

## BABEL AND THE GLOBAL HOLLYWOOD GAZE

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### BABEL AND THE GLOBAL HOLLYWOOD GAZE

In popular imaginaries, “world cinema” and Hollywood commercial cinema appear to be two opposing forms of filmic production obeying diverse political and aesthetic laws. However, definitions of world cinema have been vague and often contradictory, while some leftist discourses have a simplistic take on the evils of reactionary Hollywood, seeing it in rather monolithic terms. In this article, I examine some of the ways in which the term “world cinema” has been used, and I explore the film *Babel* (2006), the last of the three films of the collaboration between the Mexicans Alejandro González Iñárritu and screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga.<sup>1</sup> *Babel* sets out to be a new sort of film that attempts to create a “world cinema” gaze within a commercial Hollywood framework. I examine how it approaches this and ask whether the film succeeds in this attempt. I explore the tensions between progressive and conservative political agendas, and pay particular attention to the ways “other” cultures are seen in a film with “Third World” pretensions and U.S. money behind it. I frame my analysis around a key question: does the Iñárritu-led outfit successfully create a paradigmatic “transnational world cinema” text that de-centers U.S. hegemony, or is this a utopian project doomed to failure in a film funded predominantly by major U.S. studios?<sup>2</sup> I examine the ways in which the film engages with the tourist gaze and ask whether the film replaces this gaze with a world cinema gaze or merely reproduces it in new ways.

A number of critics have identified the loose and at times contradictory thinking associated with the label “world cinema.” For instance, in their introduction to *Remapping World Cinemas*, Stephanie Dennison and Song Lim argue that when approaching the term we are confronted with “a web of power relations and at times conflicting ideologies that defy any simplistic

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<sup>1</sup> Their previous two films are *Amores perros* (2000) and *21 Grams* (2003), and, as is the case with *Babel*, they are characterized by multiple plotlines and several protagonists with the rejection of an individual hero; the use of extremes of lens length, and close ups at key emotional moments; and free-ranging camera work with most of the film shot using hand-held camera. For more discussion on their style, see Shaw.

<sup>2</sup> The core team is made up of Guillermo Arriaga, the cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto, Argentine composer Gustavo Santaolalla and the Mexican based German-born production designer Brigitte Broch.

account on the definition or meaning of world cinema” (3).<sup>3</sup> They claim that to ask “what is world cinema?” is, in fact, fruitless, and can never be value free (1). Like Dennison and Lim, Catherine Grant and Annette Kuhn also state that “world cinema” is “a catch-all term suffering from contradictions and a lack of clear definition” (1). It can, they argue, be used to mean:

all non-Hollywood or all non-First world cinemas from the most mainstream to the most-experimental [...] (or) world cinema can stand simply for a global cinema that embraces all films, including those of the First World (1).<sup>4</sup>

While it is, then, neither possible nor desirable to provide a definition for “world cinema,” what we can do is examine the ways in which it has been applied in practical and theoretical terms, and then consider how *Babel* and Iñárritu’s sense of himself as a world cinema filmmaker fits within this.

According to Grant and Kuhn, in its practical usage, “world cinema” is “a strenuously promoted brand” that lends respectability to film festivals, DVD collections, academic courses, and academic publishing (1). In academia, it refers to a canon of “great cultural texts” (ibid). In commerce, it has links to world music, and for Dennison and Lim, it is a non-Western, often counter-hegemonic cultural product (1). To extend ideas about the practical usage of the term, in a pedagogical context world cinema is broadly taken as a collection of national cinemas in an idealised, usually canonical syllabus for a Film Studies student. An illustration of this can be found in the hyperbolically titled and subtitled *THE OXFORD HISTORY OF WORLD CINEMA: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide* (Nowell-Smith).<sup>5</sup> In commercial terms, the types of films that are sold in the “world cinema” section of retail outlets are national/transnational films; that is, they are rooted in a specific national context but have the ingredients to sell in the international market.

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<sup>3</sup> Their solution is “to rethink world cinema in three ways: as a discipline, a methodology and a perspective” (7).

<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, Dennison and Lim write of the two conceptualisations of the term: “The first regards it as the sum total of all the national cinemas in the world, and the second posits it against US or Hollywood cinema” (6). For further analysis of concepts of “world cinema,” see Chaudhuri S., and Hill J. & Gibson P. C.

<sup>5</sup> While this book provides a valuable source in terms of the quality of individual essays, and I am not looking to critique the quality of the book itself, it does give an insight into the use of the label in marketing terms (in this case in the discourse of academic publishing). There are chapters on the history of Hollywood, dominant American genres and a number of chapters dedicated to an overview of national cinemas.

