

BABEL: from the Biblical story to the González Iñárritu film

Dimitris Hall

Aarhus University

Great Works of Art

Linda Maria Koldau

December 2011

Table of contents

Abstract

The Tower of Babel and the perfect language

Alejandro González Iñárritu's Babel Analysis

Japan

Marocco: Abdullah's family

Morocco: Richard and Susan

Mexico

Themes

Lying

Police as the language of the state

Assumptions

Why Babel is a Great Work of Art // Conclusion

### **Abstract**

The biblical story of the Tower of Babel hints at a perfect, common language that humans used to possess which almost allowed them to reach the heavens. Using and analysing Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's 2006 film Babel, I shall compare the two Babels and how they deal with miscommunication. I will show that the kind of perfect language that the biblical story details is impossible to exist, because of inevitable (mis)uses of language such as lying, and I will explain how verbal, as well as nonverbal communication, their short-comings and strengths and their portrayal, make the 2006 film a great work of art.

## The Tower of Babel and the perfect language

- <sup>1</sup> And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.
- <sup>2</sup> And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.
- <sup>3</sup> And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.
- <sup>4</sup> And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top [may reach] unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.
- <sup>5</sup> And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.
- <sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, Behold, the people [is] one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
- <sup>7</sup> Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.
- <sup>8</sup> So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.
- <sup>9</sup> Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth. <sup>1</sup>

The famous parable of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis talks of how all of humankind once shared a common language. So all-powerful were we when we could communicate completely and perfectly that we almost even built a tower to Heaven. God, of course, would have none of this, so He created misunderstanding and miscommunication in the form of different languages within the people.

To suppose the above as fact would be to suppose that the existence of a common language would actually lead to perfect communication, devoid of any kind of misuse and misunderstanding, a language that would allow humanity to be godlike – perhaps perfect language, in the Bible, would be one of the last remnants from the Garden of Eden. It would also presuppose that a perfect language such as this would be enough to convey meaning alone. The parable underlines the importance of verbal communication for humanity: ‘philosophers, psychologists and linguists commonly make the point that it is the possession of language which most clearly distinguishes man from other animals’

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 11:1-9, King James Edition 1769

(Lyons, 1981, p. 2). Recent studies would show that in fact other animals do possess language, as in the case of the bottle-nosed dolphins, but that is beyond the point.<sup>2</sup>

The point is that humans do not only communicate through language. In fact, the use of nonverbal communication is theorised to be just as, if not more efficient than verbal communication, ‘especially when relational messages are of paramount importance’. (Manusov & Paterson, p. xvi) Nonverbal communication is meant to be ‘facial expressions, bodily movements, vocal cues, and other ways of communication without words’. (Gray & Ambady, p. 43). Perhaps building a tower to Heaven would not count as a relational message, but a quick examination of our everyday lives would show that in fact a lot of our communication with other people is indeed non-verbal.

This new linguistic layer shows that verbal communication, on its own, cannot be perfect. In fact the mere existence of lying as a practice, which requires at a minimum two people that share a common language, makes the very idea of a perfect language fall to pieces. On the other hand, nonverbal means of communication can be very efficient vessels of intentions. While misunderstanding of nonverbal communication can occur (often with cultural variations, such as the same gestures having different meanings), body movements and facial expressions are much more rarely misinterpreted than words. Furthermore, nonverbal communication can be largely involuntary and so can even be used to detect deception in verbal communication (Vrijs, 2004).

In summary, communication, and its breakdown, can be verbal and non-verbal. The Western world has laid its foundations on notions that tend to overlook or completely ignore the importance of nonverbal communication as a supplement or indeed as a valuable set of individual communicational behaviours, as the story of the Tower of Babel or the titular Alejandro González Iñárritu film, go to show.

### **Alejandro González Iñárritu’s Babel: Analysis**

Cinema, just like other visual narrative arts and as opposed to literature or oral storytelling, uses nonverbal communication in great effect, both as part of the narrative technique (since

---

<sup>2</sup> Organisation of Communication System in Tursiops Truncatus Montagu: <http://www.dauphinlibre.be/markovhtm.pdf>

actors imitate realistic behaviour, they also imitate the same realistic nonverbal cues) and the creative freedom particular to the medium (when ‘every image is worth a thousand words’).

