

Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Guillermo Arriaga

26 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

Guillermo Arriaga: Thank you all for being here. It's kind of intimidating with this light, but I hope it will be good. I have chosen some clips of the films I have written, some of the ones I directed, and I will talk a little about this craft of screenwriting, or storytelling.

I didn't study screenwriting at all, ever. I have no film studies. Where I come from, where my storytelling comes from, is that need to tell stories. I was saying in an interview that when I was a kid I had this gigantic crush on girls. I loved girls. But I was too shy to approach them. I'm telling you, when I was nine or ten years old, I really loved them. And I had something called ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder, so I was shy and my head was a mess and I had no way of playing logically. I began writing them letters. And then they responded to it. I said, 'Wow! If I write letters to them then they will say something.'

And then I have this tendency to answer every question with a story. There are people who answer with ideas, there are people who answer with concepts, I answer always with stories. So I began putting them together, the need of expressing myself in the written form and the storytelling. And I began to realise that if I don't tell stories, stories will grab me by the throat and will literally kill me. Poison me. It's something organic, almost part of my biology.

I have this constant need to tell stories. There is something that causes a lot of anxiety in writers, the notion that we have only one gallon of ink and that sooner or later we'll run out of that gallon. And if you pay the bills writing, like in my case, you send the kids to school with your writing, you're terrified that you will have nothing else to say, forever. And there's also this feeling that someone will realise that you are a fraud. And they will say, 'Yeah, this man, he's not good at all.'

So you live under that pressure. I know many of you here are writers and you know what I'm talking about. It's terrifying, for example, for someone like the great master of them all, William Faulkner, who wrote his best novels when he was 32, 33 years old. Between the age of 30 and 40 Faulkner wrote his masterpieces. And then none of his novels

were of the same level, of the same quality, of the first ones. When you're supposed to gain all the wisdom that age brings with it, man, you cannot write good stuff any longer.

It happened to Hemingway. *A Farewell To Arms* for example, is much better than *Across The River*. You say, 'It's not possible, it's the same guy.' So we never know when this changes. We hope it never ends. In my case I am very, very bad at adapting. I have no idea how to express the ideas of other people, or to adapt a novel or do anything like that. I cannot make a living adapting. I don't know how to do it. The stories I've been telling have been very personal stories.

For example *Amores Perros* – I don't know if you've seen it – but *Amores Perros* involves dogfighting. Well, guess what, I had a dog whose name was Coffee. He was eight years old. He used to run away all the time and there were dogfights where I grew up. And then they had this champion dog and said, 'Why don't you make this dog kill Guillermo's dog, just for fun?' But my dog killed the other dog, so I used that story to tell the story of *Amores Perros*.

I have a mild infection in my heart. Nothing serious, but I wanted to have a try-out in the Mexican boxing team for the Olympics. I was training so that mild infection in the heart became a mess. It went from the pericardium, which is the membrane around the heart, to the muscle. And the doctor told me if the infection goes inside you need a heart transplant. It was never close that I would have a heart transplant, but just thinking about it made me write *21 Grams*. All those thoughts of what would happen if I die.

And once I was with a friend. I was 12 years old, he was 16. We had a high powered rifle, a 30-06 calibre rifle, and it said in the bullets box it could have a reach of five miles. And the guy was like, 'No way, five miles? It should be 500 yards.' I said it was five miles. 'Why don't we shoot the cars far away?' We were in the desert, watching cars and we said, 'Let's shoot them and see if it really hits so far away.' They were like a kilometre away.

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And he was like, 'No don't shoot them, what if it's true?' And this is the origin of *Babel*. So any one of the stories I have been telling in cinema or my novels, with the exception of one, has to do with personal things. With my personal life. So that terrifies me; what happens when I have nothing else to say? At least I am happy not to be a one hit wonder. That would have killed me. Really, because there are people who are famous for just one thing in their life, and they wrote or sang or did something when they were 30 years old. And they're 60 and it's, 'Can you just sing that song again?'

People who wrote one film, and are known only for one film or one book... fortunately that is not my case. The other day some critic said that I was a one trick pony because I always repeat the same kind of structure. First of all, I don't think I have repeated any of the structures, I think they are completely different. But in that case I prefer to be a one trick pony, rather than to be a one hit wonder.

The critics are always saying, 'We want something original.' I have a very personal way of saying things and they say, 'He's repeating himself.' [Guillermo is handed a note] 'Please shut up, you are saying so many stupid things. The Organisation.'

