

Sabine N. Meyer

## Transculturality and Filmic Practice

### Cultural Difference and Transcultural Belonging in 'Babel'

The 2006 film 'Babel' is the third collaboration between two Mexicans – script-writer Guillermo Arriaga and director Alejandro González Iñárritu<sup>1</sup> – and a transnational co-production among companies based in France, Mexico, and the U.S. Not only has it received numerous awards, but it has also been paid considerable attention by reviewers and scholars. Particularly the latter have explored its representation of borders, immigration policies, space, time, and issues of translation, as well as its focus on children, affective dimensions, and contingency. The majority of reviews and research, however, can be divided into two, seemingly mutually exclusive, camps. One camp draws a direct connection between the film title's biblical implications (the Tower of Babel) and its message, and hence insists that the film represents linguistic confusion and human communicative failures. Critic David Denby, for instance, writes in the 'New Yorker': "The movie is a lofty globe-hopping lament over mishaps and misunderstandings in wildly dissimilar places [...] We are scattered into different languages and habits, and either we can't talk to one another at all or we fall into gruesome misunderstandings".<sup>2</sup> Michael W. DeLashmutt similarly emphasizes 'Babel's' depiction of global unity as an illusion and its insistence on cultural disparity and prejudice.<sup>3</sup> The other end of the argumentative spectrum is represented first and foremost by film scholar Werner Faulstich, who reads the film in opposition to its biblical title. "It is a film about entirely successful communication, not about failing communication, as many critics think".<sup>4</sup> To Faulstich, 'Babel' demonstrates that all continents, nations, and cultures are linked; that human beings as individuals and in their relationships are comparable to each other beyond all cultural barriers and circumstances; that the diversity of languages does not hamper communication; and that cultural differences are, in the final analysis, not decisive.<sup>5</sup>

Such contrasting readings of 'Babel', however, fail to address its complex representational strategies. For what makes this film so challenging is its representation of cultural differences and divisions *and* transcultural belonging and a common humanity; its simultaneous emphasis on the entanglements and commonalities of human beings across the globe, and on the geopolitical realities and cultural divides dominating their lives. Interpreting 'Babel' through the theoretical framework of transculturality allows me to shed light on its formal and

1 The first two films of what is considered a trilogy by many critics are 'Amores Perros' (2000) and '21 Grams' (2003).

2 David Denby: A Critic at Large: The New Disorder, p. 4.

3 Michael W. DeLashmutt: Breaking the Ties that Bind, p. 496. Similar attitudes are displayed by Rachael K. Bosley; Juan Pellicer; Dolores Tierney.

4 Werner Faulstich: Die Überwindung des strafenden Gottes, p. 192; my translation.

5 Werner Faulstich: Grundkurs Filmanalyse, p. 215.

thematic complexities and to situate it in the post-9/11 resurgence of conservative nationalism. 'Babel' can be called a transcultural film, as it accomplishes to engage critically with cultural difference, the nation-state and its borders, and the political and economic inequalities it produces, while simultaneously emphasizing transcultural belonging, human connectedness, and universal humanism across the globe.

### ***Transculturality and the Resurgence of Conservative Nationalism***

As defined by the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch in his essay "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today" (1999), transculturality seeks to transcend the traditional Herderian concept of culture as a stable, territory-based and autonomous realm.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to this idea of culture as internally homogeneous, separatist, and exclusive, transculturality emphasizes the permeations of cultural boundaries, the mutual cultural appropriations and interpenetrations, and therefore conceptualizes "culture" as inclusive.<sup>7</sup> Ways of life today do not end at the borders of national cultures any more but are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other in transnational dimensions. This is a consequence of the "inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures" due to processes of migration, a global economy producing economic (inter)dependencies, as well as material and immaterial communication systems.<sup>8</sup> Through acts of mutual appropriation and interpenetration, hybridization occurs, with much of the previously foreign entering the structures of the self and with characteristics of the self becoming foreign.<sup>9</sup> Transculturality does not imply the uniformization of single cultures into a larger global culture. Instead, it fosters a new diversity of different cultures and life-forms, with each emerging from transcultural permeations.<sup>10</sup>

As Günther H. Lenz has so succinctly put it, transculturality "critically engages the boundaries of the nation-state without simply dismissing it, distinguishing between the political and juridical workings of the nation-state and the dynamics of the culture(s) of/in a nation-state *that always transcends its borders*". Hence, it "works through [...] and works with cultural differences in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. without dissolving them or claiming a new synthesis".<sup>11</sup> The concept of transculturality, as Welsch insists, "is able to cover both global and local, universalistic and particularistic aspects", that is, it does not ignore what Welsch himself calls the "resurgence of particularisms worldwide".<sup>12</sup> He obviously refers to the strengthening of local ties, allegiances, and identity politics within different state formations in the wake of globalization processes, which

6 Wolfgang Welsch: *Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*, pp. 194 ff.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 197; see also Andreas Jahn-Sudmann: *Film und Transnationalität*, p. 17.

