

Weighing Up the Qualities of Independence: *21 Grams* in Focus

• Geoff King

At the heart (literally) of *21 Grams* (2003) is a concern about questions of identity; of measuring that which seems ineffable – the essence of life, or what makes us distinct, unique as individuals, or otherwise. My aim in this paper is to use the film to attempt a similar, if less lofty, enquiry into the current identity of American independent cinema, a sector that often seems equally resistant to being clearly or definitively pinned down and categorized. *21 Grams* is a useful exemplar of a number of significant trends in the contemporary indie sector, including both its situation in the industrial landscape and its most distinctive formal qualities. Industrially, the film lies in a position poised between all-out independence and attachment to the empires of the Hollywood major studio-distribution operations. Formally, and in the intersection between form and content, it also occupies something of a hybrid position: alternative in some dimensions, especially its narrative structure and the use of hyper-realistic visual textures, but also more familiar-conventional in others, including a storyline that might otherwise seem closer to the stuff of somewhat implausible melodrama. In each case, I suggest, this can be taken as representative of a significant proportion of the American independent sector more widely.¹

Industry

In industrial terms, *21 Grams* lies in the border territory between Hollywood and a more formally independent domain beyond the reach of the studio machine. The film was distributed by Focus Features, the identity of which is worth quoting in full from the company website:

Focus Features is the speciality films unit of Universal Pictures, a division of Vivendi Universal Entertainment (VUE) (universalstudios.com), the US-based film, television, and recreation entity of Vivendi Universal, a global media and communications company.²

Quite a mouthful, and one that makes clear the positioning of Focus in relation to the studios: it is part of Universal Pictures, itself part of a transnational media empire.³ As such, it is one of many examples of studio-owned indie-oriented outfits. The involvement of the majors in the 'speciality' market, which also includes selected overseas imports, dates back to the early 1980s, when it was one of the factors involved in the consolidation of the independent scene at the time.⁴ The way was led originally by United Artists, a struggling studio that merged with MGM, another name from the classical studio era that had by then become a shadow of its former self. United Artists Classics was created in 1980 as a speciality division to handle art-house films, mostly foreign, but it became one of the major players in the American independent sector in the early 1980s. Twentieth Century Fox followed, as did Universal, creating their own classics divisions. All three proved short-lived at the time, but studio involvement of this kind escalated in the 1990s, as the indie sector demonstrated a capacity for substantial commercial success. Two of the biggest independent operations, Miramax and New Line, were sold into the arms of the studios in 1993: Miramax to Walt Disney, New Line to Ted Turner, subsequently becoming part of the Time-Warner conglomerate.⁵ Sony Pictures, owner of Columbia, created Sony Pictures Classics in 1992. Twentieth Century Fox established Fox Searchlight

in 1994. Paramount Classics, an offshoot of Paramount Pictures, was launched in 1998. The set of studio-owned 'independent' arms was completed in 2003 with the long-anticipated creation of Warner Independent Pictures by Warner Bros. and the launch of Dreamworks SKG's subsidiary, Go Fish.

Universal, meanwhile, underwent a convoluted relationship with a number of entities before the formation of Focus Features, suggesting uncertainty about how exactly to position itself in relation to the independent/speciality market. It bought the notable speciality distributor October Films in 1997 and was also involved in Gramercy Films, as a joint venture with PolyGram Filmed Entertainment. Gramercy subsequently became part of USA Films, a division of the former Hollywood studio head Barry Diller's USA Network, as did October; they all came back together under the same umbrella in December 2000, when USA Networks was merged with Universal's corporate parent, Vivendi. In the meantime, Universal Focus came into being as a speciality unit. The arrangement under which *21 Grams* appeared was established in 2002 when Universal bought another noted independent outfit, Good Machine, and folded it and USA Films into a new-look Focus Features. The resulting creation had a strong indie/speciality pedigree, manifested most clearly in the presence at the head of the unit of David Linde and James Schamus, two of the three partners in Good Machine, which was, along with October, one of the leading lights in the New York independent film scene from the 1990s. To the Vivendi/Universal empire, Linde and Schamus brought knowledge and experience of the speciality market and, crucially for a project such as *21 Grams*, relationships with a number of international filmmakers.

