

# Mexican Retrogrades in the Wave of American Film Culture

Jiayi Zhang

Beijing Sport University, Beijing 100084, China

noelia\_2019@qq.com

**Abstract.** As one of the most penetrating media, film is an important expression of national cultural soft power. From the beginning of the 20th century to the present, American film culture has swept the world, directly or indirectly dominating the global screen entertainment. Relying on its mature film industry, the United States has rapidly penetrated its culture and values to the world, affecting the cultural identities of other countries. (Under the long-term hegemony of "Hollywood" values, the Mexican film culture as its neighbor has been seriously affected. In Hollywood films, Mexico seems to be synonymous with "chaos", "poverty" and "violence". For Mexican filmmakers, how to keep the Mexican style in the film in the "encirclement and suppression" of American films is the first problem, and then the goal is to show the real Mexico to the world. In response to this situation, some Mexican filmmakers have successively tried a genre-based creative path, transplanting the Hollywood genre film model into the local narrative, in order to achieve a balance between commerciality and artistry. This is also the goal that a group of Mexican filmmakers of the new genre have always pursued. They reject the domineering "cultural fusion" of Hollywood, but take the initiative to choose the "wall" that crosses national borders, galloping into the global film industry with Mexican concepts and creativity. One of the worthiest of exploration is the Mexican director Alessandro Gonzalez Inarito, because he has lived in the United States for a long time, so he has witnessed the situation of Mexicans in the United States, in his film *The two perspectives of the United States and Mexico* have appeared many times, intuitively revealing Mexico in the eyes of Americans. And almost all the films he shoots contain Mexican elements, trying to break the world's stereotypes about Mexico through the perspective of Mexicans. In the past ten years, Mexican films have made good news on the international stage and become one of the most active countries in the film industry in the world. Therefore, through the study of Alessandro's films, it is necessary to break the Mexico established by the United States and to re-establish the understanding of Mexico and its films.

**Keywords:** American-Mexican Film; Alejandro González Iñárritu; Death Trilogy.

## 1. Introduction

The American film industry has swept the world, especially the culture and business of Los Angeles and New York, more commonly referred to as "Hollywood", which has a direct or indirect impact on global screen entertainment. In terms of industrial production systems, Hollywood represents the most mature in the world. A creation method that incorporates other cultural elements is designed to improve cultural output by wrapping American social and humanistic concepts in the shells of different cultures. It is possible to summarize American cultural values as follows: Advocating individualism, the pursuit of personal freedom, equality for all, competition and struggle, the importance of material things, the pursuit of happiness, and the importance of practicality. In *Citizen Kane*, produced in the 1940s, the individual sought freedom and independence; in *Rocky*, produced in the 1970s, the boxer struggled against gangster stereotypes; and then in *Forrest Gump*, produced in the 1990s. As a representative of American mainstream consciousness, the pursuit of life and the aesthetic pursuit of life hope are reflected; at the beginning of the millennium, the Hollywood film *The Pursuit of Happiness*, in which Chris is at any given moment, reflects the value of the pursuit of happiness. All of them believe that happiness must be created by themselves and that they are capable of creating it themselves. The public has gradually become disenchanted with the heroism portrayed in the Marvel series in recent years. As a result of the word-of-mouth buzz surrounding the movie *The Eternals*, it is apparent that the previously favored "American blockbuster" is losing its appeal and that films such as *Nomadland* are becoming more popular in exposing the other side of American freedom. Some members of a family recently revealed their "freedom status."

