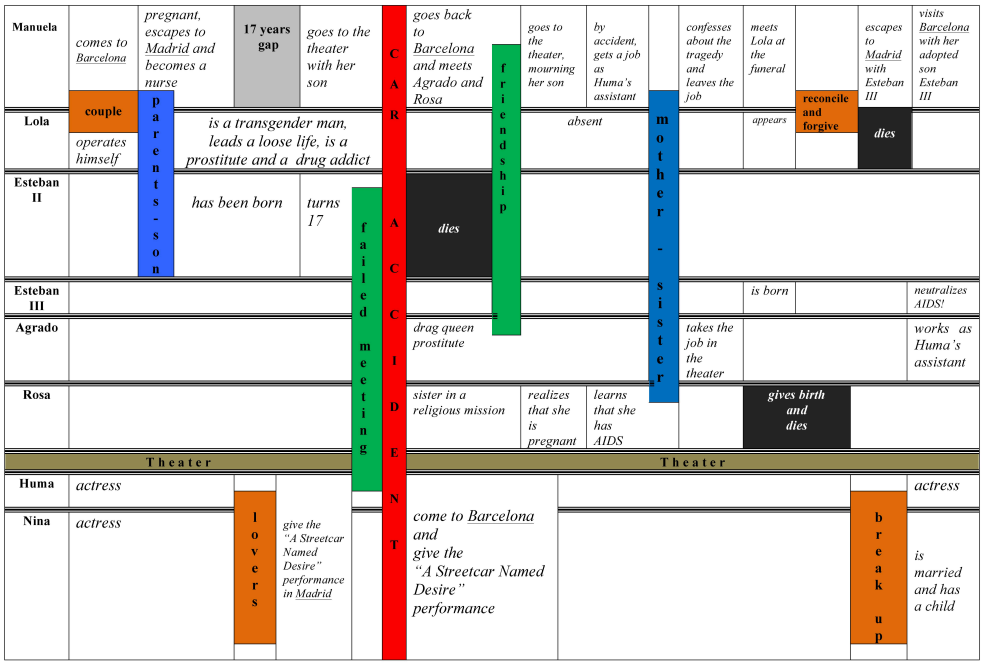
blood kinship

social interaction

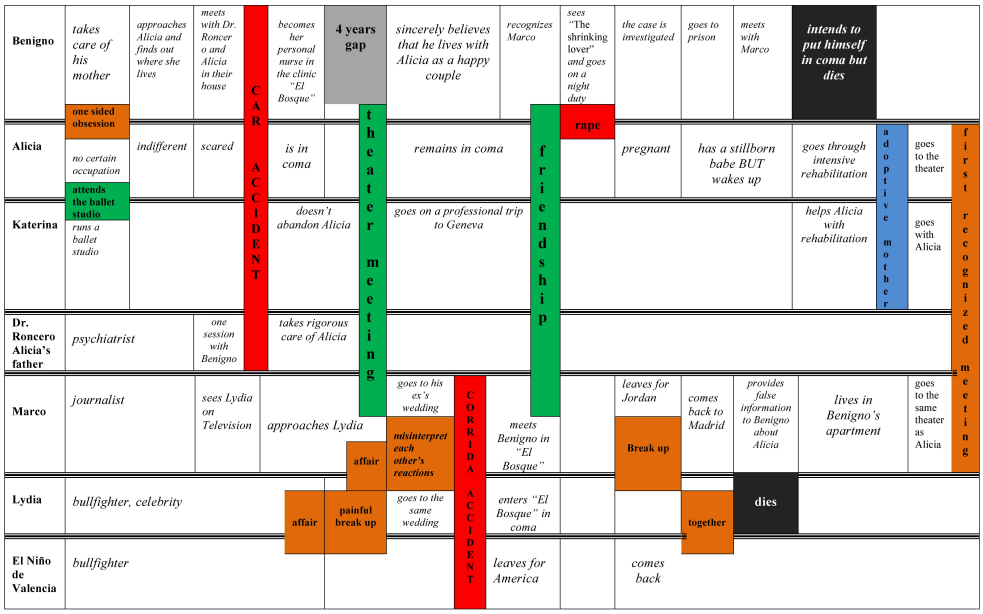
Carne Trémula, P. Almodóvar, 1997.