The acquisition of Good Machine, following that of October, was another move by a studio to buy-in, ready-made, a position in the indie/specialist market. The studios had learned the value of capitalizing on the expertise of those already involved in this sector, giving them significant latitude rather than seeking to subsume indie units to the dominant strategies

of the parent companies. A lesson was gained from the not very happy experience of the earlier classics divisions, the films of which had been handled without any special care or attention by the mainstream domestic distribution offices.⁶ The deployment of Linde and Schamus at the head of Focus followed a pattern established by Disney and Turner, which retained Harvey and Bob Weinstein and David Shaye, respectively, to run Miramax and New Line. Unlike Miramax and New Line, however, whose operations embraced a range including very big-budget productions such as *Gangs of New York* (2002) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), Focus Features was designed to be a modest operation, handling a relatively small number of films the qualities of which would mark them off from the mainstream (much the same strategy as that adopted by studio specialist arms such as Sony Pictures Classics and Paramount Classics). Exactly how this market position is defined is an issue to which I return in the second half of this paper, but it is useful at this point to note statements on the subject made by Schamus and Linde. For the former, the aim of Focus is to handle films addressed at 'specific but pretty substantial audiences.'⁷ Along similar lines, Linde identifies a mission to reach 'a mainstream audience with original, compelling cinema.'⁸ In both cases, an attempt is made to identify a position somewhere between Hollywood and the farther reaches of independence: something 'specific' that involves 'original, compelling cinema' (read: not the same as Hollywood), but that can also reach 'mainstream' or 'pretty substantial' audiences (i.e. not *too far away*).

If *21 Grams* was distributed by Focus, the film was also partially distanced from the studio-specialist orbit. It was executive produced by Ted Hope, the third partner in Good Machine, who opted not to join Linde and Schamus in the move to Universal. Instead, Hope formed a new company, This Is That, in partnership with two other former colleagues from Good Machine, producers Anthony Bregman and Anne Carey. The trio aimed to maintain a greater level of autonomy and real independence than would be possible under a studio wing, based on a desire

to limit themselves to work on projects to which they felt a personal level of interest and commitment.⁹ This Is That promptly signed a three-year, first-look deal with Focus, however, binding its immediate fate partially, at least, to that of the new studio subsidiary. The first product of the agreement was to be *21 Grams*, giving the film an industrial location that straddles one border (between This Is That and Focus Features) of a broader borderline zone (the semi-indie or 'Indiewood' territory of studio-owned or studio-connected speciality subsidiaries). Hope was already on board the film when Focus won a bidding war to finance the \$20 million project and gain worldwide distribution rights (rival contenders were reported in the trade press to include, variously, DreamWorks, Miramax and Regency Enterprises¹⁰). It seems likely that the deal between the two companies, and personal relationships between the major players, were factors in the success of Focus in beating off the competition. A further Focus/Good Machine factor, demonstrating how Universal gained from its decision to foreground the latter in the new entity, was the fact that the acquisition was 'spearheaded' by Amy Kaufman, another former Good Machine executive who joined Focus on its inception.¹¹

Figures such as Kaufman, along with Linde, Schamus and Hope, are important players in the indie/speciality market because of their record of forging relationships with the kinds of filmmakers whose work is particularly appealing in this sector. Kaufman's CV at the time of her move to Focus included executive producing Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001), a breakthrough foreign-language success in the US market, and the acquisition of international rights to Pedro Almodóvar's *Hable con ella* (2002). Other directors of overseas origin courted by Focus Features since its creation include François Ozon (*The Swimming Pool* [2003]), Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding* [2001] was distributed in the US by USA Films, followed by *Vanity Fair* [2004], the co-producers of which included USA and Focus with US distribution by Focus) and Roman Polanski, whose *The Pianist*

(2002) was the winner of three Oscars. As the first English-language feature of the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu, *21 Grams* fits closely into this strategy, Iñárritu having established the status of a desirable property at the speciality/indie end of the market following the critical and (for a subtitled import) commercial success of *Amores perros* (2000). Relationships with filmmakers of this calibre are an important currency in the speciality market. Their films tend to be among the more marketable of subtitled, foreign-language products, a sector that has followed the independent scene more generally in being increasingly hit-driven in recent years (success tending, as it does in Hollywood, to be concentrated in a relatively small number of titles that achieve market breakthrough). Alternatively, they can be recruited, as in the case of Iñárritu, as valuable assets to the American independent scene itself.

The value of the work of filmmakers such as Iñárritu in the independent sector can be measured in numerous ways, including its capacity to attract critical praise of the kind that translates into Academy Awards or nominations. The Oscars have come to play an important role in the indie and Indiewood economies since the 1990s, disproportionate numbers of films from these sectors having gained the substantial boost to box-office performance that usually results from nomination and/or Oscar success. Academy Awards are also coveted by the studios, of course, not just for commercial reasons – which are considerable – but also because of the status and patina of 'quality' they confer. This is one reason for studio investment in indie or semi-indie units, which can provide a dimension of 'prestige' seen as useful to the overall studio image (as a counter to regular attacks on Hollywood from politicians and other sources, including threats of greater regulation), provided that it can be accompanied by a measure of profitability. The biggest success for Focus in this dimension to date was *The Pianist*, which secured awards for best director, best actor and best adapted screenplay. *21 Grams* was also seen as potential Oscar fodder, being 'pushed in all

principal categories' – meaning, being subject of significant investment by the distributor in the promotional campaigns that accompany each year's Academy Awards campaign.¹² It gained nominations in the awards for 2003 for Naomi Watts (best actress in a leading role) and Benicio Del Toro (best actor in a supporting role), although did not win in either category (Focus was more successful in the same year with *Lost in Translation*, winner of best original screenplay and nominated for best picture, director and actor in a leading role).

