



Guillermo Arriaga

by José Manuel Prieto

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(Interview)



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Guillermo Arriaga.

I first heard about *Amores Perros* when it was being filmed. A friend of mine, a screenwriter and fellow novelist, described in detail a car chase scene with a wounded dog in the backseat and a spectacular crash at an intersection. “A lot of blood, violence, and speeding. And dogs—the story is all about dogs.” But what could I say? The description made a bad impression on me, even though my friend couldn’t have praised the film more. I refused to see it in the summer of 2000 when I returned to Mexico City from Moscow, and my wife, who is Russian, recommended it as a “good Mexican film.” I refused to see it just as I still haven’t seen (and don’t plan on seeing) *Life is Beautiful*. I kept resisting *Amores Perros* when it appeared at the Blockbuster on my corner, with all its prizes listed in small print. Finally I saw the film—but filled with all the prejudices against

“interesting,” “promising,” “suggestive,” and “innovative” films. Have I made myself clear? And like Balzac’s grouchy old man who is eventually won over by the panorama of life that ensues, by human kindness and beauty, I had to admit after the final scene that my friend and my wife were right, and thus I told myself: interesting, promising, suggestive, and innovative (all without quotation marks).

I met Guillermo Arriaga, who screenwrote *Amores Perros*, three weeks later on a cold and rainy night in La Sandía, a restaurant in Mexico City, and asked him a few questions.

Translation by Margaret Carson.

JOSÉ MANUEL PRIETO Is this your first screenplay?

GUILLERMO ARRIAGA Yes, it’s my first. I’ve published three novels and have a book of unpublished short stories I wrote many years ago which I consider to be the direct antecedent to *Amores Perros*. But *Amores Perros* wasn’t my first experience with films. My novel *Un dulce olor a muerte* [*A Sweet Smell of Death*] was adapted for the screen. I wasn’t too pleased with the result, which had very little to do with the novel. I didn’t write the screenplay; I only sold the rights. There were a lot of expectations about that film, but it was a complete disappointment.

JMP So *Amores Perros* was your first experience as a screenwriter...

GA I don’t think of myself a screenwriter. For me, the screenwriter is someone who interprets what the director wants to do. A writer is someone who proposes things, someone who’s a creative collaborator.

JMP So you wrote *Amores Perros* as you would a novel, with all the narrative complexity?

GA Yes, with all the linguistic complexity of a novel. I wanted it to be a work that offered as many readings as a novel. As I worked on it, I even thought of it as a novel. I wrote 36 treatments and rewrote some pages maybe 150, 200 times.

JMP Are you referring to the dialogue?

GA No, I mean the story, the scenes, everything. It’s what the writer creates in a film. Many people think you write the dialogue and the director develops the idea. I made the decisions about the story and the structure in the screenplay. The writer is the one who proposes the plot, the idea, and sets it out in realistic, lively scenes.

JMP I really liked how *Amores*—even though it’s created with an incredible multiplicity of levels, with a certain textual complexity—manages to have both a crisscrossing and at the same time, simple development. That’s really interesting to me.

GA I think that’s exactly what a novelist does.

JMP Despite the fact that three stories are interwoven, the viewer never gets lost, he can easily follow the plot.

GA I think a good narrator is someone who can tell a story the way it demands to be told and can keep the audience (or the reader) interested in the challenges faced by the characters. That’s the

great lesson of writers like Faulkner: the story itself looks for the best way to be told. The most important thing is to saturate the story in humanity.

JMP Also, the film constantly jumps backward and forward.

GA Yes, of course, it goes fast forward, it comes and goes.

JMP Were you satisfied by the way it was filmed?

GA Very satisfied because, look, I worked closely with Alejandro [González Iñárritu] on the screenplay, and then I stayed on the project, so we understood each other very well. I didn't just give him the script and say good-bye. I was there during rehearsals, when the film was shot. That doesn't mean I made any of the decisions the director makes; I made the decisions of a writer. Sometimes he called me and said, "A scene isn't working for the camera, you have to do something," so I went back and rewrote it.



Director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu. Photo by Fernando Franco.

JMP You mean, you worked together.

GA Yes, that's what we did when we realized a scene wasn't working because of problems with the dramatic tension, the dialogue, or the way the scene was set up. We had to fix each scene during rehearsals, at the point where you can still do something, because once it's on the screen it's too late.

JMP And was the director always willing to change the scenes on the spot?

GA For me it was a pleasure to work with Alejandro. We respected each other; we each had our own territory.

