

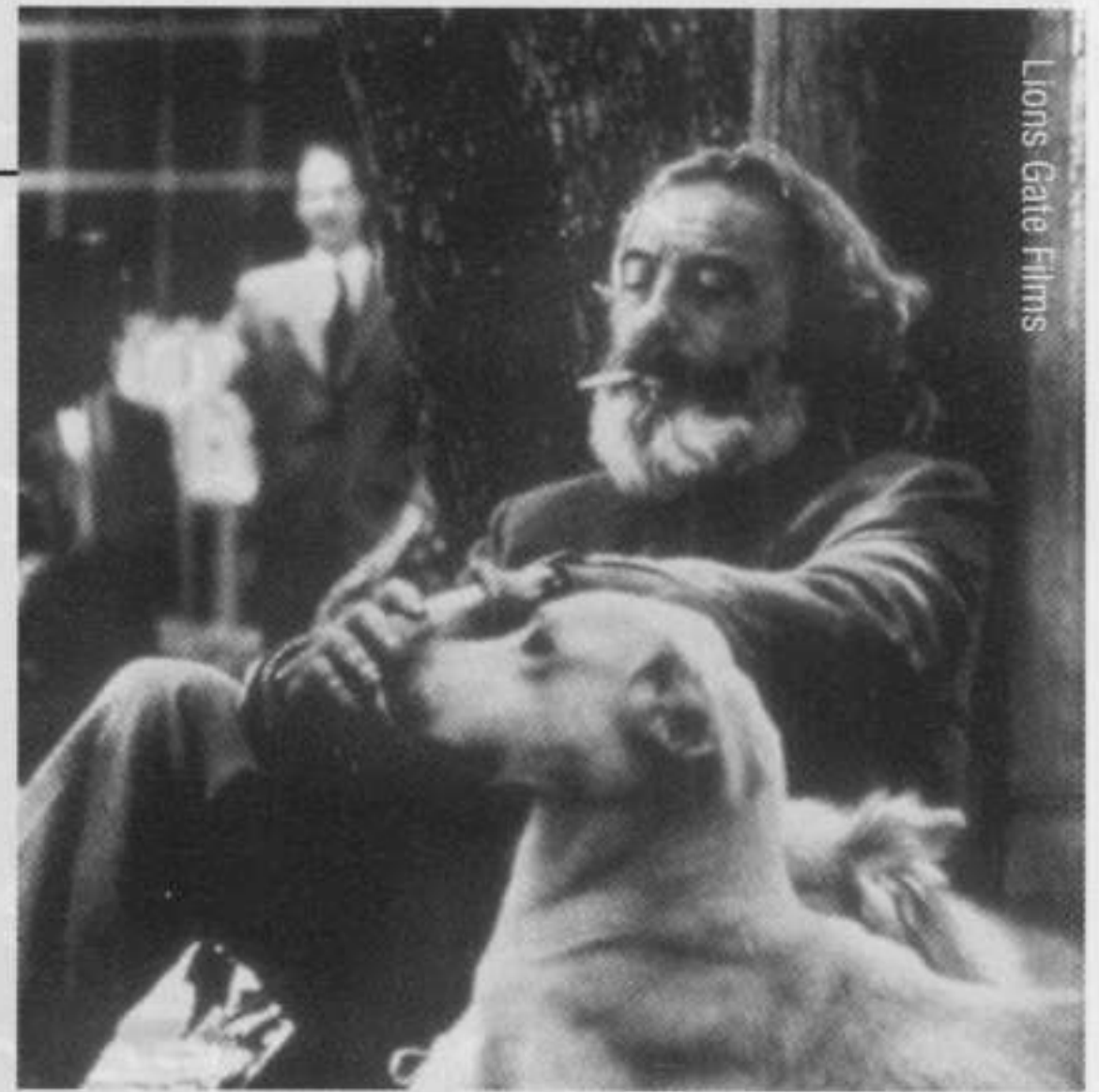
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## Structure and Character in

# AMORES PERROS



Emilio Echevarria is El Chivo in *Amores Perros*

By **Guillermo Arriaga** translated by **Alan Page**

I have always been obsessed by automobile accidents. I find them the most terrible price man pays for technology, for wanting to go beyond his natural limits. An accident is a mixture of speed, blood, and twisted metal. They often radically change the victims' lives, not only because of the injuries they may sustain, but also the fears, contrasting emotions and nightmares that remain. Also, a crash can put us in touch with people we would not know otherwise. In a few brutal seconds, they join victims, witnesses, policemen, doctors. They are fortuitous roads for encounters.