8 Wolfgang Welsch: *Transculturality*, pp. 197-198.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 198; Werner Faulstich: *Grundkurs Filmanalyse*, p. 209.

10 Wolfgang Welsch: *Transculturality*, pp. 203; 205.

11 Günther H. Lenz: *Towards a Politics of American Transcultural Studies*, p. 396 (original emphasis).

12 Wolfgang Welsch: *Transculturality*, pp. 204; 205.

has led scholars to reflect on the complex relationship between the global and the local, the transnational and the national.<sup>13</sup> “The continued force of nationalism”, Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden have argued, “[...] must be recognized as an emotionally charged component of the construction of the narratives of cultural identity that people at all levels of society use to maintain a stable sense of self”.<sup>14</sup> “Nationalism”, Craig Calhoun starts his seminal work on the topic, “is not a moral mistake”.

[While being] too often implicated in atrocities, and in more banal but still unjust prejudices and discriminatory practices, [...] it is also a form of social solidarity and one of the background conditions on which modern democracy has been based. It has helped secure domestic inclusion and redistributive policies [...] [and] helps locate an experience of belonging in a world of global flows and fears. Sometimes it underwrites struggle against the fantastically unequal and exploitative terms on which global integration is being achieved.<sup>15</sup>

Calhoun therefore concludes that we should “recognize the continued importance of national solidarities”.<sup>16</sup> Nationalism received an additional boost in the wake of 9/11, which led to a downturn of the pro-globalist fever of the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> “While the attack on the twin towers and the Pentagon radically exposed the permeability of national borders that had been eroded by the forces of globalization, the [Bush] administration [...] [went] through great lengths to tighten and shore up those borders, legally, politically, and militarily”.<sup>18</sup> In addition, by introducing the idea of a homeland, most visibly in the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, political ideologues, backed up by conservative scholars such as Samuel P. Huntington, have suggested a sense of unity based on native origins, birthplace, birthright, common bloodlines, ancient ancestry, and racial/ethnic homogeneity. Such unity has “relied structurally on its intimate opposition to the notion of the foreign”,<sup>19</sup> the creation of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ binaries. Moreover, this understanding of unity feeds itself on radical insecurity, mostly embodied by supposed threats of terrorism. Not surprisingly, the homeland ideology has had an “exclusionary effect that underwrites a resurgent nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment and policy”.<sup>20</sup> It is to be expected that the Covid-19 pandemic, with its border closures and restrictions, will, in the long run, have a similarly exclusive effect. Reinforcing a rising tide of nationalism and unleashing anti-immigrant rhetoric, the pandemic is likely to heighten nationalist affinities for a securely bordered homeland and to foster anti-immigration policies.

The ensuing analysis demonstrates that in ‘Babel’ cultural difference and trans-cultural belonging coexist not only on a thematic but also on a formal level. By confronting viewers with humans’ communicative failures, mutual suspicions, ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ binaries, and geopolitical and cultural divides, ‘Babel’ negotiates

13 See, for example, Rob Wilson, Wimal Dissayanake: *Global/Local*.

14 Elizabeth Ezra, Terry Rowden: *General Introduction*, p. 4.

15 Craig Calhoun: *Nations Matter*, p. 1.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

18 Amy Kaplan: *Homeland Insecurities: Transformations of Language and Space*, p. 59. See also Jamie Winders: *Bringing Back the (B)order*, pp. 922-929.

