

No Exit: The Mysterious Worlds of Isaac Ezban

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Opening Scene in *The Incident*

Jean-Paul Sartre was right. There is no exit from the human condition. We are all trapped in a universe not of our own making, until, of course, we create one of our own that lets us escape our daily imprisonment. The young Mexican auteur, Isaac Ezban, escapes the ordinary by taking the world of the body and bit by bit interchanging it with the world of the mind. Our physical world is transformed into an imagined one that in turn becomes embodied. His films blend science fiction with horror and fantasy. This blending puts his work on the road to a distinct identity.

In the fall of 2014 I attended the Vancouver International Film Festival. My primary goal was finding a new film or two for the International Science Fiction Film course I was going to teach for the last time in January of 2015. I viewed one from Hong Kong that was simply too silly for a Canadian audience and a Vietnamese film whose near-future timeframe of peasants becoming fishermen after global warming had flooded their rice paddies felt too mundane. Then I saw Isaac Ezban's *El Incidente/The Incident* (2014) and was captivated. In *The Incident* there are two parallel stories—one of two brothers and a cop trapped in a stairwell they cannot escape and another of an ordinary family driving to the beach on a highway that loops them back to the same place. The stairwell story begins the film, while the family story which follows chronologically proves to be a prelude to the first.

In both episodes the normal fabric of time and space is torn asunder, forcing the characters to live out the remainder of their lives trapped in a singular space from which there is no exit. In his second film, *Los Parecidos/The Similar*s (2015), which is set at a desolate bus station in 1968 Mexico, the majority of the eight strangers are transformed into the spitting image of one of them.

Ezban's vision in both films creates a battle of dual or parallel universes that magically intersect. The imagined becomes real and the real is frozen out of existence. Everyone's normal development is blocked by what Dennis Harvey, writing in *Variety* (14 Oct. 2015) termed "some sort of tear in everyday reality's fabric." Ezban's imagined world is identifiable, almost ordinary, but it is missing a fundamental gene. Its inhabitants are trapped in a void in which the real world that they once experienced is absent. The split or separation in reality is his trademark.

But this division or duality results in a singular reality that dominates the screen. Two become one. In *The Similar*s black and white tile squares are distinct from each other yet they create a single mosaic of checkerboard flooring in the bus station; the opposites of male and female become similarly headed; through the trope of lightning time and space achieve an Einsteinian unity; the outer night and the inner day become conjoined twins that blend into in the station's utter greyish twilight; duality turns into its opposite.

Ezban shot *The Incident* in October 2013, releasing it in 2014, and shot *The Similar*s only ten months later (July/August, 2014), releasing it in 2015. However, he wrote *The Similar*s first; and then *The Incident*, which he then filmed first. *The Similar*s is an earlier concept dating from as far back as 2011, when he was only 25 and it has the feel of a homage to an earlier art form. Shot in black and white with muted colour tones, the film is meant to feel like something from the 1960s, which is the decade in which the story is set. While it has a referential political context (the massacre of students in Mexico City on October 2, 1968) the film follows more conventional horror genre tropes—a psychopathic child with supernatural powers, knife-inflicted mutilation, blood and gore, and the unexplainable producing copious amounts of screaming. Among the images that pay homage to earlier psychological thrillers is the clock that appears regularly to mark the passage of time, the film's eerie and high strung soundscape, the dark and stormy, lightning-driven night, the profound sense of entrapment and claustrophobia (echoed in *The Incident*), and the overall mood of eeriness and disquiet that accompanies this haunted space. *The Incident* has one sequence (the endless road) shot in colour; while the stairwell sequence is more greyish.



Trapped in the perpetual staircase *The Incident*

Ezban's primary interest in his storytelling is the relationship between where we are in our bodies and where we are in our minds. Ignacio, the young boy in *The Similar*s, is abnormal. He needs to be drugged by his mother into a somnambulist state in order to stay under control. Ezban shows how Ignacio's playing with toy figures and the story he imagines for them migrates into the "real" world of the bus station. He becomes the puppeteer of the people in the station and he moves them like hapless chess pieces on the checkerboard floor. The station becomes a metaphor for his mind, its walls his cranium. Ignacio projects a comic book titled "The Similars" ,which he has been reading, onto his current time and space so that his immediate reality (the bus station) becomes a mirror of the comic book. The comic book's message of loss of individuality is recreated in the bus station during the traumatic night of October 2, 1968. As a filmmaker who creates unreal worlds for his audiences, Ezban is using the Ignacio character and his *modus operandi* as a substitute for any filmmaker's actions as an artist.