Babel uses the full gamut of cinematic techniques to not only portray the miscommunication hinted in the Tower of Babel allegory but to go beyond it. Babel’s script is purposefully in a chronologically confusing --but artistically inspiring-- order; Alejandro González Iñárritu, in his signature style, takes advantages of cinematic innovations to create separate stories that are only gradually tied together into a single narrative. I will analyze the film’s script and depicted events in their chronological order to avoid confusion, while describing some of the scenes that best portray the film’s take on the limits of verbal communication and the potential of the nonverbal sort.

### Japan

Chieko is a deaf-mute teenage girl. Apart from her best friend and her father, she is alone in the world. Boys of her age at first interested in her stand back in horror when they discover her disability. Despite or because of that fact, one of the girl’s chief characteristics is her exhibitionist tendencies, perhaps to counteract this rejection and isolation from men. She quite literally throws herself at anyone she likes, either to make sure they get the message or, at times, just to spite their ‘hearing’ and make them feel uncomfortable. *‘When to touch or to be touched by words is not an option, then body becomes an instrument, as a weapon or an invitation.’*<sup>3</sup> Her aural isolation from the world is often shown beautifully: at specific moments in the film, particularly following scenes with intense emotions and a lot of noise, the viewer is suddenly taken to Chieko’s silent world, where the only means of communication is sign language, facial expressions and the written word. The absence of sound is deafening by itself. Her mother has committed suicide before the events of the film but it is never clear to the viewer how it came to pass; according to Chieko, her mother jumped from their apartment’s balcony but her father later insists that Chieko was the first to discover her mother’s body, shot in the head.

The real story begins when the police want to speak with Chieko’s father. They want to question him about a rifle that was ‘used by terrorists’ in Morocco. Apparently, that rifle was registered to his name. Chieko’s father confirms that he gave this rifle to his hunting guide when he

---

<sup>3</sup> Imagining Babel: The script: <http://www.visualhollywood.com/movies/babel/about3.php>

was at a hunting trip in Morocco as a gift and a token of appreciation – an apparent trick of fate, as what was meant as a gift was to become the trigger of the unfortunate or tragic events depicted in the film.

The same police officer was previously with Chieko in her home, where he had invited him supposedly to talk to him about the case but really to make a move on him. She appears completely naked to him and tries to make him have sex with her but he refuses – not because he does not want to but because Chieko is underage, a fact she herself probably does not care for.

After many failed attempts to find some love and reassurance, having also been betrayed by her best friend (also deaf-mute) for a boy, this is the final straw for Chieko's self-esteem. Her crying in that scene is amazingly loud and agonised – she can't hear it and we haven't heard any other sound leave her mouth before either. The contrast is shocking. The police investigator, obviously shocked as well, tries to comfort her. She writes him a note which she urges him to read later, alone. When he does, with the companionship of some sake, he is obviously touched. But we never learn what she wrote for him.

In the final scene of both the film and the Japanese sub-plot, Chieko's dad returns to his apartment to find his daughter standing on the balcony naked, 'hurt, but whole'<sup>4</sup>. He goes to her; she holds his hand and cries in his hug. In this scene, as with many in the film, no words are uttered but the message is perfectly clear.

### **Morocco: Abdullah's family**

Hassan, the man to whom Chieko's dad gifted the rifle, in the first scene of the film, sells the weapon to a family. They need it to kill jackals that threaten their herd of goats. The two boys of the family take an interest to the rifle from the start. One of them, Yussef, is much better than the other one, Ahmed, at shooting and hitting things. They try to shoot rocks that are far away to test the claim of Hassan that its range is 3km. They progressively try different targets, when they start shooting at some moving cars from their mountainous, desolate vantage point. They had no intention to harm the people inside, just to see if the rifle and cartridges were good. When Ahmed repeatedly misses and blames the gun, Yussef tries shooting at a passing bus. The bus stops and they can hear screams from afar; they run away.