[LAUGHTER]

What I think is the one trick pony is really the three act kind of structure. Why do we think that we have to put rules on storytelling? Just because a Greek philosopher said two thousand years ago it has to be. Who says that on page 30, page 60, page 90 we always have to follow the same structure?

I think that every story has a different way to be told; each one of them. And we have to realise that in real life, in our daily life, we use extremely sophisticated storytelling. We never go linear, we never structure with a first act, second act and third act. We always use this back and forth kind of storytelling. So why do we have to go always with this kind of structure?

There are people who are paid a lot of money in Hollywood because they are able to bring

the 35 page turning point to page 30. Really. They are called Script Doctors. And the disease is not being on page 30. That's the great disease the script doctors are curing.

Now I've been teaching seminars and many people are asking me if there's any technique. I think that the only technique for writing has to come, not from the technique itself, but from questions about important things.

I was a juror in Venice last year, at the Venice Film Festival. I have just been part of the jury at the San Sebastian Film Festival and there's a tendency about boredom. I know what's going on in the world; that cinema's representing, that everyone's bored. And even the way they are shooting films has to do with boredom. This is not a way of criticising, I'm not criticising, I'm just presenting what I have seen in these festivals.

You know, they put the camera like this and a guy comes walking from far away. He arrives. He says something to the woman who is watching him coming from far away. And he goes out of the frame, and the woman is watching him. Then the camera slowly pans, and the guy is sitting and she's still looking at him. And he comes walking again. I'm not criticising, but that's the way a lot of movies have been shot. I think that middle class people, which is basically where filmmakers come from, have their world so organised that nothing really happens. They wake up, they have a cup of coffee, they go to study at college, they go back, they have another cup of coffee, and they sleep. Sometimes they have sex. With themselves.

So, it's obvious. I came from another tradition. I came from a tradition where everything happens. Shakespeare, talking about British writers, a lot of things happen in Shakespeare. Every time I write a scene or a story and it's not working I think, 'How would Shakespeare solve this?' It happened to me in *Amores Perros*. *Amores Perros* was a story that was not working, and I asked how it could work and thought of Shakespeare. In Shakespeare the way of doing things is: the closer the characters are, the greater the conflict. Think of *Hamlet*.

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Who killed Hamlet's father? Who is marrying Hamlet's mother? *Macbeth*. He wants the throne. In order to get the throne he has to kill the King. But the King is his best friend, and the one who is pushing him to kill his best friend is his wife. So when you put things so close, conflict becomes much larger, bigger. So that's something I use, that's a trick that I give to you. Think like Shakespeare. Or William Faulkner, *The Sound & The Fury*.

Benjy [the protagonist in Faulkner's novel] has been castrated by his brother because Benjy was having sex with his sister and the brother is in love with his sister. It becomes a great tragedy. Huge conflict, when things are close. So in *Amores Perros* how it helped, I have a guy who wanted to be in love. This guy was in love with his brother's wife who – by the way – is pregnant. And that helped me a lot to make things advance.

I already said that I have no education at all in screenwriting. But when I have read all these manuals of screenwriting, they say things that I will never follow. And I have learned that the first rule of screenwriting, or any art, is having no rules. Everyone has to find their own way of doing things. For example, every screenwriting teacher says, 'Research, research, research is the key to everything.' I say I'm too lazy to research. I'm talking about myself and the things that happened, so why do I have the need to research at all? So I do not do any kind of research, ever.

I wrote a film that takes place in Morocco in *Babel*, and [has] a story in Japan. I have never been to Morocco and I have never been to Japan. I made no research about how people live in Japan, I make no research about how people live in Morocco. I have been with goatherds in the mountains of the deserts of Mexico, and I am sure they behave the same as the Moroccan goatherds.

I have a teenage girl in Mexico City, and I am sure that a teenage girl in Japan would behave exactly the same. So why do I need to research? To know that they take their shoes off when they come into the house? Okay, I do that when I go to a Japanese restaurant. So I know they do that. And the good thing is that

many Japanese and Moroccan people have told me, 'Wow, did you really live in Morocco? It's just like that.' So what's the point of research? So I do no research.

But, when you're nominated, you go with every one of the nominated writers to talk to audiences, and I was with Peter Morgan, who I have a profound admiration for. And for him *everything* has to do with research. While he's talking about *The Queen*, a misstep and the whole country's going to be against him. Or not. So for him research is important, that's why I'm saying the first thing is not to have rules.