JMP Tell me—as a novelist, do you think that in a film, the screenplay can satisfy a viewer who’s expecting a complex work? Don’t you think that a novel has countless subtleties that get lost when it’s brought to the screen? A film tends to have a more schematic treatment. Do you know what I mean?

GA Yes, I think a screenplay can be a complex work, and when you have a good relationship with the director these subtleties don’t have to be lost. It’s a collaborative work, as a team, with respect and closeness between the writer and director. If they communicate well with each other, it’s more likely that the finished work will keep the subtleties.

I believe the screenplay should be elevated to the status of a literary genre and treated with the same standards as any other genre, such as the novel or poetry.

JMP How about when you adapt a novel?

GA Of course, when you adapt a novel it isn’t possible to capture its literary spirit, but it *is* possible to capture its essence and transform it into images.

JMP Don’t you have to make certain concessions in a film? Weren’t there any made in *Amores Perros*?

GA Yes, you do, but not in this case. We weren’t looking to please anyone; there weren’t any kind of concessions made. Alejandro said, “I want to tell this story because I think it’s worth it.” The purpose of the film was simply to tell this story and that was all.

JMP Did you write the screenplay before you met Alejandro?

GA No.

JMP So the film and screenplay developed as you worked together?

GA Yes.

JMP Alejandro is the same age as you. Are you friends?

GA No, he’s younger, he’s about your age.

JMP But you have a lot of things in common?

GA Yes, a lot of things, but I’m an atheist and he’s very Catholic.

JMP Also, you don’t drink. (*In the restaurant where we met, his friends were having a birthday celebration and Guillermo didn’t have a single drink.*)

GA Until my dying day. And Alejandro, without being an alcoholic, drinks just like anyone else. Despite our differences, we complement each other.

JMP Let’s focus on the model’s character, the blonde in the second story who’s a Spanish actress. I liked her. How did you avoid turning her into a caricature, how did you make the character so believable?

GA ...and likeable. My intent is always to create paradoxical characters. I believe that paradoxes break stereotypes. Why should we categorize a model as a superficial and frivolous person?



Goya Toledo and Álvaro Guerrero in *Amores Perros*. Photo by Rodrigo Prieto. All film stills courtesy of Lions Gate Films.

JMP But it's what you expect, right? That tendency. She's shown as an absolutely normal person, without being caricatured. On the whole, none of the characters are stereotypical; instead, they're very well-defined, physically unique, not simple prototypes.

GA In Latin-American productions there's a tendency to say that the audience isn't interested in people who have been fucked over, so it's better to show the middle class. These days, I think audiences don't care about seeing people who are fucked over, or the rich, the middle class, or blacks. What's important is that the film be about human themes, interesting themes.

JMP It's anti-Televisa and anti-Hollywood. The characters never use artificial, unreal language, which I found very interesting. However, one thing a foreign audience might not get is the dialogue, the language used by the characters, which seemed naturalistic in the way they use teenage slang. It began to feel exaggerated to me.

GA Well, what's there is how I speak. You can't help but communicate who you are. That's the kind of language I grew up with. I use it every day, I can talk to you just like that.

JMP Did you have a special strategy in mind when you put it in the mouths of your characters?

GA No. I believe that lower-class characters should talk like lower-class people, middle-class characters like middle-class people. For example, the middle-class couple in the second story say "my love," or "I love you" to each other, and as their relationship deteriorates the violent tone of their language increases.

JMP So you varied the tone, or should we say, changed the dosage. Something else—the world that's shown in the story about the dogfights, that clandestine world, how do you know about it? For me, that's perhaps the most original, most vivid, most underground. I don't think many people here in Mexico City know about that world, so how do you? How do you know it exists?

GA I lived in a lower-middle-class neighborhood. I grew up in Colonia Unidad Modelo, where there were dogfights. I had a dog named Cofi, the same as the dog in the first story, an ordinary dog. One

day he ran away and some kids who had just come from fighting their dog let it loose to kill mine. My dog went back, then grabbed the other dog by the neck and killed it. After that he became famous. Several people brought their dogs over to fight him, and he always won. I never took him to the dogfights. I was very young then. But he kept running away.

JMP I thought so. There was a moment halfway through the film when I felt there was some autobiographical material.

GA I think a creative person can't help but use things from his personal life, but only at certain moments. As Hemingway said, "There are things in your life you shouldn't discuss because it will hurt the people you love." Also, we can't forget the importance of imagination and observation.

JMP Getting back to the film, the three stories that are linked together revolve around dogs.