## 2. Alejandro Gonzalez and his Death Trilogy

### 2.1 The Mexican-American

More and more people are recognizing the drawbacks of pursuing extreme freedom under traditional American values. The Mexican film industry, as its neighbor, has also been significantly affected by the long-term hegemony of Hollywood values during the last century. Additionally, the financial crisis that erupted in 1994 caused the Mexican film industry to suffer its worst crisis yet. In 1995, there were only nine Mexican films produced, compared to 200 in previous years. Additionally, only 10% of the Mexican film screen quota is reserved for domestic films. For example, in 1998, there were 183 American films screened in Mexico and eight Mexican films. Therefore, Mexican filmmakers in the 1990s were faced with the challenge of surviving Hollywood films, a weak economy, and neurotic politics. This environment, however, has resulted in the emergence of a new genre of Mexican filmmakers. Rather than being dominated by Hollywood's dominant "fusion," they prefer to build a wall that crosses national boundaries. Mexican concepts, creativity, and film production techniques are used, and they become knowledgeable about Hollywood technology, and attempt to capitalize on the powerful capital investment of multinational groups in the film industry to gain international recognition, most notable being the uniqueness of the Mexican-American films directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. Mexico City was the birthplace of the director. At the age of five, his father became a vegetable supplier with low paid for a small restaurant since the economic recession. Even in the capital, Mexico City, there were a significant number of social problems in the 1960s. Various violent acts were repeatedly banned, and violent incidents such as shootings at shopping malls appeared repeatedly as well. In such an environment, Akira Kurosawa's classic work *Rashomon* influenced the artistic path of little Alejandro. A theme of Alejandro's films is the pursuit of kindness and the call for beautiful human emotions. The multi-line parallel narrative is also used by Latin American writers, such as the Argentine writers Jorge Borges, Ernesto Sabato, and others. The work is consistently styled. Through *Amores Perros*, the director not only integrates the native culture of Mexico with the acquired culture of the United States but also creates a distinctive style of film-making. Since the director had studied in the United States during the later period of the film, he was aware that Mexicans had "low self-esteem" when compared with Americans and faced the "wall" between the United States and Mexico. That wall, according to Gonzalez, was the largest in the world; it only blocked the Mexican road to the United States, while the American road to Mexico was unobstructed. The tragic situation of Mexicans in the United States has been witnessed by Alejandro as a beneficiary of American film and television culture. Since he is a foreigner, he can empathize with the huge economic and cultural differences. Accordingly, the cultural core, audio-visual language, and other elements of the "Death Trilogy" all reflect the personal "barrier" between people, between countries, between languages, and between cultures. *Babel* and Iñárritu's prior works, *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*, are also considered a "Death Trilogy". In an interview, Iñárritu proposed the concept of "barrier". As a creative concept, "the three films have a consistent theme. In the trilogy, I expressed my concern for people's living conditions and spiritual confusion, especially the difficulties they face in communicating". These three works are collectively referred to as the "Death Trilogy" by scholars.

### 2.2 The Barriers in His Film

Because the last part of the Death Trilogy, *Babel*, has had a considerable impact on the world, both domestic and foreign scholars have conducted more research on it. According to some scholars, there are two types of barriers in "Babel": the barrier between couples in the United States resulting from psychological misreading; Moroccan and Mexican relations are hindered by an unbalanced economic and cultural development.

The first type of barrier is the loss of a third child by Richard and Susan, a young couple from the United States. The loss of a child was Susan's lingering nightmare, as well as losing the past between her and her husband. In spite of Susan's deep guilt over the child's death, she dared not confront

Richard's concern. Despite their deep love for one another, life's hardships and misfortunes, as well as their mutual misunderstandings, continue to batter the "besieged city" of their love; their different ideologies further deepen their separation, despite their efforts to communicate. However, it always ends in mutual accusations. Due to mutual incomprehension, the two hearts drift away from one another and become increasingly distant. As a result of the long-term barrier, Susan was filled with a fear of communication. In the film, there is a scene in which Susan's hand accidentally touches Richard's. She withdraws her hand as if she has been shocked by electricity. Although Susan still loves Richard deeply in her heart, and Richard also loves Susan deeply, Susan's heart is filled with fear, fear of rejection, and fear of further injury. Susan was prevented from expressing her true inner thoughts as a result of this psychological barrier and her fear of communication failure.

In the second type of barrier, we analyze the part of Mexico that best reflects the director's own experience. Debbie and Mike say the director commented on the stereotypes of Mexico from people in economically developed countries, represented by the United States, stating, "I don't like Mexico" and "Mexico is really dangerous" due to the fact that the children were sitting on the rags of Santiago's car, the dark and rough faces that were different from white Americans, the strange and dilapidated buildings, the anti-mainstream colors, and the unsettling noise. All of these elements portray poverty, desperation, and danger. This passive and negative attitude toward a culture completely unfamiliar to them is due to the influence of their parents' dominant values and the American dominant culture. Despite what they see on camera, Mexican culture is not all there is to Mexican culture. Even if it was, it would only be one aspect of Mexican culture that differs from American culture. It is not entirely attributable to their mothers that the children have a negative image of Mexico and a reluctance to embrace this exotic culture. An unbalanced economy is characterized by a barrier and conflict between the two cultures.

### 2.3 The Methods to Strengthen the Theme

A constant theme of his films is the "Barrier" theme, which he has independently created in terms of film language, film sound effects, etc., resulting in a distinctive film style that is unique to him. By continuously innovating the way of telling stories, he is able to create a unique style, structure, and texture to the film, strengthening the impact of the theme and the feeling of "barrier" he wishes to convey.

