

**A World of Differences:
Image, Identity and Reality in Alejandro Iñárritu's *Babel*¹**

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"The most universal quality is diversity".
Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), *Essays* (1580).

Palavras-chave: Alejandro Iñárritu, *Babel*, comunicação intercultural

Keywords: Alejandro Iñárritu, *Babel*, intercultural communication

1. Babel's syndrome

The legend of Babel constitutes one of the most interesting parables of the Old Testament, in the sense that it reveals simultaneously the apprehension and prejudice towards cultural differences. According to the book of Genesis, after the Deluge, all humans spoke one single language and understood each other perfectly, thus avoiding misunderstandings and hypothetical conflicts. To avoid dispersion around the globe and to reinforce their interaction, they decided to erect, in the plain of Shinar, a city (Babylon) with a massive tower (Babel). However, this stairway to heaven was not dedicated to the divine cult, but to glorify the name of the builders, immortalizing them. Fearing that they would deviate from the righteous ways, God decided to thwart their plans, and to confuse them by splitting their language into seventy-two tongues (Genesis 11: 1-9). Therefore, human pride was punished; the tribes scattered throughout the world; and the tower was destroyed.

This ancient parable is an appropriate metaphor to describe our time, characterized by a kaleidoscope of ethnic, political, religious, professional, economic and sexual differences. Such a diversity results, frequently, in equivocal situations; and these may provoke two types of conflicts: personal (dilemmas or problems of conscience) or interpersonal (real or imaginary opposition of values, needs or interests, as well as struggles to gain power) (Giddens 669, 681).

In this context, do our differences prevail over what we universally share as humans, in terms of feelings, general values, and common sense? If so, how compatible are individuals living

¹ Mancelos, João de. "A World of Differences: Image, Identity and Reality in Alejandro Iñárritu's *Babel*". *English Language and Literature Studies: Image, Identity and Reality: Proceedings*, vol. 2. Org. Milica Spremic, and Biljana Dorić-Francuski. Belgrade, Serbia: Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, 2011. 413-422. ISBN: 978-86-6153-054-8.

in countries as different as Morocco, Japan, the United States and Mexico? Human divergences and convergences constitute the central theme of *Babel* (2006), a masterpiece directed by Alejandro Iñárritu, and written by Guillermo Arriaga, nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Linked together by a single incident, several characters are forced to confront and revise their images of the Other and, concurrently, of themselves.

In this paper, I intend to examine and discuss: a) The images, misconceptions and stereotypes characters from culturally different countries have of the Other's identity; b) How those ideas influence their behavior towards the *Other*; c) How those conceptions relate (or not) to reality. In the next pages, I analyze the interference these elements generate in the complex process of intercultural communication; and I examine how the movie *Babel* reflects upon this occurrence, both in contents and in dramatic, sociological and formal codes.

2. From hazard to tragedy

The convoluted plot of *Babel* revolves around a local event that will cause an unpredictable — and sometimes implausible — chain reaction on an international scale. Ysujiro Wataya, a Japanese business man, offers a Winchester M70 rifle to Hassan Ibrahim, his skilful Moroccan guide, who, on his turn, sells it to Abdullah Adboum, a goat herder. Yussef, one of his sons, wishing to impress the older brother, and unaware of the rifle's fire range — supposedly three kilometers —, shoots against a bus full of occidental tourists. By mere casualty, Susan Jones, a North American woman, is seriously injured. A sign of the times, this event is promptly interpreted as a terrorist act, and generates several reactions on a diplomatic level, receiving wide media coverage, as one would expect.

It is significant that the central object in this situation is a Winchester rifle, a fire weapon manufactured in the United States, a more recent model of “the gun that won the west”, as it is colloquially known. I argue this rifle constitutes a symbol of America's attempt to globalize and police the world, namely the sensible areas in Western Asia, without exhausting all possible means of dialogue, before resorting to more aggressive strategies.

In *Babel*, several images, preconceptions and stereotypes towards the Other complicate the process of both interpersonal and intercultural communication. In this context, American arrogance is one of the negative factors that, in the plot, lead to a further escalation in the conflict that opposes tourists like Richard to Moroccans. The US believe in its superiority and, therefore, in its legitimacy to be an ideological model, a position grounded on historical roots that go back to the beginnings of the American colonization, in the 17th century (Nye 177-178).

Puritans thought of themselves as a people chosen by God to lead the world, and based that belief upon the similarities between their history and the *Book of Exodus*. As Shira Wolosky states: “The New England Fathers’ errand into the Wilderness was declared by them to be an Exodus. They, the New Israel, had been divinely chosen to cross the Atlantic/Red Sea, and, under the leadership of Winthrop/Moses, to escape the slavery of Pharaonic England in order to find the New Jerusalem in the New World” (Wolosky 207).

