Babel: Humanity is not the prisoner of fate

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Babel, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, written by Guillermo Arriaga

Babel comes to us with a certain pedigree; it has won a bevy of awards. Last Thursday, the Hollywood Foreign Press showered it with seven Golden Globe nominations, among them best film, best director and best screenplay. The Cannes Film Festival earlier this year recognized Alejandro González Iñarrittu as best director, while also nominating *Babel* for the Palme d'Or as best film. The film also won the François Chalais Award (a prize of the Ecumenical Jury). The 18th Palm Springs International Film Festival, which has been growing in stature over the years, will name Iñarritu director of the year and will honor its actors with an Ensemble Performance Award. The National Board of Review named *Babel* its runner-up winner.

We wouldn't be surprised if *Babel* were nominated for various Academy Awards, including best film. Of course, it would be foolish to believe that the various awards, which over the years have proliferated excessively, are necessarily any measure of a film's artistic worth. But this third film by the team of director Iñárritu and screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga is so ambitious in philosophical, political, structural and technical terms that attention must be paid.

This is because the filmmakers, despite the limitations of their social outlook, think in big, global terms. Their narrative canvas stretches from North America (the United States and Mexico), to North Africa (Morocco), to Asia (Japan), while all the while managing to avoid the tourist's postcard view of the world. It tells four interconnected stories and uses at least five languages (English, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese and sign). It also enjoys a very large, international, multiracial, multi-class cast that makes excellent use of non-professional actors, especially children. In a certain sense, *Babel* is a welcome antidote to the narrow, provincial outlook of films such as *Crash*.

As in their previous two collaborations (*Amores perros* and *21 Grams*), *Babel* (which completes the "Death Trilogy") tells what at first appear to be separate stories, in this case four. One involves an isolated family of goat herders who live in the harsh conditions of the Moroccan desert hills and whose father gives his young sons a rifle to protect their goats from predatory jackals.

The second concerns an American couple (played by Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett) touring Morocco and traveling by bus past the field where the boys' animals are grazing. One of the youngsters decides on a whim to see how far the bullets travel, shoots at the vehicle and strikes Blanchett. While she lies injured in the stark home of their sympathetic local guide in a rural village, Pitt and the guide try to arrange treatment and evacuation; meanwhile, Moroccan police search for what are immediately presumed to be the terrorists who shot her.

In the film's only significant time-warp, Pitt calls home to California, ordering the couple's housekeeper/nanny (Adriana Barraza) to stay with the couple's two young children even though she had long ago made plans to attend her son's wedding in Mexico.

Unable to arrange alternate childcare, the housekeeper decides to take them—with her loose-cannon nephew (Gael Garcia Bernal)—to Mexico, a decision that takes a dangerous turn when, on their return, they encounter a suspicious guard at the U.S. border.

Simultaneously, in a seemingly unrelated story in Tokyo, a deaf-mute girl (Rinko Kikuchi) tries to cope with her mother's death, sexual longing and estrangement from her father, apparently a corrupt businessman. She engages in a series of provocative sexual acts to attract the attention she is not receiving from her uncommunicative father. This segment reveals a surprising twist—that inevitable, serendipitous "thing" that in Iñárritu and Arriaga's films connects all the stories, in this case the rifle—that has set everything in motion from the beginning and sent all the characters to a helpless and implacable encounter with fate. This fatalism has been integrated, though perhaps not wittingly, into the complicated, well-thought out structure of the film and suffuses all the stories.

On one level, In *Babel* Iñárritu and Arriaga try to show how an inability to understand others has crippled relationships, at the individual level and, by extension, at the socio-political. Appropriately enough for a film called *Babel*, language barriers abound, but the cultural gulfs are even wider and deeper. The Moroccan guide's mangling of English and the Mexicans' Spanglish in dealing with their American charges are as usual, yet as limited, as the strained communications of a deaf-mute with hearing-speakers.

Only the authorities seem able to communicate across their boundaries and jurisdictions, yet even there, unseen U.S. authorities insist that the shooting was an act of terror yet cannot get clearance from defensive Moroccan authorities (also unseen) to send in a Medevac chopper. The Tokyo detectives who come calling on the deaf-mute teen are following up on a query from Morocco; the officious and bureaucratically numb officers of the Border Patrol and Office of Homeland Security are sufficiently connected to make the case for stopping and ultimately deporting the housekeeper/nanny, but unable to process the detailed and touching human elements of the situation. In the world of this film, misunderstandings and miscommunications yield human catastrophes—usually exacerbated by those in position of authority.

"I got the idea for the film, and then I invited Guillermo, and he liked the concept," says Iñárritu. "Then he started to write some story lines he shared with me. We picked some of them, and from these we started interchanging ideas and stories and characters for a long time. It was a very long, very intense process, a very difficult equation to solve. I had the idea to have five stories on five continents. We were trying to juggle five oranges—and five was too much."

The difficulty remained, he continued, "how to find something that integrates four diverse and different stories, cultures, forces and people that will never connect physically. Then you have to adjust and

rewrite, and to go from the abstract to the concrete world, which is always shocking. On the screen, [the question is] how we're going to get the language, the grammatical or cinematic language, that can get [the stories] together." One of the solutions was to shoot each segment differently: "In Mexico in 16mm. In Morocco, in 35mm. And in the Japanese story, we used anamorphic lenses, because the depth of field is minimal—the character is in focus and everything else out of focus. That isolates the character. It was a long process, but a very beautiful one for me."

