

# William Faulkner and Alejandro González Iñárritu:

## The Fragmentation of the Time and Space in a Story

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William Faulkner has had a significant influence upon filmmakers. The first instance was probably the script for Orson Welles's immortal film *Citizen Kane* (1941), which was written by Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz. It was based on the life of press baron William Randolph Hearst and on Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) (Kawin 145-46). The very prominent filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard should also be mentioned, as his films have continuously paid homage to Faulkner.

The earliest films in which Godard refers to Faulkner are *À bout de souffle* (1960) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965), which are said to be Godard's two finest films. *À bout de souffle* references Faulkner's book *The Wild Palms* repeatedly. "Between grief and nothing I will take grief" is a line in the novel that is read by the heroine, and forms the ironic basis of the film. Moreover, either a Faulkner work is mentioned or a passage is quoted in many of Godard's works, such as *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (1967), *Week-end* (1967), *Nouvelle Vague* (1990), *Hélas pour moi* (1993), *JLG/JLG: autoportrait de décembre* (1995), and *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998).<sup>1</sup>

Although Godard had been paying homage to Faulkner for many years, except for Bruce Kawin's 1977 study, which briefly touches upon the relationship between Faulkner's novels and Godard's films (151-52), no research was done on it for a long time. However, in 2007, Catherine Gunther Kodat drew a detailed comparison between Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* and Godard's *À bout de souffle*.

Since a detailed paper on the relationship between the works of Faulkner and Godard has already been written, it seems a little insipid to examine that relationship; therefore, in this paper I would like to discuss Faulkner's influence on two filmmakers who are now in their prime, Quentin Tarantino and Alejandro González Iñárritu. In my paper published in the fifth issue of *The William Faulkner Journal of Japan*, I commented on the relationship between Faulkner and Tarantino. To briefly describe what I wrote, I suggest that Faulkner's technique of dramatically fragmenting the time and space in a story, namely, the technique of "disassembling the base" of a story, is linked to his theme of "the disassembly of the base" in the society of the Old South—or the disassembly of the patriarchy, that is to say, the disappearance of paternal authority or fatherhood—which was dramatically caused by the South's defeat in the Civil War. On this premise, I point out that Tarantino, in his films, applies Faulkner's technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story and

the novelist's theme of the absence of fatherhood. Iñárritu, who professes to be influenced by Faulkner, basically borrows his technique in the same way as does Tarantino. Before explaining the relationship between Faulkner and Iñárritu, I would like to sketch Iñárritu's career.

Iñárritu was born in 1963 in Mexico City, Mexico. In 1999, he directed, produced, and wrote the script for *Amores perros*. Although the credits of some of his films do not show him as the scriptwriter, he is engaged in the scriptwriting of all his films (LoBrutto 4; Takaya 7). *Amores perros*, whose title means "miserable love like a dog" (Noya 5; Kihira 50), became a big hit not only in Mexico but also all over the world (Hayward 464) and won the Critics Week Grand Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival, the Audience Award at the American Film Institute's International Film Festival, the British Academy Film Award for Best Film not in the English Language, and 11 sections of Ariel Awards, also known as the Mexican Academy Awards (Smith 13).

In 2001, Iñárritu directed and wrote the script for the short film "Powder Keg," for which he received the Cyber Lion Grand Prix at the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. In 2002, he directed, produced, and wrote the script for the short film "Darkness," which was featured in the omnibus film *11'09''01—September 11* made by 11 film directors from countries all over the world. The film which Iñárritu, "who had become a filmmaker much sought after by Hollywood" (Hatano 10), chose the United States as the setting for is *21 Grams* (2003), which he also directed, produced, and wrote the script for. Starring two Academy Award actors, Sean Penn and Benicio Del Toro, this film made it into the international spotlight and won awards in three categories at the Venice International Film Festival.

Iñárritu directed, produced, and wrote the script for *Babel* in 2006, which features superstar Brad Pitt and Academy Award actress Cate Blanchett, and resulted in his winning numerous awards including the Best Director Award at the Cannes International Film Festival, the Academy Award for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures, and the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture (Augustyn). In 2007, the Cannes International Film Festival requested that Iñárritu participate in the production of the omnibus film *Chacun son cinéma ou Ce petit coup au coeur quand la lumière s'éteint et que le film commence*, for which he directed and wrote the script for the short film "Anna."

