

Writers on
Writing •
The **Burning**
Plain

The Burning Plain's very first image: On an isolated desert plain, a trailer home is on fire. Nothing else is around, just the inferno devouring the trailer home. Furious blazes come out of the windows. Is there anyone inside? Is someone burning alive?

Jennifer Lawrence as Mariana and J.D. Pardo as Santiago in *The Burning Plain*



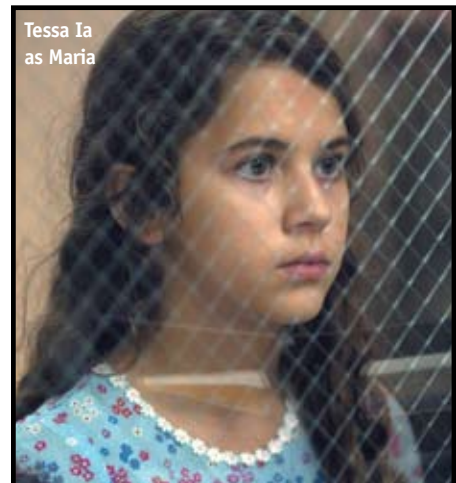
PRODUCTION PHOTOS: MAGNOLIA PICTURES

Years before, when I was nine or 10, I was playing soccer with my friends on the streets of my neighborhood. A kid came running: “fire, fire.” We look up. A column of smoke far away. Bicycles rush, boys run toward the fire. We get there. A house is burning. Furious blazes come out of the windows. A man says, “There is someone inside, I heard the screaming.” We’re terrified. Is that true? Firemen arrive. They run toward the house. They get in. They control the fire. No one inside, they say. We don’t know if we should believe them.

Life, film. An image of childhood remained years and years in my head. A haunting image. A cruel image. A beautiful image. An image that becomes the departing point. An image that itself can raise dramatic questions. Why a fire? Is someone inside? What happened? The first image of the film.

Many years after the fire, I am 25 years old. I’m driving my Jeep in a sorghum field. September. Dust, heat, the orange stalks of the ripe sorghum. Thousands of white-wing doves flying. A blue sky. Suddenly, from the fields, a crop duster appears. Flying low, very low. Six, seven feet high. I hit the brakes. The plane crosses at high speed just a few yards away. Two seconds more and it would have hit us. The chance of an accident. The unexpected turns of life.

Life, film. Pilots, sorghum fields, crop dusters spraying, heat, dust, doves. People in love, people smiling, a chance of an accident, the unexpected turns of life. One of the stories of *The Burning Plain*.

Tessa Ia
as Maria

“ I write from life, which is why I structure the stories the way I structure them.”

