Simulacrum of Reality: Network Narrative in *Babel*

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Fine Arts of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Ece Ucoluk

March 2010

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This thesis titled

Simulacrum of Reality: Network Narrative in *Babel*

by

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has been approved for

the School of Film

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Abstract

UCOLUK, ECE, M.A., March 2010, Film Scholarship

Simulacrum of Reality: Network Narrative in Babel (92 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Ofer Eliaz

Despite the different possibilities “network narrative” may offer, plot-wise or to the film industry, little is known about how the new method contributes to the process of meaning making. This study analyzes Babel, a contemporary example of network narrative, in that it dissects the film’s formula and examines how its components work together as to suggest its conceptual meaning. The analysis indicates that the network narrative in Babel functions to produce an imitation of reality across the globe. In the process of constructing this verisimilitude, Babel incorporates and blends divergent realist tenets from other filmic modes besides network narrative, including: Italian neo-realism, direct cinema and canonical storytelling. The artificial real world produced via the network narrative allows Babel to address some diverse and global socio-economic and political problematics associated with the era in which the film was produced.

Approved: ______________________________________________________________

Ofer Eliaz

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To my grandfather, Ali İhsan Erdemci
Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Ofer Eliaz, who has supported me throughout my thesis with his patience and knowledge whilst allowing me the room to work in my own way. His assistance and constructive criticism made the thesis writing process a challenging and a pleasurable experience. I attribute the level of my Masters degree to his effort and encouragement. Without his guidance and persistent help this thesis would not have been possible.

I am heartily thankful to my mother, Yasemin Erdemci, who believed in me from the beginning and supported me in every respect, as well as my life partner Damon Krane, who stood by me and provided me with feedback during the completion of the thesis.

Most of all, I am indebted to Professor Adam Knee for accepting me into the program and for the training he has given me.
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Introduction

Since its origin at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hollywood cinema has been substantially formed by the canonical storytelling system. This is the storytelling method most familiar to the world spectator. Its origins, however, go back much farther than Hollywood. Aristotle describes the hallmarks of this conventional system in his Poetics: a story must have a “beginning, a middle and an end”; it shouldn’t present “a fable composed of many fables” (246), but should instead present “an action that is one and entire, the parts of it being so connected that if any one of them be either transposed or taken away, the whole will be destroyed or changed” (234); and, an author “is not at liberty to begin or end where he pleases, but must conform to these definitions” (232). Clearly, the majority of Hollywood films have conformed to Aristotle’s system.

Around the early 1990s, however, another storytelling method began to flourish. Several scholars have taken note of this innovation and attempted to give the new storytelling method a name: “thread structure” (Smith 1999), “smart film” (Jeffrey Sconce, 2002), “forking plots” (Edward Branigan 2002), “hub and spoke plot” (Charles Ramirez Berg 2006; later used by Todd McGowan in 2008), and finally “network narrative” (David Bordwell 2006 and 2008). I will use the term network narrative throughout the thesis. Network narrative structure deviates from that of canonical storytelling in crucial ways. Even though each network narrative shows differences, there are some shared patterns. Most obvious, network narrative presents multiple storylines, instead of a single driving storyline, the cornerstone of canonical storytelling. Each of these storylines is “a separate main story and all threads have roughly the same dramatic
weight” (Smith 88). Second, unlike the single goal-oriented protagonist of canonical storytelling, network narrative features several protagonists, each having disparate goals, none of which become the ultimate/primary goal of the film (Berg 16; Smith 90). Each protagonist, therefore, has more or less the same weight in the film.

Now one might think this is not a new formula since Hollywood has used multiple stories and characters with individual goals long before the 1990s – indeed, as early as Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916). Yet while *Intolerance* has multiple stories and separate groupings of characters, each character in *Intolerance* belongs to a different time and space in history. Within network narrative, several characters, out of coincidence or accident, converge at a “time-space focal point” which causes the separate multiple stories to become interlaced (Berg 39). So, unlike *Intolerance*, network narrative characters share space and time, and become related to each other. Network narrative, Bordwell states:

…opens up a social structure of acquaintance, kinship and friendship beyond any one character’s ken. The narration gradually reveals the array to us, attaching us to one character, then another. And the actions springing from this social structure aren’t based on tight causality. The characters, however they’re knit together, have diverging purposes and projects, and these intersect only occasionally – often accidentally. (*Poetics of Cinema* 190)