I suffered a serious accident on the highway many years ago. On a hunting trip, we turned over into a ravine. I was asleep on the back seat and was awakened by the thud of the truck, after falling three meters against some rocks. Then we started to roll over and over—the glass breaking, the metal splitting, the truck spiraling downwards, the crunch of bones. The truck stopped. There was a brief silence. Then the screams, the radiator steam escaping and the cries for help.

Miraculously we all survived, saved by the metal coolers we were carrying tied to the roof. The script for *Amores Perros* stems from a car crash for two main reasons. First, to carry the characters to an extreme situation, and second, because it leads to the meeting of dissimilar characters. However, the crash is not the script's marrow. It is, so to speak, the catalyst that accelerates or modifies the characters' existence.

When I was younger, I read *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. I was fascinated by how he handled time and his characters' point of view. I discovered the importance of subjugating the structure to the story to be told. He made me realize that every story pushes toward its own narrative breath. I kept reading Faulkner. Every novel was told differently, *The Wild Palms*; *Absalom, Absalom*; *Light in August*; *As I Lay Dying*. In each one a fiercely human story was told without any complacencies; deep, terrible, and hopeful at the same time.

I then became interested in bringing a similar structure to the movies—one that was subordinate to the story and not vice versa. I wanted to write a script that showed us the story of a car crash, the story of the present and future. What led to this accident? What happened during the accident? What were its consequences?

This was the initial position for *Amores Perros* but as I said, the accident could not be the main part of the script. I wanted my characters to be involved in love stories. That love itself drove them to extremes and took them into situations where they had to make vital and intense decisions; that love represented pain and hope—the crossroads between life and death.

I wanted stories of forbidden love, where loving presupposed a risk and an adventure. It is surprising that a feeling as noble as love can become such a destructive force, thus the Spanish title *Amores Perros*. Love that bites, that devours, intense,

fierce, brave, and fearsome—love put to the test, love at the edge of the abyss.

The three stories of *Amores Perros* implicitly reflect on father figures. In all three, the parents are absent or lost. In the first story there is no father; and the brothers fight over an empty throne. In the second a father abandons his family; and in the third a disappeared father tries to return to the world he lost.

Why absent fathers? The thesis posited by Freud's in *Totem and Taboo* seems to be truer than ever today: disappeared fathers and brothers destroying themselves. Authority figures have become evanescent and have given way to power figures. Thus, authority is understood to be that which appears naturally by conviction, charisma, wisdom or experience, and power as that which is obtained through bureaucratic institutions or sheer strength. This substitution of authority for power has led to the loss of a fundamental value: fraternity. As human beings we are reaching intolerable levels of violence. Respect for the other is lost. Whoever is different from me becomes my enemy, be it by race, religion, or social class. Proof of this is the horror of war in Bosnia and Kosovo, the Tutsis and the Hutus, and violent crime in large cities. There is no guiding authority to lead to dialogue and consensus.

In *Amores Perros*, two stories deal with confrontations between brothers. This is not the fight between Cain and Abel. It is Cain against Cain, humans against humans, dogs against dogs—brotherhood broken.



It was very important to me for the characters in *Amores Perros* to behave paradoxically, to be contradictory. I wanted them to say one thing and do another, to look for good through evil, to construct by destroying, to love by hating. I find that paradoxical characters are the ones that most seduce the audience. They are the ones who most reveal the human condition. Morals try to guide us toward absolute concepts: yes and no, right and wrong, one and the other. Life is relative. That is why it is paradoxical.

"Good" and "bad" characters bore me. Characters that are debated hour after hour are far more interesting: those that come near the abyss and feel vertigo but do not fall; those that are capable of being who they are and fighting for what they believe in until the end only to discover that the paradise they expected was nonexistent—characters that are not ruined despite having been defeated for a long time.

One of the most frightening evils of contemporary society is the abominable "political correctness"—the absolute dilution of human relations (perhaps the most devastating form of violence). Everything

takes on a hypocritical, "nice" tone. Everything tends to be aseptic, lacking in depth and intensity—to be civilized. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the human race would disappear by excess of civilization—human beings bound by unpolluted, castrating morals. Ecologists forget that the most important nature to be defended is human nature.

I have tried to keep the characters in *Amores Perros* consistent with their nature. If the frog and scorpion anecdote had not been already used in *The Crying Game*, I would have used it at some point in the script. That is: a scorpion asks a frog to carry him across the river on his back. The frog refuses: "you might sting me and kill me". The scorpion answers: "no, if I sting you and you die, so do I since I don't know how to swim". The frog accepts. In the middle of the river the scorpion stings the frog. The dying frog looks at the scorpion: "Why did you do it? Now we'll both die". The scorpion, sinking, answers: "it's my nature". This is what I wanted the script to reflect: characters that sink under the weight of their own nature and do not regret it.

