

# Faulkner and Contemporary Filmmakers: Quentin Tarantino, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Guillermo Arriaga\*

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There is a clear relation between William Faulkner and cinema. His novels have frequently been adapted to films, even in recent years; James Franco cinematized *As I Lay Dying* (1930) in 2013 and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) in 2014. Moreover, Faulkner often suffered from poverty and wrote scripts for Hollywood films, such as Howard Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946).

The relation between Faulkner and cinema, mainly the film adaptations of his novels and the scenarios written by him, has been studied. However, Faulkner has also had a significant influence upon filmmakers. For example, as Bruce Kawin has shown, the script for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) was based not only on the life of press baron William Randolph Hearst but also on Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which was published five years before the film was released (145-46). Furthermore, Jean-Luc Godard paid homage to Faulkner's work in his numerous films, such as in *À bout de souffle* (1960) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965).

In my previous papers, I have pointed out that Quentin Tarantino, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Guillermo Arriaga, three of today's most prominent filmmakers, employ Faulkner's technique and themes. This paper will clarify how these three filmmakers have applied the novelist's technique and themes in their recent films and examine how the novels of Faulkner, one of America's leading writers, influence today's film world, crossing the boundary between literature and cinema. First, I shall provide an overview of these three filmmakers' careers.

Tarantino was born in Tennessee in 1963 and made his debut as a film

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director and screenwriter with *Reservoir Dogs* in 1992. He brought out *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 and won the Oscar and Golden Globe Award for Best Screenplay and the Palme d'Or at the Cannes International Film Festival. Tarantino released such sensational films as *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003), and *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004) and served as President of the Jury at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2004. After making *Death Proof* (2007) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Tarantino directed *Django Unchained* (2012), featuring Leonardo DiCaprio, and again won the Oscar and Golden Globe Award for Best Screenplay. Like Faulkner's works, *Django Unchained* and Tarantino's latest film, *The Hateful Eight* (2015), deal with black slavery and racial problems after the Civil War.

Iñárritu was born in Mexico City, Mexico, in 1963, and made his debut as a film director and scriptwriter with *Amores perros* in 2000. After bringing out *21 Grams* (2003), he released *Babel* (2006), starring Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, and won the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture and the Best Director Award at the Cannes International Film Festival. Iñárritu dissolved his partnership with Arriaga, with whom he had written the scripts for these three films, which he considers to be a trilogy. In 2014, *Birdman: or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, Iñárritu's next film after *Biutiful* (2010), won him the Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. For his most recent film, *The Revenant* (2015), starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Iñárritu won his second consecutive Oscar for Best Director. As Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona remark, Iñárritu is "one of the most significant and influential directors of the new century" (xi).

Arriaga was born in 1958, like Iñárritu, in Mexico City. After the sensation caused at various film festivals around the world by *Amores perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*, for which he wrote the scripts in collaboration with Iñárritu, Arriaga wrote the script for Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) and received the Best Screenplay Award at the Cannes International Film Festival. In 2008, Arriaga wrote and directed *The Burning Plain*, starring Charlize Theron and Jennifer Lawrence. According to Scott L. Baugh, Arriaga is "one of the most successful contemporary Latino [scenario] writers" (22).

Although this is seldom discussed, Tarantino's first name, Quentin, was derived from Quentin Compson, the protagonist of both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, which are said to be Faulkner's magna opera