---

<sup>4</sup> Babel Script: <http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Babel.html>

The very same day, rumours that an American tourist has been killed by ‘terrorists’ emerge and reach the family’s household. The children, shocked at this development, do not come forth. Soon, the police is investigating the matter and manage to track the cartridges back to Hassan. They assume he was responsible and start beating him to force him to admit his crime. He directs them to the family he sold the rifle to. On their way, by chance, they meet the brothers and ask for directions to Abdullah (their father’s) house. They lie to him but know that they’re only buying time. They return home and Ahmed admits their crime to their father, putting all of the weight on Yussef’s shoulders – he also gives away other of his brothers, lesser, secrets to make himself immune to their father’s understandable exasperation. Soon they leave together, leaving the women of the family behind and instructing them to also mislead the policemen when they arrive.

Soon, the police find Ahmed and his sons running away in the mountains. On sight, they start shooting at them. They hit Ahmed. Once Yussef sees that, he starts using the rifle, hitting a policeman in return. Once he realises that his brother is actually dead from the shot, he destroys the rifle hitting it on the rocks, walks up to the police and admits his crime, asking from the police to kill him but save his brother.

### **Morocco: Richard and Susan**

Richard and Susan are an American couple in Morocco for holidays. They have a troubled past, marked by the death of one of their three children and the subsequent running away of Richard. This trip was to make them forget. In the beginning of their story, Susan and Richard exchange a lot of silent looks and gestures that betray their sensitive relationship.

While they’re in the tour bus, Susan suddenly is hit by a bullet in the shoulder and is badly wounded. The bus is in the middle of nowhere and no help can come to them in time. Anwar, their tour guide, offers to take them, by necessity together with the rest of the group, to his village, the closest place where they could find a doctor.

Rumours spread that ‘terrorists’ were behind the shooting. The tour group is afraid to stay at the village, fearing that they would be easy pray for other terrorists, but Richard begs of everyone to be patient. Anwar takes Susan and Richard in his home and calls the village doctor to help. Anwar serves at the interpreter between the doctor and Richard. At some point, the doctor tells Anwar that Susan might bleed to death, and he looks worried. Richard asks Anwar what the doctor said and Anwar replies that he said that Susan’s going to be fine. Richard detects the lie however



from the hesitation and anxiety in Anwar's voice and angrily demands a truthful translation. In the end, the doctor does stitch Susan up after great upset.

Some of the better scenes of the film come in this narrative arc when Anwar's grandmother prepares some opium in her pipe and offers it to Susan. Until then Susan has been in a semi-deliric state. But even though they cannot speak the same language, the grandmother's gesture and the opium take the pain away from Susan, who finally breaks her wall of mistrust for everyone in the village and relaxes for the first time. She best connects back with Richard when she admits to him that she has urinated in her pants because she was not allowed to --or could not have-- moved, because of the bullet still being in her shoulder. He finds a pan and holds her so that she can urinate in it. It is a very emotional scene that allows her to trust her husband again after he had abandoned her when their baby died. Again, it is acts, not words, that convey the most meaning, and most of the scene is done in silence broken only by tears of intense forgiveness and emotion.

In the more general scheme of things, Richard fails to convince the rest of the tour group to wait for them as the rest of the tourists get increasingly anxious. They eventually leave together with the bus, so now Richard and Susan's only hope is an ambulance. When the police come to inform Richard that no ambulance can actually reach the village, Richard takes out his anger on not only the officer but on Anwar as well, ordering them to somehow make the ambulance arrive. In fact, the US embassy itself has disallowed any Moroccan ambulance to come pick Susan up, apparently because of their, understandable but mislead, fear of terrorists. When Richard comes in contact with the embassy through the village's only phone, they tell him that they will send a helicopter to pick them up, as happens in the end. Susan is operated on in a big hospital and is eventually healed. The couple becomes famous everywhere in the world as the victims of terrorists.

### **Mexico**

Amelia is the Mexican nanny for Richard and Susan's children. She is like a mother to them and has taken care of them all their lives, forming a strong connection with them. The family lives in San Diego. Her son is getting married and she was planning to go to the wedding when Richard calls from Morocco and asks her to stay behind and take care of the children on the day of the wedding. He has no choice; he has no time and energy to find another nanny, so he practically forces Amelia to work on the day of her son's wedding. Failing to find a suitable replacement for

the day, she decides to take the children with her across the border to Tijuana, where the wedding is taking place, figuring nothing bad could happen. Her nephew Santiago comes to pick them up.