I wanted to write a script as far away as

possible from anything politically correct. I was not interested in a lesson in morality. I wanted to show characters in all their pain, joy, faith, kindness, and cruelty—characters in very basic human situations: betrayal, love, abandonment, hate, struggle. Ethical judgments had to come from the spectator not from the film. Although this, we know, is an illusion, implicit in every aesthetic is an ethic.

I feel the characters are revealed through the decisions they make. In existentialist terms: living is choosing. But I also wanted these characters to be permeated by the worlds their decisions left behind. Sometimes our deepest nostalgia have more to do with what we do not experience rather than what we do. We carry the skin we never touched on our fingertips, the fights we never fought on our knuckles, in our heart what we left behind. In *Amores Perros*, Susana stays with Ramiro, Daniel with Valeria, and El Chivo decides to return. They have decided, but their lives are marked by what they abandon.

The script posits a synthesis: the life of a man is divided into three characters: a boy under 20, a man of 40, and a man of 60.

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their money into a risky, unconventional film. They trusted and supported us, two virtues hard to find in film producers.

I hope the characters and stories in *Amores Perros* touch the hearts of many people. That is what films are for, or at least that is why I write them. (i)

*Guillermo Arriaga is married and the father of two children ages 8 and 9, both of whom he considers to be his real masterpieces. He studied Communications, with a master in History, and has been a TV and radio director, producer, and writer. He recently directed two short fiction films and has been a full-time college professor. Arriaga has also had three novels published. Amores Perros is his first filmed screenplay although he has written four others.*

### **Script to Screen: *The Caveman's Valentine***

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When I went back and read it and compared it with the first script I read and even though it had been years of a process and many, many rewrites, it really wasn't that far away.

"It's essentially the same book and character. The thing that stayed the same through the entire process was Romulus Ledbetter. That character is completely George's. I felt uncomfortable even changing dialogue for him because the character, on paper, was so specific, and it was so full-blown and fleshed-out in his imagination.

"But I really do think that despite the years that we were involved in the project, it's the book. And I'm proud of that. At one point, George accused me of being too faithful (laughs), but I'm proud of that."

There were some changes, though. For one, Romulus's arc became simpler and more concrete. In the book, he seems mainly to be struggling against fear and reconnecting with the human race. "It's an Odyssey," says Lemmons. In the book, Lulu has accepted her father, where in the film there's much more tension between them.

"In the book, I felt that Lulu was the one refuge from Romulus's difficulties with the world. Lulu was the one thing he could turn to, the one oasis of love. And in the book it was Romulus who is resistant to Lulu's love. It's Romulus who is holding back from love everywhere. The world keeps reaching out to Romulus. So there was a shift in the movie. Romulus had this underlying wish to reconnect with the world and that was symbolized by his relationship with Lulu."

## *Ameros Perros*

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One's problems might very well be another's. And these three characters end their stories similarly: the three discover who they are and become themselves. They discover that pain is also a path toward hope. It is in these conclusions that the three characters converge.

I chose the dogs as a metaphor for what happens to these characters. In the first story, Cofi, a docile home dog, turns into a destructive fighting dog just like Octavio who becomes a murderer. In the second story, Richi the little Maltese dog, is lost under the hardwood floor—a metaphor for the hell Daniel and Valeria live through above and Valeria's rotting leg. In the third story, Cofi reveals to El Chivo his own condition—that of a killer. Dog redeems man. Through Cofi, El Chivo discovers who he is and how low he has fallen. From then on he will try to recover and regain his daughter's lost love.

Choosing dogs was not only because of a personal predilection (I couldn't have chosen cats, I don't like them), but because I believe this is the animal with which we have the strongest ties. It is the species we have shared the most with and which most allows us to understand ourselves. The dog we own says a lot about who we are—from one who gleefully accepts his dog's bestiality, to those who try to disguise it with vests, bowties and haircuts. In *Amores Perros* we know the characters largely because of the dog they have.

My relationship with Alejandro González Iñárritu, the film's director, was fundamental. I would get together with him once a week while I was writing. He would ask questions, make suggestions, criticize and impel me forward. He brought out the best in me and thanks to him this script achieved what it did. This script owes a lot to him. He then let me do the same while he was filming. He invited me to the rehearsals and the set, and I suggested and commented. We broke the paradigm that the writer and director are enemies. We worked in mutual respect and harmony with tremendous complicity. The way it should be, I suppose.

I must also acknowledge the work of our executive producers: Martha Sosa and Francisco González Compeán, and of the directors of Altavista Films: Alejandro Soberón and Federico González Compeán. They were respectful of our work, suggested changes to the script (but did not impose them), and put

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