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Los Amantes del Círculo Polar (Lovers of the Arctic Circle)

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Los Amantes del Círculo Polar (Lovers of the Arctic Circle)

Abstract
This is a review of Los Amantes del Círculo Polar (Lovers of the Arctic Circle) (1998).

This film review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol3/iss2/7
The "circle" of the title alludes to more than simply where the film is set (actually, only a small portion is set within the Arctic Circle). The "circle" instead hints at a sense of circular time and - depending on the perspective - of coincidence, destiny, or fate. Like his three earlier Spanish-language, Basque country-based films, *Tierra* (1996), *The Red Squirrel [La Ardilla Roja]* (1993), and *Cows [Vacas]* (1991), Julio Medem's latest film plays with the possibilities of coincidence, with Time governed by forces beyond those of Reason, and leads the religious-minded viewer to wonder after the fateful nature of such coincidence.

The film tracks two characters, Ana and Otto (both with palindromic names suggesting more circularity, more beginnings looking like endings), through their interwoven lives. Each character is played by three different actors as the film intertwines their relationship from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. (Ana is played by Sara Valiente, Kristel Díaz, and Najwa Nimri; Otto is played by Peru Medem, Víctor Hugo Oliveira, and Fele Martínez.) They are brought together by seeming coincidence as grade schoolers - Otto running after a ball, Ana running away from her mother - while they eventually have to separate. In succession they are brought together and subsequently kept apart as the narrative of the film progresses through alternating perspectives on events through the eyes of Ana and then Otto, causing a good deal of shifting back and forth through chronological time. The film itself is divided into chapters with titles like "Ana's eyes" or "Otto's
eyes." And of course, as one might surmise, the opening scene of the film already foreshadows the final scene (the beginning is the end, and vice versa), and while the viewer might guess this is the case, the viewer does not quite know how it will come about, what circumstances will lead from point A to several other points and back around again to point A.

The result of all of this is that events are portrayed twice, though from different viewpoints, and the film does not progress in linear time. At times the effect is shown before the cause. These filmic devices point toward a plurality of perspectives as they function to deconstruct the authority of the film camera, questioning the "truth" of what is framed on screen. This also entails that the viewer of *Lovers of the Arctic Circle* must do some work, making decisions along with the cycling progression of the film, and must suspend a line of reasoning which would believe that the camera tells the "truth." At the same time - and this is the brilliance of Medem's filmmaking - it is a stunningly romantic film that overwhelms the viewer, leaving a feeling of near exhaustion by the end ... and it is well worth the struggle! As Ana and Otto's relationship is an intimacy of mind, soul, and body, so does the viewer's mind, soul, and body interact with this film.

Medem's "coincidental film" could be said to stand somewhere between the films of Woody Allen and those of Krystof Kieslowski. In Allen's films, characters run into each other in uncanny places, but one could easily chalk that up to the
continual setting in New York City. Allen rarely gives hints to suggest the coincidences are anything other than coincidence. On the opposite end, Kieslowski’s films leave open a strong suggestion that there is a supernatural force behind the seeming coincidences. In Kieslowski’s *Blind Chance*, *The Double Life of Veronique*, or the *Three Colors Trilogy*, the seeming coincidences beg the question of a divine motivator, albeit veiled, calling the shots. *Lovers of the Arctic Circle*, typical of Medem’s films, does not strongly imply a divine motivator behind coincidence, nor does it leave all to chance. Paradoxically, Medem and his crew are able to create breathtakingly physical films through inspired cinematography and soundtrack, but through their intense physicality, metaphysical elements begin to take form.