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Shifting Conceptions of Alejandro González Iñárritu: Interpreting the Auteur

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Abstract:

This introduction to a special issue of *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinema* charts the shift in Alejandro González Iñárritu’s directorial persona from transnational auteur to mainstream figure over the course of his 6 feature films and virtual reality installation: *Amores*
perros (2000), 21 Grams (2003), Babel (2006), Biutiful (2010), Birdman or (The Unexpected 
Virtue of Ignorance) (2014) and The Revenant (2015) Carne y arena (Virtually Present, 
Physically invisible) (2017). It argues that this shift into a (predominantly Anglo) mainstream is reflected in the different ways in which his last names (apellidos) are used, abbreviated or even excised altogether, and in the differing approaches to him as auteur employed by authors of the different articles, but that Iñárritu’s persona and creative collaborators continue to be determined by his Mexican and Latin American identity.

Keywords:
Alejandro González Iñárritu
transnational auteur
mainstream director
auteurist approaches

It is timely that we should be putting the finishing touches to this special issue of Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas on Alejandro González Iñárritu in the very week of the twentieth anniversary of the film which first brought him to the world stage, Amores perros (2000). These last few flourishes are taking place just as a director-approved special edition of Amores perros is being released from Criterion. Chocked full of special features the special edition includes an essay by Mexican critic Fernanda Solórzano and a new video essay by Paul Julian Smith, who also has an article in this issue. A one-day symposium on Iñárritu organized at the University of Sussex in 2016 was the original impetus for this special issue (See Figure 1).

When plans for the symposium were first made in September 2014 (we plan years ahead at Sussex) it was months before the release of Iñárritu’s Birdman or (the Unexpected Virtue of
Ignorance) (2014) and over a year before the release of The Revenant (2015). Before these two films, Iñárritu was still considered a transnational auteur of what are called ‘smaller budget art films’ (Cook 2010: 25). Amores perros was made in Mexico but funded by a company with a transnational reach, whilst others like 21 Grams (2003) and Babel (2006) were made in the United States by production companies associated with American Independent Cinema and yet another, Biutiful (2010), was made in Spain as a Spanish/Mexican co-production with production support from US independent producers and the UK Film Council. In September 2014 Iñárritu was still a non-mainstream, stylistically innovative filmmaker exploring clearly alternative ideologies. Although his films up to that point had skirted around Hollywood by casting Hollywood stars (Naomi Watts, Sean Penn, Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchet, Javier Bardem), and drawing funding from Hollywood independent production houses (Focus Features, Lionsgate) he was still an auteur working outside the industry. Part of his non mainstream alternativity came from the fact that he was a Mexican filmmaker, working on productions outside of his native country but still working with his early collaborators and a largely Mexican and Latin American creative team: Mexican cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, Mexican production designer Brigitte Broch, Argentine composer Gustavo Santaolalla and Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, with whom he worked on up to Babel). With Birdman released in November 2014—although still working with Latin American collaborators in key creative roles (Argentine screenwriters Armando Bo and Nicolás Giacobone, Mexican drummer Antonio Sánchez and of course Mexican cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki -- there was a shift away from the classification ‘non-mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ and towards a more industry-based position. As a comedy Birdman was also very different from Iñárritu’s first four films which focused on pain, death and the inequities of neoliberalism in the Global South. Iñárritu’s mainstreaming was partly to do
with the focus of *Birdman* – a washed-up Hollywood actor (Michael Keaton) seeking artistic authenticity by mounting his own Broadway production of a Raymond Carver play. But it was also to do with how rapturously the film was received by the mainstream industry. With *Birdman*’s Oscars and the approbation from the industry they signalled, Iñárritu became only the second Latin American ever (after his compatriot Alfonso Cuarón in 2014) to win Best Director and Best Film Oscar. With *Birdman* Iñárritu also became a more ‘popular’ director. The playful scorn *Birdman* threw on Hollywood superhero franchises, and on the vanity of a Hollywood star, appealed to the industry as a flattering self-portrait which it was happy to embrace.