(Dawson 17). In my previous papers, I have already analyzed the close relation between Faulkner's works and Tarantino's early works. In brief, I showed that Faulkner's technique of dramatically fragmenting 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" of society in the Old South—or the disassembly of the patriarchy, that is to say, the disappearance of paternal authority or fatherhood—that was dramatically caused by the South's defeat in the Civil War. Hence, I suggested that the technique of "disassembling the base" of a story reinforces the theme of "the disassembly of the base" in the Old South, namely, the disassembly of the patriarchy. On the basis of this premise, I pointed out that Tarantino, in his films, applies Faulkner's technique of fragmenting time and space in a story and the novelist's theme of the disappearance of paternal authority. "Story" is the critical term here, meaning a narrative following the passage of time; in other words, a narrative in accordance with chronological order. "The technique of fragmenting time in a story" divides a story into segments and arranges them out of chronological order; and "the technique of fragmenting space in a story" depicts either "one story by using multiple narrators" or "one story by using multiple narratives in which the protagonists differ from each other." Films generally use the latter depiction. Tarantino's masterpiece *Pulp Fiction* consists of three narratives, all of which feature different protagonists but are nevertheless interconnected: the narratives of Vincent, Butch, and Jules. As each of these narratives is divided into segments that are arranged out of chronological order, *Pulp Fiction* fragments time and space in the story, and the technique of "disassembling" the "base" of the story strengthens the theme of the "disassembly" of the "base" or paternal authority; namely, the theme of the absence of fatherhood.

With regard to the suggestion that Iñárritu and Arriaga's films resemble Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in structure, Iñárritu comments: "I like the way he 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, Arriaga explains: "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 Arriaga state that the structure of Tarantino's films is derived from Faulkner's novels, and that their work is based on the work of Faulkner, not Tarantino. Even

when bringing out his latest film, Arriaga remarked that he is influenced by literature rather than cinema, especially Faulkner's works, and that he has read all the novelist's written works, including his letters ("Guillermo Arriaga Interview"; Sorrento). In my previous papers, I pointed out that, in the trilogy by Iñárritu and Arriaga, similar to Faulkner's works, the technique of "disassembling" the "base" of a story indeed reinforces the theme of the "disassembly" of the "base" or paternal authority. These papers were published fourteen and eight years ago, respectively; Tarantino, Iñárritu, and Arriaga subsequently continued to release more works. Therefore, this paper will especially discuss their recent works.

First, I shall analyze Tarantino's recent films. In *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino made the maximum use of both the theme of the disassembly of paternal authority and the technique of fragmenting time and space in a story, whereas in his recent works, he refrains from employing the technique, though he retains the theme. In my opinion, the reason why time and space in the story, or the "base" of the story, is "not disassembled" in these recent works is because the narrative in which the paternal authority that the protagonist virtually approves of, namely, the "base," is "disassembled," has been changed into a narrative in which the protagonist, a minority or a socially disadvantaged person, "constructs" his or her new "base" by disassembling paternal authority willingly.

When examining Tarantino's works in detail, it emerges that in *Pulp Fiction*, in which time and space in the story is disassembled, although a "godfather," namely, a paternal figure or a kind of symbol of paternal authority, is raped by a corrupt homosexual cop, thereby leading to the loss of paternal authority, the protagonist Butch rescues the "godfather" from the rape. In contrast, in Tarantino's next film, *Jackie Brown*, time and space in the story are not disassembled because the female protagonist willingly sends a "godfather," who had attempted to kill her, to his death.

Although Tarantino's next work, *Kill Bill*, like *Jackie Brown*, is a narrative in which the female protagonist murders a "godfather," namely, the boss of a group of assassins that tries to kill her, *Kill Bill* is rather more complicated than *Jackie Brown*. *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* does not fragment time and space in the story, whereas, like *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* does. In *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, the "godfather" Bill, whose name is included in the title of the film, merely stands by and watches the heroine murder his subordinates, and his

face does not appear. In short, like *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* fragments time and space in the story because, like *Pulp Fiction*, it is the narrative of the absence of a paternal figure, not a narrative wherein the heroine kills a paternal figure. However, like *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* does not fragment time and space in the story because the heroine kills the “godfather” Bill, who is brought out in front and whose face is revealed.

In his next film, *Death Proof*, Tarantino cast Kurt Russell in the role of the macho villain—who attacks young girls—because Russell acted the part of a truly macho man in *Escape from New York* (Tarantino et al.). The villain is portrayed as a paternal figure, as also evidenced by what a female character says about him, “He’s old enough to be my dad!,” and by the fact that the ending theme song is April March’s “Chick Habit,” in which a daughter tells her father not to chase young girls. Time and space in the story is not fragmented in *Death Proof*, in which the paternal figure abuses the heroines but eventually gets beaten to death by them (Tarantino, *Death Proof* 129).