Therefore, what makes this model original is that multiple characters belonging to different stories collide with one another —mostly out of coincidence. This creates intermingling stories and lives, opening up a web of relations. Another feature of network narrative is the absence of the villain/hero dichotomy that typifies canonical storytelling. Instead, network narrative builds up what Evan Smith calls “bona fide protagonists”: down-to-earth individuals with ordinary lives and goals. If one character makes a
decision that puts one or more other characters in a bad situation it is not because the first character had malicious intentions, but because the decisions were either unexceptionally careless or the best options available within constrained circumstances. Also contrary to canonic storytelling, network narrative tends to violate the strong closure of canonical storytelling by leaving stories more or less unresolved (Smith 89). Finally, although network narrative films present multiple storylines, the number of separate narrative strands does not exceed four (Berg 16). To sum up, the blending all these traits –multiple stories, multiple non-heroic protagonists, multiple goals, interwoven stories and lack of closure– constitutes the network narrative paradigm.

While scholars have defined the constructive principles which govern network narratives, and have categorized the various combinations, it was the work of specific directors which originated these principles. Yet little attention has been paid to why directors chose this method over others, and to what kind of a meaning it contributes. In The Way Hollywood Tells It, David Bordwell expresses his opinion on the underlying factors for why this new model comes to prominence around the 1990s. He argues that network narrative was the new product the film industry needed to replenish itself during the 1990s. This innovation was part of an experiment that sought to find alternatives to both canonic narration and to the overcrowded independent films initially innovated as an alternative to canonic narration. He further states that a ‘generational shift’ had been taking place since the children of the 1980s were growing up in the multi-media context.

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1 See David Bordwell’s Poetics of Cinema and The Way Hollywood Tells It where he talks about the different plot strategies of network narrative films. Similarly, in A Taxonomy of Alternative Plots Charles Ramirez Berg presents twelve categories each designating a different combination achieved under the same unconventional formula.
of television, computers, video games and comic books. In order to meet expectations of young digital-age consumers, cinema not only has to provide films with the highest technology, but also with an intriguing narrative, far from the predictable moves of the canonical storytelling system. Thus a product differentiation was necessary, and ‘network narrative’ was one answer to this call. Ramirez Berg offers essentially the same explanation by stating that “the rise for independent film and the need for product differentiation are surely important factors” for directors’ increased use of this new method. He also enumerates factors outside the concerns of the film industry that might have contributed to the directors’ selection of this trend such as “the fragmenting ‘postmodern condition’ and its revolt against master narratives; the ubiquity of shorter narrative media forms such as music videos; video games, which stress multiple kinds of interactive narrativity, require various sorts of player strategies including role playing, team building; the branched experienced of surfing the net; and hyper text linking that allows users to create a personalized sequence of disparate types of artifacts that might include text, image, video and sound”(6). Berg concludes the essay by stating that filmmakers choose this more complex method because it prompts the spectator to pay multiple visits to these films via DVD, Tivo, iPod and video to better grasp the film and get pleasure out of it (57).

It is likely that these factors have had an impact on the rise of network narrative. However, the explanations of Berg and Bordwell are limited in that they offer only the interplay of the profit motive and changing consumer taste as the primary underlying factors for any director’s choice to employ network narrative. In doing so, these
explanations minimize or altogether disregard the agency of the filmmaker and fail to examine the contribution of network narrative to film language. It also misses the meaning some directors intend by using the method.

The present study will examine the use of network narrative apart from the profit motives of the film industry. Whereas some scholars argue network narrative exists primarily as an innovative means to generate profit in response to changing consumer tastes, I will argue that Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2006) uses network narrative to make a critical realistic representation of the contemporary world.

