



Vol. 13, Number 3, Spring 2016, 129-158

**Film Adaption and Transnational Cultures of Production:  
The Case of Guillermo Arriaga**

**Daniel Chávez**

The University of New Hampshire

The circulation of Latin American cinema in a transnational context has widened the options that actors and directors from the region have regarding their involvement in the different aspects of film production. In order to analyze Guillermo Arriaga's transnational career as a writer of novels and screenplays I contrast his work with that of other writers and filmmakers who have participated in both the cinematic and literary fields. The fact that Arriaga has crossed the lines between writing, adapting, and directing his own works in Spanish and English leads me to review the current relationship between film and literature in general. Finally, by comparing Arriaga's novels and films, I propose that the contemporary practice of film adaptation contributes to the "flexibilization" in the roles writers, actors, and directors play in filmmaking and in the circulation of cultural capital between film and literature in the current media markets.

Regarding the current phase of transnationalization of Latin American cinema, two of the most frequently discussed phenomena include: the participation of actors and directors in international co-productions in Europe and Hollywood, and

the distribution of films written and produced in the region for other markets (Alvaray 2008; Linhard 2008; Shaw 2007; Smith 2003; Velazco 2011). These two general trends are indeed the most palpable transformations in the recent era of global circulation of Latin American visual spectacles. However, a number of other aspects intrinsic to film production have undergone a process of flexibilization<sup>1</sup> in the filmmaking field. These aspects have received less attention, and in my opinion, are essential to understand the present and future of these globalizing tendencies.

On the one hand, the prominence gained in the last decades by the model of independent cinema production and the introduction of digital technologies fostered processes of flexibilization in the sources of capital and the number of personnel employed in film production (Levy 496, Fischer 92). These processes have allowed (or imposed) more permeability and permutability in the different roles authors and filmmakers can play in their own productions. Certainly, nowadays it is hardly newsworthy to hear of some actor or writer changing hats to direct her/his own film or that directors, especially in independent productions, are also writers and editors of their work. In a way this has been done since the times of silent films. However, this phenomenon of alternating positions before and behind the camera is acquiring a multinational character, since for many contemporary films this means the crossing of language barriers, crossing international borders, and working across media markets.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, a limited number of actors started to work on projects in English, or other languages, for productions aimed for the global circuits, thus inaugurating the

---

<sup>1</sup> As part of neoliberal economic terms, flexibilization of labour is understood as the capacity for corporations and employers to hire and fire workers as their financial and production cycle requires without having to deal with collective bargaining or other protective measures for workers. Flexibilization of capital can be subsumed into the variety of processes of deregulation of financial markets that lead to the crash of 2008 (Harvey 110-112). In this case I focus on the creative use of neoliberal economic constraints that allow filmmakers and film production units to have easier access to writing, shooting personnel and meager but less restrictive financial sources loosely bound to large studios or state production agencies. Risks and restrictions have always hovered over the filmmaking process, but I argue that it is precisely this flowing of multinational talent and capital brought about by flexibilization that has allowed the emergence of transnational careers for prominent Latin American directors including Walter Salles and Fernando Meirelles from Brazil; and Guillermo Arriaga, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro, and Alfonso Cuarón from Mexico, among others.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief period during the silent and early sound eras is possible to trace a number of international careers of directors and actors who were able to participate with success in film industries in their home country and in Hollywood. Among the best-known directors: Fritz Lang (Austria), Antonio Moreno (Spain) and Alice Guy Blaché (France); for actors Marlene Dietrich (Germany), Greta Garbo (Sweden), José Mojica, Lupe Vélez, Ramón Novaro, Dolores del Río (all from Mexico) are good examples (Rodríguez 2004). Once talking cinema and the Cold War politics made “foreign accents” in English “less attractive,” transnational careers became more difficult and scarcer for actors (Rodríguez 75, Crafton 497).

current trend of transnational cinema. On the other hand, a select number of directors from Latin America, with very visible examples among Mexican filmmakers, are now able to pursue what can be called a “multi-track career,” writing screenplays and/or directing in English for international projects, and then shooting on location or producing in their country of origin with the capital and contacts they were able to develop through their previous work in Hollywood. Furthermore, it is important to notice how adaptations contribute to this flexibilization and intensify the synergies and convergence of diverse media markets including books, comics, tv, videogames, and internet.

By comparing the work of Guillermo Arriaga and other directors and actors in transnational Mexican cinema I want to explore some dimensions of the aforementioned flexibilization of labor, media markets, and the transformation and transference of different forms of capital in the current cultures of production.<sup>3</sup> I also argue that, even if the phenomena observed here are hardly new in the history of film, the frequency and specific form in which they occur now is having an impact on the globalization of current Mexican and Latin American cinema.

In this particular case, I choose to analyze first the literary and screenwriting activity of Guillermo Arriaga, comparing his work with that of historical and contemporary figures (Faulkner, García Márquez, Revueltas, Magdaleno), then I explore how the practice of adaptation of literary works for the screen synergically contributes to media convergence and problematizes the strict divisions of labor considered in the past as essentially distinct in the criticism of film and literature (Deuze 2009).

#### *Writing Novels as Writing Cinema for Guillermo Arriaga*

When pressed to define himself in his interviews Guillermo Arriaga declares “I am a writer,” in terms of filmmaking he will emphatically add “I have done it all” (Enrigue 2007). Indeed, after the release of the film *The Burning Plain* in 2008—starring Charlize Theron and Kim Bassinger—Arriaga has tried in succession some of the most important roles available in a film production project. To be sure, by the second decade of the millennium, Arriaga’s screenplays were featured in four major

---

<sup>3</sup> “Cultures of production” in media are defined as ways to organize and reproduce practices of visual representation including its creation, distribution, and circulation. The study of the division of labour in each step in the production of images, as well as the symbolic power ascribed to different tasks and specific participants along the process, is part of this concept (Caldwell 2009).

film productions, including the trilogy directed by González Iñárritu: *Amores perros* (1999), *21 Grams* (2003), and *Babel* (2004); he also wrote the screenplay for *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), Tommy Lee Jones' directorial debut. Arriaga participated as executive producer on three of his films, did a cameo in one (*Three Burials*), and was editor of a short called *Campeones sin límite* (1997). From that progression of works in a very intense decade of production, it seemed only logical he would write the screenplay for his first directorial project, the aforementioned *The Burning Plain* (2008).

Arriaga's literary activity has a cinematic side in its own right. Out of his three novels, all published before the release of *Amores perros* (1999), two have been adapted for the screen. *Un Dulce olor a muerte / Sweet Scent of Death* was originally published in 1994. A film by the same title directed by Gabriel Retes reached theatres in 1999. But Arriaga was disappointed with the results of the cinematic transposition of his second novel, so he decided to take on the challenge and prepare the adaptation of his third novel for the screen himself (*Enrigue* 2007). *Búfalo de la noche* the book, was published in 1999. The adaptation by the author was shot in Mexico and released in 2007, directed by Jorge Hernández Aldana in close collaboration with Arriaga.

While approaching critically the many sides of Arriaga's artistic activity, the first question that comes to mind is: how does the work of this narrator of violent and implacable storylines compare with the activity of other writers deeply involved in cinema projects who are considered beacons in the contemporary arts of literature and filmmaking? Moreover, for its international and cross-media activity, Arriaga's case presents some important challenges. For instance, could it be that by the second decade of the new millennium the prestige ascribed to the best screenwriters rivals the prestige ascribed to the best novelists? What does the apparently seamless transition from writing novels to directing his own screenplays tell us about the current relations between the literary and cinematographic fields?

