

## **Alejandro González Iñárritu's melodramatic masculinities**

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Abstract:

Melodrama is a genre with deep roots in Mexican cinema with distinct conventions and particularities. Alejandro González Iñárritu demonstrates a fluency in this genre integrating it into the conventions of transnational arthouse cinema. As someone whose auteur status is conferred both through multiple prestigious awards and articulations of his creative self as originator of his projects, Alejandro González Iñárritu's play with genre is often overlooked. Using videographic criticism as a tool for analysis (Grant 2016 and Keathley and Mittell 2016), this article considers the actor's dynamic performances in Alejandro González Iñárritu's male-centred melodramas *Amores perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006), *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015).

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dynamic

Alejandro González Iñárritu (AGI) is one of a triumvirate of Mexican filmmakers who have supported one another financially and through promotional opportunities to become internationally renowned figures in international cinema (Shaw 2013; Tierney

2018).<sup>1</sup> Unlike the other two – Guillermo del Toro and Alfonso Cuarón – both of whom have mixed genre and franchise filmmaking with their own auteur projects, AGI has carefully cultivated an auteur persona on the arthouse circuit. His breakthrough film was *Amores perros* (2000) released just as Mexico was undergoing considerable political shifts and was part of an optimistic moment anticipating social change. Met with international success and acclaim, *Amores perros* was read as the emergence of a new wave of Mexican filmmaking, yet when examined closely and in retrospect has a more complicated place for multiple reasons, as Dolores Tierney has clearly mapped (2018: 47-60). The new wave of filmmakers did not flourish at home, instead, AGI and many of his contemporaries left to attain success abroad becoming transnational auteurs. They carried with them their Mexican sensibilities as insider-outsiders in the US film industry, which has had a long history of bidirectional border crossing as well as certain aesthetic approaches drawn from Mexico's considerable and well-established media landscape (Podalsky 2011: 130-132). Between 2000 and 2015 AGI directed five feature films, each marked by his auteurial imprimatur. Although he has not made a feature film in Mexico since his first, his aesthetic is marked by Mexican melodrama and can be traced in the dynamics of male relationships in his films, as this article will examine.

In AGI's filmography masculinity inhabits a clearly defined space. In his films gender is defined rather than inhabiting a spectrum. Gender is to be understood as fixed in meaning, which means that it is neither performed (pace Butler 2004) nor is it a 'masquerade' (Cohan and Rae Hark 1993: 7). His men and boys in particular are clearly marked in their gender identity as individuals who possess 'skill and endurance' (Kirkham and Thumim 1993: 3). What is less clear is the place of Iñárritu's men and boys in the social worlds that they inhabit. That is where the drama

lies. They struggle to find a means to express their full selves in a world in crisis. As this article will explore, his male characters articulate their frustration with modulated, expressive tones and movements, shifting from carefully contained movements to bold and dramatic gestures. It is in the crisis and the struggle to place themselves in worlds in flux, burdened by alienating environments, frequently marked by fear, that the men and boys in AGI's films struggle with their place as men, but not with their masculinity. Masculinity as it is presented in AGI's films is not a culturally specific masculinity, although, as Paul Julian Smith (2003: 30-31) has suggested, it is in dialogue with a pattern of masculinity in Mexican film. This is not to suggest that there is one type of Mexican masculinity. To fix on a homogeneous singular Mexican machismo is to fall into a reductive trap first set by the poet and essayist Octavio Paz (1950) and challenged by Sandra Messinger Cypess (2012). As this article will explore, the masculinity to be found in these films is a masculinity that has a specific energy particular to Iñárritu's films that requires release and containment, that is curtailed by external forces and managed as a burden by the individual. To convey the affective tensions brimming over in his male characters, AGI has used the melodramatic mode. The aim of this article is to complicate the work of AGI by qualifying his auteurist approach by attending to the performances and the original scores that are particular to the Mexican melodrama from which he has drawn. Despite his public persona as transnational auteur, elsewhere others such as Deborah Shaw (2013) and, more recently, Tierney (2018) have considered how limited it is to look at AGI's work simply that of an auteur. In her 2013 study of Guillermo del Toro, AGI and Alfonso Cuarón, Shaw asserts that their 'films have caused critics to rethink classificatory borders' (Shaw 2013: 225). To extend her proposition, I want to consider the traces of the national by creating a new loosely boundaried category –

melodramatic masculinity – and to explore the distinctly Mexican traces that it reveals.