The first chapter will demonstrate that *Babel* is a realistic representation because of its formal elements. The film fuses a series of techniques from four different cinematic modes. The techniques inherent to network narrative include: multiple perspectives, non-heroic protagonists, coincidence and lack of resolution. Some of these elements, like coincidence, ordinary characters, and lack of resolution, also belong to traditional Italian neo-realism (Bordwell and Thompson *Film History* 363). However, *Babel* employs additional neo-realist elements which are not also essential components of network narrative. These include: social themes, blending non-professionals with professional actors, shooting on location and substantial use of natural lighting (Bordwell and Thompson *Film History* 362). From direct cinema, *Babel* borrows offhand composition², hand held camera, and zoom in and out. Finally, the film incorporates the continuity editing of Hollywood cinema. It is through the combination of these techniques that

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² This term refers to unconventional, less than ideal and ostensibly unstaged composition, such as when the characters are shown to us from a vantage point or distance that is not ideal but chosen to not miss the ongoing event.
Babel produces the appearance of reality. However, it is the similarities as much as the differences in the way that Babel treats these techniques that define the film’s realism. Thus, I will compare Babel with the neo-realist approach, particularly as employed in Paisan (Rossellini 1946), in order to uncover the two different ways of simulating reality. I will argue that although Babel provides a manufactured reality compared to neo-realist films, it pursues a similar goal to that of neo-realism at its core: to depict the social, economic and political climate of the period in which the film was produced.

The second chapter will examine the social, economic and political themes in Babel. It will argue that Babel uses network narrative to highlight the global socio-economic and political problems of its era: (1) economic disparity across the globe, (2) international displacement of labor and (3) inadequacy of the global news media. The second chapter will analyze the way Babel discusses these issues. The chapter is divided into three sections, each of which identifies a socio-economic and political issue Babel confronts. Each section at the same time examines how network narrative plays out in presenting these issues more accurately than canonical storytelling is capable. Because of the principles of network narrative —multiple characters, multiple stories, multiple perspectives, colliding time and space—Babel is able to discuss various current issues across the globe.

The first section will examine the depiction of global economic disparity. The economic condition of each space/geography will be analyzed in terms of mise-en-scene elements. Then the relationships between spaces portrayed by their juxtaposition (via cross-cutting) will be interpreted. It will be argued that the arrangement of multiple
geographies via cross-cutting functions to contrast these multiple geographies whose mosaic brings about the global economic situation.

The following section will be about the ways in which network narrative conveys the second contemporary subject, international displacement of labor. Multiple perspectives are used to unfold the life of a Mexican nanny in the United States. The second section will provide interviews with actual immigrants in the United States to reveal the analogy made between the character Amelia and the real people she represents, both men and women, in terms of their common desires, problems, and motivations for immigration. Via Amelia, Babel unfolds actual lives of immigrants whose daily lives are determined by the economic disparities across the globe.

The third section will show how Babel uses network narrative to depict another current issue, the globalization of media. Babel shows television as the mass medium which disseminates information internationally, distorting that information in the process by virtue of the medium’s commercial orientation. Through its use of network narrative, Babel shows us the path through of which the narrative of one character’s shooting evolves into a biased portrayal as the news report travels across the globe.
Chapter 1: An Amalgam of Realist Techniques in *Babel*

This first chapter will examine the different techniques *Babel* employs to produce verisimilitude. The film blends certain techniques from four different cinematic modes: (1) the multiple points of view characteristic of network narrative; (2) the social themes, on-location shooting, naturalistic lighting and mixing of professional and non-professional actors, all borrowed from the traditional neo-realist mode; (3) the continuity editing of canonical storytelling system; and (4) the hand-held camera, offhand composition and zoom in/out reframing of direct cinema. In addition, *Babel* employs open-ending and happenstance, elements shared by network narrative and neo-realism. However, there are similarities as much as differences between the neo-realist approach and *Babel’s* attempt to re-creating actuality. The divergences are evident in the way point of view (POV), editing, happenstance and lighting function in both. I will point out these differences by comparing *Babel* to neo-realism; focusing in particular on *Paisan*. *Paisan* presents six different stories, each set in different parts of post-World War II Italy against the backdrop of the allied occupation. Each story depicts ordinary people grappling with the arduous circumstances generated by the war. I will argue that *Babel* presents a considerably manufactured reality compared to neo-realism but at its core pursues the same goal: to unravel the historical moment of its time period via the socio-economic and political circumstances befalling ordinary individuals.