The first difficulty in trying to consider the many sides of Arriaga's work is the disproportionate dimensions and unique circumstances of the examples that could serve as comparative cases. Given the transnational nature of Arriaga's work, the first difference to be noticed between his work and that of others is the marked national character binding the filmography of most of the other writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>th</sup> centuries who also worked in close contact with cinema. To start on a high note, given the avowed admiration Guillermo Arriaga feels for the American Nobel Laureate William Faulkner, I will provide some comparisons between the situations in

two different eras of film production of these two successful screenwriters. <sup>4</sup>It is important to recall that the writer from Oxford, Mississippi worked during the 1930s and 1940s for the major studios. He spent most of his time in Hollywood doctoring scripts and adapting novels and stories by other writers for about twenty film productions (Fadiman 1989). Among the best-known adaptations developed by Faulkner are Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* (1944), and most notably, the screenplay for the Howard Hawks version of Raymond Chandler's classic *noir* novel, *The Big Sleep* (1946). However, aside from the six writing credits fully acknowledging his participation, most of the work done for the screen by this giant of contemporary letters remained uncredited. Most likely this disavowing of his own work was perhaps due to the low regard in which some sectors of literary field held writers who were willing to work in Tinsel-town during the Classical Hollywood Age (1935-1955) (cf. Phillips 54). In comparison, half a century later, in a markedly multinational context, Guillermo Arriaga owes his standing as a successful writer more to his screenplays than to his novels.

It might seem equally disproportionate to compare Arriaga's activity with that of Gabriel García Márquez's, another Nobel Laureate in close contact with film. But in more than one sense the paring is pertinent. Among the authors of the Latin American Boom—the literary group dominating the continental scene for the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the Colombian writer is the figure that dedicated the largest portion of his work to cinematic activities (Cabezón 1998; Rocco 2005). From his earlier years as a journalist out of Aracataca, Colombia, García Márquez went on to write not only novels but also scripts, or adapted his own stories or those by other writers for at least twenty-five films. Moreover, his efforts to promote the training of new and seasoned screenwriters among the Latin American youth in film schools in Cuba and other countries are well known (Rocco 2005). Like Arriaga's work, García Márquez's as screenwriter has an international component since the latter's original scripts, short stories, and novels have been adapted and produced in Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, Colombia, Italy, and the U.S. (cf. Rocco 2005). But for all his constant

---

<sup>4</sup> At the U.S. premiere of the *Burning Plain* at the Virginia Film Festival in Charlottesville in November of 2008, Arriaga made special arrangements to visit the William Faulkner archive at the University of Virginia Library. In his conversations Arriaga pointed out that he shared with his admired author many a passion including hunting and writing, besides film.

collaboration with cinematographers, the great writer of Magical Realism did not cross the line to become a director.<sup>5</sup>

In the Mexican context the most pertinent examples to compare with Arriaga's work are writers Mauricio Magdaleno (1906-1986) and José Revueltas (1914-1976). Noted activist and novelist José Revueltas adapted and wrote original screenplays for twenty four film productions including the adaptation of classics of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema like *El rebozo de Soledad* (1952), directed by Roberto Gavaldón, and collaborated on the writing team for Luis Buñuel's production of *La ilusión viaja en tranvía / Mexican Bus Ride* (1954) (García Riera 10; Rocco 2011). Twenty years later, his experiences as a political prisoner at the Lecumberri penal facility were dramatically illustrated, using one of his short novels, in Felipe Cazals' film *El apando* (1976) (Chávez 130; Rocco 2011). However, to rival Revueltas' career, Arriaga still has some books to write. Revueltas produced twenty-six volumes in his complete works, including seven novels—and was saluted by Octavio Paz as one of the most brilliant authors of the Mexican mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Paz 570). An important difference between Revueltas and Arriaga, as in the case of García Márquez, is that Revueltas did not seem to be too interested in directing films.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most appropriate comparison could be made between Arriaga's work and that of Zacatecas novelist, screenwriter, and politician Mauricio Magdaleno (1906-1986). Author of important works in what is known as the Novel of the Mexican Revolution, including *El Resplendor* (1937) and *La Tierra Grande* (1949), Magdaleno entered the film scene in 1942, went on to write original scripts for other directors and adapt for the screen some classics of World Literature, including works by Ivan Turgenev, Alexandre Dumas and Juan Valera. Magdaleno crowned his prolific career as a filmmaker by directing his own stories. However, the most important fact to note here is that together with director Emilio (el Indio) Fernández, and cine-photographer Gabriel Figueroa, Magdaleno helped define the film style of the Mexican Golden Age (1935-1955) (Coria 27; Tierney 65). This foundational trio worked on some of the most representative films of that era, including *Flor Silvestre*

---

<sup>5</sup> In 1954 the short feature *La Langosta Azul* was codirected by Álvaro Cepeda Samudio and Gabriel García Márquez. Other than this early collaborative project, it appears the Colombian writer did not direct a feature length film on his own.

<sup>6</sup> At the end of his film career Revueltas indeed had plans to direct a couple of films, but unfortunately the projects were never completed. Less well known but worth mentioning are the theoretical and critical works on cinema authored by José Revueltas and compiled in the volume *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas* where he discusses aspects of production, screenwriting, adaptation, and film criticism.

(1943), *María Candelaria* (1944) and *Río Escondido* (1948), films that achieved recognition in Mexico and abroad (García Riera 167). Furthermore, this sitting member of the Mexican Academy of Spanish Language directed four films from 1944 to 1947.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in terms of writing practices he seems to be the likeliest precursor to a contemporary literary and cinematic *auteur* like Guillermo Arriaga. But despite these important similarities, a residual element in our paring effort between writers of literature and writers of film persists. This residual element, if analyzed carefully, can serve as a vantage point to explain the evolution of writing as a craft less and less attached exclusively to one medium in particular, and increasingly implicated in the circulation of transnational multimedia circuits: the crossing of language barriers and national borders. Again, this problem is key for confronting the conundrums that Guillermo Arriaga's work poses for film and literary critics.

For the most part, contemporary criticism on Mexican cinema insists on highlighting the international character attained by the work of leading actors and directors by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Deleyto and Azcona 2010; Menne 2007; Podalsky 2010). The figures more frequently invoked to epitomize this new era of transnationalization of Mexican cinema include directors Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro, and Alejandro González Iñárritu, sometimes referred to in the North American press as “The Three Amigos” of Mexican cinema (Enrique 2007; Smith 2003; Velazco 2011). Less prominently profiled in the United States, but also with a long international dossier, and who should be included in this group, is a somewhat distant precursor Alfonso Arau (b. 1932), who had an interesting career as director of four, out of his twelve films, produced in English for the U.S. market.<sup>8</sup> A much younger but also noted filmmaker with a solid transnational work is Luis Mandoki (b. 1954), director of *Message in a Bottle* (1999), *Angel Eyes* (2001), and *Trapped* (2002), all three feature-length Hollywood films, and an independent project *Voces Inocentes*

---

<sup>7</sup> Magdaleno directed *El intruso* (1944), *Su gran ilusión* (1945), *La Herencia de la Llorona* (1947), *La Fuerza de la Sangre* (1947).

<sup>8</sup> After the moderate critical acclaim and wide audience success of *Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) in Mexico and in the U.S., Alfonso Arau directed in Hollywood *A Walk in the Clouds* (1995) starring Keanu Reeves, Anthony Quinn, and Aitana Sánchez Gijón, and *Picking Up the Pieces* (2000), starring Woody Allen and Sharon Stone. More recently the veteran director finished two television productions *The Magnificent Ambersons* (2002) a remake of Orson Wells classic for A&E, and *A Painted House* (2008), an adaptation of a John Grisham thriller for Hallmark Television. In 2010 Arau directed in Europe *L'imbroglione nel lenzuolo / The Trick in the Sheet*, a historical film about the beginnings of the moving picture in Italy. Another distinctive aspect in Arau's cinematographic work is his long career as an actor, appearing in more than fifty Mexican, U.S. and European productions.

(2004), a Mexican-U.S. production on the Salvadoran civil war, among other fictional and documentary films.