A Jewish army corps and a Jewish woman, whose family were butchered by the Nazis, kill Nazi patriarchal leaders in Tarantino’s next film, *Inglourious Basterds*, which does not fragment time and space in the story. In this film, comprising the narrative of the Jewish corps and that of the Jewish woman, space in the story is divided in two, whereas time is not fragmented: taken as a whole, time and space in the story is hardly disassembled.

In Tarantino’s following work, *Django Unchained*, the black hero, who used to be abused as a slave, murders white people who persecute black slaves, with, at the top of his list, a planter in the South called “Big Daddy,” who is the embodiment of paternal authority; therefore, time and space in the story are not fragmented. In Tarantino’s most recent film, *The Hateful Eight*, time and space are likewise not fragmented, as the black protagonist kills a former Confederate general, who massacred black captives and is the “father” of the man who attempted to kill black people for making money.<sup>1</sup>

Next, I shall examine Iñárritu’s recent works. In *Biutiful*, the protagonist

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<sup>1</sup> Although *The Hateful Eight* does have an element of ensemble cast, the protagonist is Major Marquis Warren, played by Samuel L. Jackson, as Tarantino states that the leading actor is Jackson (Labrecque). Indeed, Warren is the only character who appears from beginning to end.

has only two months to live and struggles for the sake of his two children and illegal immigrants who rely on him as a father figure. Regarding this film, Iñárritu comments, "I didn't want people to go to see my next movie thinking, 'Let's see Alejandro González Iñárritu's new temporal game'" (Deleyto and Azcona 131), and remarks the following:

At the end of *Babel*, I was so exhausted I made it a point that my next film would be about just one character, with one point of view, in one single city, with a straight narrative line and in my own native language. Using a musical analogy, if *Babel* was an opera, *Biutiful* is a requiem. . . and here I am. *Biutiful* is all that I haven't done: a linear story whose characters shape the narrative in an unexplored genre for me: the tragedy. . . . I was never interested in making a movie about death, but a reflection in and about life when our inevitable loss of it occurs. (Iñárritu)

Iñárritu's explanations can be summarized from the perspective of theme and technique. First of all, unlike Tarantino's recent works, *Biutiful* is not a narrative in which the protagonist kills a paternal figure; in this film, the paternal figure is the protagonist and is not negatively portrayed. In *Biutiful*, space is not fragmented because the film is the narrative of one protagonist, and time in the story is not fragmented, either. However, time in this story becomes fragmented in the scene in which the father dies, or that is to say disappears, because he dies in the film's opening scene and his past is depicted following that scene. Nevertheless, like space in the story, time is not basically fragmented because *Biutiful* describes not so much the father's "death" as his way of "life" as he confronts death.

In Iñárritu's following work, *Birdman*, time and space in the story are also not fragmented, because the work is not a narrative in which patriarchal authority, the base, is disassembled either. It is a narrative in which a former movie star, an incompetent father who got divorced and drove his daughter to delinquency by neglecting her, attempts to commit suicide, but eventually makes a comeback both as an actor and as a father. Iñárritu's latest film, *The Revenant*, does "not disassemble" the "base" of the story either, because paternal authority, the "base," is "not disassembled": the protagonist almost dies many times, but in the end avenges his son.

In Arriaga's recent work, *The Burning Plain*, the father of one of the protagonists dies in the midst of committing adultery with a married woman, which causes three families to break down. Like the trilogy by Arriaga and Iñárritu, namely, *Amores perros*, *21 Grams*, and *Babel*, *The Burning Plain* consists of three narratives with different protagonists that are nevertheless interconnected, and each of these narratives is divided into segments arranged out of chronological order. In short, *The Burning Plain* fragments time and space in the story, and the technique of "disassembling" the "base" of the story strengthens its theme of the "disassembly" of the "base" or paternal authority.