Second, I was writing a screenplay and the producer insisted – because I come from the novels – that I had to go to one of these gurus of screenwriting seminars. It was a woman, and she was saying, 'You must know everything about your characters, everything. You have to write the whole backstory of your character.'

You must know even how much change he has in his pocket. What kind of underwear he is wearing...' and I said this was so boring. If I know everything about my characters how am I going to be surprised by them? So I have no idea at all where my characters are coming from, who their parents are, I have no idea. I'm not interested in that.

Third, many writers tell my students, 'If you don't know the end of the story, don't write it.' Again I say how boring is that? If I know the end what's the purpose of writing the story? I like to discover the end, so I have no idea of the end. The way I work in Hollywood is I pitch my stories to producers, and many of them are like, 'What happened next?' and I say, 'I have no idea.' 'What's the end?' 'I have no idea.' 'And you want me to pay this amount for something you have no idea how it's going to end?' 'Yeah, it's going to end good, don't worry.'

Don't worry, be happy. So I love to discover the end. I hate when I know everything, so that's why I don't write an outline. Why write a treatment? And I have no preconception, I have no preconceived ideas, I have just a very vague idea of where the story's heading and what structure it needs. So the way I write the stories is I sit down and begin writing.

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I'm going to show you some clips. For example you cannot write linear and then cut and paste, because in the non-linear structure that I use, the way it works – this is another trick – is because of the dramatic questions. You need dramatic questions, and those dramatic questions, you must feel them. When I was writing *Babel* there's this guy that was shooting the rifle – we're going to see the scene – and I needed a cut there. We need a cut. I'm not the kind of writer who has the wall full of papers with where it's going and everything. I have it in my head. I know where I'm going more or less.

In *21 Grams* I knew that the audience, because it was so chaotic, needed a handlebar to grab. For me the handlebar was going to be the light. *21 Grams* is written in light. What do I mean? For example, the first part of *21 Grams* happens during the day. This means the characters have some light in their lives, they're living well more or less, and the audience understands this part because it's light. This is subconscious. I'm sure that you have not noticed it if you've seen *21 Grams*. The second part is all during the night. And the third part is at dawn or dusk. And that's on purpose, and that comes from the screenplay.

It hurts a lot when they say of *21 Grams*, 'Such great editing.' No, my friend, the structure comes from the screenplay. It's published here, Faber & Faber. You can buy it and see that I'm not saying lies. And many people think that I really write linear and then cut and paste. No. I just sit and write, because I have to feel things. And that's the way ADD people think. What I always try also is to have a concept. A concept that is behind the storytelling.

For example, in *The Burning Plain* the concept was the four elements. I want a story that has to do with fire, one with wind, one with water and one with earth. In *21 Grams* it's the point of view of a dying man. That's why all the scenes come in a mess, completely disordered, because they say when you're dying your life [flashes before you], and I think if it comes to you it doesn't come: first act, second act, page 30. It comes completely scrambled. In *Babel* for example, the concept that I used to have some motive for me, was the last day

of something. This 24 hour period of time; in those 24 hours something breaks forever.

Storytelling, as with love, you never know where it's going. The other day I was in Colombia, and there was a painter who asked what if stains appeared in a painting? Nothing, discover something from a stain. The same happens with love. The process of discovering art is the same as discovering the person you love. It needs surprises. And the more profound the storytelling, the more profound is the person you love.

There's something I always think of a writer, or any artist. My friend has this image, someone who goes to the deepest part of the woods, where no-one has been before, and brings something that no-one has seen before. And that's beautiful. It's the same in love. You go to territories where you have never been before, and come back with something you have never expected. So that's how I want to approach a piece of art, writing, music, ballet, architecture. They bring me to places I never thought I was going to go.

And there's also themes. It's amazing how themes repeat and you never know why they are repeating to yourself. I have some clips here that I want to show, but first I would like to show one of the scenes that I like the most that I have written in my life.

(Clip from *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*)

APPLAUSE

I don't know if you have seen this film, but I'm going to just tell you what it's about. Barry Pepper is with the border patrol, and he killed Melquiades Estrada, an illegal Mexican, basically by mistake. Tommy Lee Jones kidnaps him and says, 'We're going to bury this guy in Mexico and you're going to tell the family why you killed him.' So it's like a kind of road movie, with horses. And they find this guy, the blind man.