Naming what AGI does as melodramatic masculinity is to take inspiration from Bhaskar Sarkar's (2011) use of the term 'epic melodrama'. He collapses two genres to evoke a deliberate tension suggested by their juxtaposition. The epic is a term associated with action-packed, grand and public narratives, when placed alongside the usually domestic and affect-centred melodrama, it resides in deliberate tension. One term is not 'a mere qualification for the other, nor are they simply additive [instead] their interaction produces a new aesthetic category' (2011: 266). In a similar vein my juxtaposition of melodrama, usually concerned with women's stories or those of the disempowered, with AGI's explosive masculinity is to suggest a new aesthetic category. Exploring AGI's male characters in terms of melodramatic masculinity entails drawing on aesthetic practices well-established in Mexican cinema and to propose a new framework for understanding a filmmaker whose work is stubbornly auterist in its consumption, that is how it is reviewed and discussed, as well as how he 'carefully constructs an auteur identity through his media persona' (Shaw 2013: 120).

In this article, I will focus on how masculinity is presented in AGI's feature films: *Amores perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006), *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015). *Amores perros* is his much-lauded debut, set in Mexico with some ostensible Mexican concerns and themes. *21 Grams* was his first 'deterritorialized' film, following Tierney's (2018: 1) definition, and one that demonstrates a transition into working with Anglophone, Hollywood-based actors and his third feature, *Babel*, a transnational film that

constitutes his final collaboration with the screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga (see Deborah's Shaw article in this issue). These are a trilogy that have different settings but have overlapping thematic and narrative concerns and approaches. *Birdman* and *The Revenant* are constructed around white, US male characters. The former is a metatextual play within a film with self-conscious aesthetic elements and the latter is a quest narrative set during the settler colonial period in the United States. All of his feature films are primarily concerned with male characters experiencing a moment of melodramatic crisis and emotional distress. Despite their distinct narrative concerns and settings, this article will argue that traces of Mexican melodrama can be found in all five.

### **Tracing Mexican melodrama**

To get a sense of the dynamic range in AGI's films before I discuss their origins in melodrama, here is an example. There is a violent exchange between father and son in *The Revenant* (2015) that explicitly references voice and provides instruction on when it is wise to speak. The scene opens with Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio) telling his son, Hawk (Forrest Goodluck), that he should stay invisible. Glass/DiCaprio is looking into the middle distance. Hawk/Goodluck attempts to respond, hunched over in the foreground of the shot, mumbling unassertively. Glass/DiCaprio turns to his son with his shotgun poised over his son's head, raises his voice and says, '[i]f you want to survive, keep your mouth shut'. Again, Hawk attempts to respond.

Glass/DiCaprio grabs him at the back of his head and says, '[t]hey don't hear your voice' (Figure 1). Hawk is clearly not being heard by Glass either. Hawk's silencing by Glass is instructive. Glass sees not speaking as a survival technique that he feels

his son must learn to the extent that he teaches him using violence and by raising his voice. This is performed at fast pace with an accelerated and brief crescendo and snap gestural violence, and one that is emblematic of AGI's masculine characters and the melodramatic mode that is evident through his films. Although the narrative and setting has no association with Mexico, traces of Mexican melodrama can be found in these films.

<Insert Figure 1 Here> Caption: Figure 1: Glass/DiCaprio, "If you want to survive, keep your mouth shut"

There is an abundance of academic work that theorizes Mexican melodrama in particular (and melodrama more generally) as a genre with strong roots in Mexican filmmaking tradition (see, for example, Tierney 1997, Sadlier 2009, Lahr-Vivaz 2016). This work often classifies the 1940s and 1950s as the high point of production in quality and volume of melodramatic films. As well as this important history, melodrama has a significant presence in the Mexican film and televisual context. Elsewhere, melodrama has been recognized as a feature of AGI's affective world building. In a close reading of *Babel*, Laura Podalsky has explored how melodrama is integral to AGI's narrative and affective world building and analyses how he employs key characteristics of melodrama including, 'misrecognition', a prescribed moral framework, and the prevalence of 'ecstatic emotional states' (2011: 139-142). This article will extend this to look at performance and movement.

