# 9/11 AND THE POWER OF THE NETWORK SOCIETY IN ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ IÑÁRRITU'S *BABEL*

**Rosa Urtiaga**
Universidad de Zaragoza
rurtiaga@unizar.es



September 11, 2001 changed the course of contemporary history in more than one sense, including the revitalization of the so-called "war on terrorism". For Craig Calhoun, 9/11 is the date on which the "non-cosmopolitan side of globalization struck back" (2002: 871). Given that most of the terrorists were Arabs who had studied in the West, the attacks unveiled a dark side to globalization in which flows of people, money, weapons and drugs suddenly became a challenge to security and state sovereignty (871). As Calhoun puts it, "the terrorist acts were framed as an attack on America rather than an attack on humanity" (870). The events precipitated a new state-centered politics based on the idea of a 'just war', which made military war on terrorism 'inevitable' and justified, crushing the cosmopolitan concerns that, in the view of many, had started to flourish by the late 1990s (870). The coming down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had questioned the development of militarism, and undermined the opposition between East and West in favor of a more cosmopolitan focus on human interconnectedness that challenged the hegemony of the nation-state. As Gerard Delanty emphasizes, the awareness of global interdependence in the post-Cold War made cosmopolitanism all the more urgent (2009: 98). Crucially, Vertovec and Cohen (2002) explored the multiple facets of cosmopolitanism as a descriptive social category and as a normative concept focusing on the struggles for global justice and the construction of a new world order. Today, although such ideas seem to be wearing thin after

September 11 and the war in Iraq (Stevenson 2011: 243) interest in cosmopolitanism as a transformative perspective has not declined (Rovisco and Nowicka 2011: 1). In fact, cosmopolitanism is increasingly regarded as a key analytical tool for studying a variety of outlooks and ethico-political practices, especially since Beck and Sznaider (2006) proposed going beyond the limitations of methodological nationalism by adopting more complex and global perspectives.

Alejandro González Iñárritu's third feature film, *Babel* (2006), is global in terms of production and release. An international co-production between France, Mexico and the United States, it was first shown at the Cannes Film Festival and later at a number of other international festivals. It features seven languages —English, French, Spanish, Berber, Arabic, Japanese and sign language— and four settings —the US, Mexico, Japan and Morocco— in which, as in other multi-protagonist films, a number of characters are connected by a global thread. *Babel* may be seen as both a post-9/11 movie and as a filmic counterpart to Calhoun's insights in that it adopts a cosmopolitan stance for understanding the complexities of the global network society. The film brings to the fore the fact that the war against terrorism, promoted by one nation-state, affects remote places, where innocent people are criminalized as scapegoats for the sake of the protection of more privileged citizens. Hence, it problematizes non-cosmopolitan forms of domination and subordination in the current network society.



Some critics have analyzed *Babel* in relation to Manuel Castells's concept of the "network society", that is, one "whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies" —by social structure, he understands "the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture" (2004: 3). For example, Paul Kerr explores the film's social relations of production, drawing on Castells's assumption that the work process tends to be globally integrated while labor is locally fragmented. For Kerr, "the film package, *Babel*, was constructed by globalized, casualized labor, and assembled by international agencies and companies which circulate capital —in much the same way as the circulating object, the Winchester, changes hands in the film" (2010: 39-40). In another example, Celestino Deleyto and Maria del Mar Azcona view *Babel* as a powerful fictionalization of the network society, characterized by the two emergent social forms of time and space: 'timeless time' and the 'space of flows'. The film's narration is simultaneously governed by 'traditional time', that is, linear, irreversible and measurable chronology, and 'timeless time', a new conceptualization of temporality that gives us immediate access to events happening in any part of the global network society. Similarly, the 'space of places', characterized by geographical

location and physical proximity, is superseded by the intangible space of flows —of information, capital, work and technology— across continents (2010: 51, 66-67). In this article, I propose an analysis of *Babel*'s critique of unequal power relations in the global network society, in particular, after the 9/11 attacks. The film makes extensive use of formal strategies that encourage the viewer to reflect about non-cosmopolitan positions of domination and subordination in the network-society of the information era. I will draw on Castells's belief that, although a network-based society is ideally a non-centered form of social structure, it is also a source of dramatic reorganization of power relationships.

