

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

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

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

Keywords: Alejandro Iñarritu, *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. In order 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). As a consequence, 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

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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, in particular 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

In order to depict contemporary cultural diversity, Iñárritu resorts mainly to three

cinematic strategies. First of all, 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 the area of 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 in order 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, *Iñarritu* 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 in order 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.

In order 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 in order to reinforce their identity and, ultimately, make

sense of themselves.

4. "The Politics of the Human"

In spite of 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, in order 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.

**Um Mundo de Diferenças:
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1. A síndrome de Babel

A lenda de Babel constitui uma das mais interessantes parábolas do Antigo Testamento, no sentido em que revela simultaneamente a apreensão e o preconceito relativo a diferentes culturas. Segundo o livro do Génesis, depois do dilúvio, todos os seres humanos falavam uma única língua e compreendiam-se perfeitamente, evitando assim mal-entendidos e hipotéticos conflitos. Para evitar a dispersão pelo globo e reforçar a sua interação, decidiram erguer, na planície de Shinar, uma cidade (Babilónia) com uma gigantesca torre (Babel). No entanto, tal escadaria para o céu não se destinava ao culto divino, mas sim à glorificação do nome dos construtores, immortalizando-os. Receando que se afastassem dos caminhos da retidão, Deus decidiu perturbar os seus planos, e confundi-los ao dividir o seu idioma em setenta e duas línguas diferentes (Genesis 11: 1-9). Consequentemente, o orgulho humano foi punido; as tribos dispersadas pelo mundo; e a torre foi destruída.

Esta antiga parábola constitui uma imagem adequada para descrever o nosso tempo, caracterizado por um caleidoscópio de diferenças étnicas, políticas, religiosas, económicas e sexuais. Tal diversidade resulta, frequentemente, em situações equívocas; e estas podem provocar dois tipos de conflitos: pessoais (dilemas ou problemas de consciência) ou interpessoais (uma real ou imaginária oposição de valores, necessidades ou interesses, bem como lutas para conquistar o poder) (Giddens 669-681).

Neste contexto, será que as nossas diferenças prevalecem sobre aquilo que universalmente partilhamos como seres humanos, em termos de sentimentos, valores gerais e senso comum? Em caso afirmativo, quão compatíveis são os indivíduos que vivem em países tão diferentes como Marrocos, Japão, Estados Unidos ou México? As divergências e convergências constituem o tema central de *Babel* (2006), uma obra-prima realizada por Alejandro Iñárritu, e

escrita por Guillermo Arriaga, e nomeada para sete óscares da Academia, incluindo melhor filme. Ligadas por um único incidente, várias personagens são forçadas a confrontar-se e a rever a sua imagem do Outro — e, por inerência, de si mesmos.

Neste estudo, pretendo examinar e discutir: a) as imagens, preconceitos e estereótipos que personagens de países culturalmente muito diferentes têm da identidade do Outro; b) como estas ideias influenciam o seu comportamento; c) como tais conceitos se relacionam (ou não) com a realidade. Nas próximas páginas, analiso a interferência que estes elementos geram no complexo processo da comunicação intercultural; e examino como o filme *Babel* reflete sobre esta ocorrência, tanto nos conteúdos como nos códigos dramático, sociológico e formal.

2. Do acaso à tragédia

O complexo enredo de *Babel* gira em torno de um evento local que causará uma imprevisível — e, por vezes, pouco plausível — reação em cadeia à escala internacional. Ysujiro Wataya, um homem de negócios japonês, oferece uma espingarda Winchester M70 a Hassan Ibrahim, o seu talentoso guia marroquino; por seu turno, este vende-a a Abdullah Adboum, um pastor de cabras. Yussef, um dos seus filhos, desejando impressionar o irmão mais velho, e desconhecendo o alcance da arma (supostamente três quilómetros), dispara contra um autocarro lotado de turistas ocidentais. Por mera casualidade, Susan Jones, uma norte-americana, é seriamente ferida. Sinal dos tempos, este episódio é prontamente interpretado como um ato terrorista, e gera reações no plano diplomático, recebendo uma ampla cobertura mediática, tal como seria de esperar.