GA At one point the film was even called *Perro Negro, Perro Blanco* [*Black Dog, White Dog*]. I use dogs as a metaphor for what happens to the characters. In the first story, a good young man becomes a murderer, and a house pet turns into a killer dog. In the second story, the dog that gets lost under the floorboards represents the couple who are lost in their own hell and the hell that Valeria herself suffers because of her destroyed leg. And in the third story, an assassin discovers his true condition through the lesson taught by the killer dog, Cofi; from then on, he finds the path toward redemption. I see the film as one piece, and there are other links that I emphasize. For example, in the first story, there's no father; in the second, a father abandons his family; and in the third a father who abandoned his family wants to return. The first story is about a 20-year-old man; the second, a 40-year-old man; and the third, a 60-year-old man. The story about the 20-year-old is in the past; the one about the 40-year-old is in the present; and the one about the 60-year-old is in the future. In the first story, two brothers try to kill each other. The third story also deals with brothers who want to kill each other.

JMP I didn't realize that—it's true. There's an almost mirror-like construction.



Gael García Bernal in *Amores Perros*. Photo by Rodrigo Prieto.

GA In the second story, the guy abandons his family for love; in the third, the character has abandoned his family for a cause.

JMP The one who's an ex-guerrilla, the assassin—let's talk about him. You know, it's hard for me to see him as someone who has, as they say, reformed. He's an assassin, we see him actually commit a cold-blooded murder in the film, and then we see how he changes.

GA He's a completely despicable character, I know. But so is the young man in the first story: he gets his brother beaten up; he takes his brother's dog to fight; and he, too, is a murderer. The first lesson I learned as a writer was that you have to love your characters very much, even if you hate them. If you love the characters you hate, you'll make them believable. There's a paradox here as well, about someone who hits bottom while trying to make things better, trying to change the world, like the ex-guerrilla.

JMP Do you come from a Marxist family?

GA I come from a family that's deeply rooted in Mexican liberalism, with an enormous social conscience—you could say we're social democratic.

Many people have given a Christian reading to *Amores Perros*: brother against brother—Cain and Abel—etcetera, a seemingly god-like retribution for adultery. But that's not my reading. I don't believe it's a film with a moral either, as one critic declared. The characters aren't punished; they learn to live with the consequences of their actions and accept them. My characters always follow their own path; that explains Octavio's line near the end of the film: "Maybe God's laughing at me, but I'm going to stick to my plans."

JMP However, at some points I noted, or it seemed to me, that a few characters, a few conflicts, followed an established pattern. I think it's an absolutely original story, but there are moments when it has a conventional frame: two brothers fight over the same woman, the baby-sitter is a drunk, things that without a doubt exist, but...

GA I don't believe you can make a vocation out of being simply original. You have to be original if the story requires it. What I worry about is falling into cliché, but I don't believe *Amores Perros* falls into any.

JMP Without a doubt, it avoids clichés, considering the young wife's decision to take off with the brother and the money and all that. No one expects it, I was expecting a more predictable outcome, but it's absolutely unpredictable. The way the three stories develop is unpredictable; for example, the fact that the paid assassin, the ex-guerrilla, leaves his pistol behind, between the two brothers, ends up surprising you.

GA I believe it's the writer's obligation to create situations in which the characters are surprising or unpredictable, that reveal human nature. Human nature is never predictable. Dramatic terminology always talks about personality and character, of the need to act, of the probability of taking an action. Personality is the probable way you're going to act. Character is the way you act by necessity, which only reveals itself when there's a tremendous conflict. Sometimes the probable way and the necessary way are pitted against each other.

By the way, what was your favorite scene?

JMP I don't know, maybe the story I liked best was the one with the model because of its absurd content, its subterranean character, the dog that gets lost under the parquet floor and all that. I liked the story's low profile—it was more subtle, less obvious than the dogfight. The little dog that gets lost and the man with the hammer were very interesting.

I liked how the story of the model was introduced. I thought for a moment that it served as a kind of contrast between the frivolous world of television and the sordid world of dogfighting in the first story, a technique that's often used in movies. But then you get hooked, you follow it along. It's very interesting.

GA I have a writer's perspective and I don't believe you should waste a single scene. In my opinion each scene should have a dramatic and narrative charge that advances the plot. I don't like static scenes, scenes that merely explain. I like scenes that tell the story.

The contrast between the scenes also has a role in the narrative. I like to use a dialectic structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis within the individual scenes as well as throughout the film. For example, the first story is a realistic drama, with various characters filmed in exteriors; the second, an absurd piece with two characters cooped up inside an apartment; the third is a psychological drama, almost a thriller. Three stories about different social classes and even different kinds of dogs: a ferocious Rottweiler and a wimpy little lapdog.