19 Amy Kaplan: *Homeland Insecurities*, p. 59.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

the post-9/11 paranoia that has led to a resurgence of conservative nationalism and a discourse of homeland security. Through its simultaneous emphasis on a common humanity and human interconnectedness across the globe as well as universal human values, the film challenges the aforementioned social and political discourses and their exclusionary nature, instead promoting the idea of the existence of transcultural webs that are woven from highly diverse cultures and life-forms and that transcend – but not dismiss – the idea of the nation-state.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Cultural Differences, Homeland Insecurities, and Border Anxieties***

'Babel' is a multi-narrative, non-linear drama which links stories taking place in Japan, Morocco, Mexico, and the United States. Two young Moroccan boys, Youssef and Ahmed, are given a gun by their father to protect their family's goats from jackals, with which they incidentally shoot Susan, an American tourist traveling with her estranged husband, Richard. Amidst sensationalized media allegations of a terrorist attack, young Ahmed is killed by Moroccan officials in a shootout. Simultaneously, Amelia, the nanny of Richard and Susan's two young children – Mike and Debbie – in San Diego, takes her charges to her son's wedding in Mexico, unbeknownst to the parents. Upon re-entering the U.S., Amelia's nephew, provoked by racist border police, leaves Amelia and the children stranded in the desert. Eventually they are found, only to have unsympathetic border officials deport Amelia back to Mexico. Meanwhile, in Japan, teenage Chieko tries to cope with her mother's suicide and with the loneliness and alienation of being deaf and non-verbal in an urban landscape.

'Babel' presents a divided world, attending to the political and economic disparities, inequalities, and injustices between developed and developing countries that cannot be mediated or alleviated through the media, internet, international tourism, and global trade. In particular, the film can be read as a comment, as Iñárritu himself phrased it, on "the paranoid state that now this regime of George Bush is having [...]" with its emphasis on the existence of separate cultures and the concept of the homeland.<sup>22</sup> In 'Babel', the "clash of civilizations", to use Huntington's infamous phrase, is presented both on cinematographic and thematic levels.<sup>23</sup>

Formally, each of the stories presented "takes place in a clearly demarcated cultural/national landscape distinguished through differences in visual composition and cinematography".<sup>24</sup> Thus, the Morocco sequences are shot on Super 16mm together with faster stock. Iñárritu uses these cinematic devices in order to make Morocco "[f]eel difficult, almost dirty, because of what transpires there".<sup>25</sup> The Tokyo and Mexico/USA sequences are filmed with anamorphic lenses and

21 Celestino Deleyto, María del Mar Azcona similarly interpret 'Babel' as a "tale about huge divisions and close connections among human beings across the globe" (Alejandro González Iñárritu, p. 53).

22 Quoted in Todd Gilchrist: Interview, n. pag.

23 Samuel P. Huntington: Clash of Civilizations, p. 22.

24 Nadine Chan Su-Lin: Cosmopolitan Cinema, p. 91.

25 Quoted in Dolores Tierney: Alejandro González Iñárritu, p. 112.

shot on 35mm.<sup>26</sup> In addition, each of the narratives is linked with a specific soundtrack, ranging from Japanese pop music, sounds of traditional Japanese string instruments to Middle Eastern and fast Mexican music.<sup>27</sup> These contrastive *mise-en-scènes* and cinematic techniques suggest a “vast and disjunct world”, characterized by various separate national and cultural spaces.<sup>28</sup>

This sense of separation and isolation is also evoked on the level of theme. Throughout the film, communicative failures, fears of the Other, mutual suspicions, cultural prejudices, and homeland insecurities abound. Its characters speak in six languages: English, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, Berber, and Sign language. Mike evidences his cultural indoctrination by immediately repeating his mother’s view that “Mexico is really dangerous”,<sup>29</sup> Santiago rails about “fucking gringo assholes”,<sup>30</sup> and Richard complains to the Moroccan policeman and the tour guide about their “fucked-up country”.<sup>31</sup> Susan is paranoid about hygiene issues in Morocco: she excessively cleans her hands, uses her own knife and fork to avoid contact with the Moroccan environment, and blames her husband for drinking a Coke with ice. Just as Coke, the prototypical U.S.-American product, must not mingle with Moroccan water, Susan walls herself up in cultural isolation, as Ana M<sup>a</sup> Manzananas and Jesús Benito rightly argue.<sup>32</sup>