É significativo que o objeto central nesta situação seja uma carabina Winchester, fabricada nos EUA, um modelo mais recente da arma de fogo que “conquistou o oeste”, como é coloquialmente chamada. Argumento que a espingarda constitui um símbolo da tentativa norte-americana de globalizar e policiar o mundo, nomeadamente as áreas sensíveis da Ásia oriental, sem esgotar as vias do diálogo, antes de recorrer a estratégias mais agressivas.

Em *Babel*, várias imagens, preconceitos e estereótipos do Outro complicam o processo de comunicação tanto interpessoal como intercultural. Neste contexto, a arrogância norte-americana constitui um dos fatores negativos que, no enredo, conduzem a uma escalada no conflito que opõe turistas como Richard aos marroquinos. Os EUA acreditam na sua superioridade e, portanto, na legitimidade de serem um modelo ideológico — uma posição fundada em raízes históricas que remontam aos inícios da colonização norte-americana, no século XVII (Nye 177-178). Os Puritanos viam-se como o povo escolhido por Deus para liderar o

mundo, e baseavam essa crença nas similitudes entre a sua história e a narrativa presente no *Livro do Êxodo*. Como afirma Shira Wolosky: “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).

Talvez o mais antigo exemplo desta mentalidade resida em *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), um documento doutrinário, simultaneamente terrível e profético, lido a bordo do navio *Arbella*, antes do desembarque do segundo grupo de puritanos, em 1630. John Winthrop, o líder puritano, afirmou à centena de novos colonos: “we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us” (Winthrop 93). Este discurso, que ainda apresenta repercussões no pensamento nacionalista, originou uma posição de arrogância e superioridade relativamente a outros países. Segundo um artigo de Archibald McLeish, frequentemente citado, os norte-americanos possuem um dos mais definidos propósitos nacionais de que há registo na história (McLeish 86).

Este objetivo, conhecido como “manifest destiny”, tem constituído um tema recorrente no discurso político, desde a era de Jackson aos nossos dias. Os exemplos abundam: John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) acreditava que o continente norte-americano estava “destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation” (Nye 200); após a Primeira Guerra Mundial, Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) argumentava: “America is the only nation that can sympathetically lead the world in organizing peace” (Nye 200); nesta linha de pensamento, Harry Truman (1884-1972) afirmou: “all the world knows that the fate of civilization depends, to a very large extent, on what we do” (Nye 170); e, na atualidade, até o presidente Barack Obama, num livro sugestivamente intitulado *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, assevera o seu projeto de transcender as divisões e regressar aos princípios que residem no âmago da Constituição, reavivando a importância do destino manifesto (Obama 283).

Em *Babel*, diversas situações refletem os temores sentidos pelos norte-americanos, em particular após a tragédia de 11 de setembro, alimentados pelo discurso ideológico da administração de George W. Bush, entre 2001 e 2009. Por exemplo, o disparo acidental é prontamente interpretado pelos americanos como um ataque terrorista, mesmo depois de um inquérito policial, gerando alarmismo ao nível internacional. A tentativa de resolver, pressurosamente, o caso conduz a uma investigação precipitada e justificará a brutalidade policial. Os agentes marroquinos, liderados pelo Capitão Alarid, não hesitam em interrogar, abusar verbalmente, esbofetear, pontapear e apontar uma arma à cabeça de Ibrahim; mais

tarde, seguindo uma pista, disparam contra os suspeitos, abatendo Ahmed, o irmão mais velho de Yussef, um adolescente.

No plano interpessoal, Richard Jones, o marido de Susan, demonstra arrogância para com os marroquinos. Por exemplo, comete um *faux pas* na comunicação intercultural, ao tentar pagar a Anwar, o veterinário, que trata, no contexto de emergência, da sua esposa ferida, deduzindo que este aguardava uma compensação monetária pelos seus esforços. Este tipo de situações comuns deriva da imagem geral que o mundo tem dos africanos como economicamente desfavorecidos e, portanto, suscetíveis de serem comprados.