*Babel* narrates four stories that take place in three different continents over a five-day span. The film scrambles the chronology of these storylines by means of a regular pattern that divides the film into twenty-four sections. The opening section, set in the Moroccan Atlas, introduces a goatherd, Abdullah (Mustapha Rachidi), and his two teenage sons, Ahmed (Said Tarchani) and Yussef (Boubker Ali El Caid). We witness the transaction of a rifle between Abdullah and his neighbor, Hassan (Abdelkader Bara), who was once given the gun as an act of gratitude. Hassan gives the rifle to his two teenage sons, who decide to test it, first on some rocks and then on a moving bus. They realize they have hit the bus, and run away, at which moment the second section starts, taking us to San Diego, where an undocumented Mexican nanny, called Amelia (Adriana Barraza), is in charge of two siblings, Mike (Nathan Gamble) and Debbie (Elle Fanning). The events of this storyline shuttle from San Diego to a Mexican village close to Tijuana on the other side of the US-Mexico border. The third fragment, also set in Morocco, revolves around a married couple from the United States, Richard (Brad Pitt) and Susan (Cate Blanchett), who happen to be Mike and Debbie's parents. While on a tourist bus, Susan is shot, and the incident is misinterpreted as an act of terror. The fourth section takes spectators to Tokyo and revolves around Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi), a deaf-mute teenage girl. Apparently unrelated to the other stories, we later find out that Chieko's father, Yasujiro (Kôji Yakusho), gave the same rifle that has now wounded Susan to his Moroccan hunting guide as a present at some point in the past. The fifth section returns to Morocco, where Ahmed and Yussef are running home after having unintentionally shot Susan. This order (Morocco-San Diego/Tijuana, Morocco, Tokyo) is almost strictly followed until the end of the film, resulting in a complex, fragmented and multi-focal film (see Deleyto and Azcona 2010: 50-56).

By means of its multi-protagonist narrative, *Babel* depicts the global reach of the accidental shooting of a United States citizen in Morocco in order to exemplify the devastating effects of the sovereign prerogatives of certain countries, specifically the US, in a global world increasingly driven by fear of terror after 9/11. As Ezra

and Rowden argue, "the rhetorical deployment and exploitation of September 11 and the subsequent Iraq war by political officials and some elements of the American media created a popularizing discourse that turned all US citizens into potential victims and all foreigners into potential victimizers" (2006: 11). In *Babel*, the shooting incident is rapidly labeled as a terrorist act by the United States although, as the Moroccan media claim, the country has been free from terrorist activity for many years. Yet, the connection between the global security network and the international media system is highly effective in quickly spreading the misconception, putting extreme pressure on the Moroccan authorities. Fearing the damage that the international crisis could cause to the economy of the country, they abuse their own subjects, ignoring human rights. As the film shows, diverse forms of domination are ascribed to certain nation-states and their privileged subjects, and treatment by law enforcement authorities under international pressure is uneven. In contrast with the abusive practices endured by the family of goatherds in Morocco and the Mexican undocumented immigrant, the United States and Japanese citizens are treated respectfully. Notably, the suggestion of terrorist links by the US Government is enough to shut down the air space in the area, so that Susan can be evacuated. As Ulrich Beck states, since the global and the local are "mutually implicating principles", global processes "transform the quality of the social and the political *inside* nation-state societies" (2002: 17).



The unbalanced logic of power governing present-day network society is a key theme in *Babel*, and it runs parallel to the film's uneven network structure. In her analysis of multi-protagonist films, Azcona draws on Deleuze and Guattari's "acentered structure" of "the rhizome" as the structure that best represents so-called mosaic films or network narratives like *Babel*. As she explains, because these movies lack a narrative center, they potentially disrupt the hierarchical organization reflected in conventional movies —which tend to privilege one character over the others (2010: 21). In the past decade, a number of multi-protagonist films —such as *Traffic* (2000), *Crash* (2004) and *Syriana* (2005)— speculated about the emergent network society, which was being theorized in the social sciences (Wellman 1999; Castells, 2009; Van Dijk, 2006). In these films, the network morphology and the proliferation of points of view it offers tend to counter the inequalities they expound. While *Babel* roughly conforms to this logic, its presumably even structure disguises unequal power relations at its basis. As the narration unfolds, the apparent structural and narrative balance is put to the test and, gradually, the tourists' (Richard and Susan's) storyline takes shape as the central and dominant one, mirroring the film's central concern with power dynamics. Therefore, against the apparently decentralized narrative conventions of ensemble movies, the shooting incident becomes the focal event in *Babel*, and the storyline that deals with it, together with its protagonists, are given more

prominence. In other words, although the four-part structure of the film, as expected, appears to be balanced due to scrupulous compliance with established turns and an even distribution of screen time, the structure turns out to be one-sided for a number of reasons that I aim to explain next.