The independent sector also has its own equivalent of the Oscars, the Independent Spirit Awards, presented by the Los Angeles branch of the Independent Feature Project, a membership-based support and information service for independent filmmakers. Focus was the biggest winner in 2004 (for films distributed in 2003), but not with *21 Grams*. *Lost in Translation* swept the top of the board, with awards for best feature, best director and best screenplay. *21 Grams* was left in a decidedly odd position, symptomatic of the problems that continue to beset all attempts to define 'independence', or to mark it off clearly from the mainstream. A Special Distinction Award was given to the film, Iñárritu, screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, producer Robert Salerno and to the three stars, Sean Penn, Del Toro and Watts, although it was declared ineligible for the Spirit Awards themselves because of the size of its budget. Although 'still modest by studio standards', the budget of \$20–22 million was ruled to have exceeded the award nomination guidelines, which include an 'economy of means' criterion.¹³ Quite what this means is not entirely clear and has been subject of controversy at the Spirits for some years, the budget ceiling for qualification as independent having been raised steadily over time.¹⁴ According to the IFP website 'economy of means' involves 'particular attention paid to total production costs and individual compensation'. Another factor is 'the percentage of finance that comes from independent sources', a score on which *21 Grams* might not have fared well, depending how exactly 'independent sources' are defined (probably not including money from studio affiliates).¹⁵

The IFP clearly wanted to include *21 Grams* for reasons of aesthetics (non-financial qualifying factors including 'uniqueness of vision, originality and use of provocative subject matter'), but felt constrained at the industrial/financial level. The dilemma is one faced more generally in definitions of independence, a constant source of friction among commentators within and outside the indie sector. For some, independence should be defined purely in industrial terms. Greg Merritt, for example, defines an independent production as 'any motion picture financed and produced completely autonomous of *all* studios, regardless of size.'¹⁶ Films made by smaller studios or given a guarantee of distribution by one of the majors before production are classified as 'semi-indie'. In neither case, in Merritt's account, is style or content a consideration. Any other basis of definition is 'too slippery', including 'the widely held belief that independence is determined not by financing but by "spirit", by professing an alternative vision.'¹⁷ Others, including the IFP, seek to include a wider range of factors, often considered alongside relative degrees of independence in industrial terms. It is this latter approach that I take here, in the case of *21 Grams* and more widely in relation to the contemporary indie landscape. A literal use of the term might suggest restriction to the domain of industry and economics, but this is not the manner in which 'independent cinema' has been established in its dominant usages in recent decades. Other definitions may be somewhat slippery, as Merritt suggests, but that is because independence is best understood as a relative rather than an absolute quality, at industrial and other levels, drawing on a range of different traditions and inheritances. What, then, of *21 Grams*, beyond its location in the industrial zone between Hollywood and clear-cut independence? The principal focus of the remainder of this paper is on its formal qualities, starting with narrative structure.

Formal Qualities 1: Narrative

It is in the dimension of narrative structure that *21 Grams* makes its most obvious and immediate

claims to the status of something other than the mainstream, an issue to which much of the film's critical attention has been drawn. How, then, might independent features be defined on the basis of the use of distinctive narrative strategies? Two broad alternatives can be identified. In some cases, indie films are marked by narrative forms in which the familiar dynamics of the 'classical Hollywood' variety are downplayed, halted or subdued.¹⁸ Strong, forward-driving narrative is replaced by more relaxed, rambling or decentred structures, akin to those associated with some forms of international 'art' cinema ('classic' indie examples include *Stranger Than Paradise*, 1984, *Working Girls*, 1986, *Slacker*, 1991, and *Clerks*, 1994). In some cases, classical patterns are largely retained but subtly subverted, conventional expectations being established but not fulfilled (a good recent example is *The Good Girl*, 2002). Alternatively, indie films can also offer narratives more complex than the typical Hollywood focus on a limited number of major cause/effect-oriented plot strands. Narrative strands can be multiplied, increasingly complex, sometimes creating tangled webs.¹⁹ In some cases, temporal structure is equally complex or unconventional. *21 Grams* falls strongly into the latter camp, characterized by a multi-strand narrative that is both highly fragmented and subjected to radical temporal disjuncture. The viewing experience that results is very different from that associated with the dominant Hollywood mainstream, requiring much more active work than usual on the part of the viewer if the relationship between the various narrative pieces is to be understood.

