

Film Review: „21 Grams“

The *Filmkasino* in Vienna was the right cinema to watch the new movie by Academy Award-nominated director of "Amores Perros," Alejandro González Iñárritu. If you are used to visit futuristic cinema temples, the *Filmkasino* looks very strange. After passing a round arch door out of mahogany with a piece of frosted glass in the upper half, you stand behind a little sliding window also with a frame made of the brown tropical wood. On your way to the theatre you pass a little old-fashioned kiosk. The only thing changed might be the latest snacks of Kelly's. These snacks and posters of recent movies fetch you back to the present. Entering the theatre the atmosphere of the 60ies blows your mind. Although it seems as nothing has changed for over 40 years, the cinema is equipped with all the latest modern technology. It is a mosaic of different time periods, what is why it is the right place to watch 21 Grams.

Powerhouse actors like Sean Penn, Benicio Del Toro, Naomi Watts, Melissa Leo and Charlotte Gainsbourg put up impressing performances. It took three years until Guillermo Arriaga and González Iñárritu knew what the film should look like. Nearly every shot in *21 Grams* was done with a hand-held camera, to have a maximum of authenticity. Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto translates the mood of the screenplay of Guillermo Arriaga perfect into action. The grainy look of the film, the inevitable pull towards the colours of grey and blue and the hand held work gives a powerful immediacy to this story of fate, love, death and rebirth.

As Elvis Mitchell from the New York Times said: "You won't come out unaffected, because the depths of intimacy that Alejandro González Iñárritu plumbs here are so rarely touched by filmmakers that *21 Grams* is tantamount to the discovery of a new country. It's an extraordinarily satisfying vision."

Right from the beginning - if one could call it that - the audience is plunged into the story, like a child with deflated water-wings pushed into the deep end of a pool. Short non-sequential scenes introduce central characters of the film: a father playing with his two little children, a woman, who is being told that her fallopian tube is seriously disabled, a man eating his meal, a patient in an intensive care unit as well as a woman who sniffs

coke. There is little to no understanding of who these people are or what is being shown. There are flashes from the climax of the picture shown in the first five minutes and crucial character back-story blinks by before the audience even knows its meaning. All of this visual information takes about a full film reel before the audience has a chance to adjust to the rhythms of the picture, and unscramble its inhabitants.

We learn that Jack Jordan (Benicio del Toro) is an ex-convict who now firmly believes in Jesus. Paul Rivers (Sean Penn) is an academic who needs a heart transplant to survive. His wife Mary (Charlotte Gainsbourg) wants to have his child through artificial insemination, but Paul is not very enthusiastic about this. Christina (Naomi Watts) is a woman in deep depression. She reverts to drug taking to ease her pain. These three characters are connected through one terrible incident.

125 minutes people paid close attention to a patchwork of scenes alternating between several different time periods and after a while a story emerges from the fog.

A tragic accident took away the husband and the two little daughters of Christina. She decides to release the heart of her husband for use as a transplant and so Paul Rivers survives. Slowly but surely his relationship with Mary goes on the rocks.

Paul wants to know who donated his heart, so he hires a private detective. This leads him to Christina with whom he falls in love. "I have Michael's heart." – The facial expression of Christina describes perfectly the emotion one must have after such a sentence. The audience got restless even before Christina cracked up and was lost in a mixture of feelings when the scene finished with the words: "You don't have to be afraid. I've a good heart." At latest this piece of the puzzle tells you, that this film deals with a situation beyond the control of human beings and has to lead to fateful events.

We learn that no one is simply good or bad. Everything is just floating in an immense universe of circumstances. The strengths and weaknesses of the acting persons are shown without judging them. In a sense *21 Grams* can be seen as an interactive motion picture. You are intellectually engaged right from the beginning because the whole film moves backwards and forwards in time and jumps from character to character. So a puzzle waits

to be put together. That is why *21 Grams* is an excellent production which leaves its audience with some questions: "What is that - 21 grams? Is it the weight of a soul? Is it the lost of bodily fluids? Is it the release of air and gases after death? Or is it the weight of the world we have been carrying on our shoulders?" These questions kept me busy and for a moment the time stood still – like it has been doing for over 40 years in this cinema – when an idea went through my head: 21 grams must be all the bad things we have done in our life's and we lose our blame when we die.