When I was a kid, where we were taught, in the class there was a skeleton. A real skeleton. And we had a lot of fun with him. He used to be a

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person, so we put him in a hat, and then we put him in a tie, we had fun with him. And if we had a skeleton here, right now, we would feel a little bit uncomfortable. But nothing serious. But what about if I had a guy who has been dead for three days? A rotting corpse? Would we feel uncomfortable?

What happens with the rotting flesh that creates such anxiety in us? What happens with the smell? Why are we not shocked to have a skeleton here but we are so shocked if we see a cadaver here? So I decided that I would like to have a corpse being a protagonist of the film. So this is the film of the corpse being a protagonist.

Second, I used to go to some very little village in the north of Mexico, far away from everything. There were friends of mine, who I loved a lot, they are farmers who don't know how to read or write. They are very poor... By the way the wife of my greatest friend, and a great friend of mine, died yesterday at the age of 53, because they have no idea what diabetes is and she didn't take care of herself and she died.

The grandmother of my friend Lucio Estrada, and his brother Melquiades Estrada – which is [named] in honour of him – and Pedro Estrada, was blind. I remember that I used to visit her, and she knew I was there and she'd hold my hand. And she was watching the soap operas, not watching, she was hearing the soap operas and was asking me what was going on. This and this, and it was, 'Ah, okay.' One day the man that was taking care of her was herding goats, he was leaning on a tree and he had a heart attack. A friend of mine also, this happened many years ago. And he died.

So she was by herself, with no-one taking care of her. And I have this obsession with blind people. Blind people in the desert, and blind people in far away places like this man, so that's where that scene comes from. I personally like this scene a lot. I think that it says [a lot] about the characters and a human decision: should they kill or not kill the guy? I always like the audience to be in the place of the characters. What would you do, would you kill the guy? You know he's going to die from

hunger, he's going to die by himself so what's better; to shoot him out of pity or let him die by himself?

The one we're going to see is a scene that came before. Tommy Lee Jones' character who was the best friend of the Mexican, of Melquiades Estrada, is very angry with the Barry Pepper character because he killed the only friend he has in life. It's called *The Three Burials* because first the guy is buried in the desert because the character played by Barry Pepper shoots him and in panic he buries him in the desert. But some coyotes dig him out and begin eating him.

That idea comes from a guy I knew, he was fighting in the Mexican revolution, he was severely wounded, there were thousands of corpses in the battlefield, horses dead, people dead, and the coyotes came in to eat them. He was alive, but a coyote was biting him in the neck, trying to eat him. He was like [makes a swishing sound, like an arm waving] to the coyote, but he didn't mind and he ate a big chunk of his shoulder and his back. So I have this thing of coyotes eating corpses since then. In this scene, Tommy Lee Jones' character is taking Barry Pepper to the house of Melquiades, with the corpse of Melquiades.

So they find first Melquiades buried, because coyotes didn't dig him up, and some hunters find him by chance, and then he's buried in some Texan graveyard by the authorities. But Melquiades asked Tommy Lee Jones' character, 'Please, take me down south to Mexico and bury me in Mexico, because I want to be buried in Mexico.' So Tommy Lee Jones is going to fulfil the promise of his best friend. Here's what happens when Tommy Lee Jones brings Barry Pepper with the corpse of Melquiades to Melquiades' house.

(Clip from *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*)

APPLAUSE

For me, this is the core scene of the movie. And I was saying – you never know how you choose things. Or as the Argentinean writer Ernesto

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Sabato said, you never choose obsessions, obsessions choose you.

I have been repeating myself, in seven themes. I'm going to tell you things that some people have noticed that happen in my films. For example, there's people that are amputated, or on the verge of being amputated. Why [do] I like people being amputated? I have no idea.

I like people wearing the clothes of someone else, because it has a representation. Here Tommy Lee is pushing him to wear Melquiades' clothes because he wants him to become Melquiades and he's going to have to travel all along to Mexico as Melquiades, and go through all the nightmare that represents the many illegal workers who come to the United States from Mexico. He has to go the other way round.

You can see Americans crossing illegally to Mexico. It happens in *The Three Burials*, it happens in *Babel* and it happens in *The Burning Plain*. Always Americans coming to Mexico. Why I choose that theme? I have no idea. There's a clip of how these themes repeat, this comes from *The Burning Plain*, the film I wrote and directed.