A second strand of “world cinema” is seen in films that seek to say something about “the world,” with a focus on relationships between citizens and transnational socio-political issues in a “cinema of globalization” (Zaniello).<sup>6</sup> These texts explicitly address questions of globalisation within their narratives, central to which are the ways in which relations of power between nations and peoples are played out onscreen. Some examples of such films include *The Voyage* (Solanas, 1992), *Dirty Pretty Things* (Frears, 2002), *In This World* (Winterbottom, 2002), *The Constant Gardener* (Meirelles, 2005), *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005) *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2006), *The International* (Twyker, 2009), and *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006). The films are often transnational in terms of production context and cast and crew.

*Babel* is an interesting case of a hybrid text, for while it is an example of (commercial) cinema of globalisation in that it engages with relations between people of the world and attempts to create thematic links between them, it also shares elements of the “foreign” films traditionally seen as examples of world cinema. Thus, while two of the cast are global Hollywood stars (Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett), and while the film was predominantly funded by Paramount Vantage (of which more later), it has a focus on non-English speaking peoples and cultures (Moroccan, Mexican and Japanese), and relies on a predominantly Mexican core team of filmmakers, and local cast and crew in the shooting locations.

*Babel* is a film of great scale and global ambition. It tells four stories located in four countries (USA, Mexico, Morocco and Japan) and uses six languages (Spanish, Arabic, Berber, Japanese, sign language and English, translated for a global audience through subtitles). The storylines are held together by an accident, as with *Amores perros* and *21 Grams*, this time caused by a bullet fired in play by two young Moroccan goatherds, Ahmed (Said Tarchani) and Yussef (Boubker Ait El Caid) (one storyline). Yussef unwittingly shoots Susan (Cate Blanchett), an American tourist, when testing a rifle, and the Moroccan storyline focuses on the aftermath of the shooting for the family. The second storyline explores the aftermath for the victims, and focuses on Susan’s attempt to survive in the shack of their tourist guide, accompanied by her angry and worried husband Richard (Brad Pitt). It also deals with the way in which the accident is highjacked by the U.S. government, which takes it to be an act of Islamic terrorism against its citizens. A third storyline, linked to the U.S. couple in Morocco, features their children in the care

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<sup>6</sup> This term is used by Tom Zaniello in his book *The Cinema of Globalization: A Guide to Films About the New Economic Order*.

of Mexican nanny Amelia (Adriana Barraza) in California, and her ultimately disastrous decision to take them across the border to her son's wedding in a village near Tijuana, in the absence of alternative childcare. This results in her arrest and the immigration authority's refusal to allow her back into the U.S., where she had lived and worked for many years. The fourth story is set and shot in Japan and deals with the traumas faced by deaf-mute teenager Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi). This storyline has the most tenuous link with the others, as her father had, on a hunting trip to Morocco, given his Winchester rifle to his guide, the rifle that is used to shoot Susan.

### BABEL AND HOLLYWOOD WORLD CINEMA

In their discussion of definitions, Dennison and Lim challenge the idea that "world cinema" texts contest hegemonic (Western) power structures and challenge cultural norms imposed by globalisation (3). They question these simplistic definitions, arguing that rather than foregrounding resistance as a defining principle, more emphasis should be placed on "the interconnectedness of cinematic practices and cultures in the age of globalisation, particularly in terms of the conditions of production and consumption" (4). They also advocate a theoretical shift from the West/Hollywood vs. the rest dichotomy, and suggest thinking in terms of "hybridity, transculturation, border crossing, transnationalism and translation" (6). This is helpful in seeing *Babel* as a new form of film, a Hollywood world cinema text. In line with Dennison and Lim's formulation, Iñárritu and Arriaga's film in many ways deconstructs an America versus the rest paradigm, and is characterised by "hybridity, transculturation, border crossing, transnationalism and translation" in terms of storylines and themes, cast and crew, score, all the while relying on U.S. funding and the star system to make and sell the film.

The plot description outlined above points to the fact that *Babel* is a transnational film in the most obvious of ways: it has multiple locations, with different types of border crossings explicitly featured in two of the stories. It is made by a transnational director and features transnational stars (Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett and Gael García Bernal).<sup>7</sup> It can also be seen as a film that fits within the concept of a cinema of globalisation, as explained above. *Babel* takes some of the most pressing contemporary social issues in its attempt to make a film about "the world"; nevertheless, as befitting a

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<sup>7</sup> In a case of intertextual casting, Bernal and Adriana Barraza reform as a family unit, with Bernal playing Amelia's nephew Santiago; in *Amores perros* they played mother and son.

Hollywood world cinema text, it privileges a North American point of view even when it appears not to. While the film has a focus on non-Western cultures, the shadow of U.S. socio-political concerns hangs over all of these, with the exception of the Japanese storyline. Two of the four storylines are concerned with the fates of North American characters: Susan and Richard, and, in the sections dealing with Amelia's story, their children. It can also be argued that the plot dynamic in the Moroccans' storyline is only possible and of interest as Yussef shoots a North American citizen. In addition, in terms of topics addressed, Mexican immigration to the U.S. and the "war on terror" are very much North American "global" concerns. The Japanese storyline which focuses on teenage alienation is presented in such a way as to make it easily accessible to Western audiences, with a focus on teen culture, including Western dance music.