However, the process of flexibilization in the cultures of production of Mexican cinema has not affected only the screenwriting and directorial fields, it has also been fueled by the emergence of some notable screen acting careers. On the side of histrionic talent the most recognizable names include Gael García Bernal, Diego Luna, and Salma Hayek, who are periodically involved in productions in Mexico, the U.S., and Europe, and who by 2007 had all debuted as producers and directors (Velazco 2011).<sup>9</sup> Guillermo Arriaga shares with this group of directors and actors the pedigree of having worked for projects with national and transnational funding and distribution, in both languages, Spanish and English. From this select set of high profile players only Guillermo del Toro, and Arriaga have crafted on their own most of their screenplays, and they are the only published authors with three novels in print in both Spanish and English editions.<sup>10</sup>

To summarize, the specific combination of writing and cinematic practices in the case of Arriaga separates him from his literary precursors (Faulkner, García Márquez, Revueltas) in that he has also included the role of director in his filmography (as did Magdaleno) and in that he, like the contemporary cohort of Mexican actors and directors that have an international profile, also works across languages. To be sure, Arriaga writes novels in Spanish and his screenplays are mostly produced in English, with the exception of *Amores perros* and *Búfalo de la noche*. Nevertheless, what makes this multi-track cinematic and literary writing career interesting is the bridging of both fields due to individual choices and by virtue of his participation in the flexibilization and concurrence of media markets.<sup>11</sup> In my view,

---

<sup>9</sup> Gael García directed *Déficit* (2007) a socially conscious drama. Diego Luna debuted as director with a documentary project *Julio César Chávez* (2007) about the career of a noted Mexican boxer, and in 2010 directed his first feature length fiction film *Abel*. Besides her work as producer for several North American film and television projects including *Frida* (2002) and *Ugly Betty* aired in ABC (2006-2010), Salma Hayek directed *The Maldonado Miracle* for HBO in 2003.

<sup>10</sup> With the publication—in 2011—of Guillermo del Toro's last novel in the *Strain Trilogy* (written in collaboration with Chuck Hogan) the evolution of this Mexican director and scenarist evinces a somewhat similar pattern of crossing from one media to another. With one interesting difference: Del Toro moved from filmmaking to writing novels.

<sup>11</sup> Certainly it is possible to find other examples of contemporary writers-directors with successful careers in both fields. In the U.S., Woody Allen was a writer of plays and short stories before he became a leading figure in film. Paul Auster has met great success as writer and critical acclaim with his films. Three interesting figures in Spain are Isabel Coixet, the Catalan filmmaker who has directed her own screenplays in Spanish, English, and Catalan, and Carlos Ruiz Zafón, who worked for a number of years as screenwriter in Hollywood and has



these tendencies are slowly reshaping contemporary cultures of production, and transforming the access to, and reach of, popular international products both in visual and textual form. But how did the fields of literature and film evolve making possible the phenomenon of flexibilization in which Del Toro and Arriaga are participating? In the following section I propose a particular perspective that explains how film adaptations of literature have contributed to the historical processes allowing for the present conditions of the synergic circulation of literary and cinematic products.

*When Word and Image Meet as (Un)Equals*

It is well known that the relationship between literature and film has been intense since the inception of moving pictures in 1895. However, this intensity cannot mask the uneasiness and sometimes the open conflict between both practices in terms of competition for prestige and cultural capital. The examples abound. On the one hand, a generalized perception among most literary critics is that adaptation of literary texts to the screen almost always leaves the visual version wanting (Wolf 18-21). The most frequent allegation against adaptations is perhaps that of a failure to convey the “complexities,” “nuances,” and “multiplicity of levels” of the written text (Sánchez Noriega 54). This does not mean that acclamation for good transpositions of classic and contemporary novels, stories, and plays, is lacking. But in literary academia the customary gesture is to treat film adaptations by worthy authors as derivative at best, and undeserving for the most part. On the other hand, the filmed words in dialogues, narrations, and speech utterances are frequently treated by film critics as an ancillary element, as a code completely subordinated to the image and sound track.

When observed in context and compared side by side, dismissive criticism from the literary field of cinema and vice versa, the discontent frequently evinces a mutual distrust of the specific set of codes pertaining to each language: textual and audiovisual on one side, purely textual on the other. This mutual misapprehension ultimately obeys specific agendas of cultural distinction and processes of capital reproduction and conversion (Bourdieu 39). Yet, as is also well known, for every

---

recently met great commercial success with his novels in Spanish. Veteran director Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón won the Herralde Prize in 2009 with his first novel *La vida antes de marzo*. Other examples of novelists directing films based on their own novels are: Vicente Molina Foix (Spain) directed *Sagitario* in 2001 and *El dios de madera* in 2010, and the Argentinean Mempo Giardinelli shot his *El décimo infierno* in 2010. But again, the residual difference here continues to be the transnational and bilingual twist in Arriaga’s and Del Toro’s careers in both film and narrative, which seemed impossible before the current conditions of transnational film production.

example of perceived animosity between both fields, it is possible to find hundreds of examples of close collaboration between practitioners of the cinematic and literary arts.

A good place to start tracing some elements of this long history of family relations between written and filmed narratives is the first encounters of literature with the visual arts at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. A number of writers of that era talked about their craft using visual references to the point of popularizing expressions like “painting with words” and conceiving the novel as a canvas (Elliot 2004; Jay 110). But the appeal to the field of literature was also intense at the time of the inception of cinema as modern spectacle. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, filmmakers and theoreticians such as Vachel Lindsey and Sergei Eisenstein insisted on finding the key to the “language of images,” the “cinematographic language,” or looking at film as an “ideogram” or a “hieroglyphic,” considering the “writerly” qualities of the film medium as a given (Lindsey 120; Eisenstein 33-103). Later, Christian Metz devised a theoretical model for cinematic analysis based on the idea that, like linguistics, film also had a specific syntax (Metz 1990). Moreover, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, critics from *Cahiers du Cinema* popularized the idea of the *camera stylo* and *cinema auteur* suggesting that certain directors had similar powers to those of a writer (Bazin 1985; Truffaut 1985). According to the *auteur* theory, for these select few cinematographers, films became a form of personal expression, as if they were essays or novels. Although immensely popular and productive for film criticism, this metaphor obviates the fact that cinema is, for the most part, an industrial and collectively produced art. However, as Kamilla Elliot points out: “the designation of novels as words and films as images serves agendas more than analysis. Traditionally, pure arts have been more highly valued than hybrid ones. Therefore, in the battle for representational dominance, novels and films have been pressed toward semiotic and aesthetic purity” (Elliot 5).

Furthermore, the quality of “pure art” has a direct effect in terms of the production and dissemination of cultural capital for every artistic field.<sup>12</sup> Given the fact that literature was construed during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as “pure” written “verbal” expression, the hierarchical balance in terms of cultural capital was traditionally tipped towards the art of the printed word. However, this imbalance in cultural prestige and influence was not meant to be a historical constant. With the

---

<sup>12</sup> The observation of purity in art alters the critical and public perception not only of cinema but also of its parallel art: the comic book which emerged almost at the same time and became a popular form of visual entertainment along with films in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

slow positioning of film as the most popular art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tables started to turn following a long but continuous process. If we consider spectatorship and its social impact in the battle for representational dominance between literary and cinematic products, we can see the weight and symbolic value started to tip towards the opposite side by the 1930s at the dawn of the talkies, and was confirmed with the definite triumph of film as an industrial spectacle by the 1940s.

At the time of its inception, the hegemonic social classes considered cinema as entertainment for the masses, a popular form of distraction far below the knowledge of the intellectual elite (Arnheim 11, Kracauer 16, Lindsay 30; Quiroga 182; Reyes 55). However, after the introduction of sound and the widespread adoption of the technologies of the image fostered by photography and cinema, the massive quality of this spectacle tipped the scale in its favor in terms of social capital. By the 1940s the Benjaminian spectator, dividing her/his attention between sound, light, image, and word became a widespread social reality (Benjamin 40-56; Reyes 27). In other words, the film spectacle audiences grew rapidly after the 1900s (with some fluctuations) and then peaked by the 1950s, while the number of readers of books and newspapers maintained a more stable progression as shown since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (De los Reyes 263; Gomery 82; Kovarik 161; Rosas Mantecón 266). Certainly, quantitative changes do not imply immediate qualitative variations. The perceived value of cinema as an “artistic” and “intellectual” activity and its concomitant cultural influence still had some hurdles to overcome.

