

Film History

Babylonian complications

By Maximilian G. Burkhardt



Source: Tobis Film GmbH

“Behind every window lurks a story.” Modern urban films deal not with cities but the people who live in them. Isolation, lack of communication and the world of work are their major concerns, says film scholar Fabienne Liptay.

“And the Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep,” it says in Genesis. At first there is just an inky blackness on the screen. But the viewer hears something; wind gusting across a stony desert landscape. Then a man wearing a turban appears. A short time later a shot rings out. That is how *Babel*, directed by Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu begins, though the opening scene does not show the advent of the story. Among other awards, the film won the prize for best direction at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, and is regarded as the first attempt to make a film about globalization.

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Solitary human figures in the emptiness of the desert – an intriguing setting for, and an oblique reference to, the theme evoked by the title – the city. Of course, this theme has had a long and illustrious history in the cinema and in other art forms. Mention the term “urban movies” and every filmgoer will think of cities like New York, London, Paris, which have been the dominant presences in the genre. “Films set in, or dealing with, cities always activate certain visual associations,” says film scholar Fabienne Liptay, Junior Professor at LMU Munich: “It is almost impossible to see the Eiffel

Tower in the cinema and not picture, in the mind’s eye, a heart symbol floating above it.”

But the world, and the economics of film production and marketing, has changed. The training of today’s filmmakers has become international, and the teams they work with are international. Globalization has had an impact on the funding of films, but also on their subject matter, says Liptay. The screen is almost totally black. Hardly anything can be discerned, but one hears screams, distraught voices, farewell messages on answering machines, radio reports, metallic noises, sirens, muffled, high-pitched tones played by the Kronos Quartet, and the prayers of the Chamula Indians. This is how Alexander Ernst, in his blog “perspektive89”, describes Iñárritu’s contribution to Alain Brigand’s collective film *11’09’01*. The title evokes both its theme and its form. Each episode deals with the trauma of 9/11, depicted by 11 minutes of “visual silence,” in a single static shot. “Since 9/11, the New York skyline has been a significant absence in American films. Hollywood speaks of the trauma by pointedly not referring to it,” explains Liptay, citing the poster for *Spider-Man* that was withdrawn by Sony shortly before the film opened. The motif showed the Twin Towers, still intact, reflected in the eyes of the film’s hero. However, American filmmakers have since reacted

intensely to the events of 9/11 – either dealing directly with the harrowing events in movies like Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* or Paul Greengrass’ *United 93*, or presenting wishful scenarios of retribution as in Tony Scott’s *Déjà Vu* or Duncan Jones’ *Source Code*.

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One cannot accuse *Babel* of rehashing conventional effects. The film is set on four continents, North and South America, Asia and Africa, and comprises 28 sequences, which are cross-cut to present four parallel narratives. Such “network narratives” are typical of contemporary episodic films, says Liptay. They provide a formal response to a world that is more interconnected and apparently more complex than ever before. *Babel* unfolds primarily in desert landscapes, the Moroccan Sahara and the Sonora Desert in Northern Mexico. One of its narrative threads develops in San Diego, but the city is never shown on screen. That story is elaborated south of the border, in deceptively rural Tijuana. *Babel* touches on the imagery of conventional cinematic treatments of the city only in the scenes that are set in Tokyo. Only here, in the first real megacity in the world, does Iñárritu exploit the stereotypes of the cinematic city – or so it may seem. In fact, the protagonists

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move about in the cityscapes of Tokyo as if they were in a trackless waste. The deaf mute Chieko, traumatized by her mother's suicide, roams amid the ceaseless hum of traffic in search of solace. Everywhere flickering neon lights transform the night into a garish day.

Contemporary films – complex works of cinematic art

In Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express* (1994), cop No. 223 and the blonde-wigged drug dealer also find themselves adrift in a sea of humanity. These are characters who have lost their way, says Liptay. "Wong Kar-Wai, like Iñárritu, has found an interesting formal solution to the problem of depicting aloneness in a densely populated urban landscape. This is wonderfully choreographed in a scene where the character played by Tony Leung contentedly sips coffee while the world around him, in an accelerated time-lapse sequence, races past."

In Iñárritu's film too, nothing is incidental, especially where chance appears to call the shots. Every transition from one sequence to the next is carefully motivated, i.e. deliberately planned. Continuity is achieved by visual orchestration, either on the level of content and imagery or on the level of form and staging, and often on both at once. In one scene, Susan, an American tourist from San Diego, is lying on the floor of a hut in Morocco. She is in pain and screaming, as a veterinarian treats a wound in her shoulder. While on a desert safari with her husband Richard, she has been hit by a bullet fired by Ahmed, who has been sent by his father, a goatherd, to hunt jackals with his brother Yussef. The gun belongs to a neighbor, who once received it as a gift from the Japanese hunter Yasujiro – Chieko's father. As Susan fights for her life, her Mexican housekeeper is crossing

the border to attend her son's wedding in Tijuana. With her are Susan's two children. The cheerful outing will turn into a nightmare odyssey in the Sonora Desert.

