

21 Grams

Mexican filmmakers Guillermo Arriaga, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu, and Rodrigo Prieto (writer, director, and cinematographer, respectively) had a foreign film hit three years ago with *Amores Perros* ("Love's a Bitch") wherein three apparently random lives intersected around a horrible car accident. The three stories were shot in high-contrast, desaturated color and told in jumpy, crisscross style, pointedly out-of-sequence. Now making their first film in los Estados Unidos, *21 Grams*, these *muchachos* and the rest of their team have confected a tale of: three apparently random lives intersecting around a horrible car accident, all shot in high-contrast, desaturated color within a jumpy, crisscross style, pointedly out-of-sequence.

Seeing the first of their films will not help you decipher this new version of how fates intersect. *21 Grams* (the weight supposedly lost at the moment of death) links an ex-con, Jack (Benicio Del Toro), who has found Jesus and is struggling to straighten out his life, Christina (Naomi Watts), a nervous mother and wife who suffers a crushing tragedy, and Paul (Sean Penn), a mathematics professor who will die if he doesn't receive a heart transplant. All are dramatically thrown together through the calamitous accident.

Now playing with time sequences can be intriguing in forming motion picture narratives--viz., *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*...even *Amores Perros*. But Messrs. Arriaga and Gonzalez go too far this time. At one point in *21 Grams*, math professor Paul introduces fractals--a complex dimensional geometry--to the puzzled Christina, and one feels the filmmakers themselves want to tell their story in fractals, in jagged fragments of narrative that leap from back to front, middle to side, front to middle... However, there is no consistent pattern (as in *Memento*) which the viewer can discern. The fragments are too random, offering little or no reward for concentrated effort. A more straightforward telling of the tale would have *heightened* the drama and avoided what is self-indulgent time-bending.

Yet it's worth checking out *21 Grams* to see its performances, which are thrilling. Sean Penn, already on a role with his portrayal of a tough Boston mug in *Mystic River*, has here a more measured, nuanced role which he handles securely, moving from weary cynicism to guarded hope. Del Toro perhaps has the hardest part to assay, making convincing his stolid religious conversion, but, to this viewer, he pulled it off. The torments he goes through, especially in the context of his beloved family, are genuinely agonizing. Watts, though, as Christina, is extraordinary. Starting from an uncomplicated character, she plays complicated and profound emotions, from apocalyptic grief to delicate winsomeness (when being courted by Paul) to stomach-turning rage. She shows a range and power that should be considered at awards time.

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