How the opening scenes of *21 Grams* are related to one another is, on first viewing, far from clear. First, we see the character played by Sean Penn (later revealed as mathematics professor Paul Rivers) sitting naked on a bed with the sleeping figure of a woman (Cristina Peck, played by Naomi Watts). Main title. Next comes a father (later established as Cristina's husband) hurrying his two young girls out of a diner. We then see Cristina (although not yet named as such) at a therapy group, followed by a sequence involving the efforts of the character played by

Benicio Del Toro (Jack Jordan) to make contact with a youth, seeking to steer him towards religion and away from a life of crime. Then, an 'atmospheric' shot of birds in flight, flocking against a darkening blue sky. A more concerted 'start' to the narrative then seems to set in, as we are given a voice-over from Paul, accompanying images in which he lies seriously ill in a hospital bed, connected to an array of tubes. This opening sequence is fragmented, but at this stage no more than might be typical of many features. It is important to remember when examining a film such as *21 Grams* that openings can, quite conventionally, be fragmentary and enigmatic, introducing a number of components that, usually, come into focus relatively soon. In this case, however, the film proceeds further without settling down into a more conventionally developed narrative pattern. A few scenes later, the movement is distinctly towards greater puzzlement on the part of the viewer rather than increased clarity. We see Paul sitting at the side of a dilapidated swimming pool, unshaven, with a gun in hand – the latter a major source of narrative enigma (something 'out of the ordinary' that we expect to be explained). Cut to Jack, being led to a prison cell (for what reason, we do not know). We see Cristina swimming, then the Reverend John (Eddie Marsan) preaching to Jack's congregation, Jack's wife visibly uncomfortable at her husband's apparently devotional attitude. Cut to Paul, bearded and clearly very sick, at home, having a furtive smoke in the toilet before being admonished by his wife, Mary (Charlotte Gainsbourg). Next, we are thrust, joltingly, into the middle of a scene in which Paul is bleeding heavily, accompanied by a distressed Cristina and an unshaven Jack. What is happening is far from clear, although there seems to be some continuity between the two scenes on the basis of threats to Paul's health (but is his bleeding and the general feeling of panic anything to do with the heart condition about which we learn in the preceding scene?). Next, we have a clean-shaven and healthy-seeming Paul ringing a doorbell, the enigma of the previous scene only deepened in the process.

More questions are raised, enigmas established; but certain threads also begin gradually to cohere. Shortly after the last scene listed above, we see Paul driving Cristina past a group of men labouring behind a fence, somewhere out in a scrubby/desert landscape; he points out one (Jack, bearded) and she says she wants to kill him. The viewer might connect this with the bleeding-Paul scene, but quite probably not, especially on a first viewing. Maybe it has something to do with that shot of Paul with a gun, but how? Subsequent scenes eventually reveal motive. We see Cristina making cookies with her daughters. A few scenes later, she picks up a cell-phone message: Michael on his way home with the girls. Then, a call from what proves to be a hospital: news that provokes a deeply concerned facial expression and an ominous 'what?', 'where', but neither she nor the viewer yet knows the answers. Reverend John drives past the scene of an accident; blood-covered sheets, which provide a heavy hint. Cristina arrives at the hospital, but revelation is delayed (the receptionist asks to be excused, retreating to a rear office to make a phone call after checking the details on her computer screen – implying news too sensitive for her to impart). Jack comes home, late for his own birthday party, and gives us most of the story: 'I just ran over a man and two girls'. Cut, confusingly, to Jack driving fast, the bleeding Paul in the back seat with Cristina. We then see Paul post heart-op, with his scar, asking whose heart he has been given (he cannot be told), and then, eventually, Cristina at the hospital, getting the full news: that the girls are dead and Michael is effectively the same (in critical condition, with low brain activity). At this point, half an hour into the film, much of what we have seen can be reconstructed (but not everything): the attentive viewer is likely to realize why Cristina wants Jack dead, although plenty of opportunities for confusion remain (Paul and Jack shifting from bearded to clean-shaven, for example, with the potential for one or the other – Jack, especially – not to have been recognized in some of the more fleeting fragments). Soon after this Cristina is asked about donating Michael's heart, and her

relationship with Paul is half-explained (but not fully), especially when this is linked into an immediately following scene in which Paul's beeper goes off, to alert him to the availability of a replacement organ (a relatively unusual example, in this film, of a direct causal link between successive scenes from different narrative threads). Numerous questions remain, but are eventually answered, including: how Paul traces the source of his new heart, follows and establishes a relationship with Cristina and agrees to kill Jack; how Paul walks Jack out into the desert scrub, shoots past him and walks away, his post-operative health deteriorating; how Jack bursts in on Paul and Cristina in a seedy motel room; how the already dying Paul shoots *himself* in the body after a struggle, halting Cristina as she beats Jack with a lamp-stand.

