Maria del Mar Azcona, *The Multi-Protagonist Film*.

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REFERENCES

1 In this stimulating and original volume the author presents “a contemporary tendency to abandon the single-protagonist structure on which most films narratives have traditionally relied and replace it by a wider assortment of characters with more or less independent narrative lines” (1). Of particular importance is the fact that the films falling into this relatively new category present “a multiplicity of characters of similar narrative relevance ... without establishing a strict narrative hierarchy among them” (2). Azcona also makes the most suggestive remark that this shift from “the single-hero pattern” (which, of course, is still dominant in Hollywood and elsewhere) to “the multi-protagonist format” (5) can be at least partially attributed to “a rapidly changing cultural context and the evolution of human relations in our (globalized) world” (5). She will return insistently to the socially symbolic significance of a multiplication of points of view on numerous occasions, which will give us the opportunity to highlight both the volume's strengths and the author's apparent unwillingness to take her arguments and analyses to their logical (political) conclusion.

2 The volume is divided into seven chapters, the first two of which offer “a brief history” of the topic and propose theories capable of coming more firmly and convincingly to grips with what is at stake than might seem apparent from her opening remarks. She then analyses an early example of such an 'experiment' with narrative structure, Grand Hotel (1932), before devoting the next four chapters to an individual film in each case and the numerous ramifications that can be inferred: Short Cuts, American Pie, Singles and Syriana. A brief conclusion rounds off the study. Chapters 4 and 7 strike this reviewer as particularly
incisive, because the former deals with the most significant practitioner of the multi-
protagonist film, Robert Altman, and the latter brings to the fore the political and
psychological implications of Azcona's evocation, quoted above, of globalization. Chapter
5, devoted to the teenage comedy, discusses among a wealth of films Animal House, Revenge
of the Nerds, American Graffiti, Dazed and Confused and Fast Times at Ridgemont High, whereas
Chapter 6, on romantic comedies, discusses The Brothers McMullan, Hannah and Her Sisters,
This Year's Love and others.

3 The author is anxious to place her arguments concerning the multi-protagonist film in a
historical context and therefore does us the great service of going back to the 30s and 40s,
to films with “ensemble casts and multi-stranded stories” (11), both to show that the
subject under discussion in her book did not suddenly emerge from nowhere and to insist
on the differences between classical Hollywood and the modern cinema (Altman's
Nashville, made in 1975, can be taken as a useful starting-point). Thus, referring to the late
Robin Wood's path-breaking study of Howard Hawks, she points out that “the dynamics
of the all-important group” take precedence over individuals, while reminding us of
Wood's brilliant insight that Rio Bravo is less a John Wayne film (which is how Hawks saw
it) that a film about the trials and tribulation of the town drunk, played by Dean Martin
(11). What can perhaps most easily distinguish the cinema of Hawks from that of Altman
(uniquely in the context of the present discussion, of course!) is the fact that Only Angels
Have Wings and Rio Bravo respect the unities of time and place in ways far removed from
Altman’s Nashville and Short Cuts. For the said unities function also to define a certain
homogeneity of character and meaning, which is most definitely not the case with
Altman.

4 However, characters are not everything and in her second chapter Azcona is at pains to
draw attention to numerous other factors, while simultaneously avoiding the trap of
considering that each and every film she refers to must perforce bring together all the
factors in question. Similarly, once one is dealing with a new genre, it risks becoming
rigidly codified as critics attempt to isolate its common factors, which can only too
quickly mean repressing the differences (just think of the differences between various
examples of film noir, while at the same time laying out the elements that occur and re-
occur obsessively within that genre). A particularly incisive remark is made about camera
movements which “combine with other formal elements like slow motion or subjective
shots in order to transmit a sense of uncanniness and defamiliarization, and hint that
spectators should look for a different logic beyond the immediately visible” (42).