**GUSTAVO
SANCHEZ
PARRA**

**CASSANDRA
CIANGHEROTTI**

**FERNANDO
BECERRIL
HUMBERTO
BUSTO**

**CARMEN REATO
SANTIAGO TORRES
MARIA ELENA
OLIVARES
CATALINA SALAS**

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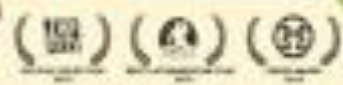


7,000 MILLION PEOPLE
IN THE WORLD... OR ONLY ONE?

THE SIMILARS

(LOS PARECIDOS)

A FILM BY
ISAAC EZBAN



THE SIMILARS (LOS PARECIDOS) IS A FILM BY ISAAC EZBAN. CASTING BY CARMEN REATO. COSTUME DESIGNER: CATALINA SALAS. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: SANTIAGO TORRES. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: GUSTAVO SANCHEZ PARRA, CASSANDRA CIANGHEROTTI. PRODUCED BY: GUSTAVO SANCHEZ PARRA, CASSANDRA CIANGHEROTTI. WRITTEN BY: ISAAC EZBAN. DIRECTED BY: ISAAC EZBAN. CASTING BY: CARMEN REATO. COSTUME DESIGNER: CATALINA SALAS. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: SANTIAGO TORRES. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: GUSTAVO SANCHEZ PARRA, CASSANDRA CIANGHEROTTI. PRODUCED BY: GUSTAVO SANCHEZ PARRA, CASSANDRA CIANGHEROTTI. WRITTEN BY: ISAAC EZBAN. DIRECTED BY: ISAAC EZBAN.

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While *The Similar*s did win the Best Latin-American Feature Film at the Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival (Spain) in October 2015 and was also screened at Fantastic Fest (Texas), the largest genre film festival in North America, the film's critical reception was not as widespread or enthusiastic as the one he got for *The Incident* the previous year. Why? First of all *The Incident* was a debut feature. It was new and Ezban was an unknown director. The praise for the ultra-low budget film reflected that sense of novelty and the discovery of a new talent. As well *The Incident*'s more fulsome engagement with Ezban's Mexican heritage was noticeable in comparison to *The Similar*s. While *The Similar*s was also clearly set in Mexico with identifiable Mexican characters (e.g. the shamanistic old Indian woman or the decrepit stationmaster sitting for 30 years behind the bars of his ticket window), the world of the "real" Mexico was mediated by radio broadcasts making it seem a bit far off and distant, almost an alien planet. *The Incident* on the other hand had a covert sense of Mexican identity, both in its settings and its themes. Since it was Ezban's second feature film script it displayed a greater maturity, even though it was his first release. Nevertheless the two films should be considered conjoined twins since they were made almost back-to-back. For example, the theme of the twisted child re-appears in *The Incident* in the figure of the cop, who reveals that he is a troubled boy from the family vacation, who is the only one to escape the time-trap of the previous cycle (Igancio from *The Similar*s becomes an equivalent escapee). Ezban has inserted a great deal of background information on the two films on the IMDB website under the heading "Trivia." These entries represent his own take on the conception and realization of each production. But the factual information on influences (Sci-Fi heroes like Phillip K. Dick or Ray Bradbury, TV Series like "The Twilight Zone" and "Lost" or recent films like *Inception* and *Cloud Atlas*) and the descriptions of how the scripts and the films came to be do not always provide complete insight into the director's genius.