With *The Revenant* -- a studio production financed by 20th Century Fox, costing $135 million and released blockbuster style in December 2015 at almost 4000 theatres across the US (not unlike the superhero franchises *Birdman* criticized) -- there was another shift in how Iñárritu was conceived within the United States film industry. During the awards season Iñárritu became a history-making, two-time winner of the Academy Award for Best Director, (joining Joseph L. Mankiewicz and John Ford, the only other two directors to win Best Director Oscars in consecutive years). He also became a much more political figure in this mainstream arena. In a year when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was criticized for the lack of diversity in its awards nominations (#OscarsSoWhite), and with the then ongoing presidential campaign of Donald Trump being run on a platform of xenophobic prejudice against Mexican (and more broadly all Latin American) immigrants to the United States, Iñárritu became, on his round of acceptance speeches for *The Revenant* at the Directors Guild, BAFTA and the Oscars, a spokesperson for his ‘hard working’ Mexican compatriots in the US (Iñárritu 2016) (further explored in my article in this special issue). Iñárritu’s self-identification as a political figure connected to his national group and a pan continental identity, was solidified by his next work,
Sangre y arena a virtual reality art installation reproducing the migrant refugee experience which has been circulating globally since its premiere at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2017 (explored by Catherine Leen in this issue).

The six articles that make up this special issue take up different eras and different underexplored aspects of Iñárritu’s shifting authorial persona including; his early, and not much written about, period as a DJ and advertising executive in Mexico City (explored by Paul Julian Smith), the rift between him and Guillermo Arriaga – the screenwriter of his first three films (Deborah Shaw); the much-less-studied English language films (Celestino Deleyto and Maria Mar Azcona, Dolores Tierney), as well as new perspectives on his earlier Spanish language films (Niamh Thornton). As part of a special issue devoted to one director, it is of no surprise that many of the articles use an auteurist lens through which to view Iñárritu. However, those articles that are auteurist also reflect a wide range of different approaches and divergent understandings of the auteur. For instance, Smith, following Tim Corrigan, emphasises the ‘business of being an auteur’, (Corrigan, 2003: 98) looking at Iñárritu’s fashioning of his career from his pre-feature film days in Mexico. Shaw on the other hand, looks at how a Cahiers du cinema model of the director as artist has favoured Iñárritu and left Arriaga out in the cold. Thornton also takes a more Cahiers like route – exploring the continuities and divergences in Iñárritu’s portrayal of masculinity across his films. Catherine Leen and I both focus on the politicized auteur, with Tierney looking at The Revenant as Iñárritu’s post-colonial take on the Western for Trumpian times and Leen exploring Sangre y arena as the product of an activist auteur. The other articles diverge from the sole focus on Iñárritu: Deleyto and Maria Mar Azcona focus more on the partnership between Iñárritu and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki to do a formalist analysis of Birdman.
The different auteurist approaches to Iñárritu presented in this special issue are mirrored in the different ways he is named across the articles. Smith, Leen, Tierney, Deleyto and Azcona all call him simply Iñárritu which is how he is referred to in Mexican news and cultural media. This missing out of Iñárritu’s first apellido (surname) González and the resulting shortening of his name suggests the heightened individuality of the auteur that is often signaled by a nickname such as Hitch for Alfred Hitchcock or Titón for Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Shaw also refers to the director as Iñárritu but initially refers to him by another shortened version of his name, which initializes his first surname to make him-Alejandro G. Iñárritu- a convention the director adopted with the release of Birdman. Fittingly with Alejandro G. Iñárritu we get a slightly less ‘other’ name for a more mainstreamed director. Thornton goes even further shortening Iñárritu’s name to just his initials AGI to avoid the confusion across his filmography caused by the shortening of his name. These different naming conventions and the multiple versions of the director they suggest both acknowledge and illustrate what is explored in this special issue: the multiple ways of conceiving of Iñárritu as an auteur.

Ultimately, the articles in this special issue aim to inspire further new scholarship on Iñárritu’s films, to provoke debates within our respective disciplinary fields and to connect with the current vectors of Mexican, Latin American and transnational film studies and the points at which they intersect; cross cultural genre analysis, postcolonial approaches to film, formalist analysis and of course, the figure of the (transnational) auteur.

References:
Cook, Pam (2010), ‘Transnational Utopias: Baz Luhrmann and Australian Cinema’,

*Transnational Screens*, 1.1, 23-36.

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