How Class Conflict is Portrayed in the Mexican and Hollywood Cinema of Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu

By

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The topic of class, and specifically the conflicts that arise when the lower and upper classes are put into contact with one another, has been fertile ground for cinema since the early days of the medium. Despite the universal resonance of these themes, the depiction of class conflict often differs from one country or region of the world to another. As cinema has grown and evolved, and barriers between regional and national markets continue to shift and blur, directors around the world often find themselves directing films in a foreign country. This allows us the chance to witness how the sensibilities of how one filmmaker from a given country can synthesize, adapt, or change to a new system and style of moviemaking in another country. Two prominent world filmmakers of the past two decades who have tackled issues of class and economic struggles are Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu. Both men are widely considered to be two of the most popular filmmakers of the Nuevo Cine Mexicano, or New Mexican Cinema. Mexican films by the two men such as *Amores Perros* (Iñárritu, 2001), *Y Tu Mamá También* (Cuarón, 2001) and *Roma* (Cuarón, 2018) have wrought dramatic conflict from class struggles, as well as becoming international success stories that have been credited with reigniting global interest in Mexican cinema. However, the two men have also found levels of success in America that many other Latin American filmmakers, past and present, have never seen. As their careers have evolved, the treatment of class issues in their films have shifted in both their American films, and their eventual returns into Mexican based films. As such, a look into how class systems and structures are presented in both American and Mexican cinema can be had, as well as analysis on how the films of the two men address the complicated class dynamics of the countries they are shooting in. In these pages I will attempt to analyze the films of Cuarón and Iñárritu in the context of how each filmmaker incorporates class commentary

into his work – and how the delivery of that commentary differs or remains the same in their Mexican and American films. I will focus the majority of my analysis on the Mexican films of both director, with special mention given to the early American films made by both men in their careers, before returning to their home country to make films such as *Y Tu Mamá También, Roma* and *Babel* (Iñárritu, 2006).

Hollywood cinema has often had a complicated relationship with political issues, with many attempts at messaging conflicting with censorship as well as the traditional goals of a Hollywood film (and indeed the majority of film in general), which is to be successful financially. In Richard Maltby's *Hollywood Cinema,* the issue of class is described throughout as a part of Hollywood's relationship with political and social issues in general. Maltby states that "Despite its promise of 'escape' from the everyday world, Hollywood remains a social institution, and its movies describe recognizable social situations in their plots and themes. Hollywood's engagement with 'the other America out there in reality' is, however, most often indirect." (Maltby 442) In Hollywood, Maltby states, the presence of social issues is often relegated to margins of stories, serving as backdrops to the various problems of the characters in the story. The nature of class, as with other political issues in Hollywood, is often used merely as a backdrop for more conventional stories focusing on individual characters rather than an interrogation of the system as a whole. In the political Hollywood film, oftentimes "Plots develop against the logic of their political content in order to remain within the broader status as apolitical entertainment." (Maltby 258) The idea of the film as a work of entertainment oftentimes means that the in-depth commentary often needed to make social and political statements is often absent from Hollywood cinema.

Maltby goes on to write that “Hollywood movies contain themes of social relevance not so much because their viewers need to have those issues dramatized as because that thematic material establishes a point of contact between the movies Utopian sensibility and the surrounding social environment of its audience.” (Maltby 258) The inclusion of real world issues such as poverty and income inequality are included in Hollywood films as a supposed reminder of these serious issues, yet in practice they are instead offered as forms of escapism, a sort of fictionalized construct that can fit neatly into the parameters of genre, convention, and other Hollywood methods of manufacturing. Although the issue of class has often been set aside in Hollywood, the problem has always had an impact on how Hollywood makes and sells films. Maltby writes that “Debates over the censorship of the movies, like those over the regulation of other forms of popular culture, were actually debates over the nature of social control… These concerns partially concealed deeper, class-based anxieties about the extent to which the viewing conditions in movie theaters provided opportunities for the mixing of classes.” (Maltby 267) In a setting where classes could conceivably mix, the class divide was handled with a careful mixture of care and disdain, addressing the issue enough to be noticed, yet not deeply enough to resonate politically or socially.

Maltby writes of the early Hollywood studios realization that a film concerning itself with social issues could bring them credit as “concerned” and thoughtful individuals rather than factories for inoffensive entertainment. By creating the template that was later described as the “social problem” film, Hollywood was able to find a way to “address” these social problems in name only, rendering class struggle as a simple issue that could be seen as an individual problem, one that does not represent the whole of America overall. Maltby writes that “… the

metaphor most regularly employed by criticism to describe the process has been one of sugaring the didactic political pill with the more pleasurable elements of genre and star performances, and above all by individualizing the issue depicted." (Maltby 260) With the issue written off as an individual problem, the Hollywood film is attempting to have its cake and eat it too: addressing the serious political issues of the time, but in superficial ways seeking not to alienate any large swaths of audience members. "…the avoidance of a class perspective has been endemic in the United States, where individualism and capitalism have long provided the cornerstone for political practice and ideology. It is easier for us to talk about 'poverty' than about exploited classes, about 'termination' and 'downsizing' than about firings, about 'the economy' but not about class conflict." (Dittmar 39) As the portrayals of class conflict in American film have more or less followed this established formula, Mexican film has often taken a similar attitude towards depicting the disenfranchised in their own cinema.

At around the same time as Hollywood embraced the social issue picture and the general watering down of in-depth class analysis in their productions, Mexican cinema was doing something similar as it entered its own "Golden Age," lasting roughly from the 1930's to the 1950's. In "Sex, Class, and Mexico in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También*", Ernesto R. Acevedo-Muñoz writes:

> In this 'Golden Age' the idea of a national fiction was well articulated, and with the economic support of the State, Mexican cinema created a vision of the nation that became consistently multiplied in films of various genres. This image of Mexico emphasized the celebration of a status quo of gentle patriarchs governing their estates and families with a stern hand, macho charros singing their way into the hearts of fair

> maidens and through honor matters, and… the creation of an idealized, romantic view of the Indians who were in reality, largely marginalized. (Acevedo-Muñoz 39)

As the Golden Age gave way to an impoverished Mexican cinema, the groundwork was being laid for a new type of cinema in Mexico to emerge – and with it, the fledgling careers of Cuarón and Iñárritu. In *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society, 1896-2004,* Carl J. Mora writes of the political conditions that inspired filmmakers in the Nuevo Cine Mexicano, saying that "The fortunes of the Mexican film industry have always been closely linked to the country's politics." (Mora 188) After a volatile period starting in the late 80's marred by political corruption, rebel attacks on property in protest of treatment of indigenous peoples, and poverty, the Nuevo Cine Mexicano emerged, with early, more conventional and commercial films such as *Like Water For Chocolate* (Alfonso Arau, 1992) achieving success both at home and abroad, setting the stage for future films by Mexican auteurs to receive global attention. Mora writes of the new movement, saying: "It is not an easy matter to characterize Mexican films during these years, except that many expressed a new edginess and internationally inspired style as in *Amores Perros* and *Y Tu Mamá También.* Tellingly, they were box-office triumphs in Mexico, the United States, and Europe. These and other films also expressed strong critiques of the nation's political, economic, and social conditions." (Mora 187) With Cuarón and Iñárritu's success helping establish the movement, Mexico began interrogating the class structures and struggles that had long been ignored in their popular cinema.

For many years leading up to the Nuevo Cine Mexicano, the Mexican cinema was in an uncertain state. Mora writes:

> From the 1930’s through the 1950’s, the middle class went to see Mexican films and the generally higher caliber of motion pictures made in that era reflected in part the more elevated culture of their audiences. The deterioration in quality of Mexican films beginning in the late 1950’s coincided with the loss of this audience. At that time also Mexican middle-class audiences were discovering an improved Hollywood product and more innovative European films. (Mora 183)

As Mexican audiences shifted towards more popular Hollywood and foreign films, the Mexican film industry absorbed the Hollywood attitude towards class. Melodramas became popular, individualizing the social problems of Mexico much like American films did. Younger and intellectual audiences were more inspired by European films, and more incisive looks at class in Mexico either were unsuccessful and controversial (such as Luis Buñuel’s *Los Olvidados,* released in 1950), or were “state-supported and made for a tiny minority of the intellectual class.” (Mora 183) The Mexican government created IMCINE as an attempt to revive Mexican filmmaking, but found little success. As a result, fewer and fewer Mexican films were released through the state, and filmmakers began to look elsewhere to get their films made. These uncertain circumstances in Mexico helped lead filmmakers like Iñárritu and Cuarón to prominence. As noted by Deborah Shaw in *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America,* “The emergence of *Amores Perros* and *Y Tu Mamá También* marks the resurgence of the independent Mexican film industry in response to the failure of state-run IMCINE to adequately manage and fund filmmaking.” (Shaw 52) Facing a Mexico reeling from years of class warfare and looking for change in their films, Cuarón and Iñarritu were able to make a splash with films

that radically portrayed class struggles in Mexico in a new light. Shaw writes of the transformation Mexico began to undergo onscreen:

> …the most widely seen image of Mexico in the 1990's was one that deliberately avoided social reality, relied on cliched images of revolutionaries, provided an antifeminist representation of Mexican women, and showed a world where indigenous women are happy to work as servants. *Amores Perros* and *Y Tu Mamá También* subsequently showed that domestic and international commercial success does not depend on the traditional representations of class, gender, or ethnicity… (Shaw 51)

These films functioned as dramatic breaks from the popular consensus of Mexican film in the 90's but were still able to appeal to mainstream audiences despite their specific class commentary.