The sequence of the tourist bus entering the Moroccan village Tazarine in order to bring the heavily bleeding Susan to the tour guide’s house serves as an example of such cultural anxieties and racial prejudices and a thinking in binary oppositions.<sup>33</sup> Viewers are presented a montage sequence of the village from the point of view of the tourists through the bus window. The tourists’ faces, captured by a hand-held camera, display fear and skepticism of the exotic Moroccan Other outside and post-9/11 anxieties about a potential terrorist attack. Long-distance shots create a sense of distance and difference, framing the villagers in a completely alien and threatening landscape and culture. Mournful, hesitant sounds of a Middle-Eastern tune even increase the unease captured by the camera.<sup>34</sup> The tourists’ fear of the Other is even heightened by the media, who immediately spread the U.S. government’s interpretation of the boys’ shooting as an act of terrorism.<sup>35</sup> ‘Babel’ provides viewers with information most of the film’s characters do not have, indicating that the shooting was a boyhood prank or, rather, utter coincidence. The audience’s discrepant awareness makes U.S.-American interpretations of events appear hysterical and highly exaggerated, and invites viewers to question the ongoing discourse on the War on Terror.

Suspensions of the foreign and unknown, however, are not limited to the members of the so-called First World. ‘Babel’s achievement is to switch between

26 Rachael K. Bosley: *A Shot Fired in Africa Echoes around the World in Babel*, n. pag.

27 Nadine Chan Su-Lin: *Cosmopolitan Cinema*, p. 91.

28 Rita Barnard: *Fictions of the Global*, p. 209.

29 *Babel*, TC: 00:28:17.

30 *Ibid.*, TC: 01:25:41.

31 *Ibid.*, TC: 01:29:09.

32 Ana M<sup>a</sup> Manzananas, Jesús Benito: *Cities, Borders, and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film*, p. 135.

33 *Babel*, TC: 00:35:35-00:37:23.

34 *Ibid.*, TC: 00:35:35-00:37:23.

35 *Ibid.*, TC: 00:58:33.

points-of-view and to demonstrate that suspicions and fears are mutual. In the aforementioned bus sequence, the Moroccan villagers are presented as similarly skeptical of the tourist newcomers: they eye the bus and the blonde Susan suspiciously, and one woman even shuts her door to avoid contact. The shot-reverse-shot technique creates the sense of two disparate cultures, divided by religion, language, and socioeconomic, physical, and linguistic differences, unable to ever meet.<sup>36</sup>

Not only does 'Babel' shed light on the "borders which are inside ourselves", as Iñárritu has phrased it,<sup>37</sup> but it also tackles the external and physical borders. In particular, the film negotiates the post-9/11 "national imperatives of border control".<sup>38</sup> Especially states adjacent to the Mexican-U.S. border have become battlegrounds in the U.S.-American debate about immigration policy after 9/11. The terrorist attacks gave lawmakers and administration officials the opportunity to present undocumented migration as a major security threat, which has led to border anxieties at best and border hysteria at worst. The reform of immigration law, as well as the enforcement of the Southern border in particular, has been advertised as a defense mechanism against terrorist attacks.<sup>39</sup>

'Babel' is highly critical of the border hysteria that developed in the U.S. in the wake of 9/11 and that has since been exploited for various political purposes. It portrays the border hysteria as one-directional: while the borders of the developing world are presented as permeable (Amelia gets to Mexico easily and quickly; American/Japanese tourists can go on vacation in Morocco), Amelia and Santiago's crossing of the U.S.-American border from Mexico is fraught with difficulties, racial prejudice, and harassment. Already on their way to Mexico, they are confronted with the political boundary, the wall, which divides Tijuana from San Diego, and the human tragedies it causes. On top of the wall, viewers see a Mexican with a backpack waiting for a clandestine opportunity to cross. Another shot depicts a border patrol jeep positioned on the U.S. side of the wall, signifying the dangerous nature of this endeavor.<sup>40</sup> On their way back, Amelia and Santiago arouse the suspicion and hostility of the border officials as they transport two white American children. Since Amelia cannot provide the parents' letter of permission and since Santiago cannot hide his intoxication, tensions between the officials and the Mexicans rise and culminate in Santiago's trespassing of the border and his abandoning Amelia and the children in the desert.<sup>41</sup> Amelia's search for help culminates in her arrest and in the U.S. official's 'convincing' her to accept voluntary deportation.<sup>42</sup> Despite having lived and worked in the United States for sixteen years, her status as an illegal immigrant allows U.S. authorities to dispose of her, with the lawsuit being just a formality. Without being able to retrieve any of her possessions accumulated during her long life in the U.S., she

36 Ibid., TC: 00:35:35-00:37:23; see also Nadine Chan Su-Lin: *Cosmopolitan Cinema*, p. 92.

37 *Babel*, Press Kit, p. 7 (my translation).