I'm going to just [tell] the backstory so you will understand what's going on. There's a Mexican, a married Mexican, who is having an affair with an American woman. And in order to have this affair work they met at a trailer in the middle of nowhere in the desert. They both live in small towns in New Mexico, so they meet there.

For some reason that the movie explains later the trailer has a brutal explosion that obviously kills them. And the kids, the daughter of this American married woman, and the son of this married Mexican [man] begin to look after each other, they begin to get in touch. And this is a moment where they come together.

(Clip from *The Burning Plain*)

Again, I have no idea that I was putting people in the clothes of other people, but here they are re-enacting their parents' love affair. They are making love in the mother's bed, wearing

her slip and his shirt. This is something that we don't know where it comes from, at least I don't know where it comes from, and that's why I don't like to know anything about the characters, because these kinds of things really surprise me.

That's why I think if there's too much planning and preparing, what you're going to write about you will not be surprised by it. These things, for example, I didn't notice this until someone who was writing a thesis on me in Belgium said, 'Why do you always [show] people in other people's clothes?' I said, 'Really? Show me where,' and he showed me these two clips.

The only way that these obsessions can go out freely is not constraining them to anything. That's what I don't like, writing the structure kind of thing, on page 30, I don't like to have a backstory about the characters, I don't like to have an outline, I want to be as free as possible, to have these things coming naturally.

There's this book by Carlos Castaneda, I don't know if you know it, 'The Teachings of Don Juan.' Don Juan used to say, 'When you walk in the desert just float. Float. Float in the desert and you will find the desert. You will find the secret of the desert if you don't walk in the desert with a purpose.' For me the same is [true of] the story. Just begin writing it, and float, and let the story tell you things. Don't try to push the story where the story cannot go.

So I like this scene particularly. And there's another scene I want to share, this comes from *Amores Perros* – has everyone seen this film, or do you need the backstory? No backstory? Okay. This one is also one of my favourite scenes, I have no idea where it came from but I'm happy that it's in the film and I'm happy that it came by itself.

(Clip from *Amores Perros*)

I still don't know where that idea, putting the gun in the middle of the two brothers that want to kill each other, came from. But I'm sure that if I had the backstory it would never come. So that's the way I work that I want to share with

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you, because I know that many writers feel liberated after I say this.

They've been taught to research, they've been taught to write outlines, they've been taught to follow rules, and when I say you can write without being constrained by anything it makes you feel free. That's what I think. So first of all I think that when we write we must have a sense that each story has a different way to be told. Each one of them. If he has to do linear and it works in the three acts, perfect. But what about if not?

I grew up in the Marxist tradition, and the Marxist tradition came from the dialectic kind of thinking, so sometimes when a scene is not working I try to think like Hegel: thesis, antithesis, synthesis – you say it like that? I always like characters to go into a scene with a dramatic objective, and the other character has a completely different dramatic objective. And they clash and that brings something else.

Many times when a scene is really stuck, that's something that helps me a lot, to think in the dialectic way. So I think it's time for questions, I don't know if this was helpful in any way.

APPLAUSE

Briony Hanson: Guillermo, thank you so much for that. This is the second time I've heard you talk, and each time it feels like listening to poetry, so I think my job here is just to make you talk some more.

I just wanted to pick up on the thesis that you've been talking about. You've said very specifically what you *don't* do – you don't do your three acts, you don't know your characters, you don't do research, you don't know the end before you start. But you also teach, you teach screenwriting students. Now if they haven't had the rich life that you've had, with the dog fights and the dead bodies, what do you tell them, how do you tell them to write? Or do you just tell them what not to do?

GA: They understand. You know, I think that having internal order is a talent that I have, but not everyone has it. Many people get lost, I never got lost, ever. I know exactly where I am

standing, where I am writing. In a city I always know where things are, I don't need maps. I know that I am heading that way, that way, and the hotel is that way. But many people don't. That's where the structure comes so I teach them how the structures work and how they don't work, and I try to teach them what it's important to think about, and what's not important to think about.

I tell them tricks that come from the craft of writing. They don't come in the manuals because they don't write. Many of these gurus don't write, but I write so I know some tricks. I know how to improve dialogue for example, and I can show them how to improve dialogue and that kind of stuff. I have my own method of structure, and that will help people how to structure. And I give them some ideas.