Perhaps the most ancient example of this line of thought can be found in *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), a doctrinaire document, simultaneously terrible and prophetic, read onboard of the *Arbella*, before the disembarking of the second group of Puritans, in 1630. John Winthrop, the Puritan leader, stated to a hundred new colons: “we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop 93). This speech, which still has repercussions in nationalistic thought, has given rise to a position of arrogance and superiority towards other countries. According to an article by Archibald McLeish, frequently quoted, the US have “the most precisely articulated statement of national purpose in recorded history” (McLeish 1960: 86).

This purpose, known as “manifest destiny”, has been a recurrent theme in rhetorical discourse from the Jackson age until today. Examples are abundant: John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) believed that the North American continent was “destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation” (Nye 200); after the First World War, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) was convinced that “America is the only nation that can sympathetically lead the world in organizing peace” (Nye 200); continuing on this line of thought, Harry Truman (1884-1972) stated: “all the world knows that the fate of civilization depends, to a very large extent, on what we do” (Nye 170); and, nowadays, even President Barack Obama, in a book suggestively titled *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, affirms his project to transcend divisions and return to the principles that reside in the core of Constitution, re-enacting the importance of the manifest destiny (Obama 283).

In *Babel*, various situations reflect the fears felt by Americans, after the tragedy of September 11, and fed by the ideological discourse of the George W. Bush administration, between 2001 and 2009. For instances, the accidental shooting is promptly interpreted by Americans as a terrorist attack, even before a police enquire takes place, generating alert on an international level. The attempt to rapidly relieve the tension leads to a precipitated investigation and will justify police brutality. The Moroccan agents, led by Captain Alarid, do not hesitate to interrogate, verbally abuse, slap, kick, and point a gun at Ibrahim’s head; later, following a hint, they shoot against the suspects, killing Ahmed, Yussef’s older brother, an

adolescent.

On an interpersonal level, Richard Jones, Susan's husband shows the same arrogance towards Moroccans. For instances, committing a *faux pas* in intercultural communication, he tried to pay Anwar, a veterinary, who took care, in the context of an emergency, of his wounded wife, incorrectly deducting he was waiting for a monetary compensation for his efforts. This rather common situation derives from the general image the world has of Africans as economically disfavored and, therefore, liable to be bought.

If there isn't, in the generality of Moroccan families, a budget large enough to be spent on certain luxuries and commodities that characterize the Western World, this is not necessarily synonymous to poverty. In the families portrayed in *Babel*, there is neither hunger, nor diseases caused by the lack of medicine. This capability of subsisting with less derives from an ancestral way of life, in communion with nature, and saving the resources provided by the environment. Survival is also favored by solidarity between members of the community or tribe, and by the tradition of taking care of the old and sick.

When Richard doesn't get an ambulance from Erfoud to carry his wife to a hospital where she can be properly treated (the American embassy feared another attack could take place on the way to the Clinique Al Hakim), he vents his anger on those Moroccans who humbly try their best to help him. The tourist pushes them, yells and even resorts to insults, revealing his despise towards a people he sees as inferior: "It's your fucked up country", he shouts (Iñarritu 15). Richard is also disregarding the fact that Moroccans are the only ones who effectively helped his wife, since the other tourists in the bus had only given him thirty minutes before asking the driver to start the engine, fearing they would be the victims of an attack, as it had happened to other visitors, in Egypt.

According to Donatella Landi, these and other episodes reflect, in *Babel*, the prejudiced image Occidentals have of the Other:

But here we see tourists recoiling in fear of being exposed to the reality of the people they are visiting and that they regard as inferior, dangerous, hateful. They also appear totally unaware they are exploiting part of the host country's often limited resources, as much as they are dismissive of the spontaneous gestures of hospitality they might receive, especially in cultures where this is a deeply embedded value. (Landi 249)

Richard's arrogance towards Moroccans also recurs when it comes to economically disfavored ethnic groups. On the telephone, he demands that Amelia, a Mexican nanny, misses her son's wedding, to take care of his and Susan's children, since they were forced by the

circumstances to delay their return to San Diego. He offers to pay for a more glamorous and expensive marriage — once again, he seems to believe everything can be reduced to money —, and tries to push her: “I’m sorry but you’ll have to do this” (Iñárritu 2).