#### Method 1: An Explicit "Barrier" Via the Overall Picture

Photojournalism is primarily based on hand-held photography, which is widely used in television dramas and movies to convey a documentary style, or to illustrate an uneasy state. As a matter of fact, the kind of realism that *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams* display — hand-held camera shake images with grainy images, moving frames, and long shots — would remind us of documentaries or Real Movies. By using different shooting techniques, in contrast to the first two films, in which the United States and Mexico were consciously not distinguished, in the third film the director attempted to emphasize Morocco and the different countries, as well as the various classes within each of these countries (with the United States, couples are different). In the Moroccan plate, the hand-held camera plays a prominent role, with Morocco appearing very different from Santiago in the United States thanks to the use of 16mm film. The 16mm film format is ideal for depicting Morocco's miserable, almost dirty, chaotic environment. Through the use of Bleach Bypass to increase the contrast of the image, it adds to the gradual recording of the emotional connection between the American couples, such as highlighting the grey in Richard's hair and beard. The high contrast of the image clearly represents Richard's emotional distress. According to Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, holding a camera is the best way to experience the world from the vantage point of a human being and to see the world from the perspective of the character in the film. The reason for this is that it is the most natural perspective. Therefore, handheld cameras are commonly used throughout Iñárritu's trilogy. In addition, the lens in the film is used to express the plot and the theme regardless of the method used. "Babel", which reveals the director's fear, doubt, and distrust of the real problems of racial and cultural differences and language communication, is the most notable of the director's films related to "barrier".

personal experience. The documentary role of handheld photography contributed greatly to strengthening the expression of "Barrier".

#### Method 2: Explicit "Barrier" in Music Via Sound

The sound world of Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's films is noisy, and his real and restless world is portrayed completely in his films: The interweaving of shrill barks and cheers in the dog-fighting arena; explosions and cries, scattered parts, and automobile whistles at the accident site; the whirring of wind and the clanging of stones at the US-Mexico border; the sounds of ping-pong-pong gunshots in the Moroccan desert; Japanese metropolises constantly reverberated. The world of human life is characterized by repeated commercial breaks and news reports. In order to create a local color for the movie, music with local characteristics, local opera, and local folk art can be selected according to the place where the movie story is taking place.

A classic approach to this problem is to use silent sound in a chaotic and noisy environment. In "Babel", Chieko, a Japanese dumb girl, is depicted in the scene when her friends enter the disco. Normal people perceive discos as chaotic and loud, but mute women perceive discos as silent. A number of short shots were spliced at this time, and the worlds of noise and silence alternated. There were three repetitions of this, which deeply affected the audience. The shot depicts the disco environment with a background of music and human voices; when the shot switches to Chieko's first viewpoint, there is silence; the flashing and gorgeous lights on the dance floor and the dancing people seem to be having a silent carnival; the silence here represents Chieko's daily life, allowing the viewer to gain a deeper understanding of her. The silent world is in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of a noisy world. The second silent substitution occurs in the movie when Chieko watches the boy she likes hugging and kissing her friend. Her ecstasy is conveyed through the silence. Through this implicit expression, Iárritu expresses the loneliness and sadness of Chieko's inability to receive love. It is evident from the sound effects that the theme of "Barrier" is gradually deepened as they progress.

#### Method 3: Enhancing the "Barrier" via Editing

Due to her professional experience, Iñárritu is particularly fond of the MTV-style narrative. *Amores Perros* adopts MTV-like shooting and editing techniques, which creates a stronger visual impact for the audience as Octavio engages in dog fighting and Ramiro engages in criminal activity. Shock. The fast editing in *21 Grams* made the film look as if it was made for MTV, causing a formal rupture and creating a large gap between the scenes. It is through this kind of editing that the narration of the film jumps up and down. This allows the audience to continuously travel through, reflect on, and explore the director's intentions in both the film and reality.

There is also a unique connection between the montages in this film. In most cases, they use the same background music to connect, and sometimes they don't use any music at all. Although they connect two different scenes, they appear so natural that the audience cannot detect any abruptness. Actually, it is a connection in connotation or meaning. As well as the connection between the two, which aims to portray the same scene, it also features a slapstick scene where brothers slap each other in the remote Moroccan countryside, revealing the location of the shooting and the nanny taking the child to a village in Mexico. This editing method highlights the regional contrast more clearly, and the theme of "barrier" runs throughout. Additionally, the film employs a better method of connection, namely the contrast method. Due to her screams of pain, Susan was suddenly transported to the voiceless world of Japan's Chieko when the village doctor sutured Susan's wound. It is through this type of interspersed sound and silence that the "barrier" is highlighted. To put it simply, the montage connection of this film is also unique. This film's parallel and intersecting narrative structure allows the director to fully exploit his free montage techniques, which is also conceivable.

