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Babel is Us: Self, Grief and Surrender in a Film of A. G. Iñárritu

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Abstract

In this paper I suggest the possibility of an analogy between the experience of grief and that of communication based on the common element of surrender. I propose an interpretation of the film Babel, by Alejandro González Iñárritu, according to which the film provides four examples of how surrender and reciprocal trust is crucial to survival. I focus on the sense of disconnectedness that affects some of Iñárritu's characters and explore how they are able to resolve it through the encounter with others. In the end, I reflect on the paradoxes that are at the heart of the film and how they are a feature of human life itself, what makes people feel closer beyond the borders of language and nationalities.

INTRODUCTION

“Where are the men?” the little prince at last took up the conversation again. “It is a little lonely in the desert...”

“It is also lonely among men,” the snake said.

(Antoine Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*)

The central idea of this paper is that the experience of an existential crisis and the loss of a loved one can throw the human being in a state of disconnectedness from the self, from others and from the world, which can result in a breakdown of the possibility of communication and affect one's most important relationships, as well as one's self-understanding.

I argue that this state of disconnectedness is what the film is about and what the title refers to with the term “Babel,” the town whose language, according to the biblical story, God had to mix to prevent the people to be able to build a tower high enough to reach Heaven. Through the analysis of the four stories which form the plot of the film, I explore the different aspects of this state of disconnectedness, the reasons that trigger it and the experiences that are able to restore the human bond to others and the world.

The film focuses on the intertwining of four family stories across four different countries:

- Chieko is a Japanese teenage girl whose mother has committed suicide by shooting herself with father's hunting gun;
- The rifle is given as a gift to a Moroccan farmer, who sells it to a friend. The new owner's two children shoot a tourist bus while playing with the same gun;
- The bullet hits an American tourist, Susan, who is travelling on the bus with her husband;
- The children of the American tourists are taken to Mexico by their nanny, Amelia, without permission, what will cause Amelia's arrest and expatriation from USA.

The first question that arises when watching the film is: what is the link between these stories? Is there a single thread running across all of them? The travelling of the rifle from one family to the other seems to suggest a link between the characters' fate, as they all experience a tragic event in the family life. One theme of the film seems indeed to be the characters' struggle with their grieving and the need to wash it away from their lives. The film suggests that dealing with grief is an experience of particular emotional complexity, which requires an exceptional effort of empathy and self-understanding. A possible way to look at the characters' experience of grief is that of seeing their surrender to it as the special ingredient for recovering from a crisis and reconnect to the self and the world.

The experience of surrendering is, however, something that one does not always achieve easily. For some of the characters in this film, it implies a falling down to a state of total disbelief in oneself, in one's own self-conception, in which one risks despair, distrust and disappointment. In other terms, this is an experience of, metaphorically, reckoning with death and rebirth.

As I will explain in the three examples shortly, there are different degrees and levels on which the experience of self-surrendering appears in the film. Nevertheless, the film offers the overarching idea that what one has to surrender to is, mainly, the fact of one's dependence on others and the others' essential involvement in one's ability to make sense of things.

This act of surrendering to the others' understanding of ourselves is at the hearth of communication, is what makes communication possible. This has also been a central topic of the Kyoto colloquium and is a theme strongly present in the film *Babel*. The familial relationships represented in the film seem all affected by miscommunication.

A reference to Derrida's *Monolingualism*, which was a suggested reading of the colloquium, can help to focus on what links communication to the experience of grieving. Communication is not a mere transfer of information from one person to another. What is to be received is not just the sound of a word but its source (the person) and meaning. As Derrida puts it, communication is not granted by the competence and mastery of a language, for language is never in our total possession. It requires, rather, acceptance of the other's testimony:

“Yet it will never be mine, this language, the only one I am thus destined to speak, as long as speech is possible for me in life and in death; you see, never will this language be mine. And, truth to tell, it never was.

You at once appreciate the source of my sufferings, the place of my passions, my desires, my prayers, the vocation of my hopes, since this language runs right across them all” (Derrida 1998, p.2).