Writer-director Guillermo Arriaga

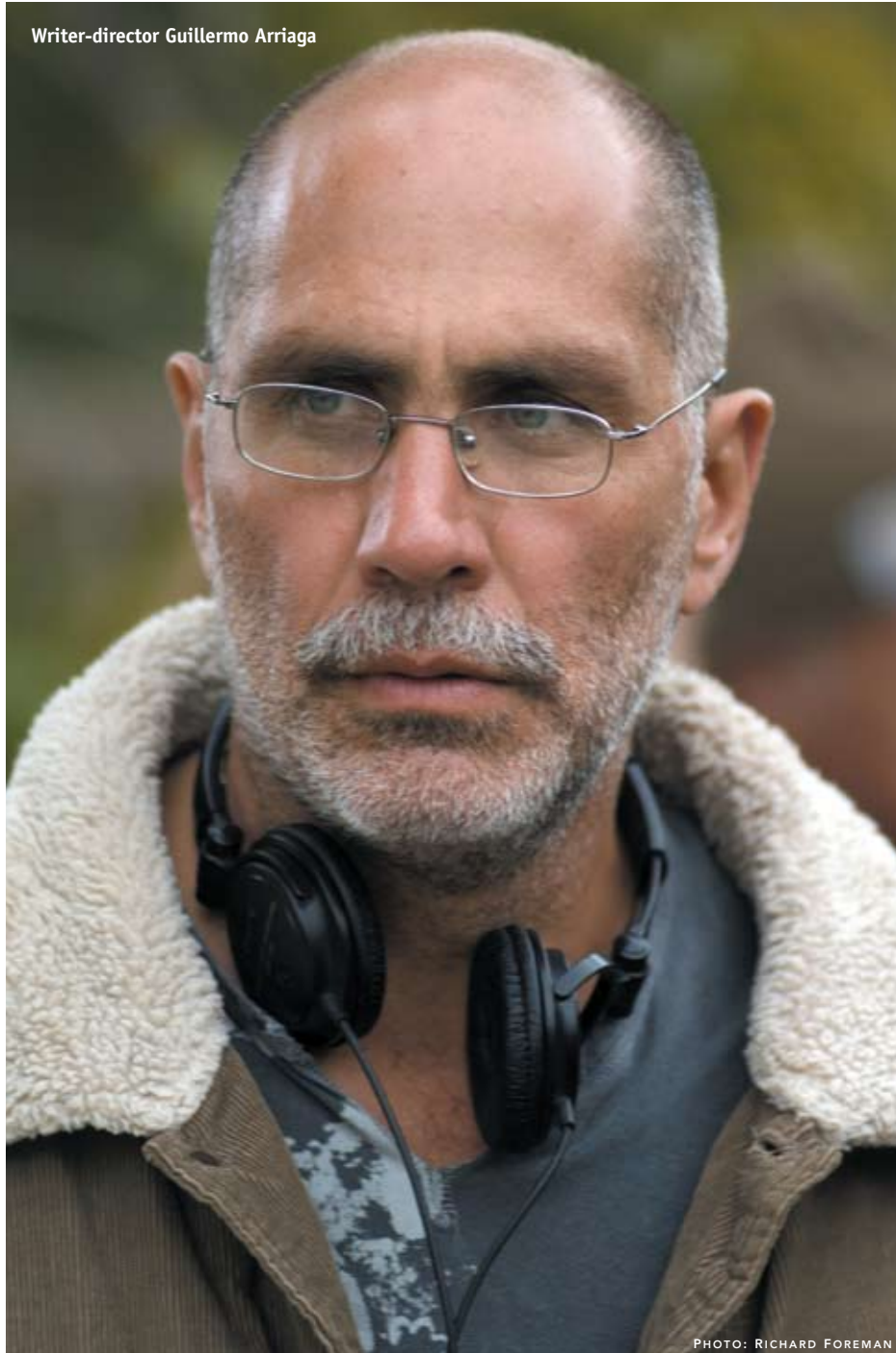


PHOTO: RICHARD FOREMAN

Beginning

Some writers like to explore historic episodes. Others like to write from stories that come from the news. Or to adapt novels. Or are influenced by other films. Most of what I have written comes from my own life. It is triggered by the experiences I have been close to: *Amores Perros* begins with the story of my own dog. I have a severe infection in the pericardium, the membrane that surrounds the heart. The infection begins spreading to the muscle. This is where *21 Grams* began. I’m 12, in Northern Mexico, in the desert, hunting with friends. One of them reads in the box of bullets: “Beware. The bullet can reach four miles.” He is 13. He doesn’t believe it. He aims the rifle to the cars far away. He wants to shoot them to know if it is true. This is where *Babel* began.

So, I write from life—which is why I structure the stories the way I structure them. Because in daily life we seldom tell stories in a linear way. We go from one place to the other, from the past to the future, then back to the past and end in the present. When you remember your life, it comes like a torrent of images, stories, situations. Years are condensed in two minutes of memories. Sometimes, two minutes of life needs years to remember. And I wanted to express this on film. The strange, changing ways of telling stories in real life.

When I write, I’m obsessed with certain issues: Where are the hands of the character? What is he or she looking at? What is the distance between the characters? I’m obsessed with light. Light is narrative. Light can give a sense of the characters. Where the light comes from. Is it dark outside? Is the sun beginning to rise? Does the night come? Also, I’m obsessed with the landscape. I cannot write a single word if the landscape is not clear in my head.

All of these concerns were present when I wrote *The Burning Plain*. To organize them, I looked for a unifying concept. In this case it was the four elements. I decided to tell four stories, each determined by one of the elements: fire, water, earth, wind. The concept helped me find the right landscapes, the right light. The hands and eyes of the characters began to make sense.

There is a story of a clandestine love between a married American woman and a married Mexican man. They use a trailer home in

the middle of an isolated plain as their love nest. The desert, the home, their skins, their naked bodies are full of dust. Earth.

There is a story of a woman emotionally hurt. She is detached from the world. She doesn’t mind showing her nakedness, she has sex with many men and doesn’t feel anything. She is cold in a city where it rains all the time. She works in a restaurant overlooking the sea. The sky is gray. Water.

There is a story of crop-duster pilots. One of them travels with his 12-year-old daughter. They spray sorghum fields. Blue skies. Doves. Birds. Wind.

There is a story of two teenagers. They fall in love in adverse circumstances. Right feeling, wrong guy. Their love comes from a trailer home on fire. Fire puts them together. Fire becomes their obsession. Fire.

Structuring

The structure of *The Burning Plain*, as the previous films I have written, interweaves different stories in different times and places. I must say that I never have a sketch, notes, plans. I just begin writing. The structure slowly begins to present itself during the writing process. I “feel” it. I cut to another story when I feel there is a dramatic question that needs to be solved later. I cut when there is something that can reveal the character too much or there is a secret that needs to be kept from the audience. I cut when I feel the rhythm of the screenplay needs to get faster, or slower. I never write the stories and then cut and paste them. I write them in the order they are shown in the films.

When I’m writing a screenplay, I always like to have a word that will represent the theme of the film. In the case of *The Burning Plain*, the word was “love.” This is a story about love. Not the valentine card-type of love. But the love that cuts, destroys, burns. The love that brings us together, that brings happiness. Ultimately, the film is about how love brings hope. How love means the chance for redemption, forgiveness. How love is the only thing that can allow us to be deeply ourselves. How love can heal. Can absolve.