Parallel to the competing but also complementary development of readers and spectators, categories that were never mutually exclusive, current cultural criticism insists on highlighting the fact that in the United States as well as in Mexico, the 1930s and 1940s were key in terms of shaping the corresponding modern national identities. In both countries, national mid and low brow cultures, and most notably youth cultures, were defined not so much by the ebbs and flows of the literary world but by expressions and feelings represented on the screens and in the magazines covering the film industry (Balio 2; Martín Barbero 166; Monsiváis 2000; Rodríguez 4). This tendency grew to the point that we can affirm that the “structures of feelings” before 1930 were text driven, dominated by printed literature and journalism, and since then have become more and more audio-visually driven, first based on radio and cinema, and now on television and the internet (Arnheim 17, Gallo 120, Williams 133).

The emergence of the “societies of the spectacle” in the 1960s was brought about by the incremental dominance of visual technologies, sound film since 1930,

and since the 1950s by television and cinema (Debord 14-17). Thus, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century it was undeniable that the mounting influence of visual media was translating into a steady source of social capital. Along with this slow transference of social impact, with the advent of consumer culture the emerging visual technologies facilitated the growth of markets of all kinds of goods, and, as such, their social capital started to intensify its convertibility into economic capital (Cubitt 182). Under this evolutionary perspective, the possibility of a dialectical conversion of economic and social capital into cultural capital is at the core of the conflict between the prestige and influence of the textual and visual arts.

However, as mentioned above, since the beginning of their intense contact the “competition” between written and visual arts was also marked by an intense and sometimes disavowed collaboration. Film studios approached literary works then, and continue to do so now, for their proven viability as effective narratives and also for their long-standing prestige as “works of art.” By 2000, approximately 85% of Oscars in the Best Film category had been given to adaptations of literary works, including novels and plays (Sánchez Noriega 46). The hiring of renowned writers like William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald as screenwriters and script doctors by the big studios in the 40s and 50s seemed to follow this logic. A similar phenomenon was observed in Mexico in those years. Magdaleno and Revueltas were already respected literary authors when they started to work for the film industry in the 1940s. Clearly, a rubbing-off of cultural capital from the literary field onto the field of cinema production was what classic film producers were trying to capture.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the uneven relationship between film and the literary field has somewhat leveled off. Contemporary authors and publishers sought to sell film rights for novels not only for the possibility of immediate monetary gain, but also because the repackaging of their publications as complimentary media products could re-launch or solidify their standing among readers and critics, and perhaps allow for their synergic repositioning in the market at the time of the release of the corresponding film. Nowadays, it is not uncommon to see how the première of a new film adaptation encourages publishers to issue “tie-in” book editions with redesigned jackets or new covers with explicit references to the cinematic version displaying the words “now a major feature film.”<sup>13</sup> This marketing tactic of course is not very new.

---

<sup>13</sup> In the U.S. market and abroad the release of Walter Salles’ *Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) was matched by Ocean Press with tie-in print editions in Spanish and English of Argentinean revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s diaries. For the 2007 première of the film *Búfalo de la*

The common 19<sup>th</sup> century practice of first publishing novels in serial form in newspapers or literary journals, and later the complete series, was a marketing campaign launched to sell the story in a bound book format, with the added bonus of newly minted engravings. Classics of English literature from Austen to Dickens, seminal French novels from Balzac to Zola, as well as Mexican literature from Payno to Frías, and Brazilian foundational novels by Alencar or Da Cunha, were marketed twice this way (Elliot 2003; Martín Barbero 1993; Saborit 1994). Clearly, if the media venues and circumstances have changed, from serial publication in newspapers to book re-editions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and from book to film adaptation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the practice of repackaging a symbolic product for its commercial recirculation has not.

In theoretical terms what does it entail to recognize this dialectical relationship between the circulation of texts and images, between consumption and artistic production for both literary and film textualities? What changes in our basic understanding of films when the once metaphorical affirmation of Truffaut and Bazin “the director is an author” ceases to be an analogy and becomes an empirical statement? So far, the fields of film criticism and cultural studies have explored some sides of the problem by presenting the fields of visual and textual discourse as somewhat convergent on the practice of adaptation, but this partial solution led to new methodological problems.

For a while in the literary field, the strict separation between both arts was bridged by a certain oversimplification in criticism. In the 1970s with the dissemination of textual analysis and narratology, some academics treated the narrative devices of both media as barely distinct (Mayne 105). To the practitioners of this form of criticism this methodological option seemed almost a “natural” procedure: a narrative in words can be structurally compared to a narrative in images. Yet, this form of analysis seemed to obviate or negate the multilevel encoding of film spectacles with the intervening complexities of sound, image, speech, text, and music. Thus, this analytical strategy tended to overlook the actual cultures of film production by occluding or ignoring many of the operations done to the original printed text.

In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the proliferation of edited collections and monographic works delving into the intricacies of the work of adaption, and its related cultural politics, is dispelling the oversimplified academic practice of looking at

---

*noche* the event was accompanied in the Mexican bookstands by the re-issue of Arriaga’s novel of 1999 by Editorial Norma. The cover jacket had a freeze-frame of the film in the center.

film adaptations as exclusively narrative devices subordinated to the rules of the literary field.<sup>14</sup> The rising awareness among critics regarding the technical interventions and cultural transformations effected during the process of adaptation has brought about a new focus. The reconfigurations, eliminations and extensions needed to go from the page to the screen in what Stam calls the “dialogics of adaptation” have become significant issues to investigate (Stam 2000).

As professionals in the cinematographic field know, it is almost a given that literary texts receive several “treatments” in order to become an actual shooting script. Very often the initial treatment has been revised or retouched by several hands and once the screenplay is ready, it is very rare if the screenwriter, let alone the author, ends up directing the film. Now, given the fetishistic qualities the film industry bestows on the director’s role, sometimes the trade press and a good part of the cultural and academic criticism overlook the contributions to the final product made by the writer or team of writers who worked on the script. Most of the time that contribution is obscured or glossed over by the specific weight of the cultural capital accumulated around the director and the cast. Moreover, the overlooking of the writing process as generator of “value” in visual media and the dispute for the rights to the profits it generates seems to be the basis of the recent strikes by the writers’ guilds against the Hollywood and television studios in 2004 and 2007. In short, the work of the writers in transforming phrases into images, chapters into sequences, is not always recognized by spectators and film critics, or if it is, more often than not the adaptation is perceived as an “opaque process,” an “intervention” on the “purity” of the text. Thus, this suspected or perceived “messing with the words” is construed as an a priori criticism of “impurity” or violent manipulation of the literary work. Hence readers’ and literary critics’ customary mistrust of adaptations.

It is possible that a number of these interpretive problems could disappear while analyzing independent films, considering the fact that for the contemporary cinema *auteur* or for truly “indie” films the director works very often in close “collaboration with” or “functions as” the screenwriter. In this case, the conflation in

---

<sup>14</sup> Among the books dealing in a wider sense with the cultural interventions implicit in the practice of adaptation works by Della Colleta (2011) and Elliot (2003) are in my view the most important. The volumes by Naremore (2001) and the two edited collections by Raengo and Stam (2004, 2005) comprise a current survey of the field including classic essays and a fresh crop of criticism on modern adaptations of American, European, and World Literature. Regarding Latin American and Spanish works, studies by Gómez (2000), Sánchez Noriega (2000) and Wolf (2001) represent a renewed effort to study film adaptations of literature in Spanish.

the roles of authorship/directorship of the story and the film, seems to make the process of adaptation more transparent for the film critic, and for the audience who expect or identify a specific style in the final product launched by certain filmmakers. A spectator knows what to expect when s/he enters a theatre or rents a DVD to watch an original script or an adaptation directed by Woody Allen, the Coen brothers or David Lynch. However, this gained “transparency” of agency in the creative process of the film, in the sense that the screenwriter and director are the same, is only apparent because the “opacity” of the adaptation remains as a residual difference. In other words, a difference between the reader’s experience when s/he reads the book and her/his experience of watching the film adaptation of that same book persists.<sup>15</sup> Here the multifaceted activity of a writer/director such as Arriaga can help refocus the debate regarding the supposed irreducible difference between the literary work and cinematic adaptation.