38 Jamie Winders: *Bringing Back the (B)order*, p. 922.

39 Ibid., pp. 924 f.; Mathew Coleman: *Immigration Geopolitics beyond the Mexico-US Border*, p. 54.

40 *Babel*, TC: 00:27:35 ff.

41 Ibid., TC: 01:20:33-01:26:05.

42 Ibid., TC: 01:58:50.

is placed on the Mexican side of the border, a poor and broken women.<sup>43</sup> Richard and Susan, her employers who profited from her undocumented work, do not seem to be assigned any responsibility and do not feel any obligations to her. That Amelia's story is only one of many is suggested by the shot through the barred windows of an SUV in the desert full of arrested young illegal immigrants who were caught during their dangerous journey across the border.<sup>44</sup>

Besides challenging neoconservative demands for securely bordered nations, 'Babel' presents the ideologically exalted 'us' as a very fragile category. Communicative failures, the film alleges, are not only a consequence of cultural and economic tensions and disparities between so-called First and Third World nations, but also emerge within seemingly homogeneous cultures hailed by neoconservatives as separate homelands or civilizations. This is, for instance, suggested by the utter emotional disjuncture between Richard and Susan at the beginning of the film or by the quarrels between Richard and the other tourists, who insist on leaving Richard and Susan behind for fear of falling victim to a(nother) terrorist attack.<sup>45</sup> The lack of intracultural understanding is also the main theme of the Japanese narrative strand. It seems at first sight rather detached from the rest of the film if one excepts the transfer of a hunting rifle from a Japanese tourist to a Moroccan hunter – clearly an allusion to the difference between hunting for leisure and hunting as an economic necessity. Repeated TV broadcasts in Japan inform Japanese audiences about the "terrorist attack in Morocco" and its happy ending and create linkages between the various storylines. While one could read these media broadcasts as an indicator of the heightened cohesion of a global world, 'Babel' does not allow for such a reading. Neither the Japanese detective nor Chieko, who both watch the news coverage, take great notice of the events broadcast all over the globe.<sup>46</sup> Rather than unifying people across the globe, the media is presented as fostering the imbalance of power between what is perceived as First and Third World nations. Through the spread of biased and inaccurate information, the media increases rather than alleviates cultural misunderstandings and prejudice and thus contributes to the post-9/11 culture of fear.<sup>47</sup>

Only tangentially linked to the other narrative strands, the Japanese plotline devotes itself to exploring one of the multiple rifts within post-industrial and hypermodern societies that cannot be alleviated through language, material affluence, postmodern mobility, or information technologies. Chieko belongs to a minority group within Japanese society – the deaf and non-verbal – and is therefore unable to meaningfully interact with all those around her not proficient in Sign language. But the lack of a 'lingua franca' is not the major reason for Chieko's failure to communicate her loneliness and psychic disorientation caused by teenage angst and the tragic loss of her mother. Her father, for instance, fluent in Sign language and able to linguistically understand his daughter, cannot reach

43 Ibid., TC: 01:59:15.

44 Ibid., TC: 01:50:42.

45 Ibid., TC: 00:38:28.

46 Ibid., TC: 00:45:42; 02:10:15.

47 See the sequences of Susan and Richard being welcomed in Casablanca by the U.S. ambassador and a host of reporters, which indicates that the global media has spread the news of the gunshot incident, distorting the actual truth of the event (Ibid., TC: 02:03:00 ff.).

her emotionally and fails to connect with her. Contrary to the biblical story its title alludes to, 'Babel' emphasizes, through Chieko's story in particular, that a 'lingua franca' does not guarantee successful communication. Chieko's "alienation", Su-Lin argues, "critiques the medium of language itself, demanding an interaction between people at the most pure level of feeling".<sup>48</sup> Selfishness, lack of empathy, and failed communication make the existence of a unified 'us' appear as a myth, lead to intracultural misunderstandings, and thus deprive homeland rhetoric of its foundation. 'Babel' seems to suggest that "bonds that exist between subjects exist not on the basis of their common ground – the same language, the same experience, and so on – but instead have a contingent origin".<sup>49</sup>

### ***Common Humanity and Human Interconnectedness***

Instead of limiting itself to such a bleak description of communicative failures, fragile national cultures, and prejudiced visions of the world, 'Babel' opens up a simultaneous panorama of a common humanity and human interconnectedness. Human beings today, the film suggests, are entangled with each other, partly due to processes of migration and communication systems, but mostly because of the universality of human experience. Once again, 'Babel' uses formal and thematic devices to emphasize common humanity and human interconnectedness.