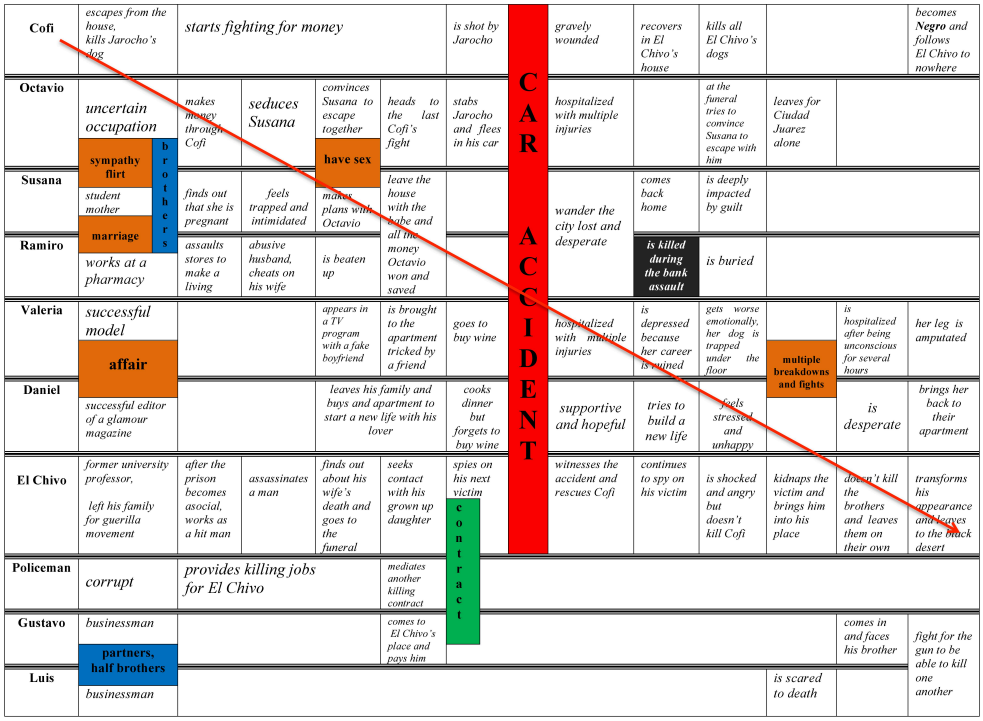
Todo sobre mi Madre, P. Almodóvar, 1999.



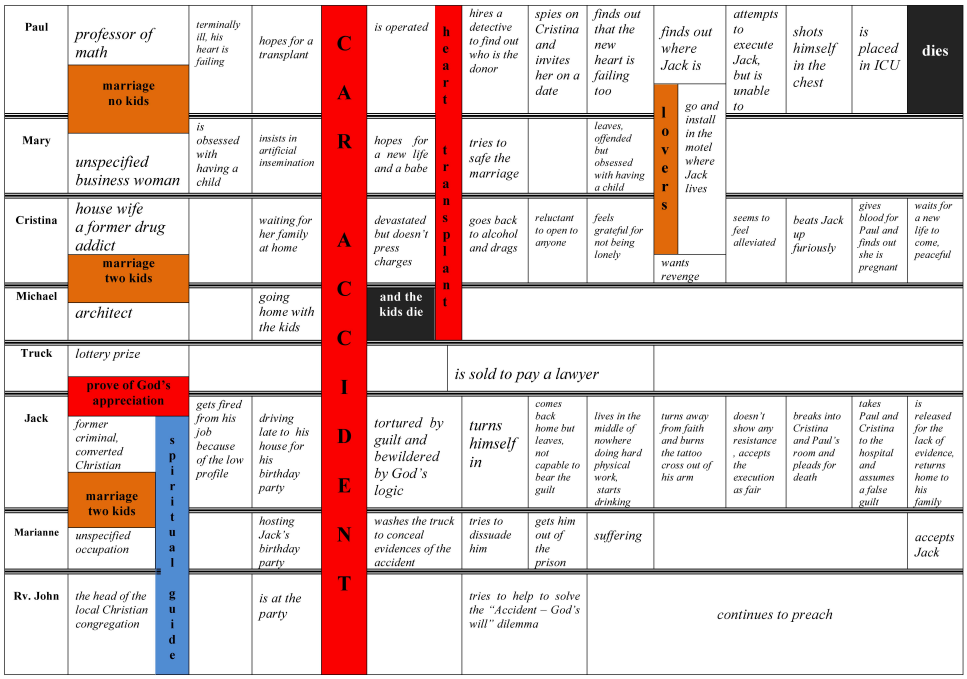
Hable con ella, P. Almodóvar, 2002.



Amores Perros, A. G. Iñárritu, 2000.



21 Grams, A. G. Iñárritu, 2003.



Babel, A. G. Iñárritu, 2006.