One of the most pronounced features of network narrative is the prominence of multiple interlaced storylines. These storylines intersect through an occurrence which is unplanned but significant in that it illuminates a web of relations between otherwise
separate characters. Most of the time this chance event is shown from the different perspectives of various characters (Berg 40). In Babel, for instance, we witness the same event, the shooting of Susan, first from the perspective of the perpetrators, Yussef and Ahmed, and then from the perspective of the victim and her husband, Susan and Richard. The first POV functions to show that Yussef and Ahmed shot someone inside the tourist bus unintentionally. From inside the bus, however, the bullet appears to come out of nowhere. Scared and confused, the tourists inside the bus interpret the shooting as a terrorist attack. Because of the boys’ preceding POV, the spectator knows the tourists’ assumption is wrong. By providing us with knowledge from multiple perspectives, the narration suggests spectatorial omniscience. In this way, viewers think they have the most objective window and utmost access to the subject matter.

POV also depicts the shooting’s effect on Richard and Susan’s nanny, Amelia, whom is caring for their children back in the US. Richard calls Amelia from Morocco in the midst the emergency and compels Amelia to look after the couple’s children on her son’s wedding day. Amelia then attempts to pass the children off to one of several other Mexican nannies working nearby, but none feels able to help due to their own constrained circumstances. Thus Amelia decides to take the children with her to the wedding in Mexico. After the wedding, re-entry to the United States becomes a problem at the border crossing because Amelia doesn’t have a letter of permission from the children’s parents. Drunk and scared, the driver of the car, Amelia’s nephew Santiago, breaks through the checkpoint and then, in an attempt to lure the Border Patrol away,  

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3 I will use the term point of view throughout the thesis to refer to a character’s perspective through the eyes of a third observer (the camera) who is situated very close to that character. I will use optical point of view when the spectator sees through the eyes of a character.
ends up abandoning Amelia and the children in the California desert. Amelia carries the children under the scorching sun as she walks in the desert for help. In response to the children’s suffering, she eventually decides to leave them in the shade of a tree while she continues to search for help alone. However, after another desperately exhausting trek through the desert, the closest thing to help she can find is a Border Patrol car. After flagging down the car, the first thing she says to the officer is that she left two children in the desert and they will die unless he helps them. When the deportation officer later scorns Amelia, saying that he doesn’t know how she could have left the children alone in the desert, viewers are inclined to disagree with the deportation officer. Unlike the deportation officer, we have had access to Amelia’s perspective and know the context of her decisions. Thanks to the multiple perspectives, we understand that it was Amelia’s concern for the children which led her to leave them alone in the desert while she looked for help. The multiple perspectives of network narrative allow us to understand the genuine motivation behind a character’s actions as something other than malicious or absentminded.

While the children are saved in the end, Amelia is deported to Mexico because she has immigrated and found work in the US without legal documentation. Multiple perspectives reveal that there are two or more sides to the story, which is something we are familiar with in actuality. Instead of oversimplifying life with clear-cut solutions, a single perspective truth or stereotypes (hero/villain), network narrative constructs spectatorial knowledge through multiple POV shots rich with life-like complexity. Each different take on the same event illuminates a portion of truth about what really
happened. These juxtaposed points of view give the spectator a narrative omniscience about each character’s intentions, more so even than the characters themselves, so that in the end the spectator thinks they know the truth about what really happened. Different points of view of an event do not have to function to illuminate portions of a story’s overarching truth. Multiple perspectives may be used to create uncertainty, as in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999), *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962) (Branigan 109). However, from beginning to end, the POVs in *Babel* never confuse or deceive the spectator, but serve to accumulate information about the same event, information which can thus be experienced as objective.

