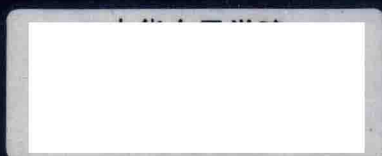


# The three amigos

The transnational filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro,  
Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón



Deborah Shaw



**SPANISH AND  
LATIN AMERICAN  
FILMMAKERS**

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**Deborah Shaw**

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# The three amigos

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This book is dedicated to Mitch and Theo with love.

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# Introduction

## Introducing the directors

Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón are the best-known Mexican directors internationally, yet none of them has directed a film in Mexico since Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*, made in 2001.<sup>1</sup> All three have made films in the USA; del Toro and Iñárritu have directed films in Spain, while Cuarón has mainly worked in the USA and the UK. These facts tell us a great deal about the nature of the film industry today: the lack of substantial funding for Mexican productions; the sites of economic power; and the global ambitions of the directors themselves. After their first low-budget Mexican feature films *Cronos* (del Toro, 1993) and *Sólo con tu pareja* (*Love in the Time of Hysteria*) (Cuarón, 1991), and the commercial hit *Amores perros* (Iñárritu, 2000), all three directors initially followed the golden path to the US film industry to further their international careers. Del Toro made the mainstream film *Mimic* (1997), Cuarón directed the children's film *A Little Princess* (1995), while Iñárritu succeeded in immediately establishing his auteurist credentials with the 'independent' film *21 Grams* (2003), starring Benicio del Toro, Naomi Watts, and Sean Penn.

All three have global auteurist ambitions which Mexico, with its limited funding possibilities, has not been able to accommodate.<sup>2</sup> Del Toro and Cuarón have had to balance these ambitions with the demands of the film industry and both have made highly acclaimed films that have combined commercial success with critical praise: the best-known examples of these are *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth*) (del Toro, 2006), and *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006). They have also directed more mainstream films that have been rather poorly received in critical terms (*Mimic*, del Toro; *Great Expectations*,

Cuarón, 1998). This dual-track career pathway taken by both directors problematises the use of the auteur category traditionally associated with quality art cinema, a category which is a key area of investigation in this book.

Iñárritu has succeeded in having more creative control over all of his films than his two compatriots, whether he is working in Mexico, the USA or Spain. However, he too has knowingly learnt and applied the cinematic languages of a new international style in order to enter the global channels of film production, distribution, and exhibition, and he has followed the expected guidelines of his paymasters. Thus, a key question when exploring the work of Iñárritu is what is meant by independence when working with major (predominantly North American) production companies.

Although del Toro, Iñárritu, and Cuarón have made very different films from each other, in diverse international and industrial contexts, all of which will be outlined in detail in the three parts of the book, the directors have a number of factors in common. When compared with other contemporary Mexican directors, they have had unprecedented international success and have crossed linguistic, national, and generic borders, cutting through traditional divisions created by film markets. They have cultivated auteurist personae through the films they have directed, their roles as producers, and by paratextual means (including DVD commentaries, interviews given in multiple fora, and in some cases special books released to accompany the films).

They have also strategically claimed a collective Mexican identity, and provided support to each other as well as other Mexican filmmakers, despite the fact that most of the films they have directed have been made outside Mexico, and have been reliant on US and European film financing structures. Rather than conceptualising Mexican cinema in opposition to US cinema, and eschewing their Mexican identities once they had crossed the border, they have worked to create a symbiotic relationship between the two. This can be seen in the relationship they have cultivated with their own production company, Cha Cha Cha, and Focus Features, the specialty branch of Universal Pictures. In 2007 the three filmmakers managed to secure a deal with Focus which gives them \$100 million for a five-film package, thanks to their reputations.<sup>3</sup>