#### Method 4: Enhancing the "Barrier" via Color

Iñárritu's films emphasize the ideographic effects of color. The movie *Babel* was deliberately colored by Iñárritu to convey stories that are set in different countries and families, with the purpose of connecting three independent stories, which results in a cohesive visual effect. For example, reddish-brown is used in the Moroccan Brothers Tale, vermilion is used in the Mexican Nanny Tale, and pink tones are used in the Japanese Girl Tale. The red transformation creates a more consistent

visual effect by maintaining *Babel's* visual effects in red. The film's tone was also controlled by Iñárritu by means of color filters in order to achieve the best visual effect. Iñárritu deftly manipulated the corridor, background, and upstairs lighting in the Japanese girl's story in order to emphasize the girl's psychological transformation from excitement to loss. For example, to light the corridor, Kino Flos with dark orange filter paper is used; when the girl goes upstairs, the Kino Flos is switched to green filter paper; when the girl enters her room, the Kino Flos with yellow filter paper is used. The transition of color from red to green to yellow reflects the girl's psychological changes very effectively.

### 3. Summary

In summary, the pattern of Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's film works has gradually expanded from the limitations of his own nation to global social issues. His vision has continued to expand as well. In addition to reflecting on his own life, his films also go beyond individual experience itself, focusing on various barriers to communication. Through the film, the director focuses on real life, the plight of human existence, the loneliness that is a part of living a life, and the resulting metaphor, and through the film, he thinks about and expresses what it means to be human and what it means to be self-existent. His films combine these elements with non-linear structures and metaphor-filled magical realism imagery, forming a distinctive style. In addition to his natural and profound directing style, the story pays attention to structure, the relationship between characters is complex, and the writing is realistic yet not lacking in the director's genius-like vision. Along with technology, he also investigated the concept of human existence and the meaning of self-existence, explored the thickness of life, re-called the humanistic spirit in postmodern society, and re-thought about "communication".

### References

- [1] Agustin, M., & John, H. Latin America's Film Industry Paradox: 5 Countries With Loud Fest Titles (and Quiet Box Office Payoffs). *The Hollywood Reporter*, Vol. 2 (2016) No. 13, p. 88-89.
- [2] Brian, N. Yankee Invasion of Mexico, or Mexican Invasion of Hollywood? Hollywood's Renewed Spanish-language Production of 1938-1939. *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, Vol. 4(1998) No.17,p. 79-94.
- [3] Jia Weixi. An Analysis of the Globalization Strategy of Contemporary Hollywood Films. *Drama Home* Vol.07, (2022). p. 160-162.
- [4] Jorge Ayala Blanco & Cui Yan. Heresy in Mexican Cinema (Preface). *Contemporary Cinema* Vol. 09 (2009), p. 117-119.
- [5] Gao Hongyan & Li Sitan. The Door of Barrier and the Way of Fusion: An Analysis of the Influence of the United States on Mexican Cinema. *Contemporary Cinema* Vol.11 (2016), p. 105-108.
- [6] Li Bin. Deeply Rooted and Lightly Flying: A Study of Mexican-American Director Inarido's Films. *Contemporary Films* Vol.10 (2015),p. 121-127.
- [7] Li Li. The Formal Expression of Curse: The Tower of Babel. *Contemporary Cinema* Vol.04 (2007),p. 153-156.
- [8] Liu Yan. The Unique Creation Techniques of Inarido's Films. *Film Literature* Vol.01(2017), p. 78-80.
- [9] Shi Yajuan. The Orientalist Perspective of the Film "Babel Tower". *Art Wide Angle* Vol.05, (2007), p. 35-37.
- [10] Wang Shan & Li Jiayao. Research on the Current Situation of Mexican Film Industry. *Contemporary Film* Vol.11 (2016), p. 98-104.
- [11] Tong Meiru. A Narrative Interpretation of "Babel Tower". *Film Literature* Vol.12. (2007),p. 134.
- [12] Tong Yuhua. The Study of Mexican Cinema after the 1990s. *Contemporary Cinema* Vol.02, (2006), p. 116-129.
- [13] Wang Wenrong. A Mexican film with all kinds of amorous feelings. *Film*.Vol.10 (2007), p.52.
- [14] Wang Xinke: Alejandro González Iñárritu Film Studies (Master's Thesis, Hunan University, China, 2019). p. 15.

- [15] Zhao Xuan. Three film and television texts and an oriental complex: a comparative literary figurative interpretation of the films "Memoirs of a Geisha", "The Veil" and "Babel Tower". *Film Literature* Vol.13 (2007), p. 34-35.