Apart from the higher visibility of the two internationally acclaimed stars playing the US tourists in Morocco (Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett), at a structural level, one key feature that makes the tourists' storyline superior is its high interconnectedness with the others. Richard and Susan's narrative strand has a higher "networking power". Castells coins this term to refer to "the power of the actors and organizations included in the networks that constitute the core of the global network society over human collectives or individuals who are *not* included in these global networks" (2009: 42). James S. Coleman refers to a similar kind of power as "social capital": in the network society, the relations between the nodes increase the social capital, facilitating productive activity and "making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible" (1988: S98). For Mark Buchanan, although the network society is in principle a non-centered structure, it is actually organized through central hubs that dominate network activity. In this sense, he argues that the Internet and the World Wide Web have few elements with a huge number of links, and that this is symptomatic of greater power (2002: 36). As John Urry exemplifies, a small number of nodes, such as Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, CNN, BBC have a very large number of links, and, therefore, control the web. The web is, for him, an "aristocratic network", where those who are connected become ever more connected, their power being increased over time (2007: 215).



In *Babel*, as in the network-based society it represents, switches are relevant sources of power, and Richard and Susan's storyline proves more powerful because it is the only one related to all the other stories. Susan's shooting is causally connected with the events of the Moroccan (Ahmed and Yussef's) narrative strand; it triggers the action of Amelia's narrative, and also infiltrates the Moroccan and Japanese media. None of the other narrative strands is bound to all the rest. For example, Chieko's plotline is faintly linked to the Moroccan story through the transaction of the rifle, and infiltrated by Richard and Susan's strand through the media but it does not interact with Amelia's. In turn, the Moroccan line of action is tied only by coincidence to Richard and Susan's and to Chieko's storylines but it is not directly bound to the Mexican one. Finally, this narrative thread is not connected with the Japanese or with the Moroccan plotline, being attached solely to Richard and Susan's. Hence, the centrality of this storyline is grounded on its higher connectivity, exerting potential influence on the other narrative strands.

Positions of structural dominance and subordination are further qualified by the nature and direction of the connections in the network narrative. As in many multi-protagonist films, in *Babel*, the four storylines are initially presented as independent, and they become gradually interconnected. Yet, the links between narrative strands are not always of the same nature nor do they all have the same relevance. For example, while the Japanese plotline is bound to the two stories that take place in Morocco, its attachment to them is very weak. They are barely hooked up by the slender causal link provided by what David Bordwell calls a "circulating object" (2006: 97): the rifle that is given as a sign of gratitude is sold to Abdullah and later accidentally wounds Susan. It is an "attenuated link" (99), to use Bordwell's terminology, since the interconnectedness is governed by chaos theory, in the shape of the so-called 'butterfly effect'. This impression of chance is reinforced when some of the characters involved in the shooting fleetingly appear in the Japanese news. Although this plotline shares key themes with the others, it mostly serves to establish parallels and contrasts between characters, and causal connections are minimized. Thus, the interconnectedness of the Tokyo line of action is fairly inferred as coincidental and ephemeral.



In the lines that follow, I will explore how the level of connection of the tourists' storyline is not only characterized by a larger number of links but also by more consistent narrative ties than those of the three others. Firstly, in a film in which most people are remotely bound by little more than chance, the attachment between Richard and Susan and the characters in Amelia's storyline stands out as the most solid: they live in the same house, Amelia is entrusted with their employers' home and children, and Richard and Susan are Mike and Debbie's parents. Secondly, while many narrative links between the plotlines are based on sheer accident, these two stories are interconnected by causal coherence through a number of telephone conversations between Richard and Amelia, in which he compels her to stay at home with his children the same day her son is getting married. The repetition of one of the telephone calls from different points of view invites the spectators to interpret these conversations as pivotal, to weigh up the scenes from both points of view, and to trace the connections and build structural hypotheses about the nature of the relationship between the two narrative strands. While multi-protagonist films usually depend on chance, and not on traditional causality, to interconnect their narrative-strands (Bordwell 2006: 93, 100; Azcona 2010: 37), I will try to show here that *Babel* deviates slightly from this logic: the rifle may get the ball rolling but Amelia's fate is governed not just by random chance but by a direct order from her employer. This is also indicative of normalized positions of domination and subordination both in the employers' house and, globally, in other parts of the world.