Se não existe, na generalidade das famílias marroquinas, um orçamento suficientemente abastado para permitir determinados luxos e comodidades que caracterizam o mundo ocidental, tal não é necessariamente sinónimo de pobreza. Nos agregados familiares representados em *Babel*, não existem nem fome, nem doenças causadas pela falta de medicamentos. Esta capacidade de subsistir com menos deriva de uma forma ancestral de modo de vida, em comunhão com a natureza, e poupando os recursos proporcionados pelo meio ambiente. A sobrevivência é também assegurada através da solidariedade existente entre os membros do grupo ou tribo, e pela tradição de cuidar dos mais velhos e enfermos.

Quando Richard não consegue uma ambulância de Erfoud para levar a sua esposa a um hospital onde possa receber o tratamento adequado — a embaixada norte-americana receava que outro ataque pudesse ocorrer a caminho da Clínica Al Hakim —, desfecha a sua raiva nos marroquinos que humildemente tentavam auxiliá-lo. O turista empurra-os, grita-lhes e recorre mesmo ao insulto, revelando o desprezo para com aqueles que vê como inferiores: “It’s your fucked up country”, grita (Iñarritu 15). Richard também negligencia o facto de os marroquinos serem os únicos que efetivamente auxiliam a sua esposa, dados que os restantes turistas do autocarro apenas lhe concederam trinta minutos, antes de pedirem ao condutor para partir, receando eles próprios serem vítimas de um ataque, tal como sucedera com outros visitantes, no Egipto.

De acordo com Donatella Landi, este e outros episódios refletem, em *Babel*, a imagem preconceituosa que os ocidentais possuem do Outro:

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)

A arrogância de Richard para com os marroquinos recorre no que toca a outros grupos economicamente desfavorecidos. Ao telefone, exige a Amelia, a ama mexicana, que falte ao casamento do filho, para tomar conta das crianças de Susana, dado que foram forçados, pelas circunstâncias, a adiar o seu regresso a San Diego. Oferece-se para custear um casamento mais glamoroso e dispendioso —de novo, parece acreditar que tudo se reduz ao dinheiro — e tenta pressioná-la: “I’m sorry but you’ll have to do this” (Iñárritu 2).

O público facilmente deduz que, para Richard, a sua família é mais importante do que a de Amelia, por ser o seu patrão. Tal arrogância deriva de uma imagem cultural, sustentada pela estratificação socioeconómica, onde os euro-americanos, mais abastados e poderosos, ocupam o topo da pirâmide. Nos estados da Califórnia e Novo México — cedidos aos EUA através do Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo, assinado em 2 de Fevereiro de 1848 (Tindall e Shi 619) — uma larga percentagem de trabalhadores braçais é chicana ou de origem chicana, alguns a labutarem clandestinamente. Dado que auferem consideravelmente menos do que os restantes obreiros e que não são proficientes na língua inglesa, a comunidade euro-americana percebe-os como preguiçosos, estúpidos e perigosos, e vê neles uma ameaça aos trabalhadores domésticos (Rosales 44-45).

O preconceito, que ocorre quando um facto é suplantado pelo julgamento de um grupo inteiro, é facilmente transmitido de pais para descendentes, criando um ciclo vicioso (Seeman 379). Quando os filhos de Richard e Susan, Mike e Debbie, viajam para o México na companhia da sua ama e do sobrinho, Salvador, observam apreensivamente as ruas exóticas e coloridas, povoadas por mulheres que acartam cestos de compras, homens passeando e jovens prostitutas. Não só a arquitetura e as ruas contrastam vivamente com a sociedade industrial que conhecem, como também os habitantes se comportam de forma diversa. O rapazinho confessa: “Mom told me Mexico is really dangerous”, ao que o conductor replica, em castelhano: “Si, está lleno de Mexicanos” (Iñárritu 6).