What is to notice, in this account, is that the emphasis on our deficit of control on the language does not appear as a negative limitation but as what, actually, makes communication a possibility for human beings. The language is pictured as something that we do not possess or dispossess but as a flow in which we already are and lets us be. What matters in communication is, then, this joining in the flow so that it brings into being something of us: sufferings, passions, desires, prayers, hopes, which are the source and nature of any act of communication, its proper context. It is there that we must look to find meaning and truth, to find mutual understanding. Communication becomes tricky when we demand that it happens through the accurate performance of a speech act. It becomes smoother when the speakers are ready to

trust each other, to take on the risks of misunderstanding and disappointment entailed in accepting someone's testimony and that are attached to any possibility of relationship with others. In other words, when they are capable of surrendering to the limitations of the mother tongue and of the language itself. This brief discussion of the Derridean conception of language paves the way to see the analogy between the experience of grieving and of communicating.

What these human conditions have in common is their relying on reciprocal trust and the need to let go. While in communication this implies accepting the limitedness of others' words as well as of one's own words in making sense of situations and conflicts, in the experience of grieving, it implies surrendering to something that we cannot completely make sense of or change, and accepting that one's existence does not only depends on self-reliance and autonomy but also on others' capacity for love and care.

LOSING ONESELF AT THE OTHER'S HANDS

Amelia is the Mexican nanny of Susan and Richard's two children. The couple, which is on a trip to Morocco, is due to come back in time for Amelia to attend her son's wedding in Mexico. However, as Susan is shot, Richard phones Amelia to tell her that their return is delayed and that she can't leave the children. She decides to take the kids with her to the wedding without asking for the parents' permission. On the way back to California, her nephew, who is driving them home, has a quarrel with the border police, causing Amelia's arrest for kidnapping of the two children. The following dialogue taking place between Amelia and the police officer shows the striking contrast between Amelia's feeling about the incident and the police officer's version of the facts:

POLICE OFFICER (CONT'D)

You've committed serious crimes.

AMELIA

I just took the kids to my son's wedding.

POLICE OFFICER

No ma'am, you did not just do that.

You took them to another country without their parents' permission and you put them in danger.

AMELIA

Sir, I raised these kids since they were born. I take care of them day and night. I feed them breakfast, lunch and dinner. I play with them. Mike and Debbie are like my own children.

POLICE OFFICER

(sternly)

But they are not your kids, ma'am.

This scene is particularly moving, as Amelia's sincere despair for the pain she has, unintentionally, caused to the children and for the impact that the arrest will have on her whole life is contrasted with the detached, uncaring response of the police officer, who confronts her with the descriptions of the crimes she has committed.

We are, thus, presented with two competing views of Amelia, which correspond to two different ways of talking about her. The picture of the loving and caring nanny is displaced by the police officer's way of depicting her like a criminal. Which is the real Amelia, we might ask? Both ways of seeing Amelia are, at once, true and false. While we know that she sincerely loves the children, we also know that her decision to go to Mexico has actually put the kids in danger. This scene, we could say, perfectly describes what a lack of communication looks like. It is a "non-dialogue," rather than a dialogue. Since the police officer rejects Amelia's testimony, the viewpoints of the two speakers remain in opposition. The film, here, shows how the failure of communication and the loss of grab on one's own life are always a possibility lurking around the human condition. Being in the world means accepting the course of our own life to be shaped, partly, through the others' perception of our actions and dealing with descriptions of ourselves that we don't identify with. Whatever might be our feelings and thoughts about ourselves, we are called to face the consequences of our actions on the life of others as well as the consequences of other people's actions on our own life. One of these unpredictable variables is that people we trust betray us and force us to address issues that we are not prepared to solve – in Amelia's story, the behaviour of her nephew, whom she trusts, is the cause of her disappointment and troubles. The arrest, the job loss and expatriation are events that throw Amelia in a state of non-belonging from which she can recover – as in the last scene in which we see her – only by the token of her son's silent hug.