While both Iñárritu and Cuarón both address class issues in their films, often through putting the disparate classes in direct contact with each other, they each approach the subject differently. Iñárritu, in particular, has used characters of lower class not just as a tool for social commentary, but as smaller parts in larger stories that connect various swaths of people. Iñárritu's first three films, all written with Guillermo Arriaga and referred to by Iñárritu as the "Trilogy of Death", are all anthology films told in non-chronological order, with large casts of seemingly different stories that are revealed to be connected in some way, highlighting the universality of the human struggle. In *Amores Perros,* a car accident brings together the lives of a lower-class teen, an older upper-class couple, and a homeless assassin. Shaw writes of the films plot, saying that "The accident thus brings apparently disparate people together, then

attempts to identify universal emotions that connect them. In this desire to seek out the universal, the film underplays the specifics of class, and is more interested in personal motivations of the characters than in the political implications of their actions." (Shaw 67) Iñárritu approaches class from a more humanist perspective than a political one, seeking to emphasize the similarities between the classes rather than the differences. One could argue that this echoes the individualist nature of Hollywood films, and could be supported by looking at Iñárritu's second film, the American *21 Grams* (2003). Like *Amores Perros,* the many characters are from varying social classes, yet in *21 Grams* class is of little to no concern to the story. Instead, the film focuses on universal themes such as death, revenge, and forgiveness, all with a star-studded cast. However, to say that class plays a negligible part in Iñárritu's work would be erroneous. Shaw points out how class is vital to the story of *Amores Perros,* writing that "Pain, love and death are not all universal and are clearly influenced by social class." (Shaw 67) The conflicts of the first section of the film, in which lower class citizens are reduced to acts of crime in order to find a better life, lead directly to the car crash that affects the lives and livelihoods of not just the lower class, but the upper and even the homeless classes as well.

Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* tells a more focused story of class conflict, with less concern for the universal themes of Iñárritu (though they do appear in his work). Films such as *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Roma* put the upper and lower classes in direct contact with one another, highlighting the servants and workers who aid the families of the rich, as well as the often silent and unnoticed labor of the lower-class that indirectly maintains their privileged status. Cuarón's films also have explicit political connections, with protests against the government featuring heavily in both *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Roma*, and characters in the

films make references to various political figures and developments at the time each film is set. In both films, the struggles of the poor are exacerbated by the carelessness of the rich, who exploit their servants while still considering them part of their "family".

Set in 1999, *Y Tu Mamá También,* concerns two privileged youths: the upper-class Tenoch (Diego Luna) and the poorer, though still comfortably middle-class, Julio (Gael García Bernal) as they travel across Mexico with Luisa (Maribel Verdú), an older woman that they both lust after. Sergio de la Mora writes that Cuarón "…revisits both the teen film and the road movie, but uses realist camerawork (long takes, handheld camera, critical voice-over narrative) to situate the film's gender and sexual politics in the context of Mexico's political system, and within the neocolonial race and class relations that inform the film's progressive politics." (de la Mora 1) It is in the film's narration that the divide between the carefree upper class and the harsh realities of poverty are laid bare. In one scene early in the film, the two boys are held in a traffic jam, which they blame on political protests sweeping the city that they could care less about. However, the narrator reveals that the jam was actually caused by the death of a working-class pedestrian, hit by a car while he was attempting to get to work. This information unbeknownst to the boys, they quickly drive past the site of his dead body. Acevedo-Muñoz writes that "The narrator, however, gives us the victim's name, his occupation, and the exact circumstances of his death, emphasizing the difficulties of surviving in the city and the inept facilities provided by the government. Julio and Tenoch insistently ignore everything but their own juvenile desires, while the narrator points toward many other things that are going on around them." (Acevedo-Muñoz 42) The narrator (Daniel Giménez Cacho) serves as the omniscient voice of the reality that exists beyond the narrow worldview of the film's

bourgeoisie protagonists. The disembodied, passionless narration serves as a grounding mechanism that both reminds the viewer of the class struggles that exist in the world, and as a sharp counter to the obliviousness of the three protagonists as they travel across the impoverished heartland of Mexico. Cuarón further emphasizes the contrast between the narration and the narrative by abruptly cutting all sound from the film with each instance of the voice-over, as if to ensure that the audience is unable to focus on anything but the sobering reality behind what originally appears to be a mixture between a buddy road trip movie and a raunchy sex comedy. The class divides are further shown in long takes of servants doing work, employed to great effect in both *Roma* and *Y Tu Mamá También.* The latter film features a sequence where Tenoch is brought a plate of food by his favorite servant, Leo. The camera follows Leo as she walks through the expansive mansion where she works, traveling through hallways and up staircases before revealing the carefree Tenoch lounging on his couch. Cuarón shoots this sequence from a distance, emphasizing the long journey through the foreboding, almost empty house that Leo must take just to deliver a plate of food that the spoiled Tenoch could easily have gotten himself. Tenoch is not aware of, or perhaps is unconcerned about, the work required of the working-class to provide him with the comforts that he relishes, as are the other protagonists of the film. Adding additional significance to this scene is the fact that the role of Leo is performed by Cuarón's own childhood maid, Libo. Cuarón explicitly includes himself and his upper-class upbringing among subjects for criticism in the world of the film. Another scene late in the film sees Luisa, Julio and Tenoch drunkenly reveling at a small restaurant in the country. In the background of this scene, the lower-class workers sit at another table far away from the trio, bringing them more drinks whenever they demand.

Through nothing but his silent camera, Cuarón starkly illustrates the class divide without shifting his perspective away from the bourgeoisie, which in turn only highlights how little issues of class and struggles with money matter to them.

While Cuarón's later films in his native Mexico (such as *Y Tu Mamá También*) are heavily concerned with issues of class (in particular the clashes that arise when upper and lower classes interact with one another) his debut film, *Sólo Con Tu Pareja* (Cuarón, 1991) eschews this topic completely in favor of a broad, almost screwball approach to modern relationships in Mexico City. While the film features qualities that would appear in subsequent Cuarón films (namely, a large cast made up of primarily bourgeois characters) the film is mostly concerned with topics of love, promiscuity, and how the two are affected by the AIDS crisis. In "Love On The Run: Re-mapping the Postmetropolis in Alfonso Cuarón's *Sólo Con Tu Pareja*", Miriam Haddu offers a context for the film by examining Mexican cinema as whole in the lead-up to the films release. Haddu writes of the described "Golden Age" of Mexican cinema, and how class was portrayed in those films. Haddu states that "Admittedly, the presence of Mexico's growing middle and upper classes is often included as an antithesis to the city's working poor or marginalized, with the upper-middle classes acting as the targets of criticisms made against the inequality of wealth distribution in Mexico." (Haddu 75) In contrast to these Golden Age films, the middle-to-upper class protagonists of *Sólo Con Tu Pareja* are likable, if perhaps a little clueless, individuals who are not looked down upon or criticized for their success. Haddu goes on to analyze the positions and status of the characters, with special focus on the main protagonist, carefree playboy Tomás Tomás (Daniel Giménez Cacho). Haddu writes:

> Tomás and his friends are presented as professional middle-class citizens. Tomás… works for an advertising company. His best friends Mateo and Teresa are gynecologists while his love interest, Clarisa, is an airhostess. All of the main characters in *Sólo Con Tu Pareja* are working professionals living independent lives. The classic Mexican cinematic framework for equating wealth with corruption and character flaws is no longer an applicable narrative ethos for this film. The filmic dichotomy of the rich versus the poor as sustained throughout Mexican cinematic history has also disappeared in this film. Tomás and his friends constitute the new generation of young professionals in Mexico, who are neither rich nor poor, and live comfortable, cosmopolitan lives in the nations capital. (Haddu 79)

With this presentation, the film posits the successful bourgeoisie of Mexico City as enjoyable people you could perhaps aspire to be, with their secure finances and fun, energetic lifestyles full of sex and madcap romps. The characters of the film are celebrated for their success, rather than vilified. Where the previous films of Mexico's Golden Age offered social commentary by comparing the upper-class, who were often presented in a negative light, and the morally righteous poorer classes, the film presents no encounters with lower class citizens of Mexico City, nor are any of their problems acknowledged in the script. By not making statements on class (namely, by not including or alluding to any mention of the lower classes) in Mexico within the storyline of *Sólo Con Tu Pareja,* Cuarón happened to be simultaneously making a statement on class. "The aspirational world of the Mexican romantic comedy is not only one that identifies love with the near impossibility of economic success via the access to the creative class, which is allegorized by the ideal couple formed by… a publicist and a flight attendant. It also frames

that ideal in a representational economy of Mexico where the lower classes have no significant role.” (Prado, “Regimes of Affect”, 7) Indeed, the portrayal of the urban upper-class echoes the average attitudes found towards the generally well-off protagonists of an American comedy. While a film portraying such characters in a mostly positive (albeit satirized in slightly exaggerated fashion natural to comedies) is commonplace in American markets, in Mexico at the time it stood out when compared to the films of the nation’s past. The film’s light, breezy style of comedy and happy ending present the bourgeoise of Mexico to be the complete opposite of how they were presented in Mexico’s earlier years, as well as a type of portrayal that Cuarón himself would go on to manipulate and parody in his later Mexican films.

After the success of *Sólo Con Tu Pareja,* Cuarón secured his first Hollywood directing job. The end result was *A Little Princess* (1995), an acclaimed adaptation of the classic children’s story of the same name by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The film tells the story of Sara (Liesel Matthews) a wealthy young girl who faces great challenges to her social standing and sense of self after her father goes missing in WWI while she attends a girls boarding school. Cuarón takes the framework of the older story and is able to make more pointed, though still limited, statements on class conflict, as well as racial differences. Like his previous film, Cuarón’s protagonists are upper class, and that perspective rarely changes throughout *A Little Princess.* When Sara first joins the boarding school run by Ms. Minchin (Eleanor Bron), her past adventures in India, thanks to her father Captain Crewe (Liam Cunningham) and his riches, almost immediately give her privileged status. She quickly gains many friends among the students but incurs the wrath of Ms. Minchin due to her headstrong nature, as well as Minchin’s jealousy over her wealth. Sara’s riches are a crucial element of the story, and the

viewer is reminded of this when we see Sara and her father carefree in a vivid, highly romanticized version of India in the film's opening, as well as seeing Sara in her opulent room at the boarding school, paid for by her father. However, her arrival at the school also brings the first explicit conflict of classes in a Cuarón film, when we are introduced to Becky (Vanessa Lee Chester), an African American servant girl. While Becky is clearly a second-class citizen in the film, Sara is instantly drawn to her, and attempts to be friendly with her. She openly addresses Becky at the dinner table, thanking her for the meal, which leads to the stern consternation of Ms. Minchin. From there, Sara gives Becky the gift of a glamorous pair of shoes, and the two girls soon become friends. Sara's friendly, class-and-color-blind attitude towards Becky is echoed throughout the film. In the film the only character who seems to regard Becky as a lesser citizen is the tyrannical Ms. Minchin, and even that is motivated more by her social standing than her race, though the two are undeniably linked in this situation. The rest of the school seems to welcome Becky as a peer at the same time Sara does, and soon they are interacting with each other as equals. To the children at least, there is no real difference between them, despite the stark consequences of Becky's lower standing, as evidenced by the poor treatment she receives at the hands of Ms. Minchin.

The loss of personal wealth, and with it a higher standard of living, is among the greatest fears and hardships endured by Sara in the film. With the death of her father (who is later revealed to be alive and suffering from amnesia) Sara is quickly removed from her position of privilege and finds herself made a servant. Her luxurious room is replaced by the dark, barren confines of the attic, where she is forced to live with Becky. This loss of her family and money is the greatest challenge to the notion that she is a "princess", taught to her by her father and

self-reinforced throughout the story. In “British Imperialism and US Multiculturalism: The Americanization of Burnett's *A Little Princess*” by Rosemary Marangoly George, comparisons to the novel are made regarding Sara’s attitude towards her surroundings. George writes “Indeed, in Burnett's novel, Sara is presented as a latter-day Marie Antoinette beset by vulgar commoners like Ms. Minchin.” (George 142) However, in Cuarón’s film, Sara has a more egalitarian outlook on those around her. “All girls are princesses”, she states in a dramatic moment that proves essential to the films message. Her status as a “princess” comes not because of her wealth, but because of her selfless character and determination. George writes that Sara does not lord her privilege of status above the lower class: “Instead, young Sara rises to the imperial ideal of the benevolent, firm, woman in the making, who is unshaken in her self-assurance and sense of self-worth despite drastic changes in circumstance.” (George 147-148) It is this kindness and resilience that makes Sara worthy of her “princess” status. Cuarón is stating that true “royalty” is not dependent on personal riches, but the kindness and benevolence shown by people like Sara, even when they are reduced to the horrible lows of the servant class. However, the film does not discount the importance of wealth entirely. At the films end, Sara is reunited with her father, and returns to her upper-class status in another dramatic reversal of fortune. It is now Ms. Minchin who is forced to work on the street, cleaning chimneys for a living. Sara’s final act of benevolence is when Becky is able to join Sara and her father as they return home to England, in essence making her a part of their family, and elevating her to Sara’s privileged status. Even after the film imparts the lesson that wealth is not everything, it is still seen as the ultimate reward to aspire to, and a result that will come to those, like Sara and Becky, who are good and pure of heart.

In addition to Becky, the character of Ram Dass (Errol Sitahal) offers a look into the class and racial structures of *A Little Princess.* The presence of India as both a tangible place and source of myth is potent within the film. India is the setting of both the very opening of the film and the fictional story of Prince Rama and Princess Sita that Sara tells throughout the film (based on actual Indian myths, and played by the same actors that play Sara's parents in a further connection between India's colonization and Sara's story). These sequences are highly stylized, and utilize vivid colors and sets, expressive camera movements, and computer-generated effects to establish India as the magical, exotic land that the British colonists of the time touted with rapturous prose. The appearance of Ram Dass, who works as a servant for the boarding schools next door neighbor, Mr. Randolph (Arthur Malet), is seen as a magical and reassuring development that gives Sara's hardscrabble servant life a boost of wonder. Ram Dass is seen as a wise, almost mystical helper whose only wish and desire is to serve and comfort the wealthy white upper-class that surround him. Ram Dass is the exoticization and fetishization of India that runs through both the source novel and Cuarón's film personified. Ram Dass often appears in circumstances that seem almost otherworldly, with flurries of wind carrying snow or refuse and swells of dramatic soundtrack music. Ram Dass not only looks out for Sara, transforming her room in the attic from a barely livable hovel to a beautiful, India-tinged suite, but cares for her father, both of whom have explicitly benefitted from Britain's colonization of India. George writes of a climactic scene near the end of the film where Ram Dass features again as a mystical agent of help:

> At a pivotal moment in this scene, in which Ram Dass is depicted as gently tending to the captain, he calls Crewe 'Sahib' - the generic colonial word for 'master' in Hindustani.