They have also harnessed a collective identity within Mexico and have used their international status to take on the role of advocates and ambassadors for the national film industry. In March 2007 an

event was held at the Mexican Senate to honour their success. At this event, *los tres mosqueteros* (the three musketeers), as they are popularly known in Mexico ('the three amigos' in the USA), called on the Mexican government to do more to foster and protect Mexican cinema (*La Nación*, 2007). Del Toro, who acted as spokesperson for the three, suggested that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) be revised in order to apply protectionist measures for Mexican cinema, which would include screen quotas for nationally produced films (*La Nación*, 2007). Their campaigning tour included a meeting with the then newly appointed Mexican President, Felipe Calderón, and the heads of cinema chains (*La Crónica de Hoy*, 2007). The three directors were lobbying for tax initiatives to stimulate filmmaking, more opportunities for the distribution and exhibition of Mexican films, and more involvement in film production from television companies. Thus, while most of their recent films cannot be categorised as Mexican, they remain important figures within Mexican film culture.

## Guillermo del Toro

Guillermo del Toro has carved out a name for himself as a director of genre films, and he happily borrows and merges characteristics from fantasy, realism, horror, art cinema, and adventure films to make what has come to be seen as a 'del Toro film', a label that carries over from films made in Mexico, Spain, and the USA. Del Toro has also cultivated his role as a producer, acting in that capacity on a number of high-profile Spanish-language genre films, including *El orfanato* (*The Orphanage*) (Bayona, 2007), *Los ojos de Julia* (*Julia's Eyes*) (Morales, 2010), and *Rudo y cursi* (*Rough and Corny*) (Carlos Cuarón, 2008). He has also been an executive producer and producer for an increasing number of US productions, including *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark* (Nixey, 2010), which he co-wrote, *Kung Fu Panda 2* (Yuh, 2011), and *Puss in Boots* (Miller, 2011).

As a director, del Toro sees no limit to the variety of genres he can incorporate into his films or the number of intertextual references that can be borrowed from these genres, as will be seen in part I of the book. Any eager film critic or film buff who attempts to spot or follow up all of these will end up frustrated at the difficulty of the task (as I quickly discovered). In terms of production contexts, del Toro's corpus can be broadly divided into Spanish-language films – *Cronos*,

*El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil's Backbone*, 2001) and *El laberinto* – and big-budget Hollywood projects – *Mimic*, *Blade II* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008). This, however, does not follow a neat divide that would allow a critic to separate out two career stages. On the contrary, there has been no chronological logic to the director's working practices and he has managed to combine making Spanish-language films with bigger-budget Hollywood projects. As will be seen in the chapters on *El laberinto* and *Hellboy II*, del Toro talks of both projects in the same breath in interviews and sees them as originating from the same imaginary universe. The creation of a recognisable style that cuts across national and generic borders is also made possible by the fact that he has been able to work with cinematographer Guillermo Navarro, his Mexican compatriot, on all three Spanish-language films, and on the *Hellboy* films. In chapters 2 and 3, I explore similarities between the films generated by the authorial force of del Toro, but also points of divergence occasioned by the very different production contexts.

Del Toro's first film was *Cronos*, which was partly funded by the Mexican Film Institute (Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, IMCINE), and partly self-funded. It won a number of national and international awards, which brought the director to the attention of Hollywood. As a result of this attention, he was employed as a director on the mainstream fantasy horror film *Mimic* (1997), produced by Miramax and Dimension Films. This was not, however, a happy experience and the director claims he lost all his battles with the studios regarding the screenplay, but managed partially to assert his style in relation to the look of the film (Wood, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Creative control was restored on his next project, *El espinazo del diablo*, which was made following the offer of finance by El Deseo, the Almodóvar brothers' production company, and co-produced with del Toro's production company, Tequila Gang, and the Mexican company Anhelo Producciones (which had also produced Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*). As IMCINE had refused to fund del Toro's planned project, he decided to re-contextualise this political ghost story to the Spanish Civil War, not the Mexican Revolution as originally intended (Lázaro-Reboll, 2007: 43).