The fact that one of Richard's telephone calls to Amelia is shown twice and from two different points of view urges us to think about and examine the characters' motives and needs. This speculation is symptomatic of the fact that they have choices and a certain amount of control over the events. It points to principles of causality, together with a certain share of responsibility on the part of the characters for the consequences of their actions. Is Richard's request that Amelia stay at home with Mike and Debbie on her son's wedding day inevitable? Is his inflexible attitude towards her a major cause bringing about the near death of Amelia and the children on the border? What options are available to Amelia after Richard's request? Is her decision to go on a one-day trip with the children irresponsible or imprudent? For Azcona, although network narratives seem to be just built out of ephemeral or attenuated links, there often seems to be a place for reflection on the "power of the individual" for the responsibilities behind apparently randomly caused acts (2010: 35). This is also the case in *Babel*. Susan's shooting in Morocco is clearly marked as an accident, even if it is one that brings light to the contradictions of a global situation in which children are sent off to work with weapons. Amelia's decision to take Mike and Debbie to her son's wedding in Mexico may be motivated by random events (Susan's accident, in turn caused by the transaction of the rifle, and the fact that Susan's sister cannot make it to San Diego in time) but is a conscious decision on her part (we see her trying to leave the children with a friend before deciding to travel to Mexico with them).



Since the telephone call is repeated in both storylines from different perspectives, we are encouraged to think that what happened later on the border could have been avoided if the characters had acted differently and, therefore, some kind of responsibility is ascribed to them. Moreover, the fact that the first phone call opens Amelia's plotline and closes Richard and Susan's indicates chronological contiguity between the two narrative strands, further supporting the hypothesis of a cause and effect logic, and departing from the randomness of the rifle, the circulating object that characterizes some connections in *Babel*. Ultimately, the cause-effect nexus between the two narratives suggests structural subordination of the Mexican storyline to Richard and Susan's. Since the events of this plotline influence to a great extent what happens in Amelia's, the latter can be considered to be an appendage or a prolongation of the former.

The repetition of the phone call plays a key role in the articulation of the overarching theme of power relations, hinting that non-cosmopolitan dynamics embedded in everyday dialogue underlie the characters' behavior, bringing about disastrous events. Wanting to know who is responsible for the tragic events on the border, spectators are prompted to wonder how the characters could have acted differently, given that, in the second version of the call, we have more knowledge about their

motivations and the effects of their choices and actions. The calls in Amelia's plotline point to her subordinate status and degree of vulnerability. Our first impression is grounded on Richard's authoritative tone, in contrast with the nanny's subservient attitude, and on the fact that the employee is not allowed to defend her position, since Richard hangs up on her. In this scene, we tend to identify with Amelia: although we barely know her, she has been presented as a loving and thoughtful person when we see her tenderly playing with the children who are enjoying their time with her. As Deleyto and Azcona argue, this portrayal of the Mexican nanny as nurturing and protective is enhanced by the warm colors and lighting of the house, including Amelia's red T-shirt (2010: 101). As the phone call unfolds, we only see her image, and feel, therefore, closer to her than to the anonymous, authoritative voice at the other end of the line.

While the movie criticizes Richard's unwillingness to genuinely engage with the nanny in the first version of the first call, it maneuvers for the opposite effect in the second —at the end of Richard and Susan's story— when we get his point of view. His responsibility is minimized this time because we know that he has been living an extreme situation trying to save Susan's life, and that he has been pushed to his limits. In this case, we get a close-up of his smiling but tearful face as he speaks to his son; and we can hear a more humanized voice, this time unmediated by technology. We are, thus, invited to sympathize with his role of suffering victim. Yet, even if the movie tends to exonerate Richard in the second version, the many dimensions of the calls in their different versions crucially point to the lack of cosmopolitan interconnectedness in the network society. The film does not give us answers about who is responsible for the events that follow the interaction but asks us to reflect on it. It is hinted that Richard has at least some responsibility, even though something akin to despair has influenced his inflexible and authoritative behavior towards Amelia.