> Through a combination of close-up shots and musical buildup, we learn that the term stirs some faint memory in the amnesiac captain's mind. It is noteworthy that it is the colonial word for master as spoken by the native that stirs Crewe's memory and nudges him closer to remembering who he really is. Just as Sara needs Becky and Ram Dass to complete and validate her princess identity, Crewe needs to be hailed as 'Sahib' by Ram Dass to remember who he is and what he has been - the imperial Sahib. (George 156)

With this reminder of his aristocratic status, the Captain begins to regain his memory, allowing him and his daughter to return to their content status as the upper crust. Unlike Becky, Ram Dass is not rewarded by joining Sara and her father on their voyage home, but is last seen by his master Randolph's side, happily loyal as always. Even in the supposedly equal world of *A Little Princess,* there are some lower-class servants who are unable to ascend the social ladder – and the implication remains that many, such as Ram Dass, would gladly reject this in honor of their happy servitude. Cuarón's portrayal of the servant class, while empathetic in the film, had yet to undergo the critical evolution that can be found in later films such as *Roma* and *Y Tu Mamá También.*

Following the critical acclaim that *A Little Princess* received, Cuarón's next foray into Hollywood was the big-budget 1998 adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Like *A Little Princess, Great Expectations* uses the pursuit of material wealth – and the sudden gift and removal of it – as dramatic motivation for the main characters, as well as a sort of prize to be given them for their good deeds. Dickens' story of a lower-class boy who suddenly finds himself part of the bourgeoisie could've lent itself to incisive commentary. Instead, the film concerns itself more with the star-crossed romance of Ethan Hawke and Gwyneth Paltrow's characters,

and any conflict that could arise between them due to their distance in social standing is for the most part ignored in favor of petty relationship dramas. *Great Expectations* shies away from any meaningful class conflict or social commentary, despite the potential conflict that could arise when the lower-class Finn, played by Hawke, befriends the wealthy and eccentric Mrs. Dinsmoor (Anne Bancroft) and her niece Estella, played by Paltrow. Finn is used by Dinsmoor and Estella as a pawn in their own personal games: Dinsmoor uses him as a companion for herself and Estella, while Estella takes advantage of Finn's love for her and uses it to make her wealthy fiancée jealous. Finn soon finds that he has a mysterious benefactor who funds him as he moves to New York City and pursues his dream of being an artist. Despite the manipulation he undergoes at the hands of the elite, and his struggles to accept his dramatic change in status, Finn, for the most part, gladly accepts his newfound wealth, and comfortably becomes a member of urban high society. After his sudden success, Finn more or less abandons his lower-class past, lying to the press that his father figure, Joe (Chris Cooper), is a dead "drug smuggler". The only real instance of memorable class conflict in the film arises when Joe later arrives at Finn's glitzy art gallery premiere. Joe's coarse nature and over-friendly attitude instantly separates him from the elite who have attended the opening, and he ends up embarrassing Finn in front of them. Rather than defend the only true family he has ever known, Finn snaps at him, and then watches as an apologetic Joe leaves the gallery in shame, not to be seen again until the end of the film. In "Not Telling The Story The Way It Happened: Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations",* Michael K. Johnson analyzes this scene from a filmmaking perspective: "Cuarón often shoots scenes of Joe and the older Finn so that they share screen space. After the fiasco at the opening, Finn's elevated social status - and his separation from Joe - is demonstrated by

his height (on the steps), by the placement of the camera (which looks down on Joe), and by the shot/reverse shot editing that takes the two characters out of the same frame to indicate the new distance between them." (Johnson 74) Finn's lower-class roots are abandoned by not only him, but the film itself. The film ends with Finn returning to his poor hometown a wealthy man who has achieved success in his own right, in addition to the success he has already achieved thanks to his benefactor. With this success, he is able to reconnect with Joe and finally win the heart of Estella, who has been brought low by her divorce. After attempting to distance himself from his past, Finn comes to accept it – but while still reveling in the high-end life that he now finds himself comfortably living. *Great Expectations,* like *A Little Princess* before it*,* establishes that wealth will come to those who are deemed to "deserve" it, and will be a reward for those who are essentially good people. Ultimately, "Cuarón's second and third feature-length movies are closer to the ideologies of American cinema of the Clinton era than to the logic of post-1988 Mexican film." (Prado 184-185) *Great Expectations* is generally not regarded as one of Cuarón's finer films, and Mora quotes Cuarón calling it a "claustrophobic" and "tough" experience. (Mora 246) Hawke later on expressed that due to the themes of class present throughout the story, his role most likely should have been played by a Latino or African American actor, though Cuarón himself disagreed. Despite making a sizable return at the box office, the film flopped with critics, and a humbled Cuarón returned to Mexico to make his sharpest social critique yet with *Y Tu Mamá También.*

While Cuarón was experiencing the ups and downs of life as a filmmaker both at home and across the border, Iñárritu was directing commercial and television work in Mexico. With the release of his feature debut *Amores Perros*, Iñárritu instantly made a name for himself in

the global film world, and practically became the sole poster child (for American and other foreign audiences, at least) for the Nuevo Cine Mexicano before Cuarón was to join him with the release of *Y Tu Mamá También* a year later. To date, *Amores Perros* is the only Iñárritu film set entirely in Mexico, and as a result, the film contains his most explicit commentary on class structure and conflict in his native land. Unlike Cuarón, who tends to favor showcasing more subtle effects of class conflict on the lives of his characters, Iñárritu emphasizes this struggle through the use of violence, whether it be poor on poor violence, or violence between classes and castes. Indeed, the film opens with a sudden and brutal car accident that, unbeknownst to the characters and the viewer, involves and forever alters members of Mexico's lower, upper, and homeless classes. Violence pervades each of the three chapters of the film, whether it be the perpetrating of it or its dramatic aftereffects. The uncertain handheld cinematography of the film allows for heightened tension, in addition to serving as a distancing tool, emphasizing the cold directness that Iñárritu shows when capturing acts of violence. In a book about González Iñárritu written by Celestina Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona, the authors comment on how Iñárritu's usage of wide shots in the film "… becomes a powerful tool in the construction of an urban space that is strongly unified in the intense feeling of violence and pervasive danger that it conveys and in the suggestion of the social conditions that produce such violence." (Deleyto & Azcona 76-77) In sharp contrast to *Sólo Con Tu Pareja,* Iñárritu's portrayal of Mexico City is one that emphasizes the gritty and dangerous aspects of life amongst the lower-class citizens and neighborhoods.

Both the opening and final segments of the film are about life in the slums of the city, and how characters in such environments try to survive. The first segment, entitled "Octavio y

Susana" is about Octavio (Gael García Bernal), a teenager who resorts to dogfighting in order to make enough money to escape the poverty of the city with his brothers wife, Susana (Vanessa Bauche). Octavio and his prize dog Cofi get involved with gangsters, and after a violent match goes wrong, he flees and causes the car accident that becomes the device allowing for Iñárritu to directly contrast the rich and poor in the city. Octavio crashes into Valeria (Goya Toledo), a famous supermodel, causing her leg to be severely injured. From there, the middle segment of the film, "Daniel y Valeria" begins, serving as the upper-class counterpart to the poverty that bookends the film. Like *Sólo Con Tu Pareja,* most of this portion of the film takes place in spacious, higher end apartments overlooking the city. Unlike Cuarón's debut, however, the action of the film does not ignore the lower-class parts of the city that exist outside of the apartment walls. Cuarón shoots the Mexico City of his film as a vibrant, exciting place for young professionals to live, work and love. "An additional feature of Cuarón's cinematic Mexico City is that it not only constitutes a modern metropolis, but is also aesthetically pleasing, unlike past cinematic representations of the same growing capitol from the Golden Age… Most of Cuarón's shots of the city are taken from an aerial position, providing the spectator with an overview of the twinkling lights, hooting cars, and bold skyscrapers below." (Haddu 82) The Mexico City of *Amores Perros,* however, is presented much differently. The city is presented instead from the ground level, staying on the main characters as they navigate the darker and more violent parts of their landscape. The opening shot of the film is of the road as Octavio speeds through the city streets, and the spatial closeness of Iñárritu's handheld camera to its subjects means that the city is shown from the subjective perspective of whoever's storyline the film is following in that particular moment. Very few exterior establishing shots are included in the film, and even

when we are present in the upscale apartment of Valeria and Daniel (Álvaro Guerrero) our viewpoint outside the window is limited to the prominent billboard of Valeria modeling that hangs outside. As the city is not shown as a whole location, we are limited to the living spaces of each character to see the stark differences that come from living in different class levels. Octavio and his family live in a small lower-to-middle class apartment, Valeria and Daniel reside in a newly bought high-end one, and El Chivo (Emilio Echevarría) lives in an abandoned building on the outskirts of the city as a vagrant. Daniel and Valeria's apartment, despite it being the only high-end location of the film, also subverts the expectation of the visually appealing, professional homes and lifestyles seen in the apartments in *Sólo Con Tu Pareja.* As it is newly bought by Daniel as a surprise for Valeria, the apartment is sparsely furnished and decorated. Large, unopened boxes remain in the hallway of the apartment throughout the segment, with the moving-in celebration for the two lovers interrupted by the sudden accident. When Valeria first sees Daniel in the new apartment, she runs to embrace him. As she does so, her foot goes through the floorboards. Daniel remarks that "I had enough to buy it, but not to fix it." The glamorous image of the apartment is subverted almost instantly, with the flaws and unfinished nature of the space, as well as the financial struggles required to maintain both the apartment and the now disabled Valeria, emphasized repeatedly through this segment of the film. From the moment her foot goes through the floor, the apartment begins to decay, which symbolizes the sudden death of Valeria's career and life as she knows it, as well as the death of her relationship with Daniel. This scene serves as foreshadowing for the consequences of the accident, as one of Valeria's legs will later have to be amputated. But it also showcases the fragile status of class in the film. The class structure of the Mexico City of *Amores Perros* is