As discussed above, Iñárritu is one of the most active filmmakers in the world today. Since the themes of his short films were not decided by him and their running times are extremely limited, I shall examine only his long films, namely, *Amores perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*, the three of which he calls "the trilogy." In regard to the suggestion that his films resemble Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) in structure, Iñárritu commented, "I like the way he [Tarantino] plays with structure—but I don't know why he gets the credit. It's really William Faulkner; it's a literary structure that has existed for a long time" (Romney 12). Furthermore, Guillermo Arriaga, who collaborated with

Iñárritu on writing the scripts for these films, remarked, “I was surprised when people said that *Amores perros* was like *Pulp Fiction*. I admire that movie, but I based my script on William Faulkner” (Hirschberg 34). It follows from what Iñárritu and his co-writer say that in addition to their films the structure of Tarantino’s are also derived from Faulkner’s novels, and that their work is therefore based on the work of Faulkner not Tarantino. Since nobody, including Faulkner scholars, has researched the relationship between Faulkner and Iñárritu, I would like to examine Iñárritu’s works by comparing them to those of Tarantino, who also follows Faulkner’s technique and theme.

Like Tarantino, Iñárritu, who distinctly declares his films to be based on Faulkner’s works, uses the novelist’s technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story and his theme of the absence of fatherhood. The “technique of fragmenting the time in a story” divides a ‘story’—which follows the passage of time—into segments and arranges them out of chronological order. And the “technique of fragmenting the space in a story” either depicts ‘one story by using multiple narrators’ or depicts ‘one story by using multiple narratives in which the protagonists differ from each other’; and films generally make the latter depiction. *Amores perros*, the first of Iñárritu’s trilogy, consists of “three narratives whose protagonists differ from each other,” but are nevertheless interconnected: the narrative in which Octavio, a poor young man in Mexico City, tries to get out of the slums with his brother Ramiro’s wife, Susana; the narrative in which the supermodel Valeria suffers a severe injury when Octavio’s car crashes into hers, and her relationship with her lover Daniel thereby deteriorates; and the narrative in which the professional killer, el Chivo, who has something to do with Octavio’s car accident, quits his profession after his ex-wife’s death. Because each of these three narratives is divided into segments that are “arranged out of chronological order,” we can say that *Amores perros* fragments the time and space in a story.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, when asked at what point his film *Babel* turned into “a story less about globalization and more about three families,” Iñárritu replied, “The only reason why this trilogy can be considered as such, besides its having been shaped for films that have the structure of overlapping stories, is that in the very end, they are stories of parents and children” (Hagerman 257); the director goes on to explain that the central theme of the “stories of parents and children” is “loss” (Hagerman 256). Indeed, the trilogy’s main theme is specifically the “loss” or absence of fatherhood. In regard to the absence of fatherhood in *Amores perros*, both Octavio’s family and Susana’s parental family, which suffer from poverty in the slums, are fatherless; Susana’s husband, Ramiro, does not welcome her pregnancy at all, and while committing a robbery, gets shot and dies leaving his two babies behind; el Chivo has deserted his wife and daughter because of his antigovernment activities; and Valeria’s lover, Daniel, deserts his two daughters for his life with her. Incidentally, a scene that was deleted in the public release but was included in the film’s DVD depicts Valeria as also starved for her father’s love. As we have seen, the aspect of fatherhood is thoroughly absent in *Amores perros*.

The second film in the trilogy, *21 Grams*, consists of “three narratives whose protagonists differ

from each other,” but are nevertheless interconnected: the narrative where Jack Jordan, who is an ex-convict in Memphis and has now turned to Christianity for help, accidentally kills—while driving his car—a man and his daughters as they are crossing the road, and is tormented by guilt; the narrative where Christina Peck loses her husband and daughters in Jack’s car accident and tries to avenge their deaths; and the narrative where the university teacher, Paul Rivers, who undergoes a heart transplant and discovers that his new heart was that of Christina’s husband, seeks her revenge. Like *Amores perros*, because each of these three narratives is divided into segments that are “arranged out of chronological order,” *21 Grams* also fragments the time and space in a story. With regard to “the theme of loss of parents or children” in *21 Grams*, although Christina loses her children, the loss or absence of fatherhood is also emphasized, as it is in *Amores perros*. Paul does not want his wife to bear a child. When Jack, who repeatedly gets sent to jail, is arrested for having a car accident, his wife says that their children may have to spend another five years without him (Arriaga 75). Although Jack returns to his family in the end, he is tormented by guilt over killing people and deserts his wife and children, rejecting his wife’s plea to help the family because their daughter is sick.