The concept of a Hollywood world cinema text is also apparent from the production context. The film was a co-production involving five companies: Inárritu's Mexican production company Zeta film; Media Rights Capital, which provided bridge financing for the project until the other companies came on board (Kerr 44); Paramount Vantage, the specialty division of Paramount, with *Babel* the first film it produced; Anonymous Content, a production and management company that operates in the fields of Film, Commercials, Music Video, Television, and Talent;<sup>8</sup> and Central Films, a Paris based company run by the Argentine, Fernando Sulichin, which has produced films from a range of national settings. The three principal financial backers of *Babel*, Media Rights Capital, Paramount Vantage, and Anonymous Content are all known for their mainstream/independent features, and *Babel* can be seen to fit well within this remit, despite its transnational settings.<sup>9</sup> The film can also be seen to prefigure a trend adopted by sectors of the U.S. film industry in response to the conservative, belligerent administration of George Bush. There were a number of films made following *Babel*, such as *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Rendition* (2007), and *Redacted* (de Palma, 2007), that demonstrated an engagement regarding foreign affairs and critiqued the state's policies with the Arab World.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information about the company, see <http://www.anonymouscontent.com/about>. Like the other companies, it has produced popular independent features, including, *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze, 1999); *Nurse Betty* (LaButte, 2000); and *Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Some of the films Paramount Vantage produced include: *There Will Be Blood* (Anderson, 2007); *Into the Wild* (Penn, 2007); *A Mighty Heart* (Winterbottom, 2007); *No Country for Old Men* (J. & E. Coen; 2007), and *The Duchess* (Dibb, 2008). Films funded by Media Rights Capital include: *The Invention of Lying* (Gervais/Robinson, 2009); *Brüno* (Charles, 2009); and *Linha de Passe* (Salles/Thomas, 2008).

It is not surprising that *Babel's* global reach is, in large part, conditioned by a North American perspective, given that most of the money came principally from U.S. production and distribution companies (Paramount Vantage was the principal distributor).<sup>10</sup> This perspective, as well as the production context, can also explain the reasons why, in terms of its branding, the film is not found in the “world” section on the real or virtual shelves of DVD outlets, but in the mainstream sections featuring mainly English language Hollywood films. It can also explain the excessive focus on Pitt and Blanchett in the marketing of the film, despite the fact that they share equivalent screen time with other lesser known and unknown actors from other national contexts.

The category of Hollywood world text is also well illustrated by the fact that at the 2007 Academy Awards ceremony, *Babel* was nominated in a number of the main categories despite its multinational cast, multiple languages and predominantly Mexican crew, presumably again as U.S. companies were the principal producers and distributors.<sup>11</sup> Despite 7 nominations, the only category in which it won was Best Original Score (by Gustavo Santaolalla). This links to the way in which a “world music” score provides the foundations for the “world” feel Iñárritu is seeking in *Babel*. The predominant instrument in the soundtrack is the oud, described by Iñárritu as “the musical DNA of the picture” (García). Santaolalla comments that this Middle Eastern instrument is an ancestor of the lute and the Spanish guitar and is connected to the Japanese koto (Ordóñez and Nieto 2007). The oud is frequently played in the same way in which the composer uses the electric guitar in previous collaborations with Iñárritu, with signature single plucked notes repeated throughout to create a simple repetitive sound that aims to link disparate stories. Here the marriage of Eastern and Western styles, achieved through the choice of instrument aims to signify the union between the characters (it is, for example, very apparent in the scene in which Richard and Susan are in the tourist guide’s shack). The notion of world music, then, helps consolidate *Babel* as a world cinema text, seen in addition to Santaolalla’s score, in the use of a range of songs, from Mexican norteño tracks at the Mexican wedding to Western club tracks in the

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<sup>10</sup> For a full list of distribution companies, see “Company credits for *Babel*,” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0449467/companycredits>.

<sup>11</sup> The film was entered in the following categories: Best Supporting Actress (Adriana Barraza), Best Original Score (which it won for Gustavo Santaolalla), Best Film Editing, Best Original Screenplay, and Best Directing. The nominations and results can be found in Sciretta 2007. *Babel* won the award for best director at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival and also won best picture at the Golden Globes of that year.