The narrative dynamic of *21 Grams* is one of fracture accompanied by motion back-and-forth in time, nudging repeatedly up to and beyond the central, defining event: the moment at which Jack's truck impacts with Michael and the two girls. Particular sub-strands are developed, in something closer to a linear fashion, within this overarching frame. Paul's relationship with Cristina is followed in sequence, at one level, even while inter-cutting with numerous other components and being subjected to more abrupt leaps forward and back. We see him first observing Cristina, then making initial contact and following it up, the local narrative thread developing in between the moments of greater disjuncture. The viewer is constantly being asked to *place* individual scenes, to work out their location in either particular threads or the larger web. Local areas of orientation are established, even while substantial areas of enigma and potential confusion remain. The catalytic event, the accident that sets off the various narrative dynamics, is not itself depicted, another characteristic of many independent features, if usually associated more strongly with the downplayed or decentred narrative variety cited above, in which key narrative events that Hollywood would usually show with great flourish are often left implicit, undepicted or obliquely handled (Jarmusch is the obvious, if far

- Weighing Up the Qualities of Independence: *21 Grams* in Focus



- Paul (Sean Penn) in healthy, clean-shaven mode, after securing a lunch date with Christina (Naomi Watts).

from the only, example). As numerous narrative fragments gradually start to cohere around the accident, edging closer and closer, they stop short of showing the moment itself, which remains off-screen. Having been informed from various perspectives about what is to happen, we return, some 70 minutes in, to Michael and the girls, passing on the street, as he finishes off what the viewer well-knows by now to be the final telephone message that will be replayed periodically as a leitmotif during the film. They pass a youth of Latino appearance who is using a leaf-blower to clear the strip of grass next to the sidewalk. The scene moves on from the previous point at which it was visited (the end of the phone message), Michael reminding the youth that he is due to do their garden that weekend. The trio moves out of shot, focus remaining on the youth and the noise of the blower. Cut from close to a longer shot, held for some moments, dominated by the sound of the blower, the effect of which is unsettling. A vehicle noise is heard from screen-right, followed by the blur of Jack's



- Paul, unshaved but not bearded, after the shooting.

truck passing in the foreground; a squeal of tires, a muffled sound of impact. The youth drops the blower, which keeps up its noise, as he runs out of screen-left and we hear tyres squeal again, in over-hasty departure.

In narrative terms, *21 Grams* can be understood as a strong manifestation of certain tendencies found more widely in the independent sector, particularly leaning towards the multi-strand complexity and/or temporal shifts, overlaps or confusions found in films such as *Happiness* (1998), *Magnolia* (1999), *Mystery Train* (1989) and *Memento* (2001). The strategy of fragmentation and temporal shifts is designed deliberately to challenge the viewer, to require greater than usual amounts of interpretive labour. This is true both generally and in some specific transitions that seem intended either to hint at connections that may or may not exist or that seem contradictory or contrapuntal. Such a strategy marks the film out as different from the mainstream, leaning closer to the terrain of 'art' cinema, whether international or American home-grown. Interpretive labour is required of the viewer of even the most mainstream of Hollywood productions, but this process is mostly comprised of a sub-conscious processing of information, as suggested by cognitive theorists of film narrative such as Edward Branigan.²⁰ In some cases, a more conscious process of puzzling is required, but this is usually motivated by generic convention, as in the detective film, or restricted to certain parts of the narrative such as opening sequences. The more substantial narrative problems posed by a film such as *21 Grams* foreground the dimension of narrative itself, drawing attention to its status as a construct.

The narrative of *21 Grams* is far from entirely impenetrable, however. Clues and systems of visual coding are used to provide points of orientation for the viewer, some of which – based on other formal qualities – are considered in the next section. The appearance and disposition of the principals changes according to the points at which they are visited in the diegesis. The most obvious example is the use of facial hair, or its absence, to mark different



• Jack (Benicio Del Toro), clean-shaven in an early scene, before the crash.

moments in the experience of Paul and Jack. Pre-operation Paul is bearded. After the operation, he is clean-shaven. Towards the end, on his mission into the desert to kill Jack, and afterwards, on what proves to be his death-bed, he is unshaven without being bearded. Jack becomes unshaven after the accident. These provide useful markers, establishing a sense of temporal separation between certain events before their nature has been elaborated, although they can add to the confusion (on first viewing, especially in the early stages, I recall some confusion on occasion between bearded and unbearded versions of the same character). All is, ultimately, made clear, even if it takes more than one viewing to get every component exactly into position.

