

THE MULTI-PROTAGONIST FILM

María del Mar Azcona

Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. 2010.

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The multi-protagonist film is not a new phenomenon. Ensemble films have existed since the early days of cinema. They have been referred to by a variety of names, such as mosaic films (Tröhler 2007) or network narratives (Bordwell 2006). However, despite the relative pervasiveness of this genre, no serious systematic attempt had been made at conceptualising it so far. Apart from its many other merits, María del Mar Azcona's work can claim a type of 'uniqueness', since her *The Multi-Protagonist Film* (2010) is the only monograph devoted to the study of this kind of movie published to date. Its publication at the beginning of this decade is justified by the unprecedented rise of ensemble films during the 1990s and 2000s. Such a phenomenon clearly merits a detailed analysis, and Azcona's monograph fills this niche perfectly.

The Multi-Protagonist Film is part of Wiley-Blackwell's series "New Approaches to Film Genre", edited by Barry Keith Grant. This series includes such well-rehearsed genres as the western, the horror film and the war film. Azcona's contribution stands out for its originality in proposing the multi-protagonist film as a genre in its own right. Initially, this appears to be a bold statement, since ensemble films have not been traditionally regarded as a category in themselves. However, the reader's misgivings are quickly dispersed by Azcona's solid argumentation: based on a fluid approach to film genre, her theorisation of the multi-protagonist film leaves no doubt about its status as a fully-fledged genre.

As is stated in its introductory chapter, this book sets out to unravel the internal workings of ensemble films. At the same time, it attempts to unearth the reasons behind their remarkable increase at the turn of the millennium. With these purposes in mind, *The Multi-Protagonist Film* begins with a recapitulation of the history of the genre, offering a comprehensive compilation of many of the movies which have used this form from cinema's early days till the present moment. The origins of the genre are traced back to the silent era, taking the reader through the different stages of its (not so) short history up to the turn of the millennium, the period this book focuses on primarily.

After the historical overview, chapter 2 presents the theoretical basis upon which Azcona's study is based. This chapter is particularly important as it fills the gaps left by earlier theorists such as Margrit Tröhler (2007) and Kristin Thompson (1999). Azcona has a flexible view of genre similar to that of authors such as David Bordwell (1989), Steve Neale (1995), Tom Ryall (1998) or Rick Altman (1999). Approaching genres as fluid, constantly evolving entities, rather than as fixed, clear-cut categories allows her to establish a more nuanced theory of this particular entry into the genre system. This approach, on the one hand, has the virtue of transcending the unproductive question of belonging and, on the other, allows her to connect the rise of these films at the turn of the century with the changing conditions of their socio-cultural context. Thus, taking into account the ever-changing nature of genres, and keeping in mind that "[g]eneric nature depends not simply on a set of sufficient and necessary conventions but also on various types of connections among texts" (31), Azcona is able to outline a very useful list of conventions which characterise multi-protagonist films at the beginning of the 21st century. This comprehensive list considers aspects such as the characters in these movies, storylines, narration, point of view and endings, as well as their idiosyncratic deployment of elements like chance, group dynamics and coincidence (37). The second part of this theoretical chapter is equally illuminating, and it is devoted to the theorisation of this genre's visual style: it is in the "visual and aural articulation of the links between plots, characters, and thematic elements" (38) that its particular style lies. The genre's stylistic specificity involves a very recognisable use of editing, soundtrack and framing and all these aspects are amply illustrated by a considerable number of examples.

The rest of the book is devoted to case studies of individual multi-protagonist movies from different periods and contexts. Chapter 3 looks at *Grand Hotel* (1932) as an early example of the genre. Even though the book is concerned mostly with contemporary cinema, starting the analysis with a film from the early days of cinema is a smart move: it not only opens up the scope of the study, but it also makes us aware of the longevity of the genre, thus highlighting the amount of

critical work that remains to be done. Azcona shows how this then-‘experimental’ movie (released in 1932) set an example for subsequent attempts at the form, inaugurating some of the main conventions in the genre and she draws attention to the suitability of the multi-protagonist structure when it comes to expressing the contingent nature of human experience.