Japanese section, and other orchestral compositions by transnational Japanese musician Ryuichi Sakamoto. There is even a track (significantly sung in English) entitled “World Citizen (I Won’t Be Disappointed),” by Sakamoto and David Sylvian.<sup>12</sup>

## **BABEL AND THE TOURIST GAZE**

Despite the Hollywood production context in which the film was made, the notion of “world citizen” is very apposite to the intentions of the director, and Iñárritu casts himself as a world cinema filmmaker in the way that he implicitly brings his Mexican identity into play, by suggesting that he can use what he calls his third world perspective to make films for everyone and bring people together (Gardels). What I aim to do in the section that follows is to explore the ways in which these seemingly contradictory elements are played out through two specific types of cinematic gazes: a tourist gaze and a world cinema gaze.

In a sense, the project of the film is a challenge to God; it is an attempt to construct a cinematic Tower of Babel, built upon a universal language of film to unite the scattered audiences of the globe. It does this by setting out the differences between people of a range of national identities (Japanese, North American, Moroccan and Mexican), then seeking to show them as fundamentally the same through a focus on universal human emotions. At the root of the director’s ideas of filmmaking is a grandiose idea that humanity is united in suffering, and that his cinema, through a form of visual Esperanto underpinned by a globalisation of emotion, can bring people together.

*Babel* follows the trend favoured by Iñárritu and Arriaga for a multi-stranded narrative, but has taken this to a new global level. *Babel* is more ambitious than many other examples of this narrative form (see Bordwell for international examples of “network narratives” and his analysis of them) in that it is used to advocate a utopian message about a “world community.” It is a film with diverse locations and no single hero, all of which mean that *Babel* has no centre, no implied unitary home, and no tour guide. Central to the idea of representing a “world community” is the way in which members of this world are seen within the film. Iñárritu claims a third world point of view that stands in contrast to the solitary U.S. hero abroad narratives that

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<sup>10</sup> For a review of the score and full listing of the soundtrack see, “Editorial Reviews: *Babel*.”

have characterised so much mainstream Hollywood filmmaking. Iñárritu sets out to counter this; in his words:

Films like *Babel* can transcend the one-point-of-view formula that has reigned for so long [. . .] It is true that the sensibility of *Babel* is that of someone from a Third World country. This film could not have been conceived or executed, and certainly would have been completely different, if it was made, say, in Switzerland or the US (Gardels).

This third world position can be countered with a hegemonic colonial or neocolonial position which rests on a tourist gaze, and Iñárritu implicitly acknowledges this. He has made a number of comments in interviews which show that he deliberately set out to avoid constructing this type of gaze for audiences in *Babel*. He says, "I tried to tell the story from the point of view of the people who live in those cultures and not that of a tourist" (Mitchell).

The type of voyeurism built into viewing film and particularly "foreign" language film means that there are many links between tourism (in terms of travel abroad) and film spectatorship. A number of theorists have commented on the links between the viewing process of the tourist and the film spectator. Ellen Strain has extended the definition of the tourist gaze to include practices beyond traditionally conceived concepts of tourism, and she cites this gaze as central to cinema and television viewing, anthropological study, and reading issues of *National Geographic*, among other cultural practices (Strain 2-3). Strain and others have also commented on the analogous practices between film viewing and tourism and the similarities in the framing of the spectacle. So, there are parallels between the travelling shot so common in film and the view from a bus/train (Strain 35; Schivelbusch 24; Gibson 169-170), and the cinematic use of close-ups, long shots and aerial shots, which find corresponding viewing strategies in the staging of tourist sites, with visitors encouraged to climb a tall monument for a good view, then switch to a close inspection of a map or a "tourist object" (Strain 33-34; Gibson 167).

There is a power dynamic in the tourist gaze which often rests upon an assumed viewer of the developed world observing a "third world other" or objects of their culture which are often deemed to be more desirable than the people themselves. John Urry notes that the tourist gaze "facilitates the world of the 'other' to be controlled from afar, combining detachment and mastery" (147), while Strain talks of "mastery through vision and



aestheticized representation" (25). The foreign "other" becomes an object of consumption, included in the price of the cinema ticket or the tour, with audiences/tourists encouraged to confuse seeing with understanding and knowing a country.

On a number of levels, *Babel* does seek to deconstruct this gaze, partly by making it the very subject of the film in the Moroccan section that focuses on Susan and Richard, the American tourists, and by de-exoticising characters from a range of nationalities. Nevertheless, it also employs a double strategy, as it relies on familiar cinematic tropes relating to the representation of nationals, and typical tourist landscapes in its bid to attain universal appeal, and in this double discourse we see its hybrid position as a Hollywood world cinema text. In what follows, I first consider how the tourist gaze is resisted, and then explore its hold on filmmakers through the ways in which the film fails to escape tourist landscapes.