Richard's domination over his employee not only parallels the superiority of his storyline over Amelia's but also the overarching theme of unequal power dynamics in the global network society portrayed through the film. In this sense, the one-way communication between Richard and Amelia mirrors her later attempts to be listened to by other characters like the Border Patrol agent and the deportation officer. In other acts of communication in *Babel*, the emphasis on the contemptuous attitude of law-enforcing agents towards a number of distant people —namely Amelia, Santiago and the Moroccan protagonists— hints that there are global grounds for the unfortunate experiences of some characters (beyond those merely attributable to individual wrong choices). For example, the viewer is invited to suture together Amelia's unidirectional conversations and the US State Department's unilateral management of the shooting. Likewise, the abuse of the

Moroccan characters is symptomatic of human rights violations against Islamic suspects pursued in relation to the 9/11 events when, after having declared solidarity with the US people in fighting terrorism, the protection of human rights in Morocco was actually weakened. Clearly, the expanded executive powers in a global conflict become the unifying global force binding the suffering of distant others. *Babel* critiques the fact that the principle of sovereignty should take precedence over the prevention of human suffering. The film calls for a cosmopolitan consciousness that, as Nick Stevenson would say, reminds global humanity of the ways in which we are morally interconnected with one another, while seeking to struggle for a form of politics that aims to accommodate difference (2011: 249).

In other words, the management of the shooting incident in the film serves to exemplify how the United States' economic, political and military supremacy facilitated a nation-centered response to the 9/11 attacks, instead of promoting transnational politics based on a more cosmopolitan understanding of the other. In *Babel*, one-sided preoccupation with security causes unfounded fears of terrorism and brings chaos to the networked, interdependent nation-states all over. For example, Amelia's ill treatment on the border is articulated as a consequence of the war on terror resulting in more severe immigration laws, as part of the global chain of narrative cause and effect. Thus, it can be argued that the United States' one-sided management of the shooting is at the basis of all the plotlines because it is, to a very large extent, deemed responsible for their resolution. Recreating these dynamics, instead of the centerless narratives of other multi-protagonist films, the structure of *Babel* places Richard and Susan's predicament at the center of the network narrative.



The domination and pervasiveness of the tourists' plotline is further highlighted by the two infiltrations of the shooting event in the Tokyo storyline, functioning as the nexus between the two stories. The first intrusion takes place while Chieko is tediously channel surfing, and a news item about the shooting filters into a random succession of local programs. The scene has a key structural function based on certain expectations and responses rooted in the network movies' generic conventions. For the viewers that are familiar with these films, the intersection of characters from different storylines seems inevitable just because we have been following them from the start: the more the narration focuses on their separate lives, the more we expect relevant encounters among them. Then, when people start to meet, even by chance, we feel what Bordwell calls a "satisfying omniscience" (2006: 99). Since the first intrusion in the TV news linking the tourists' and the Tokyo storylines is the first indication that this narrative strand is attached to the multi-protagonist structure, it makes us experience the rewarding omniscience

that Bordwell describes. This reward validates Richard and Susan's plotline as central for its ability to provide the evidence that helps us make sense of the film's structure and plot.

A similar intrusion is repeated later in the Tokyo plotline, further reinforcing the role of Richard and Susan's narrative as pervasive and a determining factor in the film. While the Japanese police officer is reading the hand-written note that Chieko has given him in the previous fragment of the Tokyo storyline, we see Susan's face on the Japanese international news and we learn about the outcome of Richard and Susan's story. The contrast between the secrecy of Chieko's note, which to our frustration we are never able to read, and Richard and Susan's conspicuously happy ending reinforces the hypothesis that, in *Babel*'s unbalanced structure, the US protagonists are more worthy of attention than any other characters in the movie. Yet, the officer's uninterested look at the television set, together with Chieko's look of boredom while channel surfing earlier in the narrative, problematizes the omnipresence of the shooting incident and the prominence given to its protagonists.