Tais situações facilmente revelam a sensibilidade de Iñárritu e o seu conhecimento dos problemas interétnicos contemporâneo. Ao invés de tentar encontrar um culpado, investe todas as personagens, boas ou más, como emoções, razão e uma complexa faceta humana que transcende os estereótipos. Como afirma Iñárritu, numa entrevista concedida ao editor da *New Perspective Quarter*, 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. Imagens de uma desordem mundial

De forma a retratar a diversidade cultural contemporânea, Iñárritu recorre fundamentalmente a três estratégias cinematográficas. Em primeiro lugar, a ação tem lugar em diversos países e continentes: Tóquio, no Japão; a aldeia fictícia de Tazarine, nas Montanhas de Atlas, a três horas a sudoeste de Erfoud; San Diego, nos EUA; e uma cidade rural, na área de Tijuana, perto da fronteira entre o México e a Califórnia. Como nota Marina Hassapopoulou, existe um padrão de simetria nesta película, que se repete cinco vezes. A audiência tem de ligar as diversas linhas narrativas para resolver o enigma colocado pelo enredo, e as recorrentes mudanças no lugar e no tempo, nem sempre explícitas (Hassapopoulou 12).

Contudo, a paleta de cores usadas para representar cada país facilita a tarefa de identificar o local onde a ação decorre numa questão de segundos. Por exemplo, as cores frias predominam nas nações ricas e industrializadas: creme, cinzento, azul pálido e verde no Japão e nos EUA; enquanto as cores quentes e poderosas, como o negro, castanho e vermelho pintam as paisagens marroquinas e mexicanas. O último cenário oferece o maior espectro cromático do filme, essencialmente graças às cenas do casamento, com a sua multiplicidade de cores festivas.

Em segundo lugar, Iñárritu convida os espetadores a experienciarem os desafios e enigmas que ocorrem no processo comunicativo, ao recorrer a várias línguas: inglês, árabe, espanhol, japonês (falado e linguagem gestual). No plano linguístico, ocorre um uso seletivo das legendas e apenas algumas das frases são traduzidas, forçando a audiência a determinar, com recurso ao contexto, o que é proferido. Por vezes, tal não constitui um grande desafio: por exemplo, não existe legendagem quando Hassam cumprimenta o guardador de cabras.

As maiores dificuldades são reservadas para as próprias personagens. Ainda que tentem ultrapassar as barreiras linguísticas, ao recorrerem a uma segunda língua, gestos ou palavras escritas, existe sempre alguém que não compreende inteiramente o que é dito (Landi 249-250). É o caso do jovem que tenta aproximar-se da atraente Chieko, no bar, e lhe vira as costas, frustrado, quando descobre que ela é surda-muda; ou o condutor da carrinha que se recusa a ajudar Richard, quando este lhe implora que pare, porque se assusta ao ver a camisa manchada de sangue do turista.

Como nota Michael Davidson, existe, em *Babel*, uma situação que pode ser usada como uma metáfora para o nosso mundo. Trata-se de uma conversa, em linguagem gestual, que decorre entre Chieko e as suas amigas, também surdas-mudas, num café da moda, em Tóquio (Davidson 250). É fácil ser-se compreendido por aqueles que enfrentam as mesmas dificuldades

e preconceitos, no cotidiano, como sucede com os deficientes; contudo, os outros clientes do café ignoram o que é dito. Neste contexto, argumento que o ruído envolvente pode aludir ao excesso de informação que invade o nosso mundo e frequentemente perturba o processo comunicativo. Gostaria de chamar à atenção para uma frase, presente no *trailer*, e que sumaria o espírito de *Babel* “If you want to be understood, listen” (Iñárritu *trailer*).

Dado que nem todos os espetadores conseguem deduzir o que é dito entre os falantes de diferentes línguas ou entre os surdos-mudos, é altamente provável que não consigam perceber a mensagem. Portanto, apercebem-se de que os erros são passíveis de ocorrer numa situação comunicativa entre pessoas com diversas culturas, e estes mal-entendidos podem gerar o conflito. Consequentemente, num mundo globalizado, a capacidade mais importante reside em saber como estabelecer a comunicação com um mínimo de ambiguidade (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel v).