The production mode of 'Babel' has determined its form. As collaboration between Mexicans, Americans, French, Moroccans, and Japanese, it was predestined to turn into "an international network narrative".<sup>50</sup> Such network narratives can be dated back to the 1920s and 1930s but became a staple of mainstream cinema (both commercial and art house) in the mid-1990s and have proliferated since then.<sup>51</sup> Network narratives are characterized by multiple protagonists, who are given more or less the same weight, numerous points-of-view and spaces, and several non-linear narratives that finally reveal a larger pattern underlying their individual trajectories. Often, a contingent moment, such as the Winchester gun in 'Babel', serves to link the seemingly disconnected narratives, setting off chains of cause and effect (the so-called butterfly-effect, as Edward Lorenz has termed it, suggesting that a beat of a butterfly's wings can cause a tornado on the other side of the world).<sup>52</sup> Network narratives tend to complicate notions of linear time by using "temporal dislocations" that compromise the traditional forward-moving plot.<sup>53</sup>

48 Nadine Chan Su-Lin: *Cosmopolitan Cinema*, pp. 96 f.

49 Todd McGowan: *The Contingency of Connection*, p. 413.

50 Paul Kerr: *Babel's Network Narrative*, pp. 41-44.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 40. For an intensive reflection on the media industrial as well as cultural/global reasons for the rise of the network narrative, see David Bordwell: *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 197 ff.; Paul Kerr: *Babel's Network Narrative*, pp. 45 ff.

52 David Bordwell: *Lessons from Babel*, n. pag.; see *ibid.*: *Poetics of Cinema*, pp. 191 f.; 199; Paul Kerr: *Babel's Network Narrative*, pp. 39 f.; Rita Barnard: *Fictions of the Global*, p. 208; Vivien Silvey: *Not Just Ensemble Films*, n. pag.; Patricia Pisters: *The Mosaic Film – An Affaire of Everyone*, n. pag.

53 Celestino Deleyto, María del Mar Azcona: *Alejandro González Iñárritu*, pp. 27, 49 f.

A classic network narrative, 'Babel's four seemingly separate storylines soon reveal similarities of form and theme. Formally, close inspection evidences a hidden organization of the different narratives, which are connected to each other in ever constant rhythms and symmetrical patterns. Juan Pellicer goes so far as to suggest that 'Babel' has a stanzaic form. The storylines are interlocked in parallel montages, and cinematic coherence is created between them. Causal connections are thereby transformed into interdependencies, so that a complex network emerges.<sup>54</sup> This careful arrangement of narrative strands prevents viewers from overly immersing themselves into the individual micronarratives and directs their attention to the larger macronarrative.<sup>55</sup>

Formal links between the various narratives are established through color, sound bridges, and graphic matches. Thus, the three settings, Morocco, Mexico, and Japan, are visually linked by carrying the color red through all of them: umber in Morocco, primary red in Mexico, and pink/magenta in Japan. Moreover, the grain, which is the filmic texture of Morocco, is carried through Mexico and Japan to varying degrees.<sup>56</sup> Especially in the last third of the film, *Iñárritu* connects the separate narratives through a lingering soundtrack. Graphic matches similarly connect the different narratives and link the various characters despite their radically different economic and political circumstances. Thus, after seeing Amelia's nephew killing a hen, the next sequence confronts us with Susan lying on the floor of the bus bleeding.<sup>57</sup>

On the level of theme, contingency becomes the major link between the film's seemingly disparate worlds.<sup>58</sup> The contingent event of the shooting forges connections around the globe. It directly triggers the story of Susan and Richard, which, in turn, causes Amelia's decision to take the children to the wedding and thus precipitates her final deportation. While Chieko's story appears independent first, toward the end of the film, we hear that it was the hunting rifle of Chieko's father that had triggered all the aforementioned events. Besides contingency, 'Babel' suggests, shared human pain and emotions also create connections in the global community. The conversation between Richard and the tour guide<sup>59</sup> serves as an example of the multiple sequences emphasizing transcultural connections between human beings.<sup>60</sup> Their sorrow about Susan's ever worsening condition, as well as their strong emotional attachment to their children, unite Richard and the tour guide across socioeconomic and cultural differences. Sitting across from each other as equals and successfully communicating about their families makes them realize their commonalities and de-emphasizes their cultural differences.