*Adaptation and the Flexibilization of Cultures of Production in Arriaga’s Novels and Films*

What would happen if we were to discover that the narrative structure of the novels and the films by Arriaga are very different? What if by observing the totality of his work a reader/spectator found out that the treatment of characters, of the weight given to dialogues in his Spanish language films and novels is different from that of his film productions in English? By posing these questions one can realize that Arriaga’s work presents a unique opportunity to challenge the critical tools of those interested in better understanding the symbolic operations carried out on texts in film adaptations, and the recent history in the evolution of this bridging of the cinematographic and literary fields.

The first observation that comes to mind after reading the three novels by Arriaga is that all of them belong to different narrative genres. The first, *El escuadrón guillotina* from 1991, offers a picaresque and fictional reconstruction of actual facts and characters in the Villista revolutionary army (active from 1910 to 1919). It is not difficult to prove that *El escuadrón* is a historical novel rich in satire and dark humor with the necessary elements to place it among what is known as the New Historical Novel of Latin America (Menton 1999, Perkowska 2009). The narrative starts in an important bastion of Villa’s revolution, the northern town of Torreón, Coahuila and

---

<sup>15</sup> Metz recognized this difference as the “disillusion du fantôme,” the phantasmatic shadow cast by the memories of the text in the reader when s/he is watching the film adaptation and has a preconceived set of expectations (Metz 111).

closes with an enigmatic and open-ended finale in Mexico City. The geographical location of this first book is the only common denominator with the second novel, *Un dulce olor a muerte* (1994) which can be classified as a thriller, a rural northern-Mexico thriller from Tamaulipas to be precise, and in that sense, it can also be described as a border narrative (Daniel 2005; Lozano 2007).

Unlike the previous two, the third novel starts and ends in Arriaga's "hometown": Mexico City. The urban landscape and actantial forces of *Búfalo de la noche* (1999) contrast sharply with those of the preceding novels, not only as regards the choice of the narrative space, but also with respect to the focalization and construction of the narrator. *Búfalo* can be placed among the tradition of urban novels based in Mexico City stretching from Gamboa's *Santa* (1908) to Fuentes' *La región más transparente* (1950) and Luis Zapata's *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1979). Furthermore, the preference given to psychological tension to propel the main characters' actions in *Búfalo* has no parallel in Arriaga's previous literary work. Interestingly, it is not difficult to establish points of contact and similarities between the young characters of Arriaga's first major film as screenwriter, *Amores perros*, and the book version, *Búfalo*. The similarities are perhaps due to the fact that the novel was published in 1999, right before the release of the first installment of Arriaga-González Iñárritu's trilogy.

Aside from the generic and thematic points of contact I think the most productive comparisons between Arriaga's novels and films should be made at the level of structure, time, and spatial organization. One of the most striking characteristics of the films scripted by Guillermo Arriaga for González Iñárritu is the complex usage of superimposed and concurrent storylines (Smith 2003b, Podalsky 2010, Tierney 2009). The narrative procedures in the trilogy became a sort of trademark of the collaborating team. Some critics call it a formula, a successful one to be sure, and insist that it is not completely original. Certainly, previous examples of literary, cinematic, and televisual, multi-narratives exist, but without a doubt the dramatic efficiency attained by Arriaga and González Iñárritu made an impact in Hollywood and drew attention again to this procedure to the point that the structural principles of their films were reproduced in subsequent major studio productions (Deleyto and Azcona 2010).<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Some notable examples include the Oscar winning film in 2004, *Crash*, written and directed by Paul Haggis, and more recently *The Air I Breathe* (2007) scripted by De Rosa and directed by Jieho Lee among many others (Deleyto and Azcona 2010). It is worth mentioning how a dual or multistory basic structure has become a standard in modern television dramas like the different CSI brands (Las Vegas, New York, Miami) and other serials. This innovation



It is clear that films with an intertwined multi-narrative structure have the appeal of breaking with the conventional rules for editing, chronological narration, single dramatic line, by bringing back different organizing principles, a variation on the Eisensteinian concept of “montage of attractions” for example, as opposed to the narrative conventions of classic cinema (Bordwell and Thompson 110-304). Let us recall that Classic Hollywood editing became a prescription, if not a restriction, after the 1920s when the industry enforced—almost invariably—the inclusion of controlled forms of manipulation of action and time (Steiger 1985). Nonetheless, with the evolution and expansion of the film industry, the predictable results of a repetitive use of chronological narration and a single narrative argument became a burden often avoided by the most innovative directors. However, opting out of the classical editing style can lead to a jumbled continuity and the greatest challenge after departing from the standard is to give cogency and balance to simultaneous story telling. Despite these risks, it is safe to say that if a multistory narrative suffers in terms of representational clarity and chronological linearity, films with this alternative structure may gain in dramatic tension and rhythm.

As noted above, the key to the narrative process in the Arriaga-González Iñárritu trilogy is a carefully timed interweaving of at least three seemingly disparate storylines in each film. The central premise is that an apparently arbitrary but effectively binding accident ends up connecting the lives of otherwise unrelated characters both physically and emotionally. In this accident an exchange of a prized possession (objects, an animal, etc.) occurs. That exchange confirms the materiality of the encounter, triggering and symbolically marking the next scenes in the other stories with the presence or allusion to that possession. In *Amores perros*, it is the fighting dog Coffey who connects all three stories, in *21 Grams* it is the heart that Sean Penn’s character receives in a transplant, and in *Babel* it is the hunting rifle that tragically connects the three main narrative structures. Thus, the accidents and objects function as actantial forces both destructuring the initially represented or assumed normalcy, and then violently restructuring reality for the characters.

In *Amores perros* and *21 Grams* a traffic accident provokes the metaphoric and visual “collision” of the three storylines. Both films have a specific urban/suburban space where all the characters live. This restructuring force acquires transnational

---

on television might not be related to the Arriaga-Iñárritu trilogy but its proliferation proves the acceptance and popularity of the formula by the early 2000s.

proportions in *Babel*, where the transforming event is not a collision but a “hunting accident” that causes what Podalsky calls a collapse in the “myth of cosmopolitan travel” (also including a transportation element) (Podalsky 2010). In this film the actions of a pair of Moroccan shepherd boys who jokingly shoot at a tour bus filled with tourists have widening ripple effects; first in the shepherd’s village where the shooting takes place, then simultaneously on the U.S./Mexico border where the children of the wounded tourist live, and also in Japan where the original owner of the rifle lives. Some critics have pointed out the “outlandish” connections of events proposed in these films, dismissing them as based on weak premises to support highly melodramatic narratives (Ayala Blanco 2001). However, we cannot discard the strict adherence to the principles of realism in all three films, and if the cause and effect connections of some of these incidents seem lacking in probability, they remain strictly and unquestioningly verisimilar. Cinematic realism requires only the latter.

However, let us, for a moment, consider the problem of causality. When observed side by side the trilogy indeed display a special form of causal interconnection between their narrative elements. Given the violent materiality of every accident we cannot claim that Arriaga is trying to apply the elegant idea of the “butterfly effect” in Chaos Theory. Broken bodies trapped by the searing steel of crashed cars or bleeding after a gunshot are not suited for a description with such ecological subtleties. Another option would be to use the metaphor of the physicochemical concept of “chain reaction.” This term seems too direct and unambiguous to account for the highly variable outcomes of human behavior, from which the actions of the main characters in these three films depend. A third option, a pure reliance on the mathematical concept of “randomness” seems too unintentional and counterintuitive given the deliberate and dramatic efficiency of the outcomes in the narrative lines. To be sure, when Paul Rivers, the character played by Sean Penn in *21 Grams*, decides to look for the family of the organ donor that saved his life, what are the odds that the surviving wife Christina Pek (played by Naomi Watts) would want to have a relationship with this person and for both to end up looking for the driver (Benicio del Toro) who killed her husband? This chain of events is, again, highly improbable but not impossible, and definitely not random.