Ignacio and his mother in *The Similar*s

Ezban's Cultural Grammars

When *The Guardian* review of the Fantastic Fest of 2014 pointed to *The Incident*'s "peculiar internal logic" it was referring to the Ezban's successful portrayal of disrupted space and time, which are presented in such an effective way as to have the audience believe in the film's premise that someone can be trapped in a spatial void in which the body ages and dies without any possibility of escape. The characters find themselves in a new world looks like the ordinary one they just left but which operates on completely different principles. In *The Similar*s this abrupt change causes paranoia, much like the entrapped characters in the classic Canadian sci-fi horror film, *The Cube* (1997). *Variety* rightly said that "the concept is the star" because Ezban doesn't have the finances to attract the best actors. But what are the sources (other than the ones he lists on the web) of his ideas? We have to look at his *cultural grammars*, especially those beyond generic tropes which he has adapted. By cultural grammars I mean the ideas that auteurs inherit from their society and carry over into art. The linguist, Anna Wierzbicka, describes cultural grammars as "a set of subconscious rules that shape a people's way of thinking, feeling, speaking, and interacting." ^[1] Cultural grammars are ideological constructions that we carry within our consciousness and which sometimes migrate into our subconscious. They help determine the identities that we accord various entities. Schools, faith communities, families, the media, etc. are all fonts of cultural grammars. So are comic books, graphic novels, films, video games and other created universes.

Among the key sources of cultural grammars are a filmmaker's nationality and/or ethnicity; social class; gender; generation; sexual orientation; religion; and language. In the case of auteur directors like Ezban cultural grammars are especially important in the articulation of their art because the inspiration for their imaginations is rooted in their personal experiences and the worlds they have inhabited. For me the most important cultural grammar that distinguishes Ezban's films is his Mexican-ness, which in turn is modified by his minority identity. He is a member of the tiny Jewish minority that lives in Mexico. He told me there are only about 40,000 in the whole country of 122 million. This is just an ethnic speck. His family is religiously observant. I had the honor of attending the Shabbat dinner at his parents' home in Mexico City in February of 2015. It is a ritual that he has attended regularly throughout his life. Because I found the interplay of dualities in *The Incident* so striking (outside/inside; youth/old age; reality/fantasy), I came to suspect that belonging to a minority group ignites a sense of dualistic identity in which one both belongs to and yet remains outside a dominant identity, especially when that identity is presented in an idealistic or ideological way. Being Jewish in a culturally Catholic country like Mexico is bound to result in a dualistic identity. But what of this primary Mexican identity and what it has contributed to these two films?



The face in the mirror. *The Similar*s

In *The Incident* I found several examples of what I consider to be Mexican influences in a film that Ezban says was partially inspired by reading David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* with its multiple narratives. Once he completed his own idea for the script, which he says was rooted in his personal experience of climbing with his father up a multi-floor stairwell to his grandmother's for Shabbat dinner, Ezban ended up including, probably subconsciously, unintended expressions of his absorption of Mexican imagery and mythology. There is a scene in *The Incident* where one of the brothers creates a shrine to his late brother in the stairwell, which includes the man's skeletal body. The skeleton-figure is typical of Mexican popular cultural imagery. It is an expression of Mexican Christianity rather than Ezban's Jewish heritage.

Building on the death-theme Ezban provides another provocative expression of Mexican identity with the idea of death as a requirement before entering a portal to the next cycle of life. In Aztec and Mayan religious practice, as in numerous other ancient civilizations, there is a belief that human sacrifice/death is required to perpetuate existence. As one character in one cycle dies, the imprisoning world permits another to escape into another space and time, which in turn becomes another cycle of entrapped life. In *The Similar*s there is also a passage out of entrapment, but only through the power of a child's imagination.

Although *The Similar*s is a more fully realized film with a greater visual and narrative coherence it lacks the sense of "national cinema" that I experienced in *The Incident*. It follows a more conventional horror genre model, almost to the point of parody. Mexico is certainly present in the characters, in particular the shamanistic old Indian woman, but the focus on the convention of *the haunted house on the hill* turns the isolated bus station into a more generic statement. Ezban's staging of the film as a homage to American 1960s horror flicks demands that the film be differentiated from its sources by having it filled with Mexican references. This was not necessary in *The Incident* because of its subtexts and cultural undercurrents. In *The Similar*s the

convention of a “dark and stormy night” is exaggerated through the hurricane-strength pelting rain and the thunderous bolts of lightning. Two worlds are created that emphasize the outside/inside dichotomy, with the nether-world of the station holding primacy. In *The Incident* there are also two worlds but they are equal and similar, neither holding primacy over the other. I found this dualistic equality more intriguing and sophisticated than the dualistic disparity in *The Similar*. *The Similar* represents another part of his mind—the one that is formed by external, non-Mexican forces like his reading in the science fiction genre and his viewing of Anglo-American genre cinema.