FINDING ONESELF IN THE OTHER'S HANDS

Richard and Susan are an American couple with two children, whose third new-born baby has died of "white death." The film shows the couple fighting back the sorrow and the problems of communication during a holiday to Morocco. They are, however, unable to enjoy their time and express their feelings to each other, as they find hard even to talk about the reason of their trip. The film scene in which, sitting for dinner in a village, Susan uses her own cutlery for fear of germs, suggests that the reason of such a disconnection between wife and husband might lie in Susan's loss of trust in the external world and, generally, in other people, as a consequence of having experienced something – her baby's early death – that she cannot make sense of and seems to her irrational. The external world has become unintelligible to Susan and everyone else is a "foreigner" to her, including her husband. Borrowing one of Naoko Saito's key concepts, we could say that for Susan to regain trust in others, she needs a new 'translation' of the world. According to Saito, the "miracle of translation" occurs when we are able to see ourselves through the other's eyes (Saito 2022, slide.75). For Susan, this will entail the scary experience of having her life depending totally from others' care.

Let us look closely at the film scenes. After the gunshot hits her into the shoulder, Susan is taken into a house in a village in the middle of the desert. While Richard goes to look for medical aid, she is left in the care of an old Moroccan woman. A vet is the only medical support available in the village, and she will need to have her wound stitched with a re-used

needle without any anaesthetic. In other words, Susan will have to face her worst fears, that of being left defenceless in the hands of complete strangers, at a time that she cannot consciously and rationally choose, rather, when the time chooses her. The scene in which the Moroccan old woman looks after her, gives her some herbal drugs to smoke to relieve her from the pain and says prayers for her is a key moment for Susan's inner revolution. As she starts to recover thanks to the help of these people and the extraordinary devotion of her husband, she abandons herself into the others' care and is able to express her feelings of guilt for her baby's death and of love for Richard. The experience of finding herself in the caring hands of others appears as crucial to the possibility of "letting go," which is at the heart of grieving as well as of trusting others. The film has many shots dwelling on Susan's eyes, which help us to see how she begins to focus on the others and begins to 'read' the world around her. Recalling Naoko Saito's words, we might say that through the experience of being in the others' hands, Susan is given the gift of translation. The others' loving response is what restores her flow of connection to the world. As Saito writes, "The gift of translation enables us to undergo the moment of crisis – the crisis of the loss of and separation from the world, which we thought to be the basis of our culture, our language, and our selves – and to celebrate the miracle of rebirth"¹.

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Chieko's story is specular to that of Susan and Richard. Chieko and her dad are grieving the death of the girl's mum and, like Susan, Chieko experiences the difficulty of coming to terms with her overwhelming grief – made more challenging by the fact she is deaf-mute. However, while Susan reacts with closing herself to the world, Chieko throws herself into the world, trying to attract others' attention and interest by attempting to seduce complete strangers. Chieko's linguistic disability has a parallel in her emotional difficulty. She is unable to express what she feels not only because of a lack of speech but also because of her struggle to "translate" her own feelings to herself and to others.

Chieko's existential crisis will find a way of resolution only after someone will be able to get the message right. Having known of her mother's suicide, the detective who is investigating the case comes to understand Chieko's act of offering her body to him as a desperate call for care. The man covers her with his coat and allows her to hold his hand in an act which seems to refer to Chieko's regression to infancy.

The film seems to suggest strongly, here, that the performance of communication does not rely much on the speakers sharing an idiom – the detective does not understand Chieko's sign language and Susan does not understand Moroccan dialect – but on their ability to read other kinds of signs, those related to life histories and experiences. No matter how much extrovert or willing we are to reach the other. If the other is not able to see what "shines through our words," to read the history that we are, it will never happen. The film, also, points to the forms of mutual acceptance and closeness between human beings that make grief bearable and nurture individuals' sense of belonging into the world. This form of acknowledgment is not just a request from a daughter to a father, or from a wife to a husband. Rather, what is at stake is what Derrida calls "an address," a call from human being to human being. In my opinion, this is the reason why the stranger – in the role of the detective in Chieko's story, and in the role of

the old Moroccan woman in Susan's story – comes to play a key role in allowing the characters to “stitch their wounds” or, out of metaphor, to let go of the pain and overcome their crisis. It is through an experience of total abandonment in the hands of others who are able to respond to their most intimate needs of love, that Chieko and Susan find their “language” again, the gift of translation which makes them not foreign anymore to others and to themselves.