reinforced by the wide chasm between the rich and poor. The chances that the working-class, such as Octavio, can cross that divide are ultimately hopeless, but the possibility that the wealthy can fall from their comfortable positions is always lingering behind their success. At any given moment, the seemingly secure fortunes of the upper-class can come tumbling down, with consequences ranging from death to the devastating loss of Valeria's self-image, complete with shots of her billboard unceremoniously being taken down outside her apartment. Now that she can no longer be successful – she can no longer claim to be a part of the upper-class – she has ceased to be useful, her very image replaced by an advertisement seeking the next billboard to hang in that particular location. The final shot of Daniel and Valeria's segment is a wide shot of the apartment, the gaping holes in the floorboard all plainly visible as the two hold each other quietly.

In his work "Screening Neoliberalism: Transforming Mexican Cinema 1988-2012" Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado considers *Amores Perros* part of the "neoliberal cinema" that has pervaded the cinema of Mexico throughout its existence. An understanding of neoliberalism is helpful to understanding the films of both Mexico and America, as both nations could be considered neoliberal states. Wendy Brown offers an explanation of the term, describing neoliberalism as a political ideology that "…transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic." Through neoliberalism, the human experience is defined by the pursuit of capital and economic gain, "…tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues." (Brown 10) Prado considers Iñárritu's film to be in the neoliberal tradition, as well as not as politically daring and outspoken when

compared to previous Mexican auteurs, writing: “González Iñárritu opts to erase any political causality within his film… González Iñárritu works in a cinematic world emancipated from the social referentiality that Mexican cinema inherited from Golden Age Directors…” Prado later states that “Rather than politicizing social difference, the film uses its vertiginous aesthetics in order to provide audiences with an affective experience that supersedes the political in terms of the human.” (Prado 176) While Prado’s analysis touches on the finer critiques of class often avoided by Iñárritu in *Amores Perros* in favor of humanism, he mischaracterizes Iñárritu as one who is unable to reference Mexico’s political past in order to critique the upper-class. In both Octavio and El Chivo’s segments, acts of violence, both intentional and accidental, occur against people who are better off than them in society’s hierarchy. El Chivo lives as homeless man, surrounded by feral dogs he has adopted as pets, who makes money as a hitman. El Chivo is later revealed to be a former teacher and family man who left his family and spent many years in jail after joining a guerilla movement. It is mentioned that El Chivo was a former member of the Zapatistas, a far-left militant group that has conflicted with the Mexican government since the early 1990’s. The Zapatistas were inspired by an earlier group of the same name that fought in the Mexican Revolution of the 1910’s. Their political theories encompass elements of libertarianism, socialism and anarchism, and their membership consists mostly of poor, rural and indigenous members of Mexican society, seeking to enact a new political system in Mexico by bringing about the end of neoliberalism in the country. The Zapatistas have sporadically engaged in conflicts with the government and have even obtained control of large portions of the Chiapas state of the country. However, most of their goals have gone unrealized. El Chivo acknowledges this when he makes a phone call to his estranged daughter, stating “I wanted to

fix the world, so I could share it with you after. As you can see, I failed." However, elements of El Chivo's political past are hinted at through the actions he undertakes in his segments of the film. The only acts of violence we see El Chivo commit are against members of the upper-class of the city. He is seen murdering a man later revealed to be a businessman early in the film, and later is asked to murder another by the target's own half-brother and business partner. El Chivo is in the middle of surveilling his next target when the car crash occurs, becoming the final piece of the puzzle surrounding the event. He takes the injured Cofi from the scene of the accident and nurses him back to health, only for the dog to violently kill his other pets while he is out one day. El Chivo considers murdering the dog as an act of revenge but reconsiders and keeps him as a companion. This act of violence by Cofi, who was conditioned to do so by Octavio, serves as a crucial turning point for the hitman. In the "dog eat dog" world of poverty, one finds that the quickest path to upward mobility is often to utilize violence against those weaker than you. After this event, El Chivo kidnaps his target before betraying the man who hired him. The two brothers are incapacitated by El Chivo, who steals from them before leaving a gun behind, letting the two of them fight over it. The film does not show which man gets the gun, but it serves as the human counterpoint to the brutal dogfights shown earlier in the film, as they scramble and shout as they writhe desperately on the floor. The former revolutionary El Chivo has managed to turn the upper-class against itself by exploiting their own disloyalties to each other. With El Chivo's storyline, Iñárritu has drawn from Mexico's political past to illustrate a small act of revolution in line with the ideals of the Zapatistas in regard to overthrowing the upper-class. However, El Chivo's motives are also based upon his own enrichment and are not just directed at the upper-class. El Chivo uses his newfound riches, stolen from the businessmen

and from Octavio at the scene of the accident, to begin his new life, complete with a drastic makeover from an unkempt vagrant "…characterized as a grotesque Karl Marx" to a clean-shaven, well-dressed older man, someone who has found redemption through becoming "a damaged bourgeoisie subjectivity." (Prado 179). But it is only through violence against the upper-class that former revolutionary El Chivo is able to begin his new life. El Chivo is the only character who is able to leave their struggles behind them, with Valeria's career (and with it her fame and status) taken from her, and Octavio's dreams of leaving the city shattered, with the final glimpse of him dejected as he leaves the bus stop where Susana failed to meet him. In the violent world of inner-city life, the only thing that leads to escape is violence against those who are above you.

21 Grams and *Babel,* the following two films by Iñárritu and Arriaga (concluding their "Trilogy of Death") take the themes and structures that they used for *Amores Perros* and adjust them for countries and different worldviews: *21 Grams* for an American perspective, and *Babel* existing as the most "transnational" film made by Iñárritu up to that point. Being part of a trilogy, the three films build on the humanist foundation laid by *Amores Perros.* As Prado writes, it is "precisely because González Iñárritu belongs to the process of neoliberal modernization of cinema in Mexico, [that] one cannot extricate his later films from *Amores Perros."* (Prado 180) Like *Amores Perros, 21 Grams* tells uses a large ensemble cast to tell a non-chronological story of three lives who are forever changed after a fatal car crash occurs. Also like *Amores Perros,* each character comes from a different social class: one lower, one middle and one upper. But unlike that film, there is not any attempts to comment on the class differences between characters. Despite the film's bleak subject matter, it can be said that the

film is “Hollywoodized” when it comes to class commentary. With surface-level acknowledgement of class differences, *21 Grams* fits into a description of many Hollywood films offered by Linda Dittmar: “It is not that films fail to depict characters from all walks of life, but that they discourage awareness of the fact that ‘walks’ translate into classes, and that classes are defined by incompatible interests responding to gross inequalities and injustices.” (Dittmar 39) The casting of Hollywood stars in the principal roles certainly helps further that notion, with actors such as Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, and Benicio Del Toro all lending their star power to the central trilogy of characters. In *Amores Perros* one of the things that connected all three segments of the film, other than the obvious intersection of the car accident, was each protagonist undergoing separate struggles to survive in the city. Octavio and Susana seek to leave the abusive and oppressive life of the lower-class, Valeria is lost without a purpose as she deals with her recovery from the career-ending injury, and El Chivo not only tries to survive his vagabond existence, but his spiritual and physical transformation as well. Each character is shaken from their foundations when confronted with the harsh realities of the pain and failed dreams of the less fortunate. The film posits each segment as a story of survival, with each character desperate to latch onto something that can lead to their ascent from poverty (the dogfighting rings in Octavio’s segment, and the cash from El Chivo’s betrayal of the upper-class in his) or at least distract them from their misery, such as the subplot of Valeria’s lost dog in her segment. *21 Grams,* on the other hand, has no such commonality of class struggles or conflict between its interwoven storylines. Unlike *Amores Perros,* the only thing that seems to unite the characters of *21 Grams* is the film’s inciting car accident, along with the vague themes of death and guilt that persist throughout the film. Jack (Del Toro) causes the fatal car accident that kills