I think it's a film with many readings, that turn both inward and outward. I believe the first reading a film should have is whether it's entertaining, not in the banal or frivolous sense of the word, but in the sense that it makes you hang on to every action, it hooks you in, it makes you feel connected to the film.

JMP It should have a hook.

GA A film should have this: a narrative force, but also different levels of interpretation for the viewer to get to where he wants to go. You can provide the audience with as many readings as you want, but the viewer who pays simply to be entertained should also be satisfied.



Emilio Echevarría in *Amores Perros*. Photo by Rodrigo Prieto.

JMP Do you think you'll direct a film?

GA Direct? Of course.

JMP With your own ideas?

GA With my own ideas.

JMP Do you have any ideas in mind yet?

GA Yes, I have ideas for my own film as well as one for Alejandro called *21 Grams*.

JMP 21 grams. Is that the 21 grams in a bullet?

GA No, it's how much weight you lose at the moment of your death.

JMP Writing novels and screenwriting are two different things, aren't they?

GA Look, I consider myself to be a pure narrator. I'm a storyteller, and I resort to the medium that adapts itself the best; if a story needs to be told in a novel, that's what I'll do. It can be a film, a novel, television, theater. What I like best are films and novels.

I think it's very hard for a pure poet to be a good storyteller, it's so hard...

JMP They're two very different ways of seeing.

GA They're two ways of seeing the world, because the poet is always trying to create images without any flesh, and the novelist loves to be splashed with blood, semen...for example, I completely despise novels that have characters named "X." In a novel the characters should have a first and last name. I can't stand poets who say, "Blue, the sea, red, very red, the sea." I like works that narrate, like in Bukowski, who keeps telling a story even when he's creating poetry.

JMP Tell me, which Latin American writers interest you?

GA Martín Luis Guzmán, for his narrative suspense, the way he makes you get interested. I don't know if you've read *El aguila y la serpiente*. It's a brutal book, showing tremendous skill with the dialogues, characters, and scenes.

There's a Colombian writer, Hernando Téllez, who has fascinating stories like "Espuma y nada más," a masterpiece in the art of intrigue, of revealing human nature.

Also, the stories of an Uruguayan writer, Fernando Butazzoni, especially his story "En torno," a pretty fucking powerful look at the relationship between life and death.

JMP Are they easy to visualize? Can they be adapted for the screen?

GA They're not easy to visualize, and they're impossible to adapt. But they provide a lesson in how to construct characters and create images and handle dialogue.

JMP Don't you think that film has a contaminating influence on literature?

GA No, not at all. Film owes more to literature than literature to film, but I don't think it contaminates...

JMP But Gabriel García Márquez, for example, has refused to adapt *One Hundred Years of Solitude* for the screen because he's sure that no director could capture all its subtleties.

GA That's an exception. You could also say it's impossible to make a novel out of Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. I read the novel that was based on the film and it was horrible. On the other hand, I don't think you could make a novel out of *Amores Perros* either.

JMP Do you see any difference between screenplays written in Latin America, especially in Mexico, and screenplays from the United States?

GA In the United States there's a terrible straightjacket—the three-act structure. I believe films are under too much control there, it's too conservative. In Cubist painting for example, all the elements were thrown into chaos to interpret reality, and in literature as well, in writers like Joyce or Faulkner. The great lesson these writers gave us was that each story searches for the way it should be told. No story can be told in the exact same way, we can't create parameters for every story, and that's what has happened with American films.

JMP Well, market pressures also have an effect.

GA But the market is also asking for something else. It's not a coincidence that several films have come out recently with an unconventional, more complex structure, like *Traffic*, *Amores Perros*, and *Magnolia*. Conventional films have played themselves out.

My film was never intended to respond to the demands of the market, or to have commercial appeal. However, it was a commercial success in Mexico, in Argentina, in Colombia, in Cuba, and it was a success at film festivals in Tokyo, Edinburgh, and Cannes.

The point is to create interesting stories, to let human, powerful things happen to the characters. Audiences don't want happy endings; that's not true. Audiences are beginning to push for changes. People don't want to see the same pictures again and again. This year films have been nominated for the Oscars that have nothing to do with conventional cinema: *Before Night Falls*, *Pollock*. Last year *All About My Mother* and *American Beauty* won Oscars—there was nothing conventional about those films.

Also, in the United States, the success of independent films shows that audiences want to see new kinds of movies.

I think the same way about interviews. Audiences want a change. I think they could be more interesting, like this one, about screenplays and films and life. I can't stand photographers who come to take my photo so that I'll appear with a dog in their magazine, no, I don't want that anymore.

JMP And what kind of dog do you have?

GA A Labrador retriever.