Viewers easily infer that to Richard his family is more important than Amelia’s, since he is her boss. Such arrogance derives from a cultural image, sustained by a socio-economic stratification, where European Americans, richer and more powerful, occupy the top of the pyramid. In the states of California and New Mexico — ceded to the US by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848 (Tindall and Shi 619) — a large percent of blue-collar workers are Chicanos or of Chicano origin, some working clandestinely. Since they earn considerably less than other workers, and aren’t proficient in English, the European American community has a distorted and negative image of them as lazy, stupid and dangerous, and think of them as a threat to domestic laborers (Rosales 44-45).

Prejudice, occurring when a single assessment is superseded by the judgment of an entire group, is easily transmitted from parents to children, creating a vicious circle (Seeman 379). When Richard and Susan’s children, Mike and Debbie, travel to Mexico in the company of their nanny and her nephew, Salvador, they stare apprehensively at the exotic and colorful streets, crowded with women carrying shopping baskets, men hanging around, and young prostitutes. Not only the architecture and streets contrast vividly with the industrial society they know, but also people behave in diverse ways. The boy confesses: “Mom told me Mexico is really dangerous”, to which the driver replies, in Spanish: “Si, está lleno de Mexicanos” (“Yes, it’s full of Mexicans”) (Iñárritu 6).

These situations easily reveal Iñárritu’s sensitivity and awareness of contemporary inter-ethnic problems. Rather than attempting to find a culprit, in *Babel*, he invests all characters, good or vicious, with emotions, reason, and a complex human dimension that transcends any stereotype. As Iñárritu states in an interview granted to *New Perspective Quarter* Editor Nathan Gardels:

Two words guided the making of *Babel* for me: dignity and compassion. These things are normally forgotten in the making of a lot of films. Normally there is not dignity because the poor and dispossessed in a place like Morocco are portrayed as mere victims or the Japanese are portrayed as cartoon figures with no humanity. (Gardels 7)

3. Images of a world disorder

To depict contemporary cultural diversity, Iñárritu resorts mainly to three cinematic

strategies. First, the action takes place in several countries and continents: Tokyo, in Japan; the fictitious village of Tazarine, in the Atlas Mountains, three hours southwest of Erfoud; San Diego, in the United States of America; and a rural town, in Tijuana, near the border between Mexico and California. As Marina Hassapopoulou (12) notices, there is a symmetric pattern in this movie, which is repeated five times. The audience must connect several narrative lines to solve the conundrum placed by the plot, and the recurrent shifts in place and time, not always explicit.

However, the palette of colors used to depict each country makes it easier for viewers to identify the place where the action occurs in a matter of seconds. For instances, cold colors predominate in rich and industrialized nations: cream, gray, pale blue and green in Japan and in the USA; while hot and powerful colors, such as black, brown or red, paint the Moroccan and Mexican landscapes. The last setting offers the widest chromatic variety in the movie, essentially thanks to the wedding scenes, with their multiplicity of festive colors.

In second place, Iñárritu invites viewers to experience the challenges and riddles that occur in the communicative process, by using several languages: English, Arabic, Spanish, Japanese (spoken and sign language). On a linguistic level, there is a selective use of subtitles and only some of the sentences are translated, forcing the audience to raise hypothesis to determine, with the help of the context, what is being said. Sometimes, this does not constitute much of a challenge: for instances, there are no subtitles when Hassam greets the goat herder.

The greatest difficulties are reserved for the characters themselves. Even though they try to overcome the linguistic barriers, by resorting to a second language, gestures or written words, there is always someone who doesn't fully understand what is being said (Landi 249-250). Such is the case of the young man who tentatively approaches attractive Chieko, in the bar, and turns his back on her, frustrated, when he realizes she is a deaf-mute person; or the van driver who refuses to help Richard, when he begs him to stop, because he is scared by the tourist's shirt stained with blood.

As Michael Davidson notices, there is, in *Babel*, a situation that could be used as a metaphor for our world. It is a conversation, in sign language, that takes place between Chieko and her friends, also deaf-mute, at a noisy and fashionable café, in Tokyo (Davidson 250). It's easy to be understood by those who face the same quotidian difficulties and prejudice, as deaf-mutes know; however, the other clients of the café ignore what is being said. In this context, I argue the surrounding noise could be an allusion to the excess of information that pervades our world and frequently disturbs the communicative process. I would like to draw attention to a sentence, present in the trailer, which summarizes the spirit of *Babel*: "If you want to be understood, listen" (Iñárritu trailer).

Since not all members of the audience manage to deduct what is being said between speakers of different languages or young deaf-mutes, it is highly probable they will fail in interpreting the message. Therefore, they realize that mistakes are liable to occur in a communicative situation between people with dissimilar cultural backgrounds, and these misunderstandings may lead to conflicts. Consequently, in a globalized world, the most important skill is to know how to establish communication with a minimum of ambiguity (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel v).