*Babel*, the last film in the trilogy, consists of “four narratives whose protagonists differ from each other,” and nevertheless have a few connections: the narrative in which Chieko Wataya, a deaf high school student in Tokyo, suffers from loneliness; the narrative in which the destiny of Abdullah’s family in Morocco is completely changed by his getting the gun that Chieko’s father, Yasujiro, gifted his guide on his hunting trip in Morocco; the narrative in which Richard Jones, an American traveler in Morocco, tries to somehow save the life of his wife, Susan, whom Abdullah’s younger son accidentally shot; and the narrative in which the Mexican nanny, Amelia, whom Richard asks to look after his children, gets involved in an incident at the United States–Mexico border and is forcibly deported to Mexico. Each of these four narratives is divided into segments that are “arranged out of chronological order.” Similar to the other films of the trilogy, *Babel* fragments the time and space in a story. In regard to “the theme of loss of parents or children” in *Babel*, although Richard and Susan have lost one of their sons and Abdullah loses both of his sons, just like in the other films of the trilogy the loss or absence of fatherhood is the main theme of this film, suggested by the following narratives: Yasujiro’s daughter, Chieko, who does not get along well with her father since his wife committed suicide with his hunting gun, laments, “Father does not really listen to me”; Abdullah’s sons get arrested or shot and killed by the police because of the gun he gives his sons and because of his running away from the police, both of which highlight the father’s incompetence, namely, the absence of fatherhood; Richard’s children hover between life and death in the desert near the border due to his wife’s accident during the trip he planned for her to Morocco, and because of which Amelia was forced to look after them, suggesting that Richard is also an incompetent father; and Amelia stays and works illegally in the United States because her family is fatherless and poor, and

this situation eventually leads to tragedy.

We have seen that like Tarantino, Iñárritu follows Faulkner's technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story and the novelist's theme of the absence of fatherhood; however, there are also two substantial differences between Iñárritu and Tarantino. The first difference is that in Tarantino's work, the absence of fatherhood is not only seen as tragic but also as comical. For example, Butch Coolidge, one of the protagonists of Tarantino's masterpiece *Pulp Fiction*, lost his father during his infancy and since then has cherished his father's watch as a keepsake, and in that respect the absence of fatherhood is tragically depicted; on the other hand, Butch's father is taken prisoner during the Vietnam War after inheriting that watch—which his own father, who was killed in World War II, used to wear as a good-luck charm—and dies of dysentery as a result of concealing the supposed good-luck charm in his anus for five years. His fellow soldier then conceals it in his anus for another two years before handing it to Butch. In this way, Tarantino depicts the absence of fatherhood as not only tragic but also as comic. Because Iñárritu's works depict the absence of fatherhood solely through tragedy, they are closer to Faulkner's than Tarantino's are.<sup>3</sup>

The second substantial difference between the work of Iñárritu and Tarantino is that unlike Tarantino, Iñárritu, a Mexican, depicts the predicaments of Latin Americans. In *Amores perros*, he refers to the chaotic social conditions and the problems of poverty in Mexico (Hayward 465). In *21 Grams*, he depicts a Latin American man who suffers from disadvantages such as poverty in American society. Jack in *21 Grams*—played by Benicio Del Toro, an actor from Puerto Rico—has black hair, speaks English with a Spanish accent, and is a Catholic (Clifford; Putman); therefore, he is a typical Hispanic. Incidentally, it is very interesting that Iñárritu, who was invited to the United States to shoot, chose Memphis, a city in the American South, as the setting for *21 Grams*, because it also appears in Faulkner's work. Iñárritu states, "Memphis is a unique city completely different from other American cities. It has something in common with Latin America. . . . It has a nostalgic and sorrowful atmosphere" (Takaya 24); his words reminding us that such Latin American writers as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, who, like Iñárritu, professed to be influenced by Faulkner, pointed out the similarity between Latin America and Faulkner's American South (Guibert 327; Vargas Llosa 75-76). Iñárritu's words also remind us of those of Carlos Fuentes, who, like Iñárritu, is a Mexican that professes to be influenced by Faulkner: "Only Faulkner . . . offers an image that is common to both the United States and Latin America: . . . the image of tragedy" (Fuentes 23).

Regarding Iñárritu's depiction of Latin Americans' predicaments in *Babel*, the filmmaker derived the title from an Old Testament tale in which God punished humans—who tried to build the Tower of Babel—by dividing their language. As the title suggests, one of the main themes of *Babel* is the difficulty of communication or the barrier between races: the narrative of Amelia, a Mexican living in the United States, depicts the problem of racial discrimination against Mexicans. As to her

crossing the border from Mexico to the United States, Iñárritu remarks, “I think that it exactly represents the dramatic situation of Mexico. People look for jobs desperately and devote themselves to live, and so tragedies occur at the border” (Sato 56). He explains the situation as follows, “There is a prejudice against Mexico in American society” (Kihira 47-48), stressing that the problem of discrimination against Mexicans is at the heart of the tragedy of Amelia, who gets involved in an incident at the border and is forcibly deported to Mexico (Mitchell 42-43). Unlike Tarantino, Iñárritu depicts the predicaments of Latin Americans, and, especially in *Babel*, refers to the problem of racial discrimination against Mexicans. This difference between the filmmakers as well as the difference in their approach to the theme of the absence of fatherhood are the substantial areas of divergence between Iñárritu and Tarantino.