In order to account for the causal relations in these films I would argue that Arriaga’s screenplays posit a form of “serendipitous mechanics,” coupled with the melodramatic principle of “emotional teleology” (Gerould 1991). I call it ‘serendipitous’ not because the facts are discovered in a fortuitous way, but because

from the numerous possibilities in human reaction and physical reality, the narration deploys precisely those that after the restructuring accident could interconnect the desires and actions of the characters from all the stories with high emotional efficiency. After that complex and binding encounter, the spectators will alternatively learn in flashbacks or recurrent depictions of the accident about the circumstances that lead other characters in each story to that point. This alteration in narrative frequency—we see the crash four times in *Amores perros*—combines with illustrations of the ripple effects in the emotional sphere and the characters' actions after the shock. In my view, this idea of serendipitous causality can help us recognize the material basis of all the plot lines and it highlights the refusal of the screenplay to connect the stories by recurring to metaphysics, religion, or magic realism.

In terms of dramatic structure, aside from the graphic depiction of violence, what makes the watching of these films such a harrowing experience is the multiplication of points of tension or sources of suspense and the diverse and disparate paths the stories could take. Moreover, this dramatic efficiency is coupled with the recurrent usage of editing elements such as cross cutting and parallel montage, that momentarily suspend the narrative flow of any of the three storylines, to revisit the next story for a few scenes, ultimately heightening the unpredictability of each situation. Furthermore, the constant interruption of each story increases the anxiety with which the spectator confronts the life and death situations unleashed by the structuring/destructuring accidents and the exchange of objects. In other words, the action in the films is slowed down, not for lack of development, but rather through the constant crosscutting between equally tense and interrupted storylines that spectators fear and/or want to see converge or solved at some point.

Given this “action packed” rendition of images in the cinematic trilogy, or the painstaking anguishing and ambulatory activity of the characters in *Three Burials* and *The Burning Plain*, one would expect that Arriaga's novels would deploy more or less similar if not the same narrative devices. That assumption is proven wrong when reading Arriaga's first novel: *El escuadrón guillotina*. Approaching the other two books with the same expectations would be highly misleading too. In general, Arriaga's prose in Spanish is much less driven by juggling temporal structures and puzzling rearrangements of points of view. In fact, the first two novels present, for the most part, a single plot line, chronological development, with third person omniscient and quasi-reliable narrators. For instance, in the case of *Un dulce olor*, aside from some brief flashbacks helping to convey the history of the fictional town of Loma Grande,

Tamaulipas, and some paragraphs recounting the dreams and memories of the main characters, no other significant asynchronies breaking the flow of time are present in the narration. One element adding to the complexity and interest of the plot is that despite the fact of being organized as a crime novel, the mystery is never solved and the end remains completely open (Lozano Franco 2007). This last element is common to all of Arriaga's literary works. As I see it, the most important contributions of the novel *Un dulce olor a muerte* reside in the use of regionally accented language, and in the endearing but non-paternalistic construction of characters from rural northern Mexican communities. The narrator can be brutal with some typecast characters, but the reader can find a genuine respect for the linguistic registers and the complex everyday life practices of modern rural towns. In Loma Grande, this Yoknapatawpha in Northeastern Mexico, most individuals are marginalized and poor but have a high sense of pride and dignity, they understand politics and keep modern consumption at bay. In the novel the reader will not find country bumpkins waiting to be rescued by urban civilized gentlemen, nor marvelous interventions of incredible realities altering the rhythm of social life. The most salient common trait in Arriaga's novels and films is its strict adherence to the principles of realism.

When looking at the totality of his works so far, books and screenplays, we learn that *Un dulce olor a muerte*, apart from being the second novel, has the merit of introducing the single most important landscape in the imaginary universe of Guillermo Arriaga: the dusty and arid expanse of the U.S./Mexico border. Only one of his novels and two out of his seven films do not present images, references or characters visiting or living in a desert or a semi-arid region. Thus, other than Mexico City in *Búfalo de la noche*, *Amores perros* and the transatlantic locations in *Babel* (urban Tokio, arid countryside in Morocco) most of Arriaga's films and novels have as their vital space the U.S. Mexico borderlands, with their semi-arid expanses and occasional dunes.<sup>17</sup>

But beyond this common thread of desert-like and border landscapes the narrative procedures of Arriaga's film scripts and novels are strikingly different. Given these differences, a simple way out for a critic would be to affirm that the strengths of the novelist are less far reaching than the powers of the screenwriter. However, this view seems tainted by film critics' traditional mistrust of literary criticism. One thing is

---

<sup>17</sup> The final scene in *Amores perros* gives us a slow panning on a long shot of a dark volcanic landscape in the outskirts of Mexico City that evokes the expanse and desolation of a desert. The suburban area where the characters of *21 Grams* meet is barren enough to remind us of a desert-like landscape.

evident, the traditions and prescriptions of the respective literary and cinematic fields are displayed and actualized in a different ways by the author. In other words, Arriaga's literary work seems more prone to linearity and traditional narrative structures while his screenplays present a more daring and experimental quality in their construction. One possible explanation for this divergence in structural procedures can be found by comparing Arriaga's work with the general tendencies in the corresponding artistic fields: while contemporary Latin American and global film allows for relatively high levels of complexity in visual and narrative structure, since the 1980s Latin American novels show a marked tendency to go back to realism and narrative efficiency (Alemany 2009).

In any case, Arriaga insists that his commitment to both forms of narration, literary as well as cinematic, is deep and complete (Enrigue 2007). In this sense, this commitment implies that his intervention in scripts or novels is indelibly marked by the rules and dominant tendencies of the given field. This is perhaps the reason why he taps into and implements the fast pace and explosive style of contemporary action and drama productions in his screenplays, and carefully builds regional and idiomatically realist worlds in his novels. But what does this mean in terms of the novelist trying to adapt or supervise the adaptation of his own work? Given this apparent disparity between textual and visual narrative technique, it is imperative to approach and analyze the only adaptation the author/director has done so far of one of his own novels. As in the case of his previous prose works, *Búfalo de la noche* has a single storyline, and as in the case of *Un dulce olor a muerte* the conflict revolves around the vicissitudes of a love triangle. Nonetheless, unlike the two previous novels, *Búfalo* is an urban narrative with a first person narration conveyed by an autodiegetic, limited, and increasingly unreliable narrator.

The basic plot line and the narrative devices in the novel *Búfalo de la noche* (1999) are well represented in the film version of 2007, although, as I will demonstrate, some noticeable differences in character treatment and narrative construction are evident. Common to both versions, the characters in the love triangle are Gregorio, a young schizophrenic, his girlfriend Tania, and the former's best friend, Manuel. After a few scenes presenting Gregorio's tormented love for Tania, the spoiled upper class student of architecture and bodacious urban flower soon gets involved with her boyfriend's best friend too. Manuel, the third wheel in the story is a confused middle class and sexually curious brat who alternates his surreptitious relation with Tania with an occasional philandering with Margarita,

Gregorio's sister, and at least another girl. Not totally unexpected, Gregorio and Manuel end up madly in love with Tania who cannot decide between the psychologically damaged but tender Gregorio, and the passionate and unpredictable Manuel. Gregorio who seems to suspect the high stakes of the still obscure game—for him but not for the reader—in which all three are involved, cannot consummate his physical love for Tania due to his mental condition (Arriaga 53).

The reader has access to Gregorio's visions including the earwigs that, according to his bouts of hallucination, get into his body through his nails and threaten to infest the bodies of those who are in contact with him (Arriaga 92-109). The other obsessive vision in Gregorio's long nights is a "night buffalo" who haunts his dreams (Arriaga 43). These detailed elements of Gregorio's mental state are delivered in periodical analepses that interrupt the story, because, as we learn in the first pages, Gregorio has already committed suicide (Arriaga 3). The plot thickens when a series of messages and emissaries meant to exact revenge and destroy Manuel's sanity, and Tania's love for his friend, surface as the posthumous legacy of the young schizophrenic (Arriaga 129).