54 Juan Pellicer: *Bridging Worlds: Transtextuality, Montage, and the Poetics of Babel*, pp. 243 f.; see Werner Faulstich: *Die Überwindung des strafenden Gottes*, p. 189.

55 See Celestino Deleyto, *María del Mar Azcona: Alejandro González Iñárritu*, p. 59.

56 Rachael K. Bosley: *A Shot Fired in Africa Echoes around the World in Babel*, n. pag.

57 *Babel*, TC: 00:33:15.

58 See Todd McGowan: *The Contingency of Connection*, p. 408.

59 *Babel*, TC: 01:27:52-01:28:36.

60 For other examples, see Mike and Debbie's happy participation in the festive joy of the wedding together with the Mexican children as opposed to their initial skepticism of their Mexican surroundings (*Babel*, TC: 00:31:50; 00:57:04 ff.). Also, in her moment of greatest physical agony, Susan finally overcomes her tremendous fear of the cultural Other and accepts help by the tour guide's mother (*Ibid.*, TC: 00:59:53).

The film's final scenes<sup>61</sup> constitute the climax of the themes of human interconnectedness and a common humanity, and tie together the separate narrative strands more closely, first and foremost through extradiegetic music – a hesitant, mournful guitar,<sup>62</sup> spheric music,<sup>63</sup> a trilling, nervous guitar,<sup>64</sup> melancholic sounds of a piano, and string instruments.<sup>65</sup> Most of the time, this extradiegetic musical score mutes the dialogues in the scenes, and viewers only occasionally hear other diegetic sounds, such as the rotor blades of the helicopter. "Words, the film seems to argue, cannot come close to the power of deeply felt human contact [...]"<sup>66</sup> In order to highlight the characters' emotions, viewers' attention is directed at their faces through numerous close-ups and a blurring of the background.<sup>67</sup> This cinematic linkage between the narrative strands is further intensified by a thematic focus on physical embrace and touch. Richard and Susan desperately kiss and caress each other, their physical touch finally enabling them to verbally express their feelings for each other.<sup>68</sup> Even though the detective refuses to sexually engage with Chieko, he lets her hold his hand and gently strokes her face, alleviating her loneliness and despair.<sup>69</sup> Sitting with torn clothes and without any possessions on the curb in Tijuana, Amelia is tightly embraced by her son.<sup>70</sup> Ahmed and Yussef emotionally interact with each other in Yussef's flashback of them catching the wind.<sup>71</sup> And Chieko and her father finally reach an understanding with her grasping his hand and drawing him into a tight embrace on the balcony of their apartment.<sup>72</sup> The tight physical embrace evoked by experiences of despair, pain, and loss, allows for a greater understanding than words could ever achieve and links the film's characters and its four narrative strands. While each embrace/touch links people from ethnically homogeneous cultures, the visual similarity and parallel editing suggests a global dimension: All human beings share emotional pain and long for greater understanding and intimacy.

As the camera zooms out and Chieko and her father disappear into the lights of Tokyo's vast cityscape, the viewer is left with the feeling that Chieko's is merely one of millions of similar stories shared by human beings all over the globe. "It's like pulling back from the beehive to see that we've just seen is only one of the myriad stories taking place in the city", Iñárritu argues. "I told you just one, but there are millions like this".<sup>73</sup> While such an insight might evoke feelings of insignificance and separation, shattering the hopes "for a deep and all-encompassing connectedness", as some scholars argue.<sup>74</sup> Others, including myself, read this

61 Babel, TC: 2:07:07-2:12:21.

62 Ibid., TC: 1:49:50; 1:59:06; 2:07:05.

63 Ibid., TC: 1:54:44.

64 Ibid., TC: 2:00:00.

65 Ibid., TC: 2:09:07.

66 Celestino Deleyto, María del Mar Azcona: Alejandro González Iñárritu, p. 62.

67 For example, TC: 01:50:46.

68 Babel, TC: 01:51:19.

69 Ibid., TC: 01:55:28.

70 Ibid., TC: 01:59:19.

71 Ibid., TC: 01:59:59.

72 Ibid., TC: 02:12:00.

73 Quoted in Celestino Deleyto, María del Mar Azcona: Alejandro González Iñárritu, p. 135.

74 Nadine Chan Su-Lin: *Cosmopolitan Cinema*, p. 98; see Sebastian Thies: *Crystal Frontiers*, p. 225.

“transition from the intimate to the sublime” as an invitation of viewers to contemplate life’s complexities, the interconnection of an endless number of stories shared by human beings all over the world. “Up close, everyone’s circumstances are different, but in the camera’s sublime opening out it is inferred that everyone shares the same fundamental need for acceptance”.<sup>75</sup> Cultural differences are eventually transcended in search for an underlying universal humanity