The story that focuses on Richard and Susan explores the position of the tourist in third world settings. This storyline demonstrates tropes associated with this position in order to challenge these tropes. The two have come to Morocco to escape from the trauma of their child dying in the crib, establishing tourism as an escape from reality for wealthy Westerners, although Susan's grief is too strong to allow her to succumb to the "pleasures" of tourism. The group they are part of is carried by coach, and the film appears to share the tourist position, with film and travel practices merging as a travelling shot reduces Moroccan women seen from the coach to veiled, shadowy, exotic figures devoid of subjectivity. This contrasts with the Hollywood-centric focus on Susan, whose grief is signalled by her expressions seen in close up. Signature Prieto/Iñárritu close-up fragment shots focus on her hands and those of Richard's finally joining to show the difficulties in their relationship and the potential for reconciling. Morocco, then, is little more than an exotic backdrop for our two Hollywood stars enacting a bourgeois couple in crisis.

However, after it has been established, the tourist figure is literally and figuratively shot by Yusef's bullet, and the holiday location soon shifts to a very different setting. An unbearably long take marks this pivotal transformative moment, with the camera unblinkingly focusing on Susan until the gun-shot punctuates the take. The switch from still camera position to a haze of extreme confusion filmed in close-up after the shooting, signals the switch in Susan's position from holiday-maker to victim and recipient of shelter and care from the locals. They are significantly taken to Mohammed

(the tour guide's) home, and now the dynamics of seeing alter, with the American couple objects of a curious local gaze. Children look through the tour guide's window at Susan lying injured on the floor of the shack, and men, women and children stare inquisitively at Richard as he anxiously phones the American embassy for help. The images from the bus are partially inverted, as they are now in the position of strange foreigners for the locals; nevertheless, the decentring of the hegemonic gaze is not complete, as the objects of the camera's gaze are predominantly Susan and Richard, with the Moroccans in supporting roles.

This is linked to the dismantling of the power structures seen to be built into the tourist gaze. Richard and Susan learn to lose the arrogance and distance built into their position as tourists as they become dependent on the Moroccan villagers for their survival. They no longer consume them as local exotic objects, but come to forge bonds with them. One of the most powerful scenes in the film comes when the helicopter arrives and Richard tries to give Mohammed money in thanks. Mohammed pointedly refuses to take it, and Richard, moved and stunned, thanks him. No dialogue is heard, and this is filmed to Santoalalla's score of strummed melodic oud. This scene illustrates Iñárritu and Arriaga's utopian idea of world cinema expressed through individuals from different nations coming together, united by the language of music and film, and making connections despite their governments' positions.

In this section the filmmakers, to some extent, demonstrate their "third world" perspective by sympathising with Moroccans and taking on aspects of Orientalism which characterise both tourist practices and the political agenda under the George W. Bush administration. Edward Said highlights America's dominance over the Orient, following from British and French colonialism (73), and in one of his categories of the term he describes Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (ibid). This is characterised by a "relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (75). Contemporary post-9/11 Orientalism takes the form of Islamophobia and paranoia, with Arabs and Muslims seen to be seeking en masse to destroy the West and target Westerners. This is effectively challenged in the film by demonstrating that the fears of the tourists and U.S. government are unfounded, and critiquing the actions of the U.S. authorities. Political systems are attacked by dehumanising the agents of repression, while humanising citizens from both countries. The audience never actually sees U.S. political figures, but are referred to government dictated policy through

disembodied voices on the telephone when Richard is asking them for help, and television reports. Likewise, a sense is given of Moroccan authorities who over-react by killing Ahmed, just a boy, as they are keen to appease the Americans and show that they are dealing with “terrorists.”

Nevertheless, to return to the idea of *Babel* as a Hollywood world cinema text, the film never fully deviates from mainstream culture in remaining within and relying on familiar and expected locations and types. Representations of places in *Babel* correspond to one of John Urry’s categories of tourism, the tourist sign, whereby the sightseer seeks out typical landscapes in his/her travels (the typical English garden, the American skyscraper, the German beer garden, etc.) (13). For Urry:

tourists are, in a way, semioticians, reading the landscape for signifiers of certain pre-established notions or signs derived from various discourses of travel and tourism (13).

Thus, in the film the locations correspond to national stereotypes: Japan is hyper-modern, featuring the latest mobile phones, cool clubs, trendy cafés, and impressive neon-bright cityscapes. Mexico is rural and poor, replete with dusty tracks and a drunken wedding with traditional norteño music. Morocco also conforms to type and is reduced to rocky arid land, mountainous scenery and poor, villages. As Paul Kerr (47) observes, the film recycles “some of the most familiar cinematic tropes” and types, including the Mexico/America border, urban Japanese teenage angst embodied in a sexualized schoolgirl, and Moroccan desert poverty. The colour design for each setting also reinforces the familiar and expected choice of representation of the diverse locations. Brigitte Broch, the production designer, who was behind the use of colours, explains:

Alejandro (Gonzalez Inarritu) and Rodrigo accepted that Morocco would be void of a primary red, so it would basically be a very dark, rich red and the oranges of that country in contrast to Mexico, where we decided to use a primary red color, like the red of the flag, to represent the straightforward Mexican passion. For Tokyo, we chose to use a lot of purples, pinks and fuchsias to make it look like a diluted blood of futuristic essence (Sneider).