AGI is a director with a firm grounding in the grammar of transnational popular and art house filmmaking that has led to his considerable success. Tierney asserts that AGI's work is a 'model of transnational exchange' which 'rather than purely imitate

Hollywood or US traditions his films embody a perspective aligned with Mexico, Latin American and [...] the peoples of the Global South' (2018: 49). Central to this affinity is Mexican melodrama. AGI draws on a Mexican style and aesthetics that are most notable in the performances he elicits from the actors in his films which are highly gestural, expressive and involve considerable movement around and through the filmic space and an expansive vocal presence and range. In this way, it is possible to read the performances as melodramatic.

There is a specificity to the physicality of melodramatic performances. Peter Brooks described the way actors' bodies externalize emotion as 'bodiliness' (1994: 17). For him, the 'melodramatic body is a body seized by meaning' (Brooks 1994: 18). This is expressed through movement and clothing and 'refuses repression' (Brooks 1994: 19). In addition to these elements, AGI plays with the expectations of melodrama through vocal performances. Where Brooks privileges the ways in which physical movement is central to melodrama – and such excess can be found in AGI's films – , AGI also gives space to dynamic range in the actors' voices which is supplemented by musical choices.

Melodrama is associated with such performative excess, but also with specific cultural tropes. Marvin D'Lugo describes Mexican melodrama as 'less a genre than a broad cultural sensibility not contained by geopolitical borders, social class, history, or specific technologies. As an aesthetic and social phenomenon, melodrama has thus eluded simple reductive classification' (2009: 113). In what is a discussion of the low budget socially driven narratives of the director Luis Alcoriza, D'Lugo draws on the writings of Jesús Martín-Barbero when he sums up that 'melodrama's transgeneric, transhistoric force' lies 'in its power as an affective bridge between collective

historical experience and the lives of individuals during periods of extreme social and ideological crisis' (2009: 114). Where Alcoriza's narratives are self-conscious and comedic, AGI uses multiple techniques to be similarly self-reflexive through cinematography and excess in performance.

In the introduction to the volume in which D'Lugo's chapter appears, *Latin American Melodrama: Passion, Pathos, and Entertainment* Darlene Sadlier (2009) helpfully signals the differences between the US/Hollywood melodrama and that of Mexico. Where the former is primarily and almost exclusively domestic the latter includes 'historical epics in which family life is viewed in relation to larger national issues' (2009: 3). She also argues for its capacity to bring 'groups who have lacked social power into communities of emotional solidarity and strength' (2009: 15). The tensions explored within a Christian community in *21 Grams*, the world in microcosm revealed through the theatre in *Birdman*, and the tension-filled combined forces of the colonizing enterprise in *The Revenant*, are all instances of this concern, as well as the more conventional familial relations to be found throughout his films. Therefore, while it would be difficult in a Hollywood context to read these films as melodramas, as films with a Mexican aesthetic and sensibility it is entirely plausible. His groupings of people rarely cohere, irrespective of whether they constitute conventional communities or not. They are amalgams of individuals whose representative force impels reflection upon the alienation experienced by his masculine protagonists.

Given that how melodrama as a genre functions shifts subject to industry and national context, it might be productive to draw on Caroline Levine's writing on form where her comparisons between genre and form point to the changeable nature of genre over the fixed nature of form. Where she suggests form should be thought of as



‘all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference’ (2015: 2-3), genre is ‘[a]n ensemble of characteristics, including styles, themes, and marketing conventions, [which] allows both producers and audiences to group texts into certain kinds’ (2015: 13). Furthermore, genres ‘can be defined as customary constellations of elements into historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms with themes, styles, and situations of reception’ (2015: 14). For Levine, genre is defined by the filmmaker, producers and distributors, on the one hand, and by the audience and reception, on the other. However, because AGI is a male filmmaker centring his stories on male characters, and, other than *Amores perros*, they are (for the most part) set outside of Mexico, viewers and critics are not inclined to read his films as melodrama, despite the significant work done by Podalsky (2011) and, more recently, Tierney (2018). Levine’s ‘customary constellations’ allow us to pinpoint where the generic features of AGI’s work lie.

Further, where Levine uses the term affordances to ‘describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs’ (2015: 6) in relation to form, it is also a useful term to think of in relation to melodrama. Genre is malleable and less fixed than form, but it still is recognizable through central conceits, themes, tropes or elements. With melodrama, the family as a significant motivating force and oftentimes controlling agent is one of these constants. The plot centred around a woman and her emotional life may appear with frequency in melodrama, but is not so crucial. The affordances of the melodrama are multiple.