Cristina's (Watts) husband and young children. Her husband's heart is given to Paul (Penn), a successful professor who has a fatal heart condition. No explicit mention or special treatment is given to it, but there are class differences between these characters. They are mostly hinted at through the respective homes of each character: Paul and his wife have a high-end apartment, Cristina seems to live in a comfortably middle-class house, and Jack, revealed to be an ex-convict, lives in a more down to earth, working class (though not outright poor or destitute) house, not unlike Octavio's home in *Amores Perros.*

The history of class depiction in Mexico and the United States has had overlap throughout the years. Each market has struggled with depicting the lower and working classes over the years, often failing to address their problems with in-depth forms of expression. With the success of Cuarón and Iñárritu, one is able to see how these two nations (and their respective approaches, or lack thereof, to class) interact with each other through film, but there have been previous intersections of America, Mexico, and the lower class portrayed on the screen. Dittmar writes of *Viva Zapata* (Elia Kazan, 1952) and how an American film portrayed the earlier iterations of the Zapatista Mexican revolutionaries:

> …the film nonetheless writes off the Zapatista uprising as uncivilized and corrupt… Seen against the history of the United States' relations with Mexico from the Mexican Revolution to the 1990s Zapatista insurrection in Chiapas, the film posits the necessity of a North American intervention and hegemony south of the border. The Mexicans, it suggests, are not ready for self-government, and their grassroots organizing for land reform are bound to founder on greed and treachery… Nowhere do we find the

> articulate intelligence or informed communal solidarity which defined the historic Zapatistas' struggles. (Dittmar 40)

Kazan's fictionalization of Emiliano Zapata, leader of the Zapatista movement and ironic namesake for the upper middle-class Julio Zapata from *Y Tu Mamá También,* discredits the lower-class uprising that still looms large in Mexican consciousness, as evidenced by Iñárritu and Cuarón's repeated references in their films towards the movements inspired by it. The American dismissal of Mexican politics and concerns, combined with the powerlessness that the Mexico portrayed in cinema experiences when faced by American interventionism, is nothing new for the world of film. There is a global imbalance between the two countries politically that has been explored in film, including an entire subplot concerning relations between the two in *Babel. Babel,* in part, tells the story of a Mexican servant living and working illegally in America, who soon finds herself deported after she has to take the children of the wealthy family she works for to Mexico to witness her son's wedding. *Babel* combines the class conflict of *Amores Perros* with the humanistic message of connection of *21 Grams,* leading to perhaps the clearest statement of how Iñárritu treats social issues in his films.

Iñárritu's *Babel* resides at a unique position amongst his and Cuarón's respective filmographies: it is the only film by either man to date that explicitly places the two countries they mostly make their films in – the U.S. and Mexico – in direct conflict with each other. The many locations of the globe-hopping *Babel* include the neighboring countries, and directly portrays border issues between the two. In the film, Mexican nanny Amelia (Adrianna Barraza) is torn when she is unable to take the day of her son's wedding off after Susan (Cate Blanchett), the mother of the children she watches is injured overseas. Her friends who also work as

nannies are unable to help, so she decides to take the children, Mike and Debbie (Nathan Gamble and Elle Fanning) with her to the wedding in Mexico. They are given a ride by Amelia's nephew Santiago (Gael García Bernal). It is on the drive to the wedding, which is in a rural community outside of Tijuana, that the streets of Mexico are shown with genuine vibrancy. Where rural Mexico was shown as a place of poverty in *Y Tu Mamá También* and *Amores Perros,* in *Babel* it is shown as a vivid place that is full of life. Using montages, Iñárritu shows the bustle of city sidewalks through the car windows on the drive that soon give way to a festive, joyous crowd once they arrive at the wedding. This allows for Iñárritu to offer a counterpoint to the negative images of the country that he himself perpetrated in his previous films. The climax of the Mexico subplot of the film is when Amelia, Santiago, and the children are questioned by American border patrol agents on the way back to San Diego. After being interrogated, Santiago panics and flees the scene, later leaving Amelia and the children in the desert behind as he attempts to outrun them. It is when they are eventually rescued that the cold cruelty of the American immigration system is truly shown, as Amelia is promptly deported after it is discovered that she is in the country illegally.

The film analyzes the power dynamics between Amelia and the American authority figures she comes into contact with, including both the border patrol agents and her employer, Richard (Brad Pitt). Throughout the film Amelia is ultimately powerless, misinterpreted and ignored at every opportunity by the forces above her in status. Amelia becomes a stand-in for the Mexican immigrant experience, with the stark power dynamics of those above her leading to the tragic ruination of Amelia's life. Early in the film we see Amelia be denied the chance to take the day off after a stern phone call from Richard. In "9/11 and the Power of the Network

Society in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel",* Rosa Urtiaga analyzes the subordination of Amelia to Richard, writing "Richard's domination over his employee not only parallels the superiority of his storyline over Amelia's but also the overarching theme of unequal power dynamics in the global network society portrayed through the film. In this sense, the one-way communication between Richard and Amelia mirrors her later attempts to be listened to by other characters like the Border Patrol agent and the deportation officer." (Urtiaga 106) Richard ends the call by hanging up on her, leaving her voiceless, not even able to object to the demands from those above her. This attitude towards Amelia continues when she is questioned by border patrol agents throughout the film. At every instance where she has to interact with an officer, they are dismissive of her and her pleas. When she leaves behind the children in the desert to look for help, she meets an officer on patrol who at first ignores her pleas to help her upon seeing her, asking her instead when she crossed the border. Despite the film being Iñárritu's most explicit deconstruction of barriers between countries, the politics of borders – and the stark power dynamics between the countries that share them - remain all too oppressive. As help arrives to find the missing children, she is asked if they are in a van of detained would-be migrants. Iñárritu briefly shows several people, children included, silently captured in the crowded back of the vehicle. From there she is transported to the dingy white immigration offices, where she is questioned by a man who is mostly photographed with the back of his head to the camera in soft focus, turning him into a truly faceless authority figure, mirroring the voice of Richard on his earlier phone calls. Urtiaga discusses how the power imbalance suffered by Amelia serves as a window into Iñárritu's vision of global issues:

> Clearly, the expanded executive powers in a global conflict become the unifying global force binding the suffering of distant others. *Babel* critiques the fact that the principle of sovereignty should take precedence over the prevention of human suffering. The film calls for a cosmopolitan consciousness that… reminds global humanity of the ways in which we are morally interconnected with one another, while seeking to struggle for a form of politics that aims to accommodate difference. (Urtiaga 107)

Babel, like the other films in the "Trilogy of Death", serves as a plea for greater understanding and unity amongst humanity, regardless of class, origin, or background. By telling such different stories of disparate characters in far-off locales, Iñárritu explicitly links his numerous storylines in an attempt to further remove the concepts of borders amongst nations. This echoes his own career as a transnational filmmaker who has worked in several countries with ease.

Like the preceding two films by Iñárritu and Arriaga in their trilogy, *Babel* utilizes a constantly shifting perspective of characters, an emphasis on coincidence and random acts of chance, and events resulting in widespread, unseen ramifications. With each film in the trilogy, Iñárritu's scope increases, though the essential messages of understanding, connection and similarities between seemingly random individuals run through each individual film. "The films are equally transnational in industrial terms. Iñárritu has strived to maintain his creative independence by diversifying production and distribution deals across the world. More importantly, the films, particularly *Babel,* tell transnational stories and feature characters whose ambiguous mobility makes them representative of twenty-first century global phenomena." (Deleyto & Azcona xi) While Deleyto and Azcona may be correct in their conclusion that the characters on Iñárritu's first three films represent several inescapable facets

of modern living (such as death, forgiveness, love, hope, anger, violence and so on) the social and financial “mobility” of these characters, with very few exceptions, does not remain “ambiguous”. Almost without fail, the mobility of the characters in Iñárritu’s films trend downwards, with often disastrous results. Those who do not see a decline in their material fortunes remain in a state of lower-class stasis, at best. Characters who are already poor and troubled, such as Octavio and Susana in *Amores Perros* and Jack in *21 Grams,* stay that way. Others who function on the thin border between poverty and wealth, such as the undocumented Amelia (who notably works for a successful white family) get their entire lives taken from them due to running afoul of the oppressive powers that be. Even those who are in societies upper classes, such as Valeria, are brought low when faced with the quick and merciless abandonment of her career once she is no longer able to function as an image of glamour. The foreboding moniker of the “Trilogy of Death” functions not only as a description of the literal deaths that line each entry, but as a blunt statement of the deaths of the dreams of the lower-class. Almost without fail, their livelihoods and goals are taken from them, further illustrating the tragic inevitability of the exploitation and pain suffered by those in such lowly positions within society.

