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## 21 Grams

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# 21 Grams

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *21 Grams* (2003).

"They say we all lose 21 grams at the exact moment of our death. the weight of a stack of nickels. the weight of a chocolate bar."

*21 Grams* is the intelligently ironic title to Alejandro González Iñárritu's latest film which poses the universal question: what is the meaning of life and death? Life can be reduced to a metric measurement, just as life can be reduced to a "divine plan," but do either of these claims explain the complexity of human action and experience?

From the outset, it is clear that *21 Grams* aims to challenge its viewers at both an intellectual and emotional level. The absence of a linear narrative structure and interweaving of three lives creates a masterfully chaotic collage. Through active viewing, we gradually understand the skeletons of the three main characters' not quite matching inner and outer lives. Paul (Sean Penn) is a mathematician who is on the brink of death awaiting a heart transplant. He seems fearless, yet is disturbed by his wife's (Charlotte Gainsbourg) insistence he freeze sperm so that she can have his post-mortem child, perhaps because he does not want to ponder his own mortality. Christina (Naomi Watts) is a recovering narcotics addict who seems to have found upper middle class happiness as a loving wife and mother of two. An ex-convict turned Christian fundamentalist, Jack (Benicio del Toro) is without a doubt the most disturbing and disturbed character in the film. Clutching to his newfound faith like a lifeboat, Jack sees it as his divinely granted duty to police his kids and wife into compliance with his literal reading of the Bible.

Echoing Iñárritu's debut film "*Amores Perros*," it is a tragic accident that forces the lives in *21 Grams* to collide. After losing his job as a caddy one day, Jack accepts a buddy's "sinful" invitation to share a couple of drinks. He is driving home in his 'Jesus Saves' pickup when he hits Christina's husband and two daughters. No doubt fearing a return to jail, he does not stop or report the accident, and guilt begins its brutal gnawing. In the hospital, Christina collapses as the death of her loved ones is confirmed. A heart becomes available for Paul.

Faced with the unimaginable, Jack, Christina, and Paul must decide whether to abandon themselves to "fate", or take action to transform their lives. I came away from the film believing all three chose agency, and for me this is where hope creeps into what would otherwise be a dark fatalist tale. Even though Christina seeks revenge, Paul leaves his wife, and Jack eventually abandons his family, these acts are not morally condemned by the filmmaker, because it is apparent that they are driven by their loss and need for love. To use the story's not so subtle metaphor, Jack, Christina, and Paul all have ailing hearts, and it is hard not to feel compassion for them as they struggle with this painful reality. While I did not feel I could state 'guilty' or 'innocent' when, for example, Christina convinces Paul to murder Jack, Iñárritu does nevertheless offer a 'moral' warning: love, though intangible, cannot be replaced by anything (a new heart), structure (such as loveless fundamentalism), or external action (such as revenge).

Jack, Christina, and Paul's pain does explode in an appropriately bloody scene towards the end of the film. From this ugliness, the beginning of the end of suffering emerges. Mysterious ironic life transforms Paul's loss into Christina's gain, reversing the initial circumstances of their meeting.

Depending on your point of view, Iñárritu's *21 Grams* is a film about all or nothing. I found it to be a convincing essay whose surprise thesis only emerges at the very end when we are challenged to reduce life to a mathematical calculation. For those viewers who have already decided life's meaning lies beyond the seeable or measurable, *21 Grams* still urges reflection on those moments through which we sense our lives to be meaningful. Do we sense an inexplicable power in our constant rediscovery of choice, translated into taking responsibility, seeking love, rejecting despair? Does meaning emerge in the unexpected accidents and surprises some call "divine plan"? Or do we experience life's mystical core as lying somewhere between the existential and the religious? Brilliantly written and acted, I would recommend *21 Grams* to anyone: it is an enthralling psychological drama regardless of interpretation.