AGI stretches the melodramatic affordances in his films, which is why the films are not always recognized for their indebtedness to this mode. Another crucial reason

why his melodramatic tendencies have been overlooked is the ways he draws upon other genres in his films and the important work that has been done by Shaw (2013), Paul Julian Smith (2003) and others on mapping out the transnational in the production, reception and distribution of his oeuvre. For my purposes here, a central reason for this oversight is the male-centred nature of his films, which can be found through a close reading of the films using videographic criticism.

### **Cacophonous and dynamic excess: experiments with videographic criticism**

As well as engaging in conventional research methods, such as the reading of critical analysis and careful watching of the texts that builds on frequent academic conversations about AGI and his collaborators, for this article I used videographic criticism as a tool. Originally, I had hoped to create an end product, something that would either be a standalone piece or one to complement this article. Instead, using Adobe Premiere Pro I manipulated, edited and organized the material and found my way to criticism as the primary end to my videographic experimentations. Experts in the field of videographic essays and criticism, such as, Catherine Grant (2016) and Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell (2016) have written about its value as a tool as well as a means to create new readings. Grant writes how videographic criticism can result in outcomes that are '[f]orged from digital material, with digital tools, and through *digital material thinking*' (Grant 2016: 1, emphasis in original). This was my experience with my creative experimentations. It led to a piece that focused on moments of cacophonous melodrama, a term I am using to signal a performative aural excess at key moments in each film that lead to what I have labelled the dynamics of excess that is evident in AGI's filmography. Dynamics reveals the modulation that

takes place on a vocal and musical level, and the change between stillness and movement that is evident from this experiment with close reading of AGI's texts.

The editing process led me to navigate the films as a means of exploring interactions between characters that highlighted how gestures and performance are at the centre of AGI's melodramatic aesthetics. In his writing on stars, Richard Dyer has signalled how such acting approaches can be employed to foreground emotions in melodrama:

[M]elodramatic performance may be defined as the use of gestures principally in terms of their intense and immediate expressive, affective signification. In melodrama, these emotions are also moral categories, and it is this that sets melodramatic performance apart, at the level of meaning from Method acting, although *both* give primarily to a character's emotional life (1998: 137, emphasis in original).

Martin Shingler has built upon Dyer's work and unpicked the challenge faced by many stars – a category of actor AGI frequently employs – that is, the tension between their recognizable 'idiosyncratic style' and the directors' requirements for their films (2012: 23). By emphasizing the performative element, Dyer is alluding to an understanding of melodrama as a mode. In what is an examination of the recurrence and predominance of melodrama in Mexican cinema from the 1930s to the early 2000s, Elena Lahr-Vivaz (2016: 10-13) asserts that describing melodrama as a mode makes space to consider the communities of feeling that are being evoked in the films. Her primary focus is on the ways filmmakers have engaged with the nation (Mexico) and its construction through melodrama during the period conventionally called the Golden Age (1930-50s), and then later used as a mode to challenge this

same paradigm by recent filmmakers (Lahr-Vivaz 2016). As a filmmaker who has both openly proclaimed his Mexican-ness and primarily worked outside of the national industry, AGI has still clearly brought with him this Mexican melodramatic mode throughout his projects.

The distinctive element in the use of melodrama by AGI is that there is no resolution to be found in the display of emotional excess. The characters are left in a stasis, expression of excess is all they have. What happens to the characters is emotional excess that builds from a moment of physical stillness or vocal quietness to expansive movement and loudness. Two such separate and comparable examples can be found in the interaction between Jack Jordon (Benicio del Toro) and Reverend John (Eddie Marsan) in a jail cell in *21 Grams* and Riggan (Michael Keaton) and his daughter, Sam (Emma Stone), backstage in the theatre in *Birdman*.

The scene in *21 Grams* opens with Jack lying on his bunk rejecting Reverend John's demand that he pray to God for mercy. Del Toro performs his response first speaking at a barely audible level and then speaking louder and louder building towards a crescendo. Each man speaks over the other as their competing perspectives appear increasingly incompatible. They hear and respond to each other as they speak. At first, they are shown in separate shots through hard cuts in a shot/reverse shot sequence. Reverend John appears to be reciting words that are meant to articulate a clear Christian requirement that Jack should repent in order to attain absolution. Reverend John states, '[s]top it or you're going straight to hell'. His voice is heard in off while the camera holds on a close-up on del Toro/Jack. Jack says, '[h]ell?, This is hell', pointing to his head and raising his voice to a shout (Figure 2). Then, as if to emphasize his point, he says, '[r]ight here'. This time he jabs both sides of his head