Iñárritu cuts from a shot of Susan's screaming mouth in Morocco to one of Chieko's silent mouth in Tokyo. Everything is connected to everything else. "*Babel* is a film about necessity and contingency, but it does not probe the hidden forces that mediate these links," says Fabienne Liptay. Indeed, it is often described as a film about the butterfly effect. A butterfly flaps its wings, and causes a tornado hours later and thousands of miles away. For Fabienne Liptay this is a rather simplistic view, which transfers a model borrowed from the physical theory of chaos to the world of social interactions. What makes *Babel* and similar works so fascinating is that they defy such simplifications. Who is to blame for all the catastrophes that happen in *Babel*? Ahmed, who fires the shot? Yasujiro, who gave his gun away, and whose wife commits suicide? Richard, who abandons his wife Susan when their youngest son dies soon after birth? Amelia, who unwittingly leads the couple's two surviving children into mortal danger because she wants to attend her son's wedding? The lives of so many disparate characters are interwoven, as in a densely patterned tapestry, the threads crisscross, the contacts between them are fleeting, says Liptay. In her view, rash explanations can never do justice to complex works of cinematic art, and she is currently working on a book-length analysis of the visual language of contemporary films.

Despite all the catastrophes that befall its protagonists, *Babel* is not a pessimistic film, concerned only with the many failures of communication between them

– quite the contrary. And that too is a feature of city life in many recent movies. They view their characters with a kind of hopeful skepticism, trying but often failing to make contact. A deaf-mute girl timidly turns her body to the wall, sinks to the floor, then she stands up. Other children watch and try to guess what she is trying to convey. A blond girl gestures with her hand, and smacks her lips to make a popping sound. The subtitle says: "Alone?" The girl by the wall shakes her head. This scene is from *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys*, directed by Michael Haneke. Like *Babel*, this film uses the sign language of the deaf-mute to explore interpersonal communication, both successful and unsuccessful.

"The city comes into play to underline the pressures of the emotional conflicts."

"Communication is a central theme in contemporary films about the city. What is new is that they refuse to dramatize it," says Liptay, "often to very poetic effect." In Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), Bob Harris' rendition of the Roxy Music hit "More than this" (in a superbly minimalist performance by Bill Murray) in the raucous atmosphere of a karaoke bar brings him closer to Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), as the song both disguises and expresses a true confession. As the pair say goodbye on a loud Tokyo thoroughfare, Bob whispers something which we cannot hear into Charlotte's ear, and they embrace, before going their separate ways (for good?). It is a moment of great intimacy in the anonymity of a noisy public space. Bob is in Tokyo for a week to make an advertising clip because he needs the money. That is also why Amelia has been living illegally in San Diego for 16 years. "The privilege and the burden of work are very topical themes



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at present," Fabienne Liptay points out. She cites the remark made by the American author William T. Vollmann which opens Michael Glawogger's acclaimed documentary *Megacities – 12 Stories of Survival* (1998): "In the lives of the poor, health, education, shelter and security cannot be taken for granted; it is conceivable that the possession of a soul is not self-evident to them either." This allusion to the imaginable sounds a vital note of caution. In fact each story is much too specific and individual to allow them to be lumped together to produce general conclusions regarding life in megacities. *Megacities* is set in Mumbai, New York, Moscow and Mexico City. In their highly praised documentaries and feature films, Brillante Mendoza (*Masahista*, 2005; *Kinatay*, 2009) and Jia Zhangke (*Still Life*, 2006; *24 City*, 2008) show megacities such as Manila and Chengdu in long camera shots. "The spectacular sight of the city scape no longer

counts; dramatic events are depicted in a very casual, sidelong way," Liptay says.

Their isolation and inability to express their emotional needs allow the characters in these films to make fleeting contact with each other – and to touch the viewer. When Chieko stands naked with her father on the balcony of their apartment on the 31st floor of a skyscraper in Tokyo, and the two embrace diffidently

and wordlessly, the camera draws back slowly to take in the silhouette of Tokyo at night. "The city comes into play only to underline the pressures of the emotional conflicts," says Fabienne Liptay. "The city is not just a backdrop, but the space in which the characters play out their lives. The city is a mosaic, a web of inter-linked stories. The film tells us that every window-pane in every city conceals another story, similar to, but distinct from, those we have just been told."



Jun. Prof. Dr. Fabienne Liptay

In 2007 Liptay was appointed Junior Professor of Film History at LMU within the context of the Master's program "Aisthesis. Historical Discourses in Art and Literature", supported by the Elite Network of Bavaria. Born in 1974, Liptay attended courses in Film and Theater Studies and English Literature at Mainz University, where she earned her doctoral degree. From 2002 until 2007 she served as a staff member of the Department of Film Studies in Mainz, where, among other projects, she contributed to a research initiative in visual studies.