For example, when I was teaching creative writing I asked them to read certain authors. And then I asked them, 'Please write a story like that author. Copy the style.' And the more they tried to copy the style the more a style of their own came by itself. At the end of the course I asked them to submit an original story anonymously. And we read it aloud, and everyone was like, 'Ah, that's you because that's your style, that's the way you put words,' and they were copying other people. So style always comes by itself.

That's one of the things I tried to teach them; what is your style? What do you want to say? What are your themes? How do you use words, how do you express yourself? Everyone finds their own way of doing it.

I became a good friend of Quentin Tarantino, we were both part of the jury in Venice, and I said, 'Man, how much damage have you done to international cinema! Because you have a talent that no-one has, you have that dialogue talent and only you have it, and many people are saying – like everyone, especially the young people – are trying to make the Tarantino style of movie, but they don't have the talent for the dialogue.'

And he said, 'And what about you, you're doing these weird structures that everyone's trying to copy. That doesn't work.' What I teach

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the students is to try to help them find their own talent. That's what a teacher has to do.

BH: And when you talk about some of the things you said, you can just hear people sighing with relief, particularly the newer screenwriters in the audience; that they don't have to do all that stuff they can just do it their way. But when you are doing your kind of non-linear sort of throwing together of random incidents that then become these incredible works, do you ever find that you lose your own way, that you go too far? Do you have to rein yourself in?

GA: No, not ever. When I was writing *21 Grams* I thought it was a very risky kind of structure. I was like, 'No-one is going to understand,' but three things pushed me forward. One, I gave it to my dad. He read the first 50 pages and said 'I understand everything.' So I said, 'Wow, it's not that bad.' Secondly I saw *Magnolia* and I said if Paul Thomas Anderson can throw Todd from the sky, I can do anything.

The third one is the 'Washington version' of *Amores Perros*. In Washington, when *Amores Perros* came out, I went to the Kennedy Center. I introduced the film, left to have dinner and came back for the Q&A and man, such weird questions they were asking.

It was like, Washington politics is damaging the brains of these guys. The questions were really, really weird. So it [screened] for five nights. And the next night a Mexican came and said, 'Man, you have to watch the film, it's not the one I saw.' He said I'd better watch it.

So I said okay. I'm sitting and the projectionist becomes a huge editor, he put reel one then reel five, then reel three [on]. The credits appear in the middle of the film. That was the Washington version. I said if the public can understand the Washington version I can do anything. And it was a better film by the way, more intriguing. Why are the credits in the middle? Very avant-garde. I'm going to do that one day, don't copy me. I'm going to do it one day.

BH: Has the fact that you have now directed changed the way that you write? Or did it just cement everything that you knew already?

GA: No, I was telling Jeremy [Brock, curator] now that I have directed I know the importance of the screenplay. First of all, I don't like actors to improvise, because there's a purpose for every word. I was talking to one of the jurors in San Sebastian, Alex de la Iglesia, and he said how much damage improvisation makes. Because actors are like, 'I'm gonna make it fresh,' and they change the words and then they repeat the same words that the other characters say before. And then it has a snowball effect.

I was once with a great actor, I'm not going to say his name, and another great actor. And the other great actor was trying to improvise and this great actor – his name is basically Sean Penn, something like that – the great actor told the lesser actor, 'Okay man, your work is acting, his work is writing, so why don't you act and he writes, and you stop improvising?'

I love Sean Penn. Really, because he said to the actor, 'Why do you think you're going to make the dialogue better in one minute when this guy has been thinking about it for two years?' So I don't like actors to improvise. I respect actors, I love actors, I'm not one of those writers or directors who hate them. I love actors. I think that they give a human form, they give a face, they give emotion, they raise the level of the words, raise the level of the image very high. But they don't have to improvise.

They are not going to make it better, they are going to cause problems in the editing room for sure. I was once in the Sundance Screenwriting Lab and there was this Brazilian writer-director, and his screenplay was like, 'Laura goes into the room, there is Jose inside, and they talk.' And so what do they talk about? He said, 'They can improvise like in *Amores Perros*.' I said, 'What the hell? Every [line of] dialogue in *Amores Perros* is written.' He thought it was improvised by the actors. No it's not improvised.

BH: So given that you're so fixed, you know what you want and when you get there you

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know you've got the script that you want to be realised, what is there left for a director to bring?

GA: Talent.

BH: To do what?