with his fingers, literally signalling the source of his psychological distress. He is sitting up in his bunk having moved to this position earlier in the exchange. In a reverse shot, rather than showing compassion for a man clearly in psychological pain, Reverend John points his fingers at Jack and loudly demands that Jack ask for forgiveness. Jack then moves to stand. As he continues his assertion that God is to blame for his downfall whilst moving towards Reverend John, his voice lowers to a whispered intensity. The men are in a two shot. Jack's position is revealed to be rooted in the same evangelical Christian worldview where he finds no solace in his God and Reverend John sees potential for forgiveness. The performances are filled with melodramatic moments through voice and gesture. It is in the modulation of the quiet-loud-quiet that reveals the emotional significance of the scene. Quietness does not indicate ease or resolution, but an inability to fully communicate pain. The dynamic range of the voices is highly expressive of the impossibility of attaining resolution to inner turmoil.

<Insert Figure 2 here> Caption: Figure 2: Jack/del Toro, "hell?, This is hell".

This exchange is an example of the gendered components to the male voice, as described by Michel Chion, '[t]he man's shout delimits a territory' his 'cry is centrifugal and structuring' (1999: 79). In the raising of the pitch of the voice, it is an attempt to claim space and dominance. The effort to establish this space and dominance is stymied in AGI's films, not by the other person in the scene, but by the character's own inner turmoil. The crisis takes place in Jack's own hell, inside his head, which is the location of his psychological trauma. There is an imperative on him not to inflict this violence on another and to contain his impulse to express himself loudly and violently.

Similar dynamic range is evident in *Birdman*. *Birdman* has been described as both a metafilm (Tierney 2018: 233), because it's partly about Hollywood and the process of acting, and satirical, because Michael Keaton (as Riggan), Edward Norton (as Mike) and Emma Stone (as Sam) are all 'refugees from superhero franchises' (Brown 2014: np). That is, they are all actors with considerable experience in superhero films, a form rarely acknowledged for performances, as evident in the paucity of awards given for acting in such franchises. Keaton, himself downplays his acting abilities. When interviewed by the journalist, Lane Brown, in an article entitled 'The Real Comeback of the Fake Michael Keaton: Scenes From the *Birdman* Set', emphasis is placed on Keaton's propensity to refuse roles the first time he is offered them because he does not think of himself as the best actor for the role, 'I always think that I'm not going to be right for a movie, or that there's someone else who can do it better' (Brown 2014: np). In a film that is imbued with metafictional layering, when interviewed the actors are keen to affirm their affinity to the theatre and their need to perform convincingly as Broadway actors in the play within the film. This meta-textual foregrounding of performance encourages attention to the actors' performances. Press reception, such as Brown's article reveals this tendency. What she does is a succinct and implicit unpicking of their star texts as actors with capacity to contribute to genre and prestige productions. Keaton's refusal is to be understood as symptomatic of his perfectionism and modesty, which works to downplay his star persona, a status more associated with surplus value than acting ability.

By evoking performance narratively, AGI has drawn on Keaton's star text as someone with capacity to deploy an acting range that crosses genre and star vehicles to nuance the portrayal of masculinity and yet, Keaton and the other actors in *Birdman* display similar elements of the dynamic melodramatic performances evident

in AGI's other films. One scene which particularly emblemizes AGI's mobilization of dynamic melodramatic performance is when Riggan goes to thank his daughter, Sam, for her work that ends with a confrontation about her drug use. The scene begins with Riggan and Sam in a two shot. The room is low ceilinged and through the use of forced perspective by the cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, Sam looks small and distant, at first, and Riggan looms large in the foreground. She is writing or doodling on a toilet roll while sitting at a table, idling her time apparently aimlessly. He speaks quietly in a near mumble, thanking Sam. He then starts to pace and sniff the air, and noting a particularly pungent aroma, asks her where she has hidden her drugs. As he scours the room, the frequency of his voice increases and by the time he finds a partly smoked joint, he is shouting, '[y]ou can't do this to me' (Figure 3). She is still small in the frame. As he moves back towards the table to confront her, they are shot on the same plane and now look distant from the viewer and each other, although they are facing each other. At this point both are shouting at each other. She challenges him and as the fight continues to escalate the camera moves to a mid-shot of only Riggan. We continue to hear her side of the fight, but it is his movements and presence that dominate the visual frame. As the fight and the scene comes to an end, his voice lowers in pitch and his body language becomes less overt as he drops and shakes his head, and says, '[t]his is my career. This is my chance to finally do something that means something'. Sam responds by asking rhetorically, '[m]eans something to who?' Again, we see the audio-visual dynamics of excess at work in this scene to externalize the emotional turmoil that lacks resolution. Riggan's comic-tragedy lies in his frustrated ambition that is not understood by those around him. There is no release for Riggan for the suffering he is going through in this melodramatic scene.