Em terceiro lugar, Iñárritu faz o espetador simpatizar com todas as personagens, mostrando que não são nem vilões nem heróis, mas apenas vítimas das circunstâncias e das dificuldades que resultam da comunicação intercultural. Como aponta Roger Ebert:

(...) 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)

Dado que a narrativa apresenta diversas camadas, é ubíqua, e as personagens são perturbadas e complexas, não é simples seguir o enredo de *Babel* — alguns espetadores podem sentir-se confusos, em particular durante os primeiros trinta minutos de filme (Landi 243). Argumento que pode ter sido precisamente esse o propósito do realizador, Iñárritu, e do guionista, Arriaga. Ao retirar a audiência da sua área de conforto linguístico e cultural, o filme sublinha que não há nem um paradigma nem um centro, neste mundo babilónico, onde todos somos o Outro.

Em ordem a descrever esta realidade multicultural, Marie Gillespie sugere a expressão “eixos de diferença” (Gillespie 11). Trata-se de uma formulação bem escolhida, dado que enfatiza a variedade (“diferença”), sem impor um centro de autoridade ou padrão, propondo, em vez disso a existência de vários polos. Significativamente, o termo “eixo” sugere dinamismo e mudança, e mostra que as comunidades, longe de serem estáticas, redefinem-se

constantemente. De acordo com Stuart Hall, todos os grupos étnicos possuem uma certa essência que deriva das suas raízes, isto é, uma história, objetivos, tradição, língua e cultura partilhados. No entanto, esses mesmos grupos também se transformam, não *fora* da diferença, mas precisamente *através* desta e do incessante contacto com outros; todos necessitam do Outro, para reforçar a sua identidade e, em última análise, para fazerem sentido de si mesmos.

4. “The Politics of the human”

Apesar de todas as diferenças existentes na hodiernidade, *Babel* aponta para aquilo que nos une: a matriz humana, o senso comum e, sobretudo, o amor familiar. Como afirma Iñárritu numa entrevista, o seu filme: “is not about political borders (...) it’s about the politics of the human” (Stratton 1). No contexto do enredo, é primeiramente o afeto filial que permeia todos os grupos étnicos, gerando uma unidade temática. Nas áridas montanhas de Marrocos, Abdullah abraça e carpe o seu filho, Ahmed, abatido enquanto escapava da polícia. No Japão, numa varanda de um arranha-céus, com vista para uma cidade insone, Wataya abraça a sua filha, nua, e traumatizada pelo recente suicídio da mãe. Nos EUA, a desesperada Amelia mostra o quanto ama Mike e Debbie, quando afirma: “[they] are like my own children” (Iñárritu 15). Em várias cenas do filme, Richard demonstra o seu amor paternal, quando, por exemplo, oculta das crianças o que sucedeu à mãe (Iñárritu 2), enquanto Susan, receando morrer, pede ao seu marido que tome conta de Mike e Debbie (Iñárritu 15). Significativamente, no epílogo de *Babel*, Iñárritu dedica o filme aos seus filhos: “Maria Eladia and Eliseo, the brightest lights in the darkest night” (Iñárritu 25).

Para concluir, a principal lição de *Babel*: aquilo que nos une define a nossa identidade tanto quanto aquilo que nos separa, e isto constitui uma base para a compreensão mútua. Certamente, não é fácil transcender as diferenças culturais e linguísticas, mal-entendidos e falhas de comunicação, imagens estereotipadas e preconceitos. A compreensão destas dificuldades e a consciência dos obstáculos envolvidos na interação social e interétnica conduz paulatinamente a uma panóplia de estratégias, na área de pesquisa do conflito, tal como a audição ativa, a comunicação direta, a negociação, a intervenção de terceiros, etc.

Tais técnicas podem ser eficazmente empregues não apenas por políticos, pessoal militar ou diplomático, mas também por todo e qualquer um de nós, na vivência quotidiana, para resolver ou, pelo menos, evitar conflitos. Mesmo em *Babel*, a paz é possível: nas palavras do poeta bósnio-herzegóvino 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.