These colour schemes, then, link the visuals with guidebook images of each country, with modernity reserved for Japan, passion for Mexico and under-development for Morocco. The film’s take on each setting is also made to conform to cultural expectations through the use of lenses, formats and choice of film stock (Kaufman).

Thus, in the Moroccan section, although the film does take viewers to areas that are not accessible to tourists, with a focus on Yussef, Ahmed and family, all played by unprofessional actors, other aspects of the tourist gaze and the Orientalism inherent within this are reinforced. As Said has observed, Eurocentric ideas of Orientalism root the Orient in inferiority and backwardness (Said 76), and this is the image presented to the audiences of *Babel*. What is interesting in this section is what we do not see and the way in which a specific geographical setting is stripped of contextual local markers. There are no signs of modernity in this representation, and no sense is given of linguistic diversity, political dissent, religion, colonial history, despite the fact that all of these areas are significant in the country's profile.<sup>13</sup> A number of popular reviews and bloggers with knowledge of Morocco question the authenticity of this section of the film, and the erasure of linguistic and ethnic diversity. One blogger asks of the boys, "why [...] were they speaking Darija, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic, and not Tamazight, the local Berber dialect?" (York).<sup>14</sup> Likewise, a reviewer for *Moroccan Time* asks, "why would boys from a village in the Atlas Mountains speak Darija, not Tamazight or Tachelheit?" (Felix). The film presents an image of a linguistically and ethnically unified country, because it is not concerned with creating an authentic documentary-like portrait of rural Morocco, but seeks to present characters as archetypes that sit comfortably in a tale ultimately more concerned with representing U.S. concerns. Thus, despite many admirable efforts to escape the tourist gaze, *Babel* ultimately relies on images of otherness as familiar to the tourist as to the film spectator.

## SUFFERING AND A WORLD CINEMA GAZE

These archetypal characters are connected within the text by their suffering: a reduction of heterogeneity is sought through an appeal to a universality of emotion and a globalised form of pain in a bid to create the sense of a "world village" where we all care about each other. Iñárritu has been explicit about the role of suffering in uniting peoples from around the world. In an interview the director outlines his position:

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<sup>13</sup> For a useful introduction to key issues in contemporary Morocco, see Entelis.

<sup>14</sup> He adds, "Other friends have also noted the fact that much of the dialogue sounds like English (or Spanish) translated directly into Darija — meaning, of course, that much of the Moroccan characters' speech is inauthentic" (York).

By filming *Babel* I confirmed that real borderlines are within ourselves and more than a physical space, barriers are in the world of ideas. I realized that what makes us happy as human beings could differ greatly, but what makes us miserable and vulnerable beyond our culture, race, language or financial standing is the same for all [...] Accordingly, *Babel* was transformed into a picture about what joins us, not what separates us (The Similarity of Differences).

This type of universality that rests on personal suffering is formed in the marketplace, and relies on melodramatic structures to pull in audiences. This philosophical brand of liberal universalism is dependent on a lack of self-conscious recognition of specifics of class and socio-economic realities for its commercial success, and the paradox here is that socio-economic realities are behind the reason for the negation of these. What makes us miserable and vulnerable is not the same for us all, but that credo is behind the emotional pull of *Babel* and its position in the marketplace. While the film was not a hit on the scale of a Hollywood blockbuster, it was commercially successful, and from a modest budget of \$25 million, it made \$135,330,182 ("*Babel*," Box Office Mojo).

Each storyline in *Babel* is built upon emotional trauma, and much of the film takes audiences outside of our comfort zone. As the stories develop the suffering of the characters intensifies, and watching the film becomes an almost unbearable experience. The Moroccan boys have to face the consequences of their actions, and Ahmed is ultimately fatally shot by the police in front of his brother and father. Susan's condition worsens, and viewers are shown her in the degrading position of lying in her own blood and urine (although she is ultimately taken to a hospital and recovers). Amelia has a moment of pleasure at her son's wedding before she has to fight for her survival and that of the children in the desert land forming the U.S./Mexican border. She is ultimately caught by the police, deported back to the U.S., and loses her job and her home. Audiences witness the alienation experienced by Chieko, a deaf-mute teenager facing a series of humiliating rebuffs to her sexual advances, culminating in her howl of pain when faced with the rejection of the handsome police officer. The final scene in the Japanese storyline hints at reconciliation with her father as he embraces his naked daughter, but not before audiences are teased into thinking that she has thrown herself off the apartment balcony.