<Insert Figure 3 Here> Caption: Figure 3: Riggan/Keaton, ‘[y]ou can’t do this to me’

Not only does AGI’s awareness of the melodramatic mode come into play in these scenes between Jack and the Reverend and Riggan and Sam, but it is also consistent with his background as a DJ with an ear to the independent US and Mexican music scenes (see Paul Julian Smith’s article in this issue). The loud quiet loud modulation is reminiscent of independent music of the 1990s and early 2000s that finds a useful unpicking in the documentary about the US band the Pixies, *loudQUIETloud: A Film About the Pixies* (Steven Cantor and Matthew Galkin, 2006). AGI varies the modulation with characters coming in quiet and building their volume to loud often returning to quiet again. The lack of subtlety in the loud-quiet range, is reflective of the melodramatic shift that happens and finds parallels in a musical style with a particular cultural currency that chimes with what has been called the ‘independent’ aesthetic of the cinematography and narratives of Iñárritu’s early films (see, Tierney 2018: 56-58). Characters, such as Jack and Riggan may begin quietly, but their intense emotions are marked by the quiet-loud-quiet dynamic range rather than pace or purely through language and a mix of macro- and micro-gesture, as may be the case in other roles.

### **Whispered fights**

The dynamic range is often used to shift up and down from speaking to shouting, but whispers are often used in AGI’s melodramatic mode to indicate heightened emotion. For example, Santiago’s (Gael García Bernal) whispered conversation with Amelia (Adriana Barraza) when approaching the Mexican-US border in *Babel* (2006) is an



indicator of stress and concern, that precedes his impulse decision to speed up his car and break through the border. The low volume interaction is accompanied by the young girl, Debbie's (Elle Fanning), high pitched screams, Amelia's concerned shouts, and the border guards yelling requests for back up into their two-way radios against the sound of the car driving away at speed along a dusty road. The effect is of a sudden change in mode from realism to melodrama. Santiago and Amelia continue on to a main road having an agitated and loud argument whilst the children sob in the back seat. The plot shift into which Santiago impels Amelia and the children into the desert is not consistent with realism and has been criticized elsewhere (Podalsky 2011: 140). At this point in the narrative, Santiago's vocal domination determine the tragedy that is to follow. Santiago is obviously fully aware of the risks and requirements of border crossing, so to ram the border is to place himself and others in a situation that creates problems beyond those that already exist for those traversing this fraught and contested geopolitical space. The quiet panic García Bernal/Santiago performs through whispers flags up the turn in this plot to melodrama.

The form of whispering in these scenes is what Michael McCallion describes as the 'stage whisper' (1988: 189). Originating in the theatre, as the name suggests, it is a vocal performance that requires the actor to project the voice within a theatre space. To attain this 'the actor has to pump out air at a prodigal rate and finds in consequence that he [sic] has great difficulty in getting out more than half-a-dozen words on a breath' (McCallion 1988: 189). Such performances result in a breathy, tense, and quick delivery that transmits the high emotion of the scene.

Modulation of (primarily male voices) in whispered tones is a way that AGI indicates melodramatic plot points in his films, as evidenced in *Amores perros*. At his

brother Ramiro's (Marco Pérez) funeral, Octavio (Gael García Bernal) attempts to convince Susana (Vanessa Bauche) to come away with him. In a film most usually associated and analysed with reference to its use of an MTV-style musical soundtrack, this scene is remarkable in its quietness. It begins with Octavio arriving at the funeral home and limping on crutches towards the coffin and then moving towards Susana in the doorway. He speaks to her in a whisper that increases in pitch as their exchange becomes heightened, when she refuses to run away with him. It is the moment when his point of view is clearly questioned by her response and the *mise en scène* reveals his disconnect with what is going on around him. His timing is clearly insensitive and self-centred. Susana has just lost her husband. Yet, Octavio's inability to realize this whilst simultaneously maintaining a whispered conversation that respects the requirement to modify volume, is an indicator of a clash between his worldview and acknowledges the social construct which tells men that they have dominion over the women they sleep with and/or give money to, which leads him to want to claim what he thinks as his right (Susana) despite the impropriety of this belief.