In addition to nationality and ethnicity, the cultural grammars associated with social class and generation have had an influence on this young director. As the son of an upper middle-class family, Ezban has lived a relatively privileged existence in Mexican society. His mother is a psychologist and his father owns his own manufacturing business. It is an existence that has allowed him to strike out as an artist and to start up a movie business—Mexico City’s only up-pop drive-in movie theatre. Living in this hemisphere’s largest city (population 21 million) and the largest Spanish-speaking city in the world, he has been raised in the bosom of urbanity and all that it offers. He is not a director like Jean-Claude Lauzon who rose from the slums of Montreal to make raw, autobiographical films. Nor is he driven by social conscience or revolutionary fervor. But what trumps his class identity is his generational upbringing. Born in 1986 Ezban belongs to the internet age and its globalizing consciousness. That is why he is so savvy about the classics of North American science fiction writing, watches the latest science fiction films like *Inception* and *Cloud Atlas*, and is at ease in using social media to promote himself and his films. There is a certain sophistication to his marketing of himself as a global figure unrestrained by national boundaries. For his generation a global audience is the norm. In the international world of cult and genre films he knows what his fans think and what they like to talk about and he is able to join in the discussion.

Ezban is a heterosexual whose male consciousness is tied to the male heroes of genre cinema and literature. But working with his wife, Miriam Mercado, a no-nonsense film producer and his partner in the successful drive-in movie business, he is certainly aware of the powerful role of women in contemporary society, even a machismo-laden one like Mexico’s. I do not know Spanish so am unable to comment on the role of contemporary language in his scripts and directing, and any idiomatic usage he may favour. His two first features are in Spanish and subtitled in English. Also important is Ezban’s fluency in English, both spoken and written. His bilingualism is an important asset for his career. He may be directing an English-language American film in the very near future.

So what are we to make of this rising new talent? In viewing *The Incident* I was amazed by the use of actors, both professional and amateur, whose body shapes and ages (extremely elderly) were so un-Hollywood. They bordered on the grotesque and represented a Mexican take on the decay of the body. Death seems to be omnipresent and omnipotent in the Mexican psyche. In spite of this Mexican centrism, I believe the most important aspect of Ezban’s auteurism is his globalized imagination that filters, transforms and adapts the tropes of his favorite genres to his Mexican-infused sensibility. His creation of parallel, interlocking universes set in Mexico, in

which recognizable Mexican characters find themselves mysteriously entrapped, suggests that his films reflect his own fundamental reality—trapped in Mexico but always trying to escape.

Ezban is part of an international visual culture community that includes video gamers, graphic novelists and comic book writers and artists, as well as a new generation of filmmakers. As a middle-class Mexican with global aspirations for his art (his films circle the globe on the film festival circuit and have been sold into various markets from Eastern Europe to China) he is painfully aware of both the limitations and the possibilities of his nationality. Culturally, Mexico City has been and remains a beacon for Spanish-speaking creators from South and Central America, especially in times of political repression. This is the milieu in which he born and out of which he creates.

When comparing him to Canadian examples, I am immediately drawn to a comparison between Isaac Ezban and the young David Cronenberg of the 1970s, whose imagination gave the world a wonderful array of novel Grade B horror films. Ezban's films are 21st century examples of what young auteurs can do within the science fiction/horror/psychological thriller blend of genres. But the question is always about innovation and originality. How innovative/original is his work? *The Incident* has a deep originality rooted in the way Ezban frames and articulates his story in spite of superficial plot similarities to the material found in *The Twilight Zone*. There is something sophisticated in the way he presents his ideas that make them feel as if they brush against the mythological. Here is a talent that stands on the cusp of greatness. The question is whether that greatness will be restricted to the genres of his first two films or whether there is something more.



Isaac Ezban in Calgary 2015

Sources:

[1] Quoted in George Melnyk, *Film and the City: The Urban Imaginary in Canadian Cinema*, Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2014, 259.

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