5 What might this “different logic” be? Here we could well start with Azcona's comments
on Grand Hotel and the historical context in which it was made: “The film’s emphasis on
chance bears echoes of the epistemology of contingency that, as Mary Ann Doane has
noticed, emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as a necessary reaction to the
excessive rationalization of time brought about by industrialization and the expansion of
capitalism” (55). In other words, chance and contingency gave back, on the ideological
mold, some of that freedom and choice also underpinning modern capitalism and to
which Americans in general have always been obsessively attached. And Azcona points
out that Grand Hotel ends up by emphasizing “the positive and constructive role of
coincidence and the unplanned” thanks to “a carefully orchestrated narrative pattern in
which nothing is left to chance” (55). In this way Hollywood forecloses any discussion of
class and economics by suggesting that what we have just seen is things as they are,
immutable throughout time and history.
And the multi-protagonist film in all this? If we juxtapose certain remarks by Azcona and her reference to other works of theory, we shall see something most instructive taking place. She mentions the emergence of a particular trend in multi-protagonist movies “in which the interconnectedness and random crisscrossing of characters with initially independent narrative lines is used to foreground the role that coincidence and accidental encounters play in people’s lives” (32). Two pages later she evokes a theory which “borrows from contemporary scientific discourse” to suggest “the role played by chaos and chance as the structuring principle” underlying certain narratives. And certain films show “a nagging concern with the search for the causes that could have changed the course of events,” only to conclude in “the irreversibility of the process” (34-5). If we jump ahead now to the chapter on that admirable and explicitly political film Syriana, we find something dramatically different taking place. The film's title becomes “a metaphor for powerful governments’ perpetual desire to remake and exploit any geographical area according to their own needs” (128). Thus “once remote and isolated parts of the planet are presented in these narratives as key pieces in wider political and economic schemes” (128). If this remains regrettably vague, it at least puts us on the right track and enables us to understand that, when so-called theorists talk of 'chaos,' they are really anxious to avoid any discussion of events that may have brought chaos and despair to millions but are also easily grasped as part of those “wider political and economic schemes.” There is nothing 'random' about them whatsoever. And since 2008 we no longer need to follow events in Iraq and Afghanistan to see the catastrophic outcome of those 'schemes': the foreclosure of homes in the United States and the outsourcing of jobs leading to misery and unemployment in that country; the determination of a bunch of fanatics to impose austerity on Greece, Ireland and Portugal, with the peoples of Spain, Italy and France waiting in the wings to taste the same medicine. The 'chaotic' events of the last three years are always due to the same factors that have nothing 'contingent' or 'random' about them.

It is fitting, then, that Altman should include a minor earthquake at the end of Short Cuts: it may be a natural event but such phenomena can be foreseen and are in no way totally random, any more than the tsunami that have wrought havoc in recent years. It's just that the financial means to offset such disasters are not made available to the poor countries most likely to undergo such catastrophes. This is not a question of 'chance' either. Indeed, the genius of Short Cuts is to show that, when all's said and done, the earthquake is no more random than Chris Penn's losing control and committing a murder, except that precise social, sexual and economic factors determine the psychic condition which ultimately prevails and forces him to act: think of the shot where, looking bemused and confused, he stands in the doorway and listens to his wife indulging (for money, of course) in obscene telephone calls in an attempt to supplement his insufficient income. His economic and sexual alienation are patent in his expression. It's always the same people who pay and never those at the origin of those 'schemes' referred to above, which are not necessarily to be grasped only in the way they affect entire countries.

Of all the films and directors discussed in this wide-ranging study perhaps only Altman and John Sayles systematically show a full awareness of the social ramifications of the narrative device under discussion, the corruption of those ever ready to take advantage of people’s belief that nothing can be done as it's all a question of chance, the helplessness and despair born of alienation (social and sexual) that Short Cuts so
brilliantly and systematically creates. So it is surprising to find no mention of the name of Sayles in the Index, nor of his film City of Hope. More seriously is the reproduction of frame enlargements: most of them are quite impossible to decipher for anyone not intimately acquainted with the film in question (and that includes this reviewer). Only the one taken from What's Cooking (43) is eloquent for any reader. I cannot apportion blame, but it is also a sign of the times when publishers practise outrageous prices for their hardback editions and cannot even offer a well-produced volume. This caveat aside, Azcona’s volume, written in a prose as elegant as it is sophisticated, deserves to grace the library of any university offering film courses.

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