The plot material itself, separated from its fragmented form, also shifts the film back into a relatively more conventional position in the broad Hollywood/Indiewood/indie spectrum than might otherwise be the case. The form is radical, by mainstream standards, but the content is closer to the more familiar stuff of melodrama. It is certainly very different from what is usually associated with the downplayed/decentred indie narrative variant (the same could be said of some of the other multi-strand indie films cited above, examples such as *Happiness* and *Magnolia*, which also tend towards the orchestration of heightened interpersonal drama²¹). The underlying *fabula*, as it would be termed in Russian Formalist criticism, is heightened and

somewhat implausible, especially when separated from the *syuzhet*, the manner in which the story is told through the order and selection of material presented on screen.²² Told bluntly, the core narrative synopsis is rather conventional: man and children knocked down by careless driver; man's heart given to transplant candidate who starts an affair with the victim's grieving wife, at whose urging he sets out to kill the driver, who is himself wracked by guilt. That the recipient of Michael's heart should end up being his wife's lover and his and his children's potential avenger is the stuff of convenient fictional confection, played out in an emotional register that would certainly risk being labelled as melodramatic excess (locating the film differently in the cinematic spectrum) if presented in linear form.²³ Relatively conventional material in a more radical, fragmentary form gives the film, along with its industrial location, something of a hybrid quality. An important role in this equation is also played by other formal devices.



• Jack, later, bearded.

Formal Qualities 2: Visual Style

Many films can be understood as making their claims to independent provision, formally, on the basis of claims to the provision of greater 'realism' than their mainstream/Hollywood equivalents.²⁴ Downplayed or more arbitrarily-shaped narrative often claims, implicitly at least, to occupy a position closer to the texture of reality than the carefully crafted dynamics associated with Hollywood convention.²⁵ The same can be said to some extent of multi-strand or temporally shifting

narrative structures, which might claim to come closer than the Hollywood norm to capturing the complex and multi-faceted nature of reality. Other formal devices are also used widely in independent features to stake claims to the status of greater realism or authenticity than the smooth and glossy textures usually associated with the Hollywood mainstream. *21 Grams* can be situated in a long tradition in which devices associated with documentary or news footage have been used in fiction features in an attempt to increase their claims to the status of realism. Unsteady, hand-held camerawork, inexact framing, restricted views and sudden zooms are among devices employed in many indie films to create an impression that the filmmaker is capturing events as they unfold, unpredictably, before the camera – as is often the case, for practical reasons, in the world of documentary or newsreel – rather than that the events have been planned in advance and carefully staged for the camera. This is a major component of the visual texture of *21 Grams*, almost the whole of which was shot hand-held to create an impression of immediacy and heightened emotional proximity. The effect, like that of the fragmented narrative, is to reduce the conventionally melodramatic potential of the material.



• Creating an impression of immediacy: hand-held camera-work.

A good example is the hospital sequence in which Cristina learns what has happened to her family: a point of major emotional crisis. The sequence begins with shots mostly held with her face in close-up, the camera moving slightly,

reframing and a little unsteady, occasionally panning or cutting quickly away to other characters in the scene. When Cristina is told her daughters are dead, she sinks downward and, in the series of shots that follows, is often lost partially or more fully from sight, the dominant camera position, unsteady, being behind the doctors who give her the news, their white coats often obscuring her from view; at one point the left half of the screen is filled with the tearful figure of Cristina's sister, sitting in the background, while the right is blacked out by the out-of-focus figure of her father's back, a smear of blonde hair just discernible on his shoulder, as he supports her. The overall impression created in sequences such as this is that the camera is not an especially privileged observer, as if it responds to rather than orchestrates the action. The effect is to give a raw and 'edgy' – as if relatively unprocessed – quality to material that otherwise contains obvious potential to lapse into a more theatrically-coded form of melodrama. A similar impression is created in a sequence in which Jack snubs his wife, Marianne (Melissa Leo), when he is released from prison (having given himself up, according to his new-found religious principles, against her strongly expressed urging to the contrary). As Jack exits a prison service van, he turns away from her direction and moves towards the camera. Cut to a long shot that whip-pans rapidly from a general view of the area of the van to a close shot on Marianne's face (the camera whips past her momentarily, then adjusts back to position her at frame-right). The Reverend John, accompanying her, comments 'leave it to me', and moves to follow Jack. The camera pans to follow him, but then seems to change its mind, swinging back in a fast pan that returns to Marianne. The impression, again, is of camera responding, uncertainly, to pro-filmic action, Marianne's sense of shock and disjuncture being mirrored by abrupt movement of a camera that seems equally taken aback by Jack's behaviour.