The blatant infiltrations of the shooting incident in the Japanese news is a representation of what Castells calls "the power of the switch", or the ability of dominant actors and institutions to connect different networks, promoting their cooperation by sharing common goals (2009: 45, 51). In *Babel*, the pervasiveness of the shooting —which points to post-9/11 paranoia about security and the subsequent military operations— and its prominence in the media is a representation of this logic of power. The power of the switch between the security network and the comprehensive media networks resides in its apparent capacity to suppress time —as evoked by the random succession of programs in Chieko's channel surfing scene— and in the capability of the shooting event to obliterate space. The subordination of the Moroccan characters that inhabit the periphery of the network society is visually enhanced when the shooting permeates through the Japanese news across a rapid, random succession of local programs. The Moroccan characters' faces do not fit in and become defamiliarized inside Chieko's bedroom, replete as it is with her personal belongings and pictures. The news beams Yussef and Abdullah's close-ups to this digital tapestry on the Japanese TV, visually representing the space of flows, "made of places connected by electronically powered communication networks through which flows of information [...] circulate and interact" (Castells 2009: 34). Notably, Yussef and Abdullah's local selves are only global when they become secondary actors in the news of Susan's shooting. Their identities are unimportant until they are linked to the presumed terrorist attack of an 'American' tourist. The film emphasizes their insignificance even more when, later in a different sequence of the Tokyo story, the TV news narrates a 'happy ending' for the US citizen's narrative strand, while ignoring the

fates of Yussef and Abdullah. Yet, since the movie has previously invited us to engage with the disgrace of the humble Moroccan characters, it also calls our attention to the subordination and the oblivion affecting the lives of the people who are peripheral to the network society.

The way in which the film constructs temporality also contributes to Susan and Richard's prominence. As has already been mentioned, Deleyto and Azcona see the film's narration as simultaneously governed by two types of temporality: traditional time and timeless time. They argue that the film's temporal arrangement mirrors timeless time when chronological time is suppressed, and sequencing is cancelled and reversed. Timeless time is exemplified by the links between fragments, evoking a sense of immediacy between events happening in remote places (2010: 50-52). I want to show that timeless time is also marked by the recurrent events connecting narrative strands —Richard's telephone calls to Amelia, and the double intrusion of their narrative into the Tokyo plotline— and that this also contributes to making Richard and Susan's strand more pivotal. As has been mentioned earlier, the repetition of scenes is a generic clue that marks them as highly informative, encouraging us to think about interweaving meanings or building structural hypothesis about the network organization of the film. Furthermore, the repeated scenes in *Babel* give us information about the actual temporal order between the different storylines. For example, the telephone calls between Richard and Amelia reveal in retrospect that the Mexican story takes place five days later, chronologically starting after Susan has been evacuated from Tazarine and gone into hospital, and not simultaneously, as the actual arrangement of segments seems to indicate. Similarly, in the Tokyo storyline, the TV news makes us realize that this has been brought forward with respect to the action set in Morocco. After the segment in which we see Abdullah and Yussef's faces on Chieko's television, the Moroccan segment that follows shows the kids hiding the rifle under a rock in the Atlas Mountains (in Yussef and Abdulah's plotline the Moroccan goatherd and his sons have not been captured by the Moroccan police yet). In *Babel*'s arrangement, the events on the TV news in Tokyo are broadcast prior to their actual happening in the Moroccan strand. Hence, the recurrent, binding scenes prove to be focal in that they raise awareness about the temporal structure of the film, based on timeless time: they disrupt previous hypotheses about the film's temporal construction. Since those pivotal scenes revolve around the shooting, they further reinforce the preeminence of this event, and the centrality and omnipresence of Richard and Susan's storyline.

Therefore, Richard and Susan's relevance and domination in the network society run parallel to the structural supremacy of their storyline and its evocation of timeless time because in the film, as in the network society, timeless time indicates