This process gives *Babel* a sharp sense of rhythm as it juggles from continent to continent and story to story. Iñarritu has an undeniable flair for just how long a scene should last and a close-up should hold. His cuts between two-shots and long-shots are often unpredictable; his *mise en scène* fluid and unlabored. His compositions are masterful. He handles large crowds with energy and panache. His cinematographic sense combines the epic and the intimate to create familiar yet strange worlds where things seem out of joint, dislocated, not quite right; where vast expanses can feel claustrophobic and a sense of dread permeates the stories from beginning to end.

Iñárritu's camera explores without editorializing. For the extended Mexican wedding sequence, the impulse is almost documentary—we are there as eyewitnesses, but not participants, which resonates deeply with the unlikely presence of Pitt and Blanchett's blond, picture-perfect American kids. For the Tokyo club/café/street sequences, the documentary impulse is far more subjective, capturing the sometimes strange, sometimes poignant world of the deaf-mute girl. When all sound suddenly drops out, we are very much "in" her distinctive universe.

In the Moroccan sequences, landscape predominates. Its stark, stony austerity is brought inside the near-bare room in which the critically wounded American wife slips in and out of consciousness. We experience these sequences primarily from the middle-class American husband's point of view, suffering with him as he tries and generally fails to communicate with the Moroccans, his British fellow tourists, the U.S. Embassy authorities, and, most importantly, with his estranged and now barely conscious wife.

That she should be the victim of this freakish accident is subtly underscored by the fact that, when we meet her, she is obsessed with saturating her hands with disinfectant salve and refusing to eat or drink anything local. All her efforts to insulate herself from the toxic and/or contaminated in this alien land prove utterly futile; her survival depends on the local medic and timely evacuation. For the brief sequences set in the couple's Southern California home, there's an almost television-like realism. To have combined such disparate visual styles, rhythms, and atmospheres in a single film without the technique ever feeling forced is a consummate cinematic achievement.

However, as admirable as these story-telling techniques are, and as fine as its rhythm is, *Babel*, in the end, is a movie to be appreciated more for its ambitions and technical achievements than for its ability to truly move or edify us. These same story-telling techniques, which Iñárritu so proudly describes, when integrated to his and Arriaga's take on life and politics, seem to have siphoned all spontaneity out of the film.

Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely after all the manipulation that goes on, for all the suffering we see in the film, its characters cannot take flight and carry us along with them. It is difficult not to be aware at all times that the film is "engineered"; that its four interlocking stories have been too meticulously planned, that the structure of the film has dictated character behavior and events more than the characters themselves. In great literature and, by extension, in great films, characters aren't mere passive instruments of their circumstances; they act upon the world.

Thus, when large emotions explode in *Babel*, they seem hysterical and contrived rather than the result of deeply felt passions that stem from the characters' organic reality, its influence upon them and their honest reactions to their circumstances. No; their emotions seem artificial to a large extent, as if forced upon them by the writer and the director to fit a grand master plan.

In Iñárritu and Arriaga's films, *Amores perros* and *21 Grams* included, this master plan takes a very definite ideological form. A relentless fatalism reduces the characters to pawns who can't comprehend, much less combat, forces beyond their power. They suffer their world. Too often, the more they try to change the circumstances, the graver the situation becomes. Action proves futile. The multifaceted forces arrayed against these small players on this universal stage are basically the many faces of the ultimate fatal force—death.

This fatalism has for centuries imbued Latin American culture and ideology, and we see it with particular virulence in the Mexican sequences. The individual struggles against one's fate may give the character a certain tragic heroism, but with the cosmic deck so thoroughly stacked against him or her, any possibility of a better outcome, a better world, improved conditions, is, at best, remote, at worst, a pathetic illusion.

Iñárritu and Arriaga wail that the world seems not to be listening to the cries of its dispossessed, oppressed or accidental victims. Their films, they insist, are a response to these unanswered cries for help and understanding or, ideally, compassion. However, the "deafness" of the authorities is indifference by design, cruelty by habit.

In the filmmakers' world, humans merely suffer, the rich and powerful thrive. Such pathos, saturated with fatalism, may inform poignant arias, heart-wrenching scenes, but it does not inspire us to individual or collective action with any hope of success or change. There are no tears of triumph in Iñárritu and Arriaga's films, only the sadness of survivors mourning the loss of the less lucky, those whose lives are overwhelmed by fate.

In *Babel*, a rifle—a simple gift—sets off a chain reaction of random, tragic events in three continents and four countries over which the participants have no knowledge and no power. This is the philosophy of well-meaning individuals who look at humanity from on high while missing out on that same humanity's daily, heroic struggles to change its conditions Both artists are Mexican nationals. Their talents are undeniable, but somehow the heroic struggles of the Mexican working-class during the past few months, in particular in the state of Oaxaca, have been anything but passive and seem to have passed them by. And if Iñárritu and Arriaga are expecting the Mexican authorities to listen, good luck.