Music is at play in Bernal's vocal performances that are embodied. The relationship between the voice and the body has been described by Roland Barthes as the 'grain' of the voice which is 'the body in the voice as it sings, the head as it writes, the limb as it performs' (1977: 188). He finds the physical presence of the performer in the voice, which is underlined by the actors' performances in each film I have considered through their emphatic gestures. Both Santiago in *Babel* and Octavio in *Amores perros* are played by Gael García Bernal, which says something about what he brings to his performances as a theatre-trained actor. This is an issue I do not have space for here. Nonetheless, the trace of similar dynamic masculinity throughout AGI's films tells us much about his directorial style. Barthes also links the grain of

the voice to music, both in the musicality of the voice – its timbre and resonance – and actual musical performance. In addition, melodrama is a form often accompanied by a score that encourages affective response. AGI's films illustrate this Barthesian equation of the voice and music in their focus on the actor's voices and its musical qualities.

### **Music, melodrama and emotion**

The melodramatic masculinity can be found in the vocal performances and the musical 'intensity' noted by Tierney (2018: 233) in her analysis of *Birdman* and *The Revenant*. Writing about *Danzón* (Maria Novaro 1992) and *Salón México* (Emilio Fernández 1948), Tierney (has identified how the traditional musical genre of the bolero is crucial to setting the mood and tone of the Mexican melodrama (1997: 365-366). Orchestral arrangements as a means of setting the mood in melodrama is particularly evident in recent more conventional melodramas, such as those of Mexican director Patricia Riggen, *Bajo la misma luna/Under the Same Moon* (2007) and *Los 33/The 33* (2015) (see, also, Sadlier 2009). However, because AGI uses contemporary, urban or ambient music, his films do not have this similar setting of mood and tone. For instance, the percussive score by the Mexican jazz performer Antonio Sánchez in *Birdman* or the long-standing collaboration with the Argentine musician and composer Gustavo Santoalalla, whose foregrounding of the guitar-like Andean charango in his scores is evident in *Amores perros* and *Babel*. The instrumentation used in Santoalalla's scores is worth pausing on because it makes for interesting comparison with other contemporary melodramas and establishes a

confused affinity with the long tradition of Latin American popular political protest songs as represented by Mercedes Sosa and Victor Jara.

Santoalalla's evocative and affective score for *Amores perros* has led to subsequent involvement in other film and television projects. These have included writing original compositions (for example, *Brokeback Mountain* Ang Lee, 2005) as well as licensing his compositions for use on soundtracks and writing arrangements for existing compositions. Santoalalla's most often uses the charango, a 'transcultural instrument' (Bauman 2004: np) resulting from the adaptation of Spanish musical instruments in rural regions of the Andean countries (including Bolivia and Peru). The charango later gained more widespread use in urban areas crossing into Chile and Argentina as a result of rural migration to the city by indigenous peoples. It was popularized by *nueva canción*, the political folk music that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, a period of considerable turbulence and unrest in Latin America (Bauman 2004 and Pedrotti 2012: 40-42). Usually played solo, the charango is a high-pitched instrument that is associated with a specific geographic region primarily populated by indigenous peoples, but not a single musical genre (Pedrotti 2012). Therefore, it simultaneously evokes space, originary subjects and a contingent political valorization of the popular, all the while it conveys heightened emotion. The last of these is its primary function in AGI's films. As with the performances AGI elicits from his actors, the melodrama evoked is gendered by AGI's placement of the score alongside moments of the male characters' feeling. The intensity and dynamic range of this expression is evident where Santoalalla employs the charango to its full potential as an instrument that facilitates staccato plucking that leads to a sparse and minimalist motif or chord harmonization that creates a layered, sonorous and vibrato effect.

