

Violent excess and vague liberalism

Amores Perros, directed by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu

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Amores Perros, a nominee for best foreign film at the US Academy Awards earlier this year, is the first feature for Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, a 37-year-old Mexican director. The film has attracted attention for its depiction of life in contemporary Mexico City.

The movie is organized as a triptych of three distinct but interlinked stories, in a similar fashion to Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic*. The title is loosely translated as "Love's a Bitch," and the name has a double meaning. The stories each deal with love and with dogs. All of the protagonists share an obsessive attachment to their animals, and also strive desperately for human relationships that elude them and that end in tragedy or despair.

The film begins with the scene of a dog bleeding to death in the back seat of a car as it speeds through the streets of the city. The driver of the car and his passenger are screaming frantically at one another. The driver is Octavio (Gael Garcia Bernal), a working class youth who lives with his mother, brother and sister-in-law in a poor section of the city. In this opening scene he is heading towards a horrific auto accident, the event that ties together the characters in the three segments of the movie.

Octavio tries to win the love of Susana (Vanessa Bauche), who is married to his shiftless and abusive brother Ramiro (Marco Perez). Seeking to get the cash to flee with Susana, Octavio enters his rottweiler Cofi into illegal dog-fighting competitions. This leads to bloody confrontation with local thugs, ending in tragedy.

The second story is "Daniel y Valeria," the rather pathetic romance of a top fashion model (Goya Toledo) and an upper middle class magazine publisher (Alvaro

Guerrero). Daniel has left his wife and young daughters for Valeria, and they have just ensconced themselves in an expensive high-rise apartment. Before they have settled in, however, Valeria is badly maimed in the same auto accident with which the film begins. The relationship turns sour almost immediately. Valeria's modeling career is finished, and her adored and pampered Lhasa apso becomes trapped under the floorboards of the apartment. She turns violently against her new lover.

The third tale is entitled "El Chivo y Maru." El Chivo (Emilio Echevarria) is a former college professor who left his family years ago to become a left-wing guerrilla. Terrorism led to a prison sentence, and now he is homeless, living in an abandoned building with a group of scruffy dogs he had adopted and dotes upon. El Chivo survives by carrying out contract killings on behalf of a former jailer. Maru is his estranged daughter, whom he left as a child, and whom he now seeks desperately to contact and establish a relationship with.

The director has said that his aim was to show the enormous contradictions of the city, the largest in the Americas. If this is his only goal, he has perhaps achieved it in part. But a film dealing with the social cauldron that is Mexico City must shed some light on the conditions it depicts. On this ground, the film is a failure.

The first two stories convey, in a limited way, the polarization that has grown tremendously in Mexico in recent years, following IMF-imposed austerity, the North American Free Trade Agreement and all the other consequences of economic globalization under

the auspices of the giant banks and transnational corporations.

The first part has some potential, and Garcia is impressive in his portrayal of the young man at the center of the action. The story does not develop, however. We learn little about the lives of the characters other than their involvement with dogs and dog-fighting. The overheated and gruesome scene with which the film begins sets the stage for the next two and a half hours, much of which is permeated with bloody violence that substitutes for serious content. It would appear that the narrative is developed around the need to shock and hold the attention of the audience. Much of the gore is gratuitous. It does not emerge from the logic of events, but is imposed externally.

The filmmaker is probably trying to say something about the utterly empty lives of the second couple. Here too, however, the story feels lifeless and stilted, the characters largely undeveloped. Daniel remains an abstraction. The angry outbursts between the middle class couple take place without context or serious explanation. The plot is ineffective soap opera—neither interesting, believable nor illuminating.

Echevarria, a noted Mexican actor, gives a powerful performance in the third segment of the film. This story aims at linking and summing up *Amores Perros* as a whole. El Chivo moves between the two worlds that have been depicted in parts one and two of the film. They have attempted to depict the depth of social polarization in the city, the misery of the vast majority and the emptiness of the lives of the middle class.

The third story investigates the life of someone who, decades earlier, is supposed to have set himself the goal of fighting inequality and injustice. How does this end? El Chivo's life has also amounted to nothing. He is separated from the person whom he loves the most. The film concludes on a note of liberal world-weariness, as El Chivo apparently recognizes that his involvement in violence has produced a never-ending spiral of despair.

It is not the task of the filmmaker to draw all the political lessons of Mexico's recent history. It is clear, however, that Inarritu's lack of historical understanding leads to a distorted and shallow depiction of life. The only politically involved character in the movie is an ex-terrorist. The struggle against imperialist oppression is identified with terrorism. There is apparently no answer to the daily

violence and misery facing the Mexican working class—none other than the search for a vague human connectedness.

The film's peculiar combination of violent excess and vague liberalism cannot be separated from the historical issues dealt with in some detail in the recent article on the *World Socialist Web Site* on Latin American cinema.
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jun2001/ba3-j01.shtm>

Inarritu has some talent, and a desire to deal with big subjects. Even so, he comes up woefully short. He has no historical frame of reference with which to comprehend the material he chooses to depict.

The young director has been compared by some film critics to Quentin Tarantino, as well as to the surrealist giant Luis Bunuel, the Spaniard who lived in Mexico for many decades. The influence of Tarantino is not a very healthy one. As for Bunuel, Inarritu would do well to learn from that master's savage satire and hatred of the existing social order.



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