GA: Everything. Of course a director brings the storytelling with the camera. He's directing the actors, he's telling the actors what to say, he has the taste. He's going to the edit room. For example with *The Burning Plain*, I sold it to the producers, and they were pitching me directors who would paint the walls green. Every wall is green and everyone is in green. I hate green, because it's a cliché. I like directors who will respect and tell the story. That will not be fancy and do all [this] ridiculous stuff that I hate.

BH: Why didn't you come to directing earlier?

GA: The word would be stupid. I was stupid not to do it before. I thought it needed a lot of technical knowledge, which I don't have. I didn't study film, I have no idea of lenses and many technical things. But I was once walking in Cancun and there was this t-shirt with Einstein that said, 'Imagination is more important than knowledge.' So yeah, I don't have knowledge but I have imagination. And I understand that directing is also surrounding yourself with the best people you can, and trusting them. So I thought that it was going to be very difficult, but now that I did it I know that I can do it again, and I hope to do it again many times.

Q (from the floor): I've noticed that a lot of the references you made during your very illuminating talk are towards playwrights and novelists. Do you see yourself more in the tradition of literary storytellers, or are there other filmmakers or screenwriters you would look at in order to discover your craft?

GA: I basically come from the novel. I was a novelist myself before writing any screenplays. When I was watching films, I thought it was constraining and I wanted to bring something else I was not finding in the films I was watching. So I began bringing it from

playwrights like Shakespeare or Sophocles, the Greeks, or William Faulkner, all those writers.

When I wrote *Amores Perros* it came from two places. First I had my car accident. I was sleeping on the back seat with no seatbelt many years ago, and we fell off a cliff. So I woke up in the middle of the accident, and I became so obsessed with the accident that I wanted to write a trilogy of films based on accidents. I was obsessed with what happened before, during the accident and after the accident. That's the structure of *Amores Perros*.

And at the same time I always wanted a film to have the structure of *The Sound & The Fury* by William Faulkner. So with those two references, the structure of the accident itself and the structure of *The Sound & The Fury*, that's where it comes from. By the way, Tarantino used to call me 'Mexican Tarantino' and I said, 'Come on man, I hadn't seen your films before I wrote anything.'

Q (from the floor): You say that you don't like actors to improvise your work. Does that mean when you finish your final draft and hand it in to the producers or the director that's it? Or are you happy to collaborate with a director to push a screenplay in the direction that the director wants?

GA: I've been very actively involved in most of the films that I have written. I have even a producer credit in some of them. I'm even an actor in one of them. And I'm very close to the films, except for *Babel*, where I had trouble with the director. I've been very closely involved with the other ones.

Even in the editing, because the way I write screenplays, taking a scene out creates a snowball effect. So I have to be there and be sure that the structure will not be falling down. It had to be very meticulously cut.

Q (from the floor): How can you trust that Tommy Lee Jones, an untested director, obviously a great actor, with *Three Burials...* What made Tommy Lee Jones pitch to you? Why did you give it to him?

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GA: When we first met we had dinner together. It's funny because with these famous movie stars you think that you've known them since you were a kid, but they have no idea who you are. 'Come on, Tom Cruise, hi my friend, how are you, how've you been? How's Katie?' But he has no idea who you are. It's a very strange sensation.

And with Tommy Lee I had dinner. You know, what is more important in this business is taste. Taste is what defines collaboration. If I find that the taste is the wrong way I would rather not work with that guy. So we began talking, and when I asked Tommy Lee which was his favourite living American writer and he said Cormac McCarthy I said, 'Man, that's my favourite also.'

When he said that Edward Hopper was his favourite American painter I said I love Edward Hopper. When he said that he loved hunting, I said I loved hunting. And when he said he loved literature, I love literature – that was the man. He was gonna do a good job, I was sure. And if not at least we were going to have a good time.

BH: Just going back one, you said that you had trouble with the director [Alejandro González Iñárritu] on *Babel*. Given you're in a room full of screenwriters, and people who are upset about the possessory credit, could you give us any more background to that rather famous falling out?

GA: Okay, we have time until six in the morning?

BH: I'm kind of asking because most journalists have the kind of auteur's perspective on an issue like that, and that's not what this room is.

GA: It has to do with something else completely. When we first met I was writing this trilogy of movies about accidents. The first movie was called *Upon Open Sky*, which hasn't been filmed because I sold the rights 15 years ago, which I had the intention of directing.