In third place, Iñárritu makes the viewer sympathize with all the characters, showing that they are neither villains nor heroes, but rather victims of the circumstances and of the difficulties that arise in intercultural communication. As Roger Ebert points out:

(...) these characters are not idiots and desperately want to utter that word or sentence but are prevented because (a) the language barrier, (b) their cultural assumptions, (c) the inability of others to comprehend what they are actually saying, and (d) how in that case everyone falls into an established script made of prejudice and misunderstandings. Iñárritu's films more in sorrow than anger, and spares most of his characters tragic retribution because he loves and understands them too much to simply grind them in a plot. (Ebert 56)

Since the narrative is multi-layered and ubiquitous, and the characters are so troubled and complex, it is not effortless to follow the plot of *Babel* — some viewers may feel confused, especially during the first thirty minutes of the movie (Landi 243). I argue that could have been the exact purpose of the director, Iñárritu, and of the author of the script, Arriaga. By withdrawing the audience from its linguistic and cultural comfort zone, the movie underlines that there is no paradigm, no center, in a Babylonian world, where all of us are the Other.

To describe this multicultural reality, Marie Gillespie suggests the expression “axis of difference” (Gillespie 11). It is a well-chosen formulation, since it emphasizes the variety (“difference”), without imposing a center of authority or a pattern, proposing, instead, the existence of several poles. Meaningfully, the term “axis” suggests dynamism and change, and shows that communities are far from being static, constantly redefining themselves. According to Stuart Hall, all ethnic groups have a certain essence deriving from its roots, i.e., a shared History, objectives, tradition, language, culture. However, those same groups also transform themselves, not *outside* difference, but precisely *through* difference and the incessant contact with others; they all need the Other to reinforce their identity and, ultimately, make sense of themselves.

4. “The Politics of the Human”

Despite all the differences existent nowadays, *Babel* points towards what unites us: the human matrix, common-sense, and mainly family love. As Iñárritu points out in an interview, his movie “is not about political borders (...) it’s about the politics of the human” (Stratton 1). In the context of the plot, it is primarily filial affection that permeates all ethnic groups, generating a thematic unit. In the arid mountains of Morocco, Abdullah hugs and mourns his son, Ahmed, shot while fleeing from police agents. In Japan, in the balcony of a sky-scraper, with a view to a sleepless city, Wataya hugs his naked daughter, traumatized by the recent suicide of her mother. In the US, desperate Amelia shows how much she cares for Mike and Debbie, when she states, “[they] are like my own children” (Iñárritu 15). In several scenes of the movie, Richard shows his paternal love, by, for instances, preventing his children from knowing what happened to their mother (Iñárritu 2), while Susan, fearing she may die, asks her husband to take care of Mike and Debbie (Iñárritu 15). Significantly, in the end of *Babel*, Iñárritu dedicates this movie to his children, “Maria Eladia and Eliseo, the brightest lights in the darkest night” (Iñárritu 25).

To conclude, the main lesson of *Babel* is that what unites us defines our identity as much as what separates us — and this constitutes a sound base for mutual understanding. Certainly, it is not easy to transcend cultural and linguistic differences, misunderstandings and faulty communication, stereotyped images and prejudice. The comprehension of these difficulties and the awareness of the obstacles involved in social and ethnic interaction is slowly leading towards a panoply of new strategies, within the field of conflict research, such as active listening, direct communication, negotiation, third-part intervention, etc.

Such techniques can be effectively used not only by politicians, military personnel or diplomats, but also by each one of us, in our quotidian life, to solve or, at least, avoid the escalation of conflicts. Even in Babel peace is possible: in the words of Bosnian-Herzgovinian poet Husein Tahmiscic (1931), “All round us / Lies the promised land / Regions not yet touched by the sun / Amidst confused landscapes” (Tahmiscic 383).

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Abstract

Do our religious, political, cultural and ethnic differences prevail over what we universally share? If so, how compatible are individuals living in countries as different as Morocco, Japan, the US or Mexico? Divergences and convergences constitute the central theme of *Babel* (2006), directed by Alejandro Iñárritu, and nominated for seven Academy Awards. Linked by a single incident, several characters are forced to revise their images of the Other, and concurrently of themselves. In this paper, I examine the images, (mis)conceptions and stereotypes characters from different nationalities have of the Other's identity; how those ideas influence their behavior towards the Other; how those conceptions relate to reality. Understanding the interaction between these aspects contributes to a more precise idea of how conflicts arise and how to approach them.