The impression of authenticity for which the film strives is also increased in some sequences by the use of film stocks designed to create a grainy image, combined with the bleach-bypass



• Cristina and her sister in harsh, high-contrast distress, after the funeral of her husband and children.

process employed in the development of the negative. These also create *expressive* effects, however, and the combination of the two is another feature *21 Grams* shares with a number of other recent/contemporary indie films (notable examples include *Julien Donkey-Boy* [1999], which uses pixelated and mobile digital camerawork and post-production processing to similar *verité*-combined-with-expressive effect). Different image quality resulting from shifts between one stock and another is one of the formal devices used to provide orientation across the different narrative fragments. Coarse-grained stocks, along with greater unsteadiness of camera, are favoured in sequences in which characters are in distress. Finer grain, and more stable framing, tend to signify more positive mood (Paul after his operation but before it starts to go wrong, for example). Graininess and unsteadiness do not simply signify greater realism, then, but are expressive of character and circumstance. Colour schemes are also employed to the same end by director Iñárritu and cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, providing sources of orientation within the narrative and expressing character/mood: yellows and reds often for the world of Jack, cooler blues for Paul, a mixture of the two for Cristina.²⁶

The bleach-bypass process, in which one of the usual stages of colour processing is omitted, contributes a contrasty and desaturated appearance that can also create effects coded as both realist and expressive. Harshness of image quality and a reduction in visual plenitude suggest a heightened realism; but it is, precisely, a *heightened* realism that also takes on

expressive qualities (the slippage between the two, found here and elsewhere, is not so much contradictory as suggestive of the extent to which impressions of the 'real' or 'authentic' are always relative and constructed). This is most notable in *21 Grams* in sequences from the latter stages, set in the New Mexico desert, in which bleach-bypass and the use of coarse-grained stock combine to express the extremity of the situation. In addition to a dimension that suggests realism/authenticity, image quality in these sequences at the same time has an 'unreal', dreamlike or nightmarish resonance. The first time we visit this part of the narrative, for example, when Paul sits by the motel pool, image quality is grainy but also seems 'artful' and somewhat affected: a filter on the lens creates a diagonal gradient effect in the sky, shading from a dark, deep blue in the upper-left of the frame to paler shades lower and to the right; the deeper blues of the sky seem echoed in the colour of the pool-cover, which lies collapsed in a mire of grungy yet what appears to be carefully composed detritus. Expressive qualities such as these help to distinguish certain fragments as belonging to this part of the *fabula*, contributing to the systems of orientation built into the film, but they also seem appropriate to material that is experienced (if this is fully grasped by the viewer) as flash-forward projection, a relatively uncommon form of temporal manipulation (another example in which this narrative technique is used, among others, to give a disjunctive indie imprint to otherwise more familiar/conventional material is Steven Soderbergh's revenge thriller *The Limey* [1999]).

The most distinctive visual qualities of *21 Grams* can be understood as both signifiers of independence (differing from the mainstream in the extent to which claims are made to authenticity and in the use of expressive effects) and as devices that serve at some (possibly subliminal) level to counter the confusingly fragmentary shape of the narrative. This is another contribution to the hybrid status of the film in its negotiation of the territory between relatively mainstream and more

- Weighing Up the Qualities of Independence: *21 Grams* in Focus

radical/alternative strategies. The formal qualities of *21 Grams* are largely in service of the narrative, as usually associated with the 'classical' Hollywood recipe.²⁷ Fragmentation of narrative is also in keeping with the broader 'content' of the film, which can be taken as a disquisition on various issues including the nature of identity and processes of causality (fate, guilt, and so forth) to which the fractured quality of the diegesis directly contributes by requiring the viewer to contribute more actively than usual to the process of understanding how one element is connected to another. At the same time, however, the film draws attention to form in its own right, at the levels of both narrative and the plurality and heightening of visual style. Part of the specific pleasure offered by the film – as an indie/specialist product, aimed at a particular section of the market – is appreciation of its formal qualities, in their very difference from the mainstream (enabling viewers in the 'specialist' market to distinguish themselves from mainstream viewers, to varying degrees, by activating the cultural capital required to gain pleasure from such qualities). But this is combined with narrative drive based on more familiar regimes designed to create strong empathy with the central characters. An underlying mode of melodrama provides sufficient emotional weight to sustain this dynamic amid potentially more distancing formal departure. The result is the achievement of something close to the hybrid quality sought by Linde and Schamus and, arguably, by much of the independent sector more generally.



• Director Iñárritu and cinematographer Prieto confer on a shot.

One significant point of reference in an attempt to locate *21 Grams* in the wider film landscape is provided by its Mexican predecessor, *Amores perros*, with which it clearly has a number of points in common. Each mixes three major plot strands, linked via the fallout from a road accident. Similar visual qualities are also found, including the use of bleach-bypass and the presence of Prieto as largely hand-held cinematographer, and numerous other elements of detail. Unusually, though, for an 'Americanization' of an overseas feature, *21 Grams* is the more formally radical, especially at the level of narrative (*Amores perros* is presented in a series of substantial blocks rather than fragments, each strand being worked through in large part before a shift to the next, with only limited intermediate cutting from one to another). This differentiates such 'appropriation' of international cinema in the Indiewood/indie sector from its Hollywood equivalent, in which innovation from elsewhere is usually put to more conventional use. In *21 Grams*, extensive rein is given to the more experimental instincts of Iñárritu and screenwriter Arriaga, but only within certain limits. Radical departure is motivated by character-experience and explicit thematics (the latter voiced most directly in Paul's closing monologue about the ineffable 21-grams-in-weight quantity lost to the dying body). The film is, after all, aimed at 'pretty substantial' audiences, rather than the margins constituted by more radical examples of art-cinema or the avant-garde. As such, it is in keeping with most of what usually goes by the name 'indie', the institutionalized end of the broader 'independent' sector that occupies a position, characteristically, within the considerable range that exists between the clear-cut Hollywood mainstream and the more radical fringe.