Chapter 4 deals with the work of Robert Altman. The special attention paid to this director is pertinent, since he may be rightfully considered as the most influential figure in the whole history of this genre to date. Altman’s penchant for multiple protagonist narratives has been evident throughout his whole career: he has made ample use of this form to explore the nuances of human interaction, establishing in the process a set of conventions that have helped shape the genre through the years. The detailed analysis of *Short Cuts* (1993) sheds light on some of them, such as the sense of fragmentation that pervades these films or the serendipity that tends to rule their characters’ lives. The end of the analysis points in a direction to be taken later by many examples of the genre, namely, the film’s preoccupation with the representation of the crisis of the heterosexual couple. The ability of those early ensemble films to accurately depict drastic changes in inter-personal relationships in the present day, together with their suitability to reflect the consequences of globalisation, has been crucial in their consolidation.

Chapter 5 tackles the intersection of the multi-protagonist movie with the teenpic. This is a genre which fits especially well in the multi-protagonist structure given the importance it bestows on the group. For this reason, Azcona’s focus on these films not only feels relevant, but also helps raise their “critical profile”, so to speak: traditionally regarded as a “low” genre, the “animal comedy” (Paul, 2002), historically one of the first manifestations of the form, has been comparatively neglected by the academia. These early examples of the genre were followed by more complex teenpics, which dealt with the coming of adulthood and the threat to the group of heterosexual coupling. As an example of this, the author chooses *American Pie* (1999), a successful ensemble teenpic that combines both traditions and whose popularity with the public was not matched by the critics. Azcona’s insights call our attention to the merits of a film which in her analysis proves to be more interesting than it appears to be at first sight.

Chapter 6 focuses on the interaction between the multi-protagonist film and the romantic comedy. The author points out the proliferation of this form in a genre whose focus had been traditionally limited to a single couple of lovers. Interestingly, Azcona relates this trend with the state of turmoil contemporary romantic relationships find themselves in: she ingeniously connects these movies’ conventions with sociological changes in the field of intimate relations. For instance, she argues that the polyphony of voices offered by these films allows for a better representation

of today's diversity in sexual choices and practices, that their emphasis on chance seems to mirror the fleeting nature of contemporary liaisons, and that their fondness for open endings mirrors the uncertainty and contingency characteristic of these relationships. These insights are confirmed by the detailed study of *Singles* (1992), which suggests that the multi-protagonist film may indeed be better equipped than the traditional romantic comedy to capture the *zeitgeist* in the intimate realm.

The last chapter looks at the developments that the ensemble narrative has brought about in the thriller. The author explains why the multi-protagonist template has started to gain prevalence in a genre traditionally focused on a single hero: in an increasingly globalised world ruled by an intricate web of corporate interests and personal connections, the individual protagonist's ability to act is seriously curtailed. The study of *Syriana* (2005) illustrates the way in which the multi-protagonist thriller, with its variety of subject positions and its disorienting effect, is better equipped to depict the complexity of a rapidly changing world which has been entirely deprived of old certainties. Due to the palpable actuality of the issues dealt with in this section, this chapter is particularly commendable: even without the benefit of hindsight, Azcona carries out a lucid analysis of the interaction between today's complex socio-political panorama and the way in which the thriller's conventions are evolving the better to articulate the concerns of an increasingly interconnected society.

All in all, *The Multi-Protagonist Film* is a momentous contribution to film genre studies. The book is well organised, clearly written and highly informative, offering a comprehensive picture of the multi-protagonist movie from its beginnings till the present day in an accessible yet rigorous and well-researched manner. In addition to this, *The Multi-Protagonist Film* fills an important gap in today's genre criticism by presenting a fully-fledged theory of a 'new' category which, oddly enough, has been a constant presence on our screens for a long time now. By the end of the book, one cannot help but wonder why such a remarkable genre has gone unnoticed for so long.

Notes

¹. Research towards this review was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education, project no. FF12010-15263, and by the Aragonese Government (Ref. H12).

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Received: 30 May 2011