The above analysis shows how Tarantino, Iñárritu, and Arriaga deal with Faulkner's technique and theme in their recent works. The following section more deeply discusses the relation between Faulkner and these works. The conclusion of my paper published eight years ago was as follows: Tarantino applied Faulkner's complex technique of fragmenting time and space in a story to his films, but made the story's content simple enough so that the audience could understand the film. Tarantino based the material for his masterpiece *Pulp Fiction* on simple, hackneyed stories of "pulp fictions" and fragmented time and space in the story. His audience was shocked and puzzled by this complex technique of fragmenting time and space in the 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 a storm and were constantly imitated (Andrew 313). By viewing them, audiences became familiar with this complex technique. The appearance of filmmakers who, while fragmenting time and space in their stories, would also make their story content complex and profound seemed inevitable: Iñárritu and Arriaga are such filmmakers. In short, Tarantino introduced the technique and theme of Faulkner's novels into film by making his story content light and simple; and after audiences had become familiar with the technique of fragmenting time and space in a story, Iñárritu and Arriaga, like Faulkner, used this technique while also making their story content profound and complex, examining issues of racial discrimination, and so on.

On the basis of this conclusion from eight years ago, I shall now analyze the trend of the recent works by Tarantino, Iñárritu, and Arriaga. In Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill*, and *Death Proof*, the story content is basically light and simple, similar to *Pulp Fiction*, whereas in his subsequent works, *Inglourious Basterds*, *Django Unchained*, and *The Hateful Eight*, the issue of racial

discrimination is addressed, and the story content has thus become more profound and complex. *Inglourious Basterds* describes the Nazis' discrimination of Jewish people and also mentions American black slaves: "It's only the offspring of slaves that allows America to be competitive athletically. American Olympic gold can be measured in Negro sweat." This matter of "Negro sweat" reminds us of the following part from Faulkner's famous short story "Barn Burning" (1939): "He stood for a moment, planted stiffly on the stiff foot, looking back at the house. 'Pretty and white, ain't it?' he said. 'That's sweat. *Nigger sweat*. . .'" (12; emphasis added). In his next work, *Django Unchained*, Tarantino, like Faulkner, directly depicts the abuse of black slaves at plantations in Mississippi. *Django Unchained* is an epoch-making film because it achieved success by portraying the reality of cruelty to slaves on Southern plantations. Actually, prior to the release of *Django Unchained*, during Hollywood's one-hundred-year history, only *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), starring Fred Williamson, *Mandingo* (1975), directed by Richard Fleischer, and *Beloved* (1998), based on Toni Morrison's novel, had directly portrayed the abuse of slaves on Southern plantations. It might go without saying that D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) depicts cruelty, not against black slaves but against black people after the Civil War; that *Goodbye Uncle Tom* (1971), directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti, is an Italian film; and that *Roots* (1977), based on Alex Haley's novel, is a TV drama. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was cinematized in 1927, not as a TV movie or a short movie, but as a full-scale Hollywood movie. In this movie, however, the director, who was from the South and was chosen by the film company in consideration of Southern film exhibitors and audiences, in a sense vindicated the Old South: "so many concessions had been made to white southerners that an unsophisticated viewer might draw the conclusion that slavery had been a northern and not a southern phenomenon" (Tibbetts and Welsh 447).<sup>2</sup> In regard to Hollywood movies that describe the reality of the mistreatment of slaves on Southern plantations, as mentioned above, *The Legend of Nigger Charley* was a hit, but was not appreciated by critics because it was a blaxploitation movie; *Mandingo* was lambasted by many critics even though its box-office revenue was good; and *Beloved* generally had a bad reputation among critics, and its box-office revenue was likewise bad (Beaulieu 53-54). Fourteen years after the failure of *Beloved*, Tarantino challenged the taboo, and *Django Unchained* became a



substantial hit in the United States (Brancati 104) and won the Oscar and Golden Globe Award for Best Screenplay: a Hollywood movie directly depicting the abuse of slaves on Southern plantations gained general acceptance in the country for the first time. *Django Unchained* was ahead of Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, which received three Oscar Awards in 2013, and *Django Unchained* is therefore a significant work that will go down in film history. As Tarantino himself states, his latest work *The Hateful Eight* is also a film about the problem of white supremacy (Brown). In his recent works, as explained above, Tarantino refrains from employing Faulkner's technique of "fragmenting" the "base" of the story because the protagonist, a minority or a socially disadvantaged person, "constructs" his or her new "base" by disassembling paternal authority willingly; but he deals with a profound, complex theme of racial discrimination, like Faulkner, especially in his three latest films.