Thus, while connections for the characters depend on suffering, the implicit intention of the film is that audiences are connected by their ability to

empathise with this suffering. An implied “world cinema gaze” is built upon this empathy; audiences can transcend national borders and share the pain of a Moroccan family, wealthy Americans, a Mexican nanny and a Japanese teenager. *Babel* seeks to construct a global viewer by rooting the storylines in multiple locations and reducing “foreign” signifiers to a surface level. In this way, the imagined viewer of *Babel* is put into the spectatorial position of “citizen of the world.” The text seeks acceptance for the foreign Other, but this is because s/he is like us on an emotional level—whoever “we” may be. Thus, a new gaze is posited, intended to take the place of the tourist gaze, one that I am tentatively calling a “world cinema gaze.” This, of course, can only exist as an imagined category, and is implied rather than embodied, as the film may have no geo-spatial centre, but actual viewers do.

This gaze is built on empathy, as a brief analysis of Rodrigo Prieto’s camera work will show. The cinematographer frequently places viewers in the centre of the action through the use of the extreme close-up. Viewers are often positioned as if we are in the room or sharing the space of the characters, and any sense of distance is removed from our look. “Imperfect” camera work mimics the eye movement of the invisible member of the group (the implied viewer), and whip pans, and abrupt edits that follow conversations convert the implied viewer into one of the characters present, but invisible.

In one of the most effective sequences featuring Chieko and her friends, this is illustrated very well. They first meet in a local park where they take drugs and drink. The close-ups are so extreme that the viewer can only be in the position of one of the friends. Dreamy ambient music captures their drug-induced high, and, at one point, Chieko looks directly at the viewer (her implied friend), as she is caught by surreal camera movements on a swing. Viewers share her euphoria as, for a time, she is not limited by her disability and is able to socialise with her friends and flirt with boys like any other teenager. Audiences experience Chieko’s wonder as she enters the nightclub and we switch from our perspectives (if we are hearing) to hers, as the sound of Earth Wind and Fire’s “September” (1978) cuts in and out. She begins to dance, mimicking the other dancers’ movements, and an extreme close-up of her ecstatic face allows audiences to share in her momentary joy at participating in normal rites of teenage years. However, a mood shift is indicated by extremely fast blinks/edits as light switches to black and back to light in synch with the hard core club track, “The Joker” (ATFC’s Aces High Remix, Fatboy Slim, 2004). This reveals in flickering shots Chieko’s best friend kissing Haruki, the boy she liked, thus destroying the moment. Her come-down is seen as she walks through the silent streets of Tokyo, with the

audience again in a position of her deafness, and we share the cruelty of the moment as she walks past a silent rock band busking on the streets.

There is no space here for any freedom of emotional interpretation, and meaning is constructed by the camera work, lights, music and close focus on Chieko. We are her best friend, but we can do nothing for her, as, despite the illusions of presence, we exist in entirely separate planes on opposite sides of the screen, thus increasing our suffering. This technique of the camera positioning the spectator in the centre of the action is commonly used in the film (and in the other two Iñárritu/Prieto collaborations), here in order for the implied deterritorialised viewer to care about all the characters and empathise with their suffering, and is central to establishing an empathetic world cinema gaze.

While the film does then de-centre the white male gaze of classical Hollywood cinema, does it say something meaningful about “the world” and the connections between societies within a coherent diegesis? *Babel* is a difficult film to assess definitively in terms of conservative or radical politics. Dolores Tierney’s reading of the film points to some of these difficulties. Thus, while she argues that, “*Babel* broadens out the Third Worldist critiques of *Amores perros* and *21 Grams*, addressing the reality of cultural and political borders in a global sense” (Tierney 114), she also acknowledges, “that for all its radical politics *Babel* still ends on a politically and racially conservative note: the privileged (white) family is saved/rescued and instead it is the (dark-skinned) inhabitants of the Third World who suffer or die” (114).<sup>15</sup>

A theoretical framework with which to examine the question of whether the film is radical and rooted in a Third Worldist perspective as Iñárritu has claimed, can be found in Fredric Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping. For Jameson, within contemporary society (the period of late capitalism) there is a “gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience” (Jameson 1990: 416). This results in “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Jameson 1991: 44). This “incapacity to map

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<sup>15</sup> For another reading that critiques the ethnic radicalism of the film, see Hassapopoulou (2008).

socially [...] (is) crippling to political experience” and leads to individual and social alienation (Jameson 1990: 258). Cognitive mapping can counter this through “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (Jameson 1991: 54).

