

# Babel essay

Sociology, Communication



## **Intercultural communication in Babel**

Intercultural communication is the transfer/exchange of information amongst cultures. What information is intended to mean and how it is interpreted by the recipients vary by virtue of how the information is portrayed. This becomes evident through a thorough and in-depth critique of the film *Babel* by Alejandro Iñárritu. *Babel* (2006) is a contemporary attempt to reveal the contemporary cultural diversity and various intercultural and communication challenges faced by the ordinary characters in the film.

In this pursuit, the film producer, Alejandro Iñárritu, refers to three main cinematic strategies:

(1) Emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity; Iñárritu sets the action in several places; including Tokyo, the Atlas Mountains, San Diego, and Tijuana, Mexico. (2) Use of ordinary people to emphasize on numerous riddles occurring within intercultural communicative process. (3) Application of several languages: English, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, and sign language (Iñárritu, 2006).

In keeping with Alejandro González, the director of the film, the selective translation of sentences and deliberate use of subtitles forces the audience to hypothesize over the things said by the characters depending on the context. For instance, he uses conversations between Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett to enable the viewer analyze what words such as Americanization and imperialism mean with respect to the context they speak them in.

Donatella Landi, in his review of the film, indicates that even though the characters continually strive to overcome the linguistic barriers by using body language, gestures and written words, or using their second language,

still there is always someone who fails to understand what is others are saying (Landi 249-250). Chieko does use body language to communicate with the policeman but eventually not everything is properly communicated between the two.

Finally, Iñárritu makes us sympathize with the characters by stressing that they are neither heroes nor villains; conversely, he shows them as the victims of the circumstances and multiple difficulties arising within intercultural communication. He uses a conversation between Chieko, her dad Chieko and her peers to clarify this point since they fall victim of communication challenges when trying to communicate.

According to Michael Davidson (2008), the Babel involves various cross-cultural situations that metaphorically reveal the real world we live in (250). The particular episode indicating the complexity of intercultural communication occurs in the bar when young man decided to approach the attractive Chieko in a tentative manner. After realizing she is deaf-mute, he instantly gets frustrated and eventually turns his back on her. Further in the film, Chieko and her deaf-mute friends have a sign language conversation at a noisy café in Tokyo.

While her deaf-mute peers challenged by the similar quotidian difficulties and social prejudices easily understand Chieko, the other clients at the café simply ignore their sign language communication. In this episode, the producer deliberately refers to the surrounding noise as an allusion to the overwhelming excess of information in the modern world that disturbs normal communicative process. Justifiably, the conceptual paradigm of the film that reflects the metaphoric spirit of Babel is reflected by how Brad Pitt,

Koji Yakusho, Cate Blanchett, and Gael García Bernal appear as authentic, stereotypical, flat, dynamic or static.

Samovar et al analyze intercultural communication and write that while most of the viewers generally fail to make sense of what is being said by young deaf-mutes and the speakers of different languages, they are highly unlikely to interpret the core message correctly. Hence, the film makes us realize that intercultural communication primarily assumes errors between the speakers coming from different cultural backgrounds. The film is thus set in different locations in various continents to help us understand that no matter the background of origin, intercultural communication will ensure barriers and errors such as prejudice and stereotypes are overcome so as the recipient decodes the message correctly. Below is one such set in the film in Tokyo, Japan:

Eventually, such misunderstandings provoke the conflicts that are plenty throughout the film. The overall wisdom of the film is that everyone should strive to establish a communication with minimum ambiguities to get heard and, most importantly, understood in a globalized world (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel 5).

In the film Babel, the portrayal of intercultural communication takes a different angle whereby through withdrawing the viewers from their comfort cultural and linguistic zone, the film highlights that there is no universal paradigm in a rather diverse and multicultural Babylonian world, wherein everyone is virtually lost if he/she fails to properly communicate with others. Susan and Richard Jones overcome challenges in communication to enable a cordial relationship.

While describing this multicultural reality, Marie Gillespie offers the notion of “axis of difference” (Gillespie 11). The notion emphasizes on the variety in the multi-polar world where there is no center of authority. At that, the ‘axis’ indicates that there is nothing constant in dynamic intercultural communication (Gillespie, 1995, P. 11).

In conclusion, Alejandro Iñárritu uses the settings, characterizations, themes and inter-related stories in the film to emphasize that a globalized world such as the post-modern one requires individuals who overrule the ambiguities to communicate effectively amongst diverse cultures.

## **Works Cited**

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