I had one that I was writing, there was one finished, and Alejandro called me because he read that one and he wanted us to meet. I

didn't know him before. They say I met him at university, no, I hadn't met him before. He called and said he wanted to meet me because I'd written *Upon Open Sky* which I intended to direct. And I was writing a film called *Black Dog, White Dog* which I was intending to direct myself. I had already written several pages of it.

We met and he pitched me a romantic comedy. Alejandro is known for being funny, doing very funny commercials and he wanted to do a comedy like Alfonso Cuarón did in his first film. It's a very nice comedy, very funny, but I said first of all, I didn't think I'm the right guy, and second I didn't write for hire.

He said, 'What do you have?' and I said I was writing this film called *Black Dog, White Dog* which I was intending to direct and he said, 'Give that to me.' I said no, because I was going to direct it, but he said, 'Give it to me.' I said I would do it under certain conditions, and this was going to be a gentleman's agreement. First of all I don't like the 'Film By' credit, but if there's going to be a 'Film By' credit, it has to be like the Coen Brothers, it's going to be you and me.

Second, I don't want any money, we will produce together and I will get this amount of money. Third, if the movie is nominated for an Oscar or in Cannes we will both go together to the ceremony. And of course nothing of that happened. When the movie was made he sent lawyers and everything to take out the shared 'Film By' credit, even though I was there all the time. I don't say I directed it, [but] I told him very clearly that I think the writer is also an author of the film and we should share equal...

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...we should share equal position. And if we're going to pick up the Oscar it's because we made a creative work. And that's where all of that broke. I was very angry because in *21 Grams* it was 'the film by the director of *21 Grams*,' when it was a very personal story. So I said 'Fuck you,' I was really pissed at him. So from the very beginning it was already broken. But we used to make beautiful kids when we

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were still married. Now we are divorced. He's the wife by the way.

Q (from the floor): In the English [language] movies do you write in Spanish and someone translates, or do you write directly in English? Especially in *Babel*, which language did you write the Japanese and Persian?

GA: So there will be no confusion, I write in Greek. No, I write in Spanish, I am translated. Now I write in Spanglish, they are translated but I push the translation and I check it out really meticulously. By the way I am really happy to have a friend of mine here, who I admire a lot, a great composer, I'm not going to ask him to stand up but he's Michael Nyman. Thank you man, for being here. He is such a great, great composer.

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Q (from the floor): I've been working on a piece that people are trying to push into a structure. How do you convince people that it doesn't have to fit into a structure, or how do you find the people who will be open to something that doesn't fit – like you said – where the 'right' thing happens on page 35? You obviously now have a reputation, but when you were starting out and doing things that were counter structure, how do you get them into the hands of the right people to get them made?

GA: How do I get into the hands of the right people?

BH: When you were beginning your career, how did you get to make the movies in the way that you wanted to make them? Disregarding all the rules and the structures, etc.

GA: I made a bet on Alejandro, I always thought that he was a great director. I still think he's a great director. I think he's a brilliant and talented man with whom I disagree profoundly but that doesn't take out any kind of respect I have for him. We, together, wrote these and things began happening.

But I was offered a lot of jobs and I said no before. They offered me a lot of jobs which I

said no to. I'm not here for the money, I'm not here for the job, I'm here because I want things. I think that I have something to express, so I didn't care about the money.

I remember the day I was going to release *Amores Perros*, the day before I had a chat with a friend of mine, a screenwriter, who made a lot of concessions with his screenplay to make it commercial. I said, 'Man, why did you make so many concessions to your screenplay, it was beautiful, now I cannot even recognise it.'

He said, 'Because my friend, I'm going to be in Hollywood. Your shitty, arty movie about dogs is going to be seen by two people. Mine is going to bring me to Hollywood!' No, my friend, that's not the way it works. First of all you don't have any will over the work. What I mean by this is you cannot decide if it's going to be a success or not.

There's no way of deciding that. There's no progress in art, your last work is not going to be better than your first work. So the best thing is to be authentic and honest with your own work. That's how it happened.

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BH: I'm so sorry to say that we have now run out of time. I only fundamentally disagreed with one thing that you've said this evening, and that is that you might only have one gallon of ink in you. Thank god that is rubbish, and you clearly have a lifetime of ink left.

GA: I hope so.

BH: Thank you so much for your questions, thank you to BAFTA and the BFI and thank you Guillermo Arriaga.

APPLAUSE

GA: Thank you very much.