In Mexico we see a very different country than the US, even in Tijuana which is literally on the border. In the wedding scenes we catch a glimpse of Mexican culture which the little children are really shocked by, especially a scene such as the beheading of a chicken for the wedding dinner.

After the party, Santiago, drunk, offers to drive Amelia and the children back to San Diego. At the border crossing the police control them. Amelia looks nervous and Santiago, while trying to hide that he is drunk, says that he is the children's uncle, which of course draws suspicion from the police. Amelia tells them that she is the nanny, but when the police ask for parent permission she cannot produce it since she really never got permission. She fakes looking for the permission in her bag. Meanwhile, the officer realises that Santiago is intoxicated and ask him to exit the car. At this point, Santiago makes a totally unexpected move and accelerates away from the border control and into the US. Trying to outrun the police which is now on their lead, Santiago drives into the desert and leaves Amelia and the children there, promising he will come back to pick them up. He never does.

Amelia is left with the children in the middle of the desert and starts panicking. When the next day breaks, she tries to find help but can't when the children are complaining, so she leaves them under the shade a tree, making them a thousand promises that she will come back with help. The help comes in the form of a border patrol car. The patrolman arrests her while she is sobbing that the children are out there and that they will die if they do not go to pick them up. Eventually they do try to find them but they can't; every tree looks like any other in the middle of the desert...

Amelia is taken to the police department. The police inform her that the children have been found but accuse her of transporting the children illegally and that her crime is deemed serious enough that she is to be deported to Mexico. None of her pleas seem to reach the police officer who is ruthless and determined. When she says that she wants to see a lawyer, the reply comes that if she pursues the case in trial she will \*only be prolonging the inevitable\*<sup>5</sup>. Forced to leave all of her possessions, her house, her life in San Diego, Amelia, crushed, is sent to Mexico where she is welcomed by her son.

---

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

## THEMES

### Lying

A common theme between the stories is lying, perhaps meaning to underline how common its use, voluntary or involuntary, is in everyday communication between people, how necessary it is to make a believable script based on verbal communication, what an inseparable part of verbal communication it is.<sup>6</sup> For all of the above reasons, as well as that the specific topic Babel deals with is miscommunication, many different kinds of lies feature in the film.

In the case of Chieko and her father, both have a different story on how the mother had committed suicide. We cannot know what the truth is, but one of them is either lying or just has a different perception of reality: the extent to which this could be considered actual lying is of course debatable. In the case of the Moroccan family, the brothers lie to not only protect themselves but also protect their family. They know they did something wrong and try to avoid the consequences – this is the biggest difference with Amelia’s lying to the police, when she pretends to be looking for the parents’ permission: she knows she did nothing wrong but is faced with the law’s different opinion on the matter. What’s right and wrong and what would be considered ‘white lying’ and what not deserves a moment for reflection. Finally, Anwar’s lies to Richard about what the doctor says about Susan could be because he wanted to soothe his pain, reassure him or even avoid his anger or disappointment.

We can see that lying as an act by itself relies on a common language understood and spoken by all parties, but that is not enough for perfect meaning to be conveyed at all times: nonverbal cues are usually sufficient for the detection of a lie. It is also obvious that lying as a practice is very morally gray: is it justifiable to lie in the right situation? A perfect language that would convey perfect meaning would need to phase out lying altogether, but with imperfect humans working with different ethical frameworks each, this would be impossible.