Finally, I would like to show what these differences mean when we examine these filmmakers, who both follow Faulkner’s technique and theme. If I were asked what Faulkner’s masterpiece is, needless to say, various opinions would be given, but the most likely candidates would be *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. Among them, except for the cinematization of a chapter of *Go Down, Moses*, “The Bear,” only *The Sound and the Fury* was adapted to film. The film version of this novel, an extremely poor piece, is very different from the original, which might be excused due to the impossibility of faithfully cinematizing *The Sound and the Fury*, which fragments the time and space in a story whose content is extremely complex. In the case of novels, while appreciating the complexity of a work, the reader can frequently check the chronology of events or the relation among characters; in the case of films, the viewer cannot. Checking is possible if the work is viewed on DVD, but since film is basically an art that is premised on being shown in movie theaters, the audience generally cannot check the chronology of events or the relation among characters, and therefore cannot fully comprehend an extremely complex film. It can be said that Tarantino realized such a situation and made films in which only the technique was complex. Tarantino applied Faulkner’s complex technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story in film, but made the story’s content simple enough that an audience could understand the film. Tarantino took the material for his masterpiece *Pulp Fiction* from simple, hackneyed stories of pulp fictions and fragmented the time and space in the story. His audience was shocked and puzzled by the complex technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story but could understand the film because the story itself was familiar and simple. Eventually, in the 1990s, Tarantino’s films took the world by storm and were constantly imitated (Andrew 313). From viewing them, audiences became familiar with the technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story. The appearance of a filmmaker who, while fragmenting the time and space in a story, would also make the story’s content a little more complex and heavy seemed inevitable: such a filmmaker is Iñárritu. Tarantino takes the material for his work from simple stories, and as stated before, adds comical elements to Faulkner’s tragic theme of the absence of fatherhood: the contents of Tarantino’s stories end up being lighter

than those of Faulkner's. On the other hand, Iñárritu, like Faulkner, tragically depicts the absence of fatherhood in his work, and deals with the predicaments of Latin Americans or the problem of racial discrimination: it can be said that the stories of Iñárritu's works are heavier and more complex than those of Tarantino's. As observed above, Tarantino introduced the technique and theme of Faulkner's novels into film by making the story's content light and simple, and after audiences got familiar with the technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story, Iñárritu, while using this technique, also made the story's content heavy and complex.

As we have seen, Faulkner's technique and theme are important keys to analyzing the recent trend in films. In other words, the fact that Iñárritu and Tarantino, two of the most active filmmakers in the world right now, follow his technique and theme is a piece of evidence that Faulkner, who died almost a half century ago, still holds importance today.

## Notes

1. Godard also often refers to Faulkner in his essays and interviews. Incidentally, Godard repeatedly attempted to make a film out of the narrative, "The Wild Palms," that is in Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, which Godard "praises" (718). In 1962, Godard planned to request that Faulkner appear in his film, but because of Faulkner's death this plan did not become a reality (Brody 141-42).
2. D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) entwines multiple narratives, but it does not use the technique of fragmenting the time and space in a story. This film consists of four narratives about "intolerance," namely, the fall of ancient Babylonia, the sufferings of Christ, the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, and the predicament of a young couple today; however, these four narratives, whose time settings are far apart, have no connection to each other. In short, *Intolerance* is essentially different from a work of Faulkner, Tarantino, or Iñárritu, in which characters appear across narratives: *Intolerance*, which is a kind of omnibus film, has nothing to do with "the technique of depicting one story by multiple narratives whose protagonists differ from each other," or the technique of fragmenting the space in a story. Moreover, although *Intolerance*, which divides the four narratives and shows them alternately, may seem to fragment the time in a story, the truth is that each of the narratives is arranged in exact chronological order, and therefore the film cannot be said to fragment the time in a story.
3. If I may add a few words about the similarity of Faulkner's and Iñárritu's tragic depiction of the absence of fatherhood, each of their actual fathers was very undependable. Faulkner's father repeatedly failed in business (Blotner 40, 73-74), and Iñárritu's father was similar. Iñárritu remarks that his childhood became very difficult when his father became bankrupt (Hirschberg 34).

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