power. For Castells, timeless time is the result of the annihilation of time in the networks of the space of flows, and dominant functions are organized in networks that belong to a space of flows, which ties them up around the world (2009: 20, 34). In *Babel*, the dominant position of Richard, Susan and the US State Department in the aftermath of the shooting is symptomatic of timeless time, especially when the introduction of dialogue is not synchronized with the matching shots. This is most obvious when telecommunications are involved, for instance, when the voice broadcasting the news is heard before correlative images appear, overlapping with the previous shot. In another example, before Susan is evacuated, we can hear a dialogue from a telephone conversation between Richard and somebody from the US State Department. The metallic voice abruptly overlaps with an extreme close-up of Richard and Susan as they come to terms with their past in the intimate space of Anwar's (Mohamed Akhzam) humble home. This shot is followed by a series of quick shots frantically portraying Susan's evacuation in a helicopter while the voice at the end of the line announces that a helicopter should arrive soon and Richard desperately asks: "how long?" He saturates his time to the limit, struggling to stop the biological time that governs Susan's pulse and imposes a temporal limit on her life. In another sequence in Tazarine, the chronological sequence is suppressed when Richard's authoritative voice, demanding from a Moroccan Police Officer an ambulance "now", is previous to the men's actual meeting, while the officer is still seen approaching Anwar's house.



By stressing Richard and Susan's privileged status as white, wealthy, United States citizens in comparison to other characters and the centrality of their narrative strand, *Babel* speculates about and criticizes unequal relations of power across nations and the distinct consequences across borders. The interest that Richard and Susan arouse is underlined by the use of visual and acoustic contrasts and parallelisms. In the closing section of the film, we see the barren Atlas Mountains in Morocco, where the frightened, unarmed, teenage Ahmed has been shot dead by the Moroccan Police. Yussef stares at his brother's body while it is being removed, a long shot zooming-in to a close-up on Yussef emphasizing that he is virtually the only witness of the killing, that Ahmed has died anonymously and unnoticed. In a brief flashback, Yussef nostalgically recalls happy moments playing with his brother in the wind. The music becomes softer, slows down and almost stops, evoking the void left by Ahmed. The motif of the wind that allows the boys' innocent play in the flashback visually connects with the next shot, narrating Susan's evacuation from Tazarine, the wind now produced by a Red Cross helicopter. Hence, the sad meanings associated with the natural wind of Ahmed and Yussef's game contrast with the meanings of hope but also inequality associated with the powerful artificial wind produced by a helicopter which will save Susan's life. The inescapable strong wind spread by the Red Cross global network blows

mercilessly over the anonymous Tazarine bodies, humbly bending down as they try to protect themselves from it. The quick shots render endless examples of similar gestures of people covering their eyes with their hands in order to protect them from the unyielding, penetrating dust, its mighty pervasiveness stressed by the incisive repetition of a few staves from the soundtrack.

This sequence dramatizes the overwhelming of the local by the global. At the same time, the music repeats itself in a spiral of increasingly higher volume, indicating that this is the climax of the film. The media emphasize Susan's nationality suggesting that she will be saved because so many efforts have been devoted to this end, given that she is a privileged citizen from the core of the global security network. At the opposite end of the scale, Moroccan Abdullah, his sons and his neighbors suffer ill treatment by the Moroccan Police, who are trying to keep under control what has become an international crisis. The wind motif linking the two narratives and the use of framing, together with editing and music, underline the contrast between the unequal outcomes of the two tragedies and the relatively uneven interest that they arouse.

These scenes echo others describing Amelia's subordinate position, when she is treated as mere disposable labor by Richard, and later humiliated by the Border Patrol Agent and the deportation officer. The ruthlessness of the Sonoran Desert, metonymically associated with the immensity and severity of the Atlas Mountains in the Moroccan storyline evoke transnational forms of violence in the network society. In *Babel*, the global reach of the shooting and its consequences problematize the non-cosmopolitan, sovereign control of security in order to fight a complex matter concerning the world at large. The film also suggests that the United States finds legitimation in defining security as the supreme value due its dominant position in the global network society, and to the interpretation of the September 2001 events as an attack on 'America'. It is made clear that the sovereignty of the nation-state and the security of its citizens take precedence over the suffering of strangers. *Babel* denounces that, in the wake of 9/11 attacks, the nation-state has become a transnational source of legitimate violence in the global network society.