In addition to serving as his most nuanced take on the universality of the human experience, *Babel* stands as Iñárritu’s sharpest critique of American policy. The mishandling of the accidental shooting in Morocco that sets the plot of the film in motion serves as a mirror into the oppressive and often unforgiving attitude of American government towards foreign countries, especially ones poorer than themselves. Urtiaga writes of this, saying:

> …the management of the shooting incident in the film serves to exemplify how the United States' economic, political and military supremacy facilitated a nation-centered response to the 9/11 attacks, instead of promoting transnational politics based on a more cosmopolitan understanding of the other. In *Babel*, one-sided preoccupation with security causes unfounded fears of terrorism and brings chaos to the networked, interdependent nation-states all over. For example, Amelia's ill treatment on the border is articulated as a consequence of the war on terror resulting in more severe immigration laws, as part of the global chain of narrative cause and effect. Thus, it can be argued that the United States' one-sided management of the shooting is at the basis of all the plotlines because it is, to a very large extent, deemed responsible for their resolution. Recreating these dynamics, instead of the centerless narratives of other multi-protagonist films, the structure of Babel places Richard and Susan's predicament at the center of the network narrative. (Urtiaga 107)

With this structure apparent, *Babel* explores how class and power dynamics have dramatic consequences on the everyday lives of its characters, masking how these dynamics shape the very world we live in as a whole. The struggles of class are not restricted to Mexico or America, they permeate the very act of existence in the 21st century.

The films of Iñárritu undoubtedly have class consciousness, but how effective and realistically he portrays and interrogates these issues has been a subject of debate. "…González Iñárritu's importance, even in the case of his more global movies, results from the negotiation between the specificities of Mexican neoliberal cinema and the world of independent and art house cinema." (Prado 180) With these influences, Iñárritu offers a world where class

determines the consequences of your life, but oftentimes is not rooted in the essence of the problems amongst the people of the world. In each film of Iñárritu's trilogy, there are moments of profound connection, as well as distance. The themes of connectivity among large groups of disparate individuals leads to a humanistic approach to the characters in his films. They are seeking to emphasize how little the differences between social, racial, and gender classifications actually matter, and that the very core of humanity lies instead among emotions and events that we all can relate to and perceive as experiences: all-encompassing themes such as loss, love, guilt, regret. As a result, the realities of the class divide can take a backseat to the focus on the universality of the human experience. The upper-class of Iñárritu's films are also victimized and lent sympathy, at times even when they are responsible for committing crimes or exploiting the lower-class. Urtiaga takes note of this when discussing the repetition of the first phone call Richard gives Amelia, where he initially tells her she will be able to attend her son's wedding. "The repetition of one of the telephone calls from different points of view invites the spectators to interpret these conversations as pivotal, to weigh up the scenes from both points of view, and to trace the connections and build structural hypotheses about the nature of the relationship between the two narrative strands." (Urtiaga 104) The phone call is shown from two perspectives: through Amelia and Mike in America in the opening scene of the U.S./Mexico plotline, and via Richard's perspective in the final scene of the plotline. What is revealed to the viewer (and unbeknownst to Amelia) in the second iteration of the call is that Richard has spent the past few days frantically trying to keep his wife Susan alive after she is accidentally shot in Morocco. Iñárritu's intent with this switching of perspective is meant to illuminate the viewer on the complexities of the relationships between characters. Richard's

presence, distant and mechanical in the first scene, is made real in the second, presented entirely in a close, tearful medium shot of Pitt on the phone at the hospital shot entirely in one take. Once learning of the stress and pain of Richard and Susan's situation, in addition to the backstory of the trip to Morocco, which was taken in an attempt to bring the now distant couple closer together after the death of their third child to SIDS, the viewer is left with some semblance of sympathy for the characters, despite the deportation of Amelia being caused by Richard's actions, with the degrading deportation even being referred to (perhaps uncharitably) by Prado as "…the direct consequence of [Mike and Debbie's] parents preference for traveling around the world rather than being with them" (Prado 181). With the inclusion of repetition of the phone call, attitudes towards that character's shift, taking the powerful and powerless of the situation and equalizing them on the great field of human pain.

> Since the telephone call is repeated in both storylines from different perspectives, we are encouraged to think that what happened later on the border could have been avoided if the characters had acted differently and, therefore, some kind of responsibility is ascribed to them. Moreover, the fact that the first phone call opens Amelia's plotline and closes Richard and Susan's indicates chronological contiguity between the two narrative strands, further supporting the hypothesis of a cause and effect logic, and departing from the randomness of the rifle, the circulating object that characterizes some connections in Babel. Ultimately, the cause-effect nexus between the two narratives suggests structural subordination of the Mexican storyline to Richard and Susan's. Since the events of this plotline influence to a great extent what happens in

> Amelia's, the latter can be considered to be an appendage or a prolongation of the former. (Urtiaga 105)

The needs and demands of the upper-class, no matter what they may be, take importance over any objections from the lower class in *Babel,* and in the case of Amelia, actively lead to the further degradation of the working class. However, Iñárritu does not place the blame of what happened in Mexico entirely at Richard's feet. In keeping with his humanist approach, the film instead blames the divide on human nature in the modern world, and on the lack of communication that plagues the characters of *Babel,* with even the title of the film reinforcing this idea. Urtiaga explores how Iñárritu reinforces these themes through his portrayal of the upper-class Richard:

> Yet, even if the movie tends to exonerate Richard in the second version, the many dimensions of the calls in their different versions crucially point to the lack of cosmopolitan interconnectedness in the network society. The film does not give us answers about who is responsible for the events that follow the interaction but asks us to reflect on it. It is hinted that Richard has at least some responsibility, even though something akin to despair has influenced his inflexible and authoritative behavior towards Amelia. (Urtiaga 106)

The non-judgmental treatment of the character of Richard reinforces Iñárritu's idea of class difference as a flimsy barrier that can be broken down and recontextualized when viewed with a broader, more unified look at humankind. In the big picture of Iñárritu's ensembles, while the realities of the disconnect between classes are acknowledged, they also are presented in ways

that minimize the true realities that account for that same disconnect and conflict. Rather than explicitly question the neoliberal and political machinations that lead to class disparity, Iñárritu's humanist approach focuses instead on disunity amongst everyday people under these political systems. While *Babel* does break from this when criticizing the unfair American immigration system (as well as their alarmist media, quick to label the accidental shooting in Morocco as a "terrorist" incident) the film still spends the majority of its running time trying to break down the systems and attitudes that divide humanity, with attention paid to the actions of the average person rather than those in power. As with his previous films, connection is the main concern. The upper and lower classes can be linked to each other in often unseen, elaborate ways that emphasize the traits shared in common with every human, humanizing them while also absolving them of their culpability in their actions. Cuarón, in general, has offered more incisive commentary on the stark realities of class conflict than Iñárritu, though he also engages in breaking down the chasm between classes through common ground between them.

Cuarón's most explicitly political film, *Roma,* is also the most class-conscious film he has made to date. In addition to this, it is also the most self-reflexive film in his filmography, as it is based on his own childhood as part of a wealthy family in Mexico City in the early 1970's. However, unlike many an auteur seeking to revisit their past, the focus of the film is not his own personal experiences, but of the servants that worked for his family – in particular, the woman he had the closest relationship with: his families maid, Libo. In *Roma,* her name has been changed to Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio) and elements of her life have been dramatized, but the film is heavily based on true events, whether they be recollections from Libo or Cuarón himself, and

Cuarón weaves events that have shaped Mexico's political history as backdrops to his story, offering a political "big picture" that offers context for the narrative. Cleo is an indigenous servant from the poorer Oaxaca region of the country, a sharp difference from the successful family that serves as a stand-in for Cuarón's own. By showing both Cleo's work and personal life in detail, the film establishes the two versions of Mexico that exist, one for the wealthy and one for the rest. To further illustrate the different lives led by the Mexico's lower class, Cleo switches between speaking Spanish to the family, and Mixtec to her fellow servants (which the film places in subtitled brackets to reinforce the difference between languages and cultures). The film could be argued as Cuarón's first attempt at something approaching cinematic realism, composed mainly in elaborate long takes and performed on location by many first-time actors. The personal connection for Cuarón results in a film that lionizes a lower-class laborer, made by a wealthy filmmaker motivated by both sincere appreciation for the labor she performed, and class-based guilt for his own part in perpetuating the environment that allowed her to perform that same labor.