Notes

- 1 This paper draws on a broader account of indie cinema in my book *American Independent Cinema* (London, I.B.Tauris, forthcoming 2005).
- 2 www.focusfeatures.com/home.php.

- 3 For more detail, see the 'Company History' available at the Vivendi Universal website, www.vivendiuniversal.com.
- 4 Other factors included the growth of independent distributors such as Miramax, New Line and numerous smaller outfits, the development of the festival circuit and the creation of filmmaker-oriented institutions such as the Independent Feature Project.
- 5 For more detail see Justin Wyatt, 'The formation of the "major independent": Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood', in Steve Neale and Murray Smith (eds), *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998).
- 6 Wyatt, 'The formation of the "major independent"', p. 84.
- 7 Quoted in David Rooney, 'Sharp Focus', *Variety*, posted at www.variety.com, 23 November 2003.
- 8 Quoted in Ian Mohr, 'Strictly Business', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 5 August 2003, accessed via www.thehollywoodreporter.com.
- 9 See interview with Hope, Bregman and Carey in Matthew Ross, 'Interview: Separation Anxiety? Not For Ex-Good Machiners At "This is that"', *indieWIRE*, 24 September 2002, accessed at www.indiewire.com/people/int_Good_Machine_020924.html.
- 10 Ian Mohr, 'Focus pushing "21 Grams" with funding, output', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 16 July, 2002, accessed via www.thehollywoodreporter.com; Michael Fleming, Claude Brodeser, "'30 Days" & "21 Grams" ignite bidding battles', *Variety*, posted at www.variety.com, 14 July 2002.
- 11 Ian Mohr, 'Focus on execs at Uni film arm', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 August, 2002, accessed via www.hollywoodreporter.com; Charles Lyons, 'Focus sharpens acquisitions team', *Variety*, posted at www.variety.com, 12 August 2002.
- 12 Rooney, 'Sharp Focus'.
- 13 The IFP press announcement of the awards is available at www.ifp.org/content/pdf/2387_6_1_3211.pdf; see also Anthony Kaufman, 'Cost prohibitive', *Variety*, posted at www.variety.com, 26 February 2004.
- 14 Kaufman, 'Cost prohibitive'.
- 15 For a brief statement of the grounds of nomination, quoted here and in the preceding and following sentences, see 'Independent Spirit Awards – History', accessed at www.ifp.org/calendar/program.php?id=54.
- 16 Greg Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film* (New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), p.xii.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- 18 For the most influential statement of the characteristics of 'Classical Hollywood' narrative, see David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, Routledge, 1985), Chapter 9.
- 19 Downplayed and more complex narrative forms are examined in more detail in my *American Independent Cinema*, Chapter 2; on the latter, see also Murray Smith, 'Parallel Lines', in Jim Hillier (ed.), *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London, BFI, 2001).
- 20 Edward Branzen, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London and New York, Routledge, 1992).
- 21 The substance of narrative content is also largely conventional, unlike features such as *Happiness* that establish indie credentials by dealing with taboo subject-matter that would not be deemed acceptable in the mainstream.
- 22 For a useful summary of these concepts, see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, pp. 49–51.
- 23 As Jonathan Romney suggests, the story, originally to be set in the same Mexico City as *Amores perros*, 'is very much the stuff of Latin American telenovelas'; 'Enigma Variations', *Sight and Sound*, March 2004, 16. The term 'melodrama' has gained negative connotations, suggesting both unlikely events and an overblown emotional register generally associated with popular, mainstream forms of the kind the indie/specialist market seeks to define itself (largely) against. For a useful overview of the history of the use of the term in relation to film, see Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York, Routledge, 2000), pp. 179–204.
- 24 For more on this see my *American Independent Cinema*, Chapter 3.
- 25 In Russian Formalist terms, compositional motivation – according to expectations created by narrative convention – gives way to motivation according to verisimilitude, greater proximity to the way things are usually experienced in the outside world.
- 26 See comments on this by Prieto in 'Production Notes' section of the film's website at www.21-grams.com.
- 27 In Bordwell's version, at least; see *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, Routledge, 1985).