Cultural artefacts and postmodern texts cannot represent a spatial totality, but they can be self-conscious about their failures, and in this find a political strength. Self-conscious texts thus need to be aware of their limitations, and *Babel* doesn't acknowledge any failures, remaining very ambitious, with a belief in its totalizing abilities. The cultural flattening and search for a form of globalised emotion means that any meaningful political and social lines on the map which connect the characters are obscured. They are, in a Jamesonian sense, alienated from the global world in which they live. Audiences meanwhile are provided with false connections made through a reliance on emotional strategies of melodrama, which negate specifics of class. Thus, while the film does create sympathy for both first and third world peoples, suffering is relied on to provide the melodramatic power of the film; thus connections depend on the ability to elicit emotion from the viewer and are not rooted in social or class based realities

It is fruitful to examine the links that the film attempts to create and the reasons for their failure in order to examine both the alienation of the characters and the disempowering of the audience. Tourism and border crossings generate the superficial narrative connections between characters. The ill-fated hunting rifle that accidentally injures Susan finds its way to Morocco, when Chieko's father, Yasujiro Wataya (Kôji Yakusho), gives it to his Moroccan hunting guide, who sells it to Abdullah. This narrative symbol of the rifle is initially a symbol of friendship and ultimately an object that comes to signify U.S. misunderstanding of other cultures. The rifle, transformed by events into a catalyst for pain, creates rather contrived connections which are not rooted in meaningful individual or socio-political relationships, while the text itself often speaks against its own purported message of individuals united in suffering. To give some examples, the narrative connects Richard to Abdullah as both lose a son and suffer due to the rifle; however, these are very different characters that can never share a space due to cultural, ethnic, and class differences. Richard's son dies in individual, private circumstances, while Abdullah's son is a victim of the very public “war on terror.” The circumstances of their grief are also very different. Abdullah will never be able to afford to travel abroad and take a holiday with his wife as do Richard and Susan, while the loss of his son will



bring financial as well as emotional hardship, as the role of children in the two societies differs greatly, with the Moroccan boys working to help support the family. The Moroccan children's lives could not be more different from the bourgeois Western experiences of Debbie and Mike.

The connections between the characters due to their suffering at the hands of the U.S. authorities work better; however, characters from both stories are disempowered because they cannot see their place in the world, and will never be able to forge alliances, against an invisible enemy. The casting also works against the superficial narrative connection, and against the sense of a transnational world cinema viewer: Brad Pitt is one of Hollywood's leading stars, while Mustapha Rachidi is a non-professional, previously unknown actor, and one can only assume that their pay cheques also varied greatly.<sup>16</sup> Audiences are thus more likely to give more value to the story interpreted by the actors with which they are more familiar.

Chieko as a middle-class teenage deaf-mute also experiences the death of her mother in a very different way from the other characters, and she takes solace in friendship, drugs and boys. Chieko's mother committed suicide (with the causes of her depression never explored), illustrating the fact that the deaths experienced by the characters are very distinct in nature. As the film shows very well, her sense of loss is linked to her loneliness and sexual insecurities. Her father may have provided the gun which sparks the narrative in the other plotlines, but the characters affected will never be more than a momentary, miscommunicated news item that appears on her television set. Thus, while her storyline is very powerful, no real ties link her to the others.

The narrative also attempts to connect Amelia's suffering with that of the other characters, but here, too, crucial differences are found in specific socio-cultural factors. She also comes to lose the children she has brought up, ironically when she attends her own son's wedding, due to harsh U.S. immigration policies. She does not see her place in the world, and her suffering is a result of her failure to consider the personal implications of these policies. Only when she is caught does she become one of the many *indocumentados* and gain an awareness of socio-economic conditions and the lines which connect her to other illegal immigrants. As with the other char-

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<sup>16</sup> It is also significant that Pitt was active in the promotion of the film at international film festivals and on posters and DVD covers, while, as is to be expected, the Moroccan actors were entirely absent.

acters, this is too late and she, like them, is disempowered by the melodramatic structures of the film, which claim the maximum of suffering by the characters and the audience.

The revolutionary active third cinema viewer demanded by 1960s and 1970s Latin American cinema has been replaced through the text by an implied weeping world cinema spectator, who can only watch in masochistic despair. The characters cannot create meaningful political alliances and find a way out of their predicaments, as there is no space for cognitive mapping within the diegesis. Thus, what is lacking in *Babel* for the connections to work is a political vision that explores the ways in which U.S. power structures are played out in specific political contexts, rooted in class and cultural realities. Characters lack political agency and knowledge of their place in the world and are thus passive victims of circumstance.

Nevertheless, this emotional response is central to the positioning of the film as a liberal Hollywood/world cinema text, and to marketing strategies that accompany these labels. It is also central to Inárritu's aspiration to be a world cinema auteur, freed from both the financial restrictions of the Mexican film industry, and limitations placed on directors of Hollywood mainstream films. Thus, *Babel* both deconstructs the tourist gaze and relies upon it, and creates an implied world cinema gaze that is central to the construction of a world cinema auteur and for the marketing of the film, but the gaze is flawed, as it can only work through a universalist and melodramatic take on "the human condition." Inárritu's dream of building a cinematic tower of *Babel* is ultimately impossible. Esperanto failed as an international language, as it lacked cultural and national roots, and *Babel* cannot provide a model for a new cinematic language for the same reason.

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