The final shot of Chieko and her father has the film end on a strong note of human interconnection. Its eventual overemphasis of transcultural belonging at the expense of its negotiation of cultural difference is also mirrored in its cinematographic language. Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto emphasizes how this final shot “dramatically departed” from how the rest of ‘Babel’ was shot.<sup>76</sup> The viewer is left with a romantic and somewhat reductive message, which the DVD cover summarizes as follows: “Pain is universal – but so is hope”. In its last seconds, ‘Babel’ sacrifices argumentative complexity in favor of a romantic and utopian ending.

Considered in its entirety, however, ‘Babel’ carefully negotiates the complex entanglements of cultural disparities and neoconservative binary thinking and increasing human interconnection and a common humanity. This dual strategy becomes most obvious where these two seemingly contradictory modes occur simultaneously. The sequence of Yussef and Ahmed fleeing after the bullet hits the tourist bus in Morocco is linked through a graphic match to the scene in which young Mike runs across the kitchen in suburban America, also wearing a red shirt. On the one hand, this visual continuity – which almost feels like a match-on-action cut – stresses the connectedness of human beings and the similarity of their existences. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of these sequences makes us painfully aware of the severe economic and geopolitical disparities that separate the American and the Moroccan children. Instead of going to school like Mike, Yussef and Ahmed are responsible for herding the goats and protecting them from jackals in the barren, hostile landscape surrounding the Berber village Taguenzalt. Their clothes display their poverty, and their family’s hut is simple, crowded, and does not offer family members any privacy. Debbie and Mike, by contrast, grow up in a safe and orderly middle-class home equipped with all the modern household appliances, new furniture, and technological devices. Each has their own bed in a nicely furnished bedroom overflowing with toys. The swimming pool in front of the house greatly contrasts with the puddle of water in which the women in Taguenzalt wash their family’s clothes.<sup>77</sup> The glaring differences between growing up in the so-called First and Third Worlds also become evident on a political level: the Moroccan police do not hesitate to immediately shoot Ahmed and to arrest Yussef to counter U.S.-American allegations of terrorism and lack of Moroccan efficiency. The boys’ lives are dispensable in the unequal political game between different worlds. Mike and Debbie, by contrast, fare much better due to their status as First World citizens.

75 Vivien Silvey: Not Just Ensemble Films, n. pag.

76 Rachael K. Bosley: A Shot Fired in Africa Echoes around the World in Babel, n. pag.

77 Babel, TC: 00:08:17-00:10:25.

The border patrol officers do everything in their power to save the children lost in the desert.<sup>78</sup>

It is the formal and thematic engagement of 'Babel' with the tensions between cultural disparities and increasing cultural convergence that constitute its transcultural film aesthetics and that make it so relevant to viewers and those interested in the themes, aesthetics, genres, and production modes of contemporary film. The advantage of the concept of transculturality, as Welsch has claimed, is that it goes beyond the seemingly hard alternatives of globalization and particularization. "The globalizing tendencies as well as the desire for specificity and particularity can be fulfilled '*within*' transculturality".<sup>79</sup> As a transcultural film, 'Babel' functions at the interstices between the local and the global. As a transcultural film produced by someone from a developing country, it also directs its viewers' attention to the multiple disparities and injustices between developed and developing nations and problematizes post-9/11 ideas of cultural purity, cultural separatism, and homeland security. It seeks to "readjust[] our inner compass: away from the concentration on the polarity of the own and the foreign to an attentiveness for what might be common and connective wherever we encounter things foreign".<sup>80</sup>

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78 A similar discrepancy between so-called First- and Third-World residents is created through paralleling Susan's and Amelia's fates. While Susan's story is broadcast all over the world and her rescue is frantically celebrated, Amelia's deportation remains unheard.

79 Wolfgang Welsch: *Transculturality*, p. 204 (original emphasis).

80 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

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