Iñárritu dissolved his partnership with Arriaga because they had gone as far as they could go with their trilogy; that is to say, they treated a complex theme with a complex technique, like Faulkner. In *Biutiful*, *Birdman*, and *The Revenant*, Iñárritu emphasizes family rather than social problems, such as racial discrimination, and tries to "reassess" a father who struggles for his family, namely, the "base" of a family, and therefore the "fragmentation" of the "base" of each story is kept to a minimum. With regard to his most recent film, *The Revenant*, which is based on Michael Punke's original novel inspired by the true story of a person who survived a bear attack, Iñárritu remarks

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<sup>2</sup> The following interview with Harry Pollard, the director of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was published in the film magazine *Universal Weekly* in the year before the release of the film:

That the Universal director's treatment of the Harriet Beecher Stowe story will meet with the approval of theatre managers and patrons below the Mason-Dixon Line, is the confident belief of the studio.

Carl Laemmle's selection of Pollard to direct his forthcoming Universal-Super is not only a tribute to that director's ability but also a recognition of his temperamental fitness to produce a picture suitable for Southern tastes. Born below the Mason-Dixon Line of Southern parents—his father was a Virginian, his mother a Kentuckian—Pollard's understanding of the South and its traditions renders him the ideal choice for a director to film "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"... The most important of these is that the slaves were more prosperous and contented under their Southern masters; not until they fell into the hands of Northern traders did the Negroes, in the main, undergo the suffering and hardships described by Harriet Beecher Stowe," says Harry Pollard. ("To Make 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Suitable for Southerners to See")

that he was inspired by Faulkner's work (De Semlyen). Iñárritu seems to have been influenced mainly by Faulkner's "The Bear" (1942), which portrays mortal combat with a bear, but he made *The Revenant* a narrative about a father and son, daringly ensuring that the protagonist's son appears in the film, even though he appears neither in the true story nor in the original novel, and then Iñárritu developed Faulkner's theme of the absence of fatherhood into the theme of the revival of fatherhood: the protagonist Hugh Glass revives from the brink of death and avenges his son.

In my opinion, the title of *The Burning Plain* by Arriaga, who states that he read all of Faulkner's written works and has been influenced by the novelist, is based on Faulkner's "Barn Burning." "Barn Burning" is a narrative of patricide, in a sense, whereas *The Burning Plain* is one of matricide, namely, a mother's disappearance. Mariana, one of the protagonists, kills her mother, who neglected her family and committed adultery, and Mariana herself abandons her daughter. Independently from Iñárritu, Arriaga still depicts the absence of fatherhood in *The Burning Plain*, as explained above, and also portrays the absence of motherhood: the technique of "fragmenting" the "base" of the story reinforces the "disassembly" of the "base" of the family, that is to say, the parents.

This paper has shown that Faulkner's technique and themes have significantly influenced three of today's world-renowned filmmakers, Tarantino, Iñárritu, and Arriaga, crossing the boundary between literature and cinema. This study has also pointed out that, in their recent works, these three filmmakers have not only employed the novelist's technique and themes, but have also applied and modified them skillfully. When asked, "Your films are so unique that they are thoroughly studied. What characteristics, nevertheless, tend to be overlooked?," Tarantino replied: "My films have literary elements. Although trying to make films as cinematic as possible, I always pursue literary elements, especially literary narrative structure" (Konishi 27; my translation). Similar to Tarantino, Iñárritu and Arriaga apply literary narrative structure to their films, as examined by this paper. Film studies tend to mostly take visual expression into consideration, and such studies are undoubtedly essential. However, I believe that further analyses of narrative structure should be conducted, because literature has profoundly influenced film, which is a comprehensive art born only about a century ago.

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