The landscape was fundamental while I was writing *The Burning Plain*. In this film, the landscape is almost a character. I tried to describe it in the most precise way, not only as

Charlize Theron
as Sylvia

a mere description of the place. The landscape itself can narrate the story. A naked woman on a balcony in a cold and rainy place is completely different from a naked woman on a balcony in a sunny and warm setting. A home on fire in an isolated desert is different from a house on fire in a city. It is different to see two people making love in a clean bed than making love in a place full of dirt.

I must say that I would flunk in a screenwriting school. I do exactly the opposite of what teachers teach their students. I never, never do any kind of research. I’m too lazy to do so. For some writers, research is a bible. For me it is an obstacle. Since my stories are so personal, I feel having too much information will get between my experience and how I want to express it. God is in the details, they say. But, I like to bring these details from my life, not from a ton of books.

I never write an outline. I don’t even know

Kim Basinger as Gina and Joaquim de Almeida as Nick



how the story is going to end. When I pitched *The Burning Plain* to my brilliant producers Walter Parkes and Laurie MacDonald, they asked “How does it end?” I don’t know, I answered, I have to find out. They laughed hard at a writer who has no idea where he is heading. But they trusted me. And trusted the story. The very last image of *The Burning Plain* was found while writing it, not before. The story whispered silently where it wanted to go.

I know very little about my characters before I sit to write. Many years ago, I was forced by a producer to attend one of those screenwriting seminars by one of the screenwriting gurus. One teaching in this seminar was: “You must know everything about your characters, even what kind of underwear they use.” Oops. It happens that I do exactly the opposite. I try to write trying to know as little as possible about my characters. If I know too much, how are they going to surprise me? And maybe that is the part of writing *The Burning Plain* that made me enjoy it a lot. The characters constantly pushed to do things that caught me off guard. It is like they have lives of their own and they want to be themselves, not what I want them to be.

Collaborating

Something I do—and I do it with passion and all my heart—is listen. While I’m writing, I have a group of friends, commanded by

Maru, my wife, that reads my screenplay as it is written. We read it aloud and I like to stop every 10 pages and ask them: What is next? If everyone agrees what is next, it means that I’m heading in the wrong direction; if there is a fight and discussion of where the story is heading, I’m in the right direction. None of them could guess what was going on in *The Burning Plain*. None of them could predict where the story was going. And when someone in this intimate group makes a point, I listen as carefully as I can. I have no ego in this process. I’m willing to take everything, every opinion, every point of view.

I also listen carefully to Walter and Laurie. They’re brilliant producers. And I have learned something in this business—work only with people that have tastes like yours. If you don’t, the process becomes hell. Walter and Laurie’s taste is impeccable. At least they have the same taste as I do. They were completely focused in the story. Not the audience, not the commercial possibilities, but what was better for the story. They gave me intelligent and thoughtful notes. Sometimes we disagreed, and even fought—the beautiful fights of the creative process.

I directed *The Burning Plain*. I wasn’t attached as a director to the screenplay when I sold it to Walter and Laurie. But after I finished, I felt that I was the right one to do it. I fought for it. It wasn’t something given to me easily.

I’m extremely happy that I did direct the film. It was one of the most enjoyable things I have done in my entire life. I smiled from the very first second to the last. And all the work I put into the screenplay helped me a great deal as a director. I had so clear in my mind the kind of locations I wanted and how to describe them in the screenplay that I could decide quickly what was right and what was wrong. The same thing happened with the cast. I had a full description of who they were, how they talked, how they moved, how they looked. Casting was much easier because I had the characters living in my head for a couple of years.

I must acknowledge the importance of my translator, Alan Page, who has been translating my work from the very beginning. As a non-native English speaker, the work of Alan has been crucial for me. He has shaped a great deal of my work. And it is also important as a writer to listen to your team—in this case, my agents Shana Eddy and Keya Khayatian and my lawyer, Linda Lichter. These people give insightful advice when needed, and every writer should respect his team if he wants to improve in this business.

I must say that I feel extremely privileged. I have been embraced by a community of filmmakers that have helped me, respected me, encouraged me. They haven’t minded at all where I come from (I’m Mexican) or, as a director, if I had any experience at all directing. They were there, putting in everything they had to help me make a good screenplay and then a good film. They cannot imagine how thankful I am to them. 🙏

GUILLERMO ARRIAGA is considered one of the most influential writers in contemporary literature and is, without a doubt, one of the most important writers in the Spanish language. Arriaga has written three novels: *The Guillotine Squad*, *A Sweet Scent of Death*, and *The Night Buffalo*, along with one book of short stories, *201 Return*. His literary work has been translated into various languages. Arriaga, whose work consists only of original stories, is also author of the film screenplays *Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (winner of Best Screenplay in Cannes 2005), and *Babel* (Oscar® nominee for Best Screenplay in 2006). *The Burning Plain*, starring Charlize Theron and Kim Basinger, is his first movie as a director.