The novel tends to be very careful in the construction of the moral conundrums the young characters face. The tension grows and is sustained much better in the novel. The narrator's long passages of self-reflexive analysis allow for a nonjudgmental approach to the world of middle class Mexican youth that seems as sincere as it is provocative. On the visual side of the equation, in the film the abstractness of Manuel's thoughts and self-doubts are not easily transposed into images, the end of the story is more ambiguous and comes earlier, but the recurrence and disturbing quality of Gregorio's obsessions are more effectively conveyed in its visual rendition. Clearly, the scenes of buffalos and earwigs are more persuasive and dramatically efficient in representing Gregorio's deteriorating mental state in the film. But perhaps the most insidious change in the novel—once it is converted into images—Is the alteration of the narrator's perspective. What comes across as a very tight autodiegetic account in the book dominated by Manuel's point of view, becomes a very close, intimate, but still very heterodiegetic and fluid camera in the film.

Spanish film critic Sánchez Noriega suggests there are four different levels of adaptation regarding the fidelity of a film to a text (Sanchez Noriega 64). *Búfalo de la noche* the film can be classified without a doubt in the category of "transpositions," in which a text suffers just enough changes so as to make it a self-contained and truly functioning film without losing the integrity and spirit of the original narration. But if

Arriaga is the author of the book, why did he decide to cut so much material, and to change the temporal order and focalization of the film? Should we not expect the highest degree of authorial freedom in faithfully adapting his own work? The old suspicion from the literary field that adaptations force and destroy the book because the screenwriter, the producer, or director have no respect for literary discourse seems difficult justified in this case.

In the process of constructing a film, the transposition of a text imposes two urgent tasks due to the very nature of the cinematic spectacle: temporal compression, and dramatic efficiency.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it seems plausible to think that Arriaga had to implement so many changes in order to make a workable film out of the novel's initial storyline, no matter who the author of the initial text is. In this case, it would be difficult to say that the screenwriter approached the novel in bad faith. In the end, despite the differences in perspective, the compression of actions and the elimination and simplification of some characters, both the film and the novel version present well-structured and efficient stories in two different media. This should be the motivation and ultimate objective of any film adaptation of a literary work.

I contend that Arriaga's case illuminates important aspects about the supposed antagonism between cinematic spectacles and writing in general, and makes evident the cultural standing of film adaptations in particular. By comparing his novels to his films, we can observe first that the narrative resources available to a novelist do not necessarily have to be the same for a screenwriter, and that despite the differences among the media, stories can be retold in any of the formats with comparable efficiency and artistry. Moreover, films and novels still tend to respond to the limitations and possibilities of their corresponding artistic field, and in that sense critics and spectators would not receive a "completely faithful" and "transparent" subordination of the cinematic to literary discourse, not even in cases when the writer of the novel, and the writer of the screenplay, are one and the same author.

However, the comparative study of a story in both its visual and its textual form could help illuminate the nature and possibilities of narrative discourse at the hands of an efficient storyteller. In the case of *Búfalo de la noche*, the ghostly apparitions in the mind of the psychologically damaged Gregorio become more prominent and effective as visual images, but the film losses some of the registers and idiosyncrasies

---

<sup>18</sup> Given the fact that contemporary films seldom surpass a length of 130 minutes, it is almost impossible to transpose all of the actions and characters from a novel of 200 pages or more into a film. Hence the need for cutting or compressing chapters and characters, and from here, in order to sustain the dramatic tension other changes must be implemented.

in the narrative's cultural and social milieu that are so carefully constructed in the novel through verbal devices. But these gains and losses are, for the most part, connatural to the possibilities, weaknesses, and strengths of each artistic field and are not due to the "failures" or forced "compromises" made in the process of adapting the original text. Arriaga's intervention has allowed him to flexibilize the barriers between fields and be in control of both forms of narrative rendition. In this sense it is possible to speak of a current flexibilization in the transference of cultural capital between the literary and cinematic field that is essential to understand Arriaga's trajectory. At the beginning of his career he was able to participate in the González-Iñárritu trilogy given his proven abilities as a storywriter. The eventual success of his work as screenwriter allowed him to go back to his novel *Búfalo de la noche*, and with the gained experience, access to contacts and capital he was able to make it into a film project. In so doing, he is closing the circuit of cultural capital between the literary and cinematic fields. In a more explicit way, in twenty years of literary and filmmaking career, Guillermo Arriaga has been able to take advantage of the transference of cultural capital by moving from writing novels, to screenwriting for the González Iñárritu trilogy, to the adaptation of his own novel (*Búfalo de la noche*) and finally, to writing and directing his own screenplay for *The Burning Plain*.

I tend to believe that the intense multimedia activity of the present generation of transnational filmmakers like Arriaga and Del Toro is signaling a slow but effective transformation in the cultures of production in general, but especially regarding writing practices in film and in literature. These changes contribute to the flexibilization of the lines of demarcation and cultural capital ascribed to the work of the screenwriter and the novelist that would ultimately change the general reception in both fields. Furthermore, the accumulation of economic capital in film and television is affecting the conversion of social and cultural capital in the symbolic sphere. I contend that, at this point in time, it has become possible to think that a simultaneous intervention in both fields can finally enhance, instead of harm or jeopardize, filmmakers' perceived influence as they write novels. Also, novelists directing films could positively affect the reception of their work in the literary field. This arrangement of symbolic influences across media seemed impossible in past configurations of the cultural sphere when film's and literature's cultural capital were thought of as uneven, competing and only seldom complimentary. This was evident during the Classic Hollywood era and the Mexican Golden Age when Faulkner and



Revueltas were involved in cinematic projects yet they had to downplay or hide their participation in the film industry.

This flexibilization in the circulation of cultural capital among different media has affected other fields and helps explain why the adaptation to film of other visual forms considered less influential like comics, web animation, and videogames has proven so successful in the last decade. These phenomena led me to believe that in the current state of internationalization of film the tendency for more literary authors or filmmakers to transit seamlessly between different media will continue and that this crossing between platforms and across languages will become a more frequent phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> In such cases, the challenge for critics in the literary and film studies fields is to reconsider the methodological rigidities and ideological assumptions of the past in order to acknowledge the flexibilization in the exchange between film and literature and other media, and eventually develop more strategically adaptable and non-hierarchical categories for comparative cultural analysis.

### Works Cited

- Aleman, Carmen. "Avances formales y temáticos de la narrativa latinoamericana desde los tiempos del Boom." *Miríada Hispánica* 1 (2009): 19-27.
- Alvaray, Luisela. "National, Regional, and Global: New Waves of Latin American Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 47.3 (2008): 48-65.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. *Film Essays and Criticism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Arriaga, Guillermo. *Escuadrón guillotina*. New York: Atria Books, 2007.
- Arriaga, Guillermo. *Un dulce olor a muerte*. New York: Atria Books, 1994.
- Arriaga, Guillermo. *El búfalo de la noche*. New York: Atria Books, 2006.

---

<sup>19</sup> The recent proliferation of films based on classics of the comic medium *Spiderman*, *Ironman*, *Blade* and *Hellboy* in Hollywood and media corporations' subsequent acquisition of comic franchises attest to the importance given by the studios to the cinematic adaptation of products of this medium. In the case of Mexico, given the slow development and haphazard production of animation it is remarkable that *Una película de huevos* (2006) and *Leyenda de la nahualla* (2007) have become important examples of the commercial and cultural possibilities of nationally developed animation, both originating from comic book or web-based comics (Rodríguez Bermúdez 2007).