Frequently working on film and TV projects that evoke nature as experienced in wild, expansive and dramatic spaces, such as *Diarios de motocicleta/The Motorcycle Diaries* (Walter Salles, 2004), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn, 2007) and *Making a Murderer* (2015 - ), Santoalalla has also written original themes for television dramas that deploy elements of the melodrama, such as, *Jane the Virgin* (2014 - 2019), a series that frequently references Mexican television soap opera tropes and style in a parodic and self-referential fashion. Taking into account the full range of his output, here is a pattern that emerges in how his compositions and arrangements are used. Santoalalla employs the charango implicitly linking space, otherness and alterity, and to evoke the full range of emotions, which proves a useful tool for AGI in how he structures masculinity. Santoalalla's score works as a counterpoint to the emotionally charged moments. In the scenes I have analysed, there is no music used, just ambient sound. The soundtrack operates not to emphasize a particular moment, instead it is used to set a mood for the film. Music is introduced to suture sequences, but also to establish tone that is disrupted by emotional outbursts whose quietness and stillness become foregrounded as a consequence.

The scoring of these films as well as the other musical choices can be understood as moves that homogenize Latin America as an undifferentiated referent and are dislocating. Such a critique chime with Ignacio Sánchez Prado's (2006) reading of *Amores perros* as a form of commoditization of Mexico and Latin America to external audiences and AGI's insertion into a transnational film market. However, such displacement establishes an unsettling otherness in the mood of the film and is integral to AGI's melodramatic masculinity. In their excessive scoring AGI's films

establish music as an over-riding presence that when absent makes quietness more startling, thus adding to the underlying mood of the film.

Quiet and silence prove challenging to discuss in the film score (see, Greene 2016). Writing about the cinema of Michael Haneke, a director whose work is marked by minimalism and silences, Lisa Coulthard (2012: 96) has identified ‘acoustic incommensurability’ as a defining element in Haneke’s work, which resonates with AGI’s films. In Haneke it occurs at a narrative level where ‘denied the power of a final, conclusive word – there is a sense that there is always more to tell’ (2012: 96). A similar tendency can be found in the films of AGI through these melodramatic dynamics where the ‘failed communications’ are ‘frequently tied to a freezing of emotions under late capitalism’ (Coulthard 2012: 88). In Haneke, these sublimations lead to extreme and brutal acts of violence, in AGI there is a more complicated combination of repression and occasional release but always a sense of withholding and lack of resolution. Jack’s powerful pauses in *21 Grams* are an instance of these.

## **Conclusion**

The melodrama in AGI’s films is attentive to male concerns and modes of emotional expression. If we consider how his male characters demonstrate traces of melodrama it is through the emotional excesses and demonstrative performativity of the actors, their vocal performances and the ways they embody their pain and suffering.

Octavio’s injuries after the car accident in *Amores perros* are more than the inevitable outcome of the terrible crash, they could be read as the physical manifestation of the crippling of his ambitions to leave with Susana. Riggan in *Birdman* enacts his inner turmoil in a series of fantasy sequences. In one he imagines performing telekinetic

stunts in his hotel room. In another he imagines himself flying through the streets of New York to the St James Theater. Glass in *The Revenant* is injured so severely by the bear attack, and so traumatized by the murder of his son that his survival and journey to get vengeance appear to be almost mythic. Each one of these roles demand that the actors perform psychical and/or psychological pain that constitutes a kind of oxymoronic vulnerable hyper-masculinity. AGI's characters are frequently disenfranchised and alienated, not by patriarchy, but by other social factors or power structures that mitigate against their successful realization of their selves, such as (neo)colonialism, immigrant policies and economic instability (see, Tierney 2018: 59-64) that imply a Mexican perspective to his world building.

In interviews AGI asserts his Mexican identity and nationality, simultaneously proclaiming that he is Mexican and disavowing any national specificity of his style, '[y]es, I am a Mexican, and I have a past and a culture. But what matters is the film itself, not where it was financed or cast. Cinema is universal, beyond flags and borders and passports' (Rohter 2008: np). It is worth unpicking this assertion. Any claims he makes to universality in creativity risks ignoring his own privilege and disadvantage. No doubt, it is useful for AGI to claim universality as a way of projecting a career from his particular perspective in 2009 that asserts a desire to attain a firm place in mainstream distribution and circulation. To challenge his assertion of a universal language in his cinema is to highlight his specificity and grounding in Mexican filmmaking culture. This article's audio-visual material thinking through of his use of the melodramatic mode, and in particular his melodramatic masculinities, re-positions the legacy of his work without disavowing his espousal of broader techniques and experimentation from other national, international or transnational cinemas.

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to Alejandro González Iñárritu as AGI for the avoidance of confusion because he recently changed his name to Alejandro G. Iñárritu and thus is differently credited in his filmography.