Few filmmakers have made themselves so at home in such diverse national and industrial contexts as del Toro, and in the chapters on the director I consider how he has weaved his way through small and large Mexican, Spanish, and US production contexts. I also explore

his travels through genres, and labels signalling market differentiation such as art cinema and fantasy filmmaking, and consider how notions of high and low culture are intermingled in his texts. I explore the auteurist strategies that he has cultivated and explain what is meant by a 'del Toro film'.

## Alejandro González Iñárritu

Del Toro's compatriot Alejandro González Iñárritu has also cultivated auteurist strategies, but to very different effect. Iñárritu has a more coherent corpus and a team with whom he has worked for the first three films: screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto, production designer Brigitte Broch, and the composer Gustavo Santaolalla. Together they have developed an identifiable style from within the codes of an international film language.<sup>5</sup> In the chapters on the director I pay close attention to the features of this language, and explore the ways that *Amores perros* entered the global market through its reliance on narrative experimentation and stylistic features of intensified continuity (Bordwell, 2002a). These features include rapid editing, fluid camera work and a hand-held camera, and the use of a range of shots, such as extreme close-ups and extreme long shots. This analysis of film form is developed in the chapter on *21 Grams* (2003), as I examine the way in which Iñárritu adopts the language of US independent cinema, with a focus on the narrative structure and the application of a range of colour palettes. Iñárritu and his team's fluency with the codes and conventions of serious, quality global film has allowed his films to be distributed internationally and consumed as art-house inflected independent films, labels and categories that I explore in some depth in part II of the book.

Iñárritu, like del Toro and Cuarón, has worked in a range of national and production contexts. His first film, *Amores perros*, was a successful, privately funded 'national' film that was an international success, and raised both his profile and that of Mexican film. This opened the doors to allow the director to make the 'independent' US feature *21 Grams*, set and filmed in Memphis. Following *21 Grams*, Iñárritu and team made their most ambitious film, *Babel* (2006), located in four countries and featuring six languages.

A text not considered by this book, as it was released after the planning and writing of part II, is Iñárritu's latest production, *Biutiful* (2010), his first film to be made without the input of Arriaga,



following a fall-out over questions of creative ownership regarding *Babel*. *Biutiful* can also be read through a transnational framework and reaffirms Iñárritu's status as transnational director. It is a Mexican, Spanish, US (Focus Features) co-production, set and shot in Spain and featuring transnational Spanish star Javier Bardem, and dealing with the hidden lives of immigrants in Barcelona.

## Alfonso Cuarón

Alfonso Cuarón has also followed a transnational trajectory, making films in Mexico, the USA, and the UK, and, like del Toro, he has had a varied career, taking on auteurist and studio projects. His first feature was the state-produced Mexican sex comedy *Sólo con tu pareja* (*Love in the Time of Hysteria*, 1991). Although it was not successful on the global scale of *Amores perros*, or indeed his second Mexican film, *Y tu mamá también* (2001), it was part of a series of films that brought middle-class Mexicans back to the cinema, and its domestic popularity afforded him the opportunity to pursue a Hollywood career. Cuarón went on to direct two star-studded features, *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998), both of which were entirely US funded, the former a Warner Bros Pictures production, and the latter financed by independent company Art Linson Productions and major studio Twentieth Century Fox.

While the director has declared himself happier with the creative process of making *A Little Princess* than *Great Expectations* (Krassakopoulos, 2007), neither of these were auteurist projects, in that the director was hired by the companies to bring quality to the products, which he did through a distinctive visual palette and mise-en-scène. Despite the very different industrial context, Cuarón brought a number of artistic ideas he and his cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki had developed with *Sólo con tu pareja*, notably the use of a green colour palette and opulent, highly decorated interiors and lush exteriors. In the second part of chapter 7, I consider the tensions between the director and production company in the making of *Great Expectations*, and examine the distinctive mise-en-scène and the significance of the artistic choices made in the three films associated with his green period in terms of Cuarón's career trajectory.

It is worthy of note that the style and the focus on the colour green applied in *A Little Princess* and *Great Expectations* were abandoned once Cuarón was able to retain creative control with *Y tu mamá*