---

<sup>6</sup> UMass researcher finds most people lie in everyday conversation: [http://www.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2002-06/uoma-urf061002.php](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2002-06/uoma-urf061002.php)

### **Police as the language of the state**

In every sub-plot in *Babel* the police make an appearance with a different role in each. The police represent the language of the law, of the state, a being of varying degrees of morality and rigidity depending on the governing state culture. The U.S. police in particular, as shown in Amelia's subplot, are much more ready to arrest and pursue offenders and treat them very badly, not really listening to their pleas. In a way, even though Amelia and the police are able to speak in the same language (Amelia's English is broken but understandable), one speaks the language of love and the other that of force. Compatibility is doomed. Moroccan police, on the other hand, is helpful, if violent, but is able to see through the clear-cut word of the law to the core of the situation and serve justice accordingly, as seen in the scene of Ahmed's death and Yussef's surrender. Furthermore, we can see how relative communication can be, since the Moroccan police also come in contact with Richard, from which they passively receive a verbal assault when they cannot secure an ambulance, which is out of their jurisdiction anyway. In Japan, the police is very polite, helpful, but a little too persistent. Chieko's father misunderstands the officer's intentions when he is offered condolences for his wife and asks him to not bother his family anymore, going to show once again that previous assumptions can get in the way of meaningful communication and a sincere, heartfelt remark can be easily misunderstood.

### **Assumptions**

Just like in the scene mentioned directly above, assumptions run throughout *Babel* and create a lot of the misunderstanding and miscommunication shown. One of the chief misunderstandings and assumptions created was that made by US officials: that the accident at Morocco was a work of terrorists. This raised global attention on the incident and upped the ante of all involved, making it more difficult for Richard and Susan to move to safety and making Abdullah and his family wanted targets. Another was the assumption both from Amelia that it would be alright to cross the border with the children illegally but also that of her nephew that offered to take them back while drunk. The police also assume that that Amelia is dangerous. Chieko makes the assumption that other men do not like her when it might even be that her over-eagerness is what is putting them off, or the fact that she is underage but not unattractive (as in the case with the police officer).

### WHY BABEL IS A GREAT WORK OF ART // CONCLUSION

Babel tells truths that we have forgot about what it means to be human and what communication with fellow humans is about. Using various instances of successful and unsuccessful verbal and nonverbal communication ingrained in the script or in the cinematic techniques, it shows how simple but at the same time difficult communication can be. Babel plays with the concept of the titular allegory of the Tower of Babel, showing how miscommunication has been a constant issue throughout history but turns the problem on its head, suggesting that even if such a thing as a perfect language did exist there would still be miscommunication; it paints a clear picture of the tragic human condition. At the same time, it shows how beautiful a successful exchange can be. This endless strive for common understanding is what still makes us human – if the Tower of Babel has one idea right is that a perfect language would be used by gods, not humans.

Alejandro González Iñárritu underlines the above problems but most of all puts together the following great components: a melancholy soundtrack by Gustavo Santaolalla, excellent, communicative acting by the full cast, a lot of which are not even professionals, and finally a script by Guillermo Arriaga, subsequently edited by Iñárritu, that captures the full range of layers or orders of misunderstanding, including verbal, lingual, physical, cultural, assumptive, deceitful and everything in between. González Iñárritu's final work is a story that is of 'tragedy and transcendence, the personal and global – and each involves an overarching yearning for communication'. The masterfully done, non-chronologically linear narrative makes it a tighter, more exciting piece of film, a fact which adds to its overall worth.

Finally, it could be said that film is a representation of successful communication in two ways. First, in the collaboration required for its creation: all the people involved need to co-operate and follow the director's vision or else the result might be disappointing or a confused mess. Secondly, and most importantly: '*...González Iñárritu contends that the universal, visual language of film is one way that artists can break through the borders and miscommunications he explores in Babel. "I believe that languages can be like a mirage that misleads and confuses us. They can make us more suspicious of people we see as others. But I also think there's no tool more perfect for breaking away from the language barrier than powerful images and music. Images don't need*

*translation because they trigger universal human emotions. Film is as close to Esperanto as it gets," he summarizes.*<sup>7</sup>

## **Bibliography**

- Lyons, John. (1981). *Language and Linguistics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Manusov, V & Patterson, L. (ed, 2006). *The Sage Handbook of Nonverbal Communication*, Sage Publications, London
- Vrij, A. (2006) *Nonverbal Communication and Deception*, 2006, featured in Manusov, V & Patterson, L (ed. 2006)

---

<sup>7</sup> Imagining Babel: The script: <http://www.visualhollywood.com/movies/babel/about3.php>