- Arriaga, Guillermo. Dir. *The Burning Plain*. Magnolia Home Entertainment. DVD, 2008.
- Ayala Blanco, Jorge. *La fugacidad del cine mexicano*. México: Océano, 2001.
- Balio, Tino. *Grand Design. History of the American Cinema 1930-1939*, 5. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Bazin, André. "On the *Politique des Auteurs* (April 1957)." in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, edited by Jim Hillier. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985: 248-259.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Cambridge MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press. 2008.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art an Introduction*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.
- Caldwell, John. T. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Cabezón Doty, Claudia. "Literatura y cine latinoamericanos en diálogo intermedial." *Taller de letras* 26 (2998): 29-54.
- Chávez, Daniel. "The Eagle and the Serpent on the Screen, the State as Spectacle in Mexican Cinema." *Latin American Research Review* 45.3 (2010): 115-141.
- Coria, Felipe. *Iluminaciones del inestable cine mexicano*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2005.
- Crafton, Donald. *The Talkies, American Cinema's Transition to Sound 1926-1931. History of American Cinema*. 4. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Cubitt, Sean. *The Cinema Effect*. Cambridge MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2005.
- Daniel, Lee. "Norteño Imaginary Spaces: a Typology of the Fictional Towns of Guillermo Arriaga, David Toscana and Alfredo Espinosa." *Hispania* 88 (2006): 257-266.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1995.
- Deleyto, Celestino and María del Mar Azcona. *Alejandro González Iñárritu*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Della Coletta, Cristina. *When Stories Travel, Cross-Cultural Encounters between Fiction and Film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011.
- De los Reyes, Aurelio. *Cine y sociedad en México 1896-1930*. México: UNAM, 1993.

- Deuze, Mark. "Convergence Culture and Media Work." In *Media Industries, History, Theory and Method*, edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009: 144-156.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. *La forma del cine*. México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1999.
- Elliot, Kamilla. "Novels, Films, and the Word/Image Wars." In *A Companion to Literature and Film*, edited by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 1-22.
- Elliot, Kamilla. *Rethinking the Novel / Film Debate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Enrique, Álvaro. "El nicho de Arriaga." *Letras libres* 9 100 (2007): 48-50.
- Fadiman, Regina. "Hollywood's Use and Abuse of Faulkner." *Mississippi Quarterly* 42.3 (1989): 333-337.
- Fischer, Hervé. *The Decline of the Hollywood Empire*. Mullins, R. trans. Vancouver: Talon Books, 2006.
- Gallo, Rubén. *Mexican Modernity, the Avant-Garde and the Technological Revolution*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005.
- García Riera, Emilio. "Prólogo." In *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas*, by José Revueltas. México: Era, 1991. 9-14
- García Riera, Emilio. *Breve historia del cine mexicano, primer siglo 1897-1997*. México: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía (IMCINE)/Universidad de Guadalajara, 1998.
- Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.
- Gómez, María Asunción. *Del escenario a la pantalla, la adaptación cinematográfica del teatro español*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- González Inárritu, Alejandro. Dir. *Amores Perros*. Lions Gate. DVD, 1999.
- . *21 Grams*. Focus. DVD, 2001.
- . *Babel*. Paramount. DVD, 2003.
- Guerould, Daniel. "Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama." In *Imitations of Life*, edited by Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991: 118-134.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hernández Aldana, Jorge. Dir. *El búfalo de la noche*. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. DVD, 2007.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes, the Denigration of Vision in 20<sup>th</sup> Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Jones, Tommy Lee. Dir. *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*. Sony Classic Pictures. DVD, 2005.

- Kovarik, Bill. *Revolutions in Communications, Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler, a Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- Levy, Emanuel. *Cinema of Outsiders, the Rise of American Independent Film*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Linhard, Tabea. "Unheard Confessions and Transatlantic Connections: *Y tu mamá también* and *Nadie hablará de nosotros cuando hayamos muerto*." *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 5.1 (2008): 43-56.
- Lindsay, Vachel. *The Art of the Moving Picture*. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.
- Lozano Franco, José. "Guillermo Arriaga. Escritor y Guionista." *Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea* 14.35 (2007): 21-26.
- Martín Barbero, Jesús. *Communication, Culture and Hegemony*. London: Sage Publications, 1993.
- Mayne, Judith. *Cinema and Spectatorship*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Menne, Jeff. "A Mexican *Nouvelle Vague*: The Logics of New Waves under Globalization." *Cinema Journal* 47.1 (2007): 70-92.
- Menton, Seymour. *La nueva novela histórica de la América Latina*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999.
- Metz, Christian. *Film Language: a Semiotics of the Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Metz, Christian. *El significante imaginario, psicoanálisis y cine*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2001.
- Monsiváis, Carlos. "South of the Border: Down Mexico's Way, el cine latinoamericano y Hollywood." In *Aires de familia, cultura y sociedad en América Latina*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000: 51-78.
- Naremore, James. *Film Adaptation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Paz, Octavio. "Cristianismo y revolución: José Revueltas." in *México en la obra de Octavio Paz*, edited by Octavio Paz and Luis Mario Schneider. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987: 570-584.
- Perkowska, Magdalena. *Historias híbridas: la nueva novela histórica latinoamericana (1985-2000) ante las teorías posmodernas de la Historia*. Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2009.
- Philips, Gene. *Fiction, Film, and Faulkner, the Art of Adaptation*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988.

- Podalsky, Laura. "Migrant Feelings: Melodrama, *Babel* and Affective Communities." *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 7.1 (2010): 47-58.
- Quiroga, Horacio. *Arte y lenguaje del cine*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1997.
- Raengo, Alessandra and Robert Stam. *Literature and Film, a Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- . *A Companion to Literature and Film*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Retes, Gabriel. Dir. *Un dulce olor a muerte*. Quality Films. DVD, 1997.
- Revueltas, José. *El conocimiento cinematográfico y sus problemas*. México: Era, 1991.
- Reyes, Alfonso. *Fósforo, crónicas cinematográficas*. México: Conaculta / IMCINE, 2000.
- Rocco, Alessandro. "José Revueltas escritor de cine: el guión de *Los albañiles*, adaptación de la novela de Vicente Leñero" *Ciberletras* (2011).
- . "De la penumbra a la escuela: el difícil camino del guionista Gabriel García Márquez." *Inti, Revista de Literatura Hispánica* (2005): 61-62, 145-158.
- Rodríguez Bermúdez, Manuel. *Animación, una perspectiva desde México*. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2007.
- Rodríguez, Clara. *Heroes, Lovers and Others, the Story of Latinos in Hollywood*. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004.
- Rosas Mantecón, Ana. "Las batallas por la diversidad: exhibición y públicos de cine en México." In *Situación actual y perspectivas de la industria cinematográfica en México y en el extranjero*, edited by Néstor García Canclini, et. al. Guadalajara: INCINE/ Universidad de Guadalajara, 2006: 263-291.
- Sánchez Noriega, José Luis. *De la literatura al cine*. Barcelona: Paidós, 2000.
- Saborit, Antonio. *Los dorados de Tomochic*. México: Cal y Arena, 1994.
- Shaw, Deborah. *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: Breaking into the Global Market*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Smith, Paul Julian. "Transatlantic Traffic in Recent Mexican Films." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 12.3 (2003): 389-400.
- Smith, Paul Julian. *Amores Perros*. London: British Film Institute, 2003.
- Stam, Robert. "Introduction." in *Literature and Film, a Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, edited by Alessandra Raengo and Robert Stam. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005: 1-52.
- Stam, Robert. "Beyond Fidelity: the Dialogics of Adaptation." In *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000: 55-77.

- Steiger, Janet. "Mass Produced Photoplays: Economic and Signifying Practices in the First Years of Hollywood." in *Movies and Methods*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 144-161
- Thornton, John. "Cultures of Production, Studying Industry's Deep Texts, Reflexive Rituals, and Managed Self-Disclosures." in *Media, Industries, History, Theory and Method*, edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 199-212
- Tierney, Dolores. *Emilio Fernández, Pictures in the Margins*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- . "Alejandro González Iñárritu, Director without Borders." *New Cinemas, Journal of Contemporary Film*, 7.2 (2009): 101-117.
- Truffaut, François. "A Wonderful Certainty." in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, edited by Jim Hillier. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985: 107-110.
- Velazco, Salvador. "Cineastas mexicanos en Hollywood: la (im)posible integración." in *Tendencias del cine iberoamericano en el nuevo milenio*, edited by Juan Carlos Vargas Maldonado, et. al. Guadalajara: IMCINE/Universidad de Guadalajara, 2011: 189-205.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- . "Cinema and Socialism." *Politics of Modernism*. London: Verso, 2007: 107-118.
- Wolf, Sergio. *Cine / Literatura, ritos de pasaje*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2001.