Despite *Roma* being Cuarón's most extensive statement of life in lower-class Mexico, his appeal as a transnational filmmaker was not abated. *Roma* was picked up by Netflix and the company spent millions of dollars supporting it during awards season. Like *Y Tu Mamá También,* the film was acclaimed by both Mexican and American critics and audiences for its frank and sensitive class portrayal and hailed as a "…a complex visual network of political, aesthetic and emotional threads that speaks of Mexico's postcolonial woes." (Albarrán-Torres 1) The film takes a removed but compassionate approach towards the character of Cleo, with her daily routine shown to the viewer in great detail. Sergio de la Mora views Cuarón's camera

as a distant figure: “The camera as a ghost of the past or as a form of consciousness—one that observes, does not comment, but does hint at a future of class guilt and a commensurate pressing demand for the enfranchisement of this long-taken-for granted sector of workers” (de la Mora 6) As the film progresses, we see how entrenched Cleo is in the family, functioning as nanny, housekeeper, cook, babysitter and more. Though there is conflict between her and Sofía (Marina de Tavira), Cleo is considered to be part of the “family” by her employers, a position which is only strengthened at near the ending of the film, when Cleo saves two of the children from drowning before collapsing on the beach, surrounded by Sofía and the children in a loving embrace. Like *Y Tu Mamá También,* Cuarón touches on the political anxieties of Mexico by having his characters live through dramatic events in Mexico’s history, though at the time they do not recognize (or in the case of *Y Tu Mamá También’s* economically secure protagonists, do not care about) their great significance. In both films, the uncertain political climate of Mexico is often relegated to background action, informing the actions of the characters but for the most part not playing a large part in their everyday lives. In a scene from *Y Tu Mamá También,* left-wing protests are glimpsed only briefly as Julio and Tenoch attempt to convince Julio’s older sister to let them borrow her car so they can embark on their road trip with Luisa. The protesters, including Julio’s sister, align themselves with the Zapatistas, with the narrator remarking that when the boys return her car, she will take it to Chiapas to deliver aid to the movement. To the boys, the political strife that surrounds them is merely an annoying obstacle in the way of their own leisurely pursuits, with no real effect on them other than the upholding of their privileged status. The personal and the political combine in *Roma* during the scene where the pregnant Cleo goes into labor after encountering her former lover and father of her

child Fermín (Jorge Antonio Guerrero) as the infamous Corpus Christi massacre happens just outside of a store window. While the protests in *Y Tu Mamá También* are sidebars meant to illustrate the struggles of Mexican life unseen by the obliviousness of the upper-class, in *Roma* they take a more immediate role in the lives of the characters, this time because of their lower status. Carla Marcantonio writes of the connection between the protests and the life of Cleo:

> The activities outside the furniture store have a causal relationship to those transpiring inside, and that implied causality builds a thematic connection: absent and violent patriarchs are to blame for the disintegration of the nuclear family, while failed and violent patriarchal institutions are responsible for the massacre of a nation's young citizens. Cleo's impending nonviable parturition crystalizes the connection, implying that the nuclear family and the national family have both undergone a stillbirth. (Marcantonio 40)

While Cuarón shoots these protests from a distance, the impact of them is fully felt by Cleo in a way that Julio and Tenoch are able to ignore. While they can live their comfortable lives oblivious to political strife, the lower-class (such as Cleo) cannot afford to shrug off such events. They shape their lives and actions, whether directly through Cleo's miscarriage, or indirectly through the maintaining of the status quo and the staggering class divide that goes along with it.

Along with the rapturous praise it received from foreign and domestic audiences, *Roma* has also been met with criticism regarding the way Cuarón portrays the servant class, versus the sympathy he provides the bourgeoisie family. Cuarón shows the exploitation of the servants

by the family, yet balances this by highlighting moments of tenderness between the classes, as Cleo is mostly treated with overall kindness by those who employ her. “The affective ties between domestic workers and the families that employ them—particularly in countries with a colonial past, where the practice is pervasive—are a muddy business. Structures of oppression are in place, but if they are enduring it is also because they are enabled by real, emotional ties that exceed and complicate them.” (Marcantonio 43) Cuarón examines the deep and genuinely loving relationships that can develop between rich families and their “help”, while simultaneously depicting the inarguable truth of the realities of the differences between them that shift those relationships into new lights.

The film does feature numerous moments of kindness from Cleo’s employers, with Sofía supporting Cleo through her pregnancy, even taking her to a doctor at one point. The image of the family embracing lovingly embracing Cleo on the beach has become perhaps the films most defining image, reprinted in numerous posters, trailers and advertisements. In one scene, Sofía, upset due to her husband’s abandonment of her and her family, even equalizes herself with Cleo based on their womanhood: she tells her that “No matter what they tell you, we women are always alone.” However, Cuarón also realizes that due to the class difference between the two, Cleo can never really become one of “the family”, despite the genuine love felt for her by them. Cleo remains a servant, and her day-to-day existence as laborer for the family continues unchanged despite her great sacrifices. After the climax on the beach, the family returns to their house, which has been reorganized by the help in their absence. A slow camera pan captures the excited bustle of the group as they explore the second floor of their redecorated house while they discuss what had happened just earlier. The emotional moment at the beach,

complete with Cleo's anguish about the guilt she feels about her feelings towards her stillborn child, becomes just another event in the day for the family, an excitement on par with the status of their newly moved rooms. As Cleo carries the family's suitcases, unpacks their laundry and answers their phone, Sofía and the children discuss their next vacations, with one child offering Disneyland as a possible destination. Sofía responds that "We can't afford Disney, but we can go to Oaxaca." The family then excitedly realizes they can visit Cleo's home, which they mention to her, but she barely acknowledges it, instead alerting Sofía to the call. Much like the protagonists of *Y Tu Mamá También,* the idea of visiting Mexico's rural countryside is an opportunity to play tourist for the upper-class, with the poverty of the region existing as an aesthetic to be ogled and fetishized. The conversation then shifts to the incident at the beach, where Cleo is again thanked with sincere gratitude – before being asked to retrieve banana smoothies and snacks for them. The appreciation for Cleo in the family is acknowledged, but the system remains in place. Cleo's status has not changed despite the families outpouring of love for her, she is still doing their menial labor while they briefly entertain notions of the adventures they could have while visiting the poor heartland. The final shot of the film shows Cleo talking to her friend, and remarking that she has much to tell her, before walking up the tall staircase outside to the roof to do the laundry, the work she must do taking precedence over everything else in her life yet again. She is exactly where she began: voiceless, powerless, with only an increase in appreciation from her employers to show for her pain.

In contrast to the Hollywood class systems, as well as the attitudes of Mexico's Golden Age, the films of Cuarón and Iñárritu attempt to offer more than a superficial and simplified portrait of lower-class existence, as shown by the expansive, at times suffocating, class system

that is reflected in their films. Their transnational sensibilities, along with the perspective on class that they offer as younger filmmakers in the Nuevo Cine Mexicano, set them apart from other filmmakers who have attempted to offer class commentary in the context of classist societies, reflected in a classist cinema. Their ability to adapt to foreign and domestic markets has allowed for their views on class conflict to carry and evolve throughout their filmographies and offer insight into how issues of class are explored in the neighboring countries.

The films of Iñárritu and Cuarón offer insight into how the cinema, and the world at large, sees class conflict. The emergence of a New Mexican Cinema beginning in the 1990's led to the varying takes on the subject by Iñárritu and Cuarón; the former focusing on universal and humanist themes, with the latter offering a blunter social critique. The Hollywood system has influenced both men as well, and their attempts at telling stories involving class in that system illustrates the difference and similarities between the film industries of the two countries. Both filmmakers have tendencies to make their films expansive affairs, with multiple characters, storylines, and perspectives. It is through these ambitious story structures that Cuarón and Iñárritu can make statements on class struggles and inequalities with broad sweep and impact, especially when compared to films focusing primarily on class with only one storyline or protagonist. Rather than focus on one protagonist, Cuarón and Iñárritu offer perspective on class in large scale situations. They offer analyses on class structure within entire communities of people, and as a result are able to comment on class structures of whole nations, as well as the entire world.

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