SURRENDER

Another key story of the film, which has not been taken into account until now, is that of the two Moroccan children who, while playing with the hunting gun, shoot the bus in which Susan and Richard are. As the police chases them through the mountains, believing them to be terrorists, they hide behind some rocks with their father and try to shoot back at the police. But when the big brother is fatally injured in the shooting, the little brother comes out and surrenders, begging the police to save his brother. This scene seems to be turning down all the tensions of the film and bringing it to an end. Thus, the chain of conflicts and troubles triggered by the gun is being stopped and closed down through the act of surrendering. This seems to point to the fact that, to allow peace to take over, always in a conflict – be it an interior conflict of the self or one between two parts – one part must surrender. In life, as in communication, one must accept this condition if one is to save important relationships. In other words, our hands are always somehow tied, and we are all a bit like Chieko – in the sense of being limited in our possibility of expression – as we are often caught in situations that are partly out of our control. Surrender appears the only way out of such situations, and comes to have an active rather than passive role. This kind of surrender is different from a simple giving up. While the latter implies a loss of energy and will, the former implies the performance of courage, as it means accepting the responsibility that comes with our involvement in events, even when we have not chosen to be in them. The child who surrenders to the police in the final moments of the film is not a child anymore but someone who is forced to learn too early that sometimes being strong means being weak, as he succumbs to his greater will of saving his brothers' life – not just to the police's greater power of fire.

CONCLUSION

I believe one of the initial scenes of the film, before it takes its very tense rhythm, contains a dialogue that is key to understand the film as I see it. It is the scene in which Susan and Richard sit together at an improvised dinner table in the middle of the Moroccan desert.

RICHARD (CONT'D)
This country is incredible.

SUSAN
Richard, why did we come here?

RICHARD
What d'you mean why? I thought you would like it.

SUSAN

Really: why are we here?

RICHARD

To forget everything, to be alone.

Two things struck me in these lines. First, the possibility to understand the question “why are we here?” as referred not only to the context of the trip to Morocco, but also to the general condition of the human, our unexplained being on Earth. The second interesting thing concerns Richard’s paradoxical answer. Is it ever possible for the human being to be alone among others? And what for?

According to the story that Amelia tells the children at bedtime, mankind is made of hawks and birds, predators and preys. As the film shows – and the bedtime story confirms – they belong inevitably to the same family. Traitor and the betrayed, savior and the saved still rely on each other to be who they are. The characters of the story might have different nationalities on their passports, they might speak different idioms, have opposite temperaments, but what makes them all alike is their human condition, their being trapped together in the game of life. All of the four stories have something of the paradox of being in such a game: Susan and Richard travel far away from home to forget and be alone but they find themselves in the care of others; Amelia loses the children she is in care of just to find that she is in need of her own son’s care; Chieko looks for a stranger to seduce and finds in a stranger someone who acts as a father to her; two young brothers compete for the best shooter and find themselves to have to protect each other from a shower of bullets. If we wouldn’t be able to find a meaning in all this, we should declare human life completely ruled by chaos. That is, a Babel. Thus, when the tragic hits our life, we ask in anger “Why me?” but we don’t do the same when someone, even a stranger, surprises us with an act of love, trust or care. Is it not because, perhaps, we feel that we are entitled to love? Is it not because, maybe, we understand the other’s care as a universal language, the only language that can ever make sense?

NOTES

1. I refer, here, to Naoko Saito’s presentation at the Kyoto colloquium, slide 79.

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