As discussed, the management and global reach of the war on terrorism is at the basis of the four storylines. We can argue that what actually connects the four narrative strands is a critique of the sovereignty of one nation-state in matters of security, which is gradually shaped as the cause of subsequent global effects. Hence, the viewer is compelled to interweave, and establish causal connections between, the events following Susan's shooting and its pervasiveness throughout the other storylines. For example, Amelia's tragic border-crossing story is presented as a consequence of the shooting, together with Richard's one-sided and inflexible behavior, echoing the US authorities' management of Susan's wrongly labeled

terrorist attack, and the way they actually handled the 9/11 events. This logic is reminiscent of the practices of control and exclusion set up on the US-Mexico border after the 9/11 attacks. These exclusionary protocols go against the notion of "cosmopolitan hospitality", an ethical attitude already proposed by Immanuel Kant in the 18th century as "the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory" (1991: 105). In *Babel*, the viewer is compelled to think about the intertwining structural and narrative layers and the events that lead to Amelia's deportation, together with Ahmed's death and the likely terrible ending for his family in Morocco. Multiple connections lead us to deduce that the unfortunate consequences that some characters suffer are not explained as an apparent converging-fates strategy. While some scenes are riddled with coincidence, misled by the circulating-object device of the rifle and the conventionalized role of chance, the functions of the links between storylines, repetitions highlighting varying points of view, and thematic connections emphasize a causal logic grounded on unbalanced global power dynamics. The uneven structure of *Babel* mirrors positions of domination and subordination enabling one nation-state to define the goals and values in the global war on terror.



In conclusion, this analysis deconstructs *Babel*'s deviant structure as a parallel artifact of the film's thematic critique of state-centered politics in the current network society. The multi-protagonist structure metaphorically embodies the power system of the emergent network society, where dominant functions are organized in networks. In consonance with the unequal network society that *Babel* represents, the centrality and superiority of Richard and Susan's narrative strand resides in its capacity to influence the other three due to its higher interconnectedness —roughly based on the number and nature of its links— and to its networking power, granting a good prospect for programming priorities and values. *Babel* supports the view that global forms of conflict, including the war on terrorism, pose profound challenges, given the potentiality of the global network society to become the site of conflict. The film defends the cosmopolitan need to interrogate the nation-state as the basic unit of political activity. Instead, *Babel* promotes more balanced, transnational political practices grounded on a cosmopolitan understanding of humanity at large.

# Works cited


Azcona, María del Mar. 2010. *The Multi-Protagonist Film*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Beck, Ulrich. 2002. "The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies". *Theory, Culture and Society* 19 (1-2): 17-44.

Beck, Ulrich and Nathan Sznaider. 2006. "Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: a Research Agenda". *The British Journal of Sociology* 57 (1): 1-23.

Bordwell, David. 2006. *The Way Hollywood Tells It. Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Buchanan, Mark. 2003. *Nexus: Small Worlds and the Groundbreaking Theory of Networks*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

Calhoun, Craig J. 2002. "The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism". *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (4): 869-897.

Castells, Manuel. 2004: "Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint". In Castells, M. (ed.) *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective.* Cheltenham, Northampton and Massachusetts: Edward Elgar: 3-45.

—. 2009: C*ommunication Power.* New York: Oxford U.P.

Coleman, James S. 1998. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital". *American Journal of Sociology*. Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure. S95-S120. <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2780243?uid=3737952&uid=2134&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21103176295587>. Accessed December 26, 2013

Delanty, Gerard. 2009. *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Deleyto, Celestino and María del Mar Azcona. 2010. *Alejandro González Iñárritu*. Chicago, Springfield and Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Ezra, Elizabeth and Terry Rowden. 2006. "General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema?" In Ezra, E. and T. Rowden (eds.) *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader.* London and New York: Routledge: 1-13.

Kant, Immanuel. (1970) 1991. "Perpetual Peace". In Reiss, H. (ed.) *Kant: Political Writings*. Trans. by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge U.P.

Kerr, Paul. 2010. "*Babel's* Network Narrative: Packaging a Globalized Art Cinema". *Transnational Cinemas* 1 (1): 37-51.

Rovisco, Maria and Magdalena Nowicka. (eds.) 2011. *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Stevenson, Nick. 2011. "Cosmopolitan Citizenship". In Rovisco, M. and M. Nowicka. (eds.): 243-259.

Urry, John. 2007. *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity.

Van dijk, Jan. (1999) 2006. *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE.

Vertovec, Steven and Robin Cohen. 2002. *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*. Oxford U.P.

Wellman, Barry. 1999. *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*. Boulder: Westview.

# Films cited

Crash (Paul Haggis, 2004)
Syriana (Stephen Gaghan, 2005)
Traffic (Steven Soderbergh, 2000)

Received: 27 January 2014
Accepted: 29 June 2014