Another feature of network narrative, the lack of resolution for some characters (Smith 94), is inherent in *Babel* and contributes to its realist effect. The unresolved ending is the case for the majority of characters’ stories. For instance, the plot doesn’t return to reveal what happens to Yussef after he surrenders during the cross-fire to plea for help for his wounded brother. Though the film implies that his brother, Ahmed, dies in the end as his body is carried out of the rocks by the police officers, the future of Yussef is left blank. Is he found guilty for shooting Susan and the police officer during the cross fire? The film doesn’t tell us. Similarly, *Babel* cuts off Richard and Susan’s story once Susan is taken to Casablanca hospital. In a classic Hollywood film, were it a happy ending, we would see Susan recuperated and reunited with Richard and the children in San Diego. If it were a sad ending, we would likely see Susan uttering her last words to Richard before she passes away at the hospital. But *Babel* neither shows a single
shot of Susan during her days of struggle in the hospital or afterwards (at home in San
Diego). In doing so, the film evades a classical Hollywood closure and the kind of drama
it would create. We do get some information about what happened to Susan, but this
comes from a television news report within the Tokyo storyline. The television report
summarizes what the American couple went through in Morocco and that Susan finally
got out of the hospital. The effect is that what Susan and Richard have been through in
Morocco appears as a ‘fact’ which strengthens the verisimilitude of the film. A similar
kind of fact created out of artifice exists in *Paisan* as well. The ending of the last episode
where Nazi soldiers push tied Italian partisans into the sea becomes a fact, thus life-like,
as soon as the subsequent authoritative voice-over declares that what we have just seen
happened in the winter of 1944. In terms of the re-creation of actuality, what *Paisan*
realizes through voice-over, *Babel* realizes by conveying a story event as a television
news report.

A key issue *Babel* emphasizes via a conversation between Richard and the doctor
in the emergency room—that Susan’s arm may not be saved due to internal bleeding,
blood clotting and the consequent risk of gangrene—is loosely touched upon in the film’s
ending. The news report barely gives enough time to get a glimpse of Susan’s arm in a
sling, which allows us to presume that it is saved, as the couple quickly walks off from
Casablanca Hospital into a car through a legion of news reporters.

The film doesn’t show what happened to the couple’s children, Mike and Debbie,
either. The last time we see the two is when Amelia leaves them out in the desert to look
for help. From the deportation officer’s scolding of Amelia for leaving the children out in
the desert, saying it was a miracle they were found, we do learn that Mike and Debbie were saved. When Amelia asks how the children are, the interrogation officer replies that it is none of her business. Instead of cutting to Mike and Debbie so as to answer Amelia’s question and satisfy our curiosity, the narration restricts us to Amelia’s knowledge. When Amelia asks about her nephew Santiago, who left them out in the desert, the officer replies that he doesn’t have any information about him. The narration doesn’t cut to Santiago in order to reveal what happened to him; instead it confines us to what Amelia sees and knows. Even though a whole story strand based solely on the perspective of Santiago or the children has never been provided, why does *Babel* continue to restrict us to a single POV, Amelia’s, after they part ways, if the whole point of network narrative is to simulate objectivity by supplying multiple perspectives on the same event? Why doesn’t the film use the opportunity to appear even more ‘objective’ by adding more perspectives (of the children and Santiago)?

Earlier I argued that network narrative simulates objectivity by supplying multiple perspectives on the same event. Here, I would like to open a parenthesis before I continue on examining the lack of closure in *Babel* to find out the function of this restricted knowledge. What *Babel* does is to create an objective POV through these four story strands (Susan and Richard; Amelia; Chieko; Yussef and Ahmed), and from within those strands the film selects certain characters whose psychology it will emphasize. This subjectivity plays out in Amelia’s story when we are restricted to her level of knowledge—about not knowing what happened to Santiago or the children. In doing so, the film acquaints us with her situation and psychology of not being able to know the
condition or whereabouts of people for whom she cares. By confining to and empathizing with Amelia, the narration also reminds us of those moments in our lives where we do end up having no clue about a person’s whereabouts or where we do lose contact with those for whom we care. So, restriction to Amelia’s perspective during the interrogation functions to acquaint the spectator with Amelia’s psychology as her situation mirrors moments in actual life. Furthermore, in the beginning of the interrogation sequence, the close-up (CU) on Amelia’s hands as she rubs them together in frustration depicts the stress and anxiety she feels. The whole interrogation sequence focuses on her face. From the beginning until the end of the sequence a long take medium close-up (MCU) on Amelia’s face underscores her psychology shifting in response to the officer’s harsh words and bad news (her deportation from the United States).

Subjectivity is inherent in other story strands as well. For example, in the scene where Chieko and her friends are dancing at the disco, the constant shift to Chieko’s optical POV with no sound reveals that, unlike the majority of the people on the dance floor, Chieko doesn’t hear the song. But what we see from outside is that she keeps up with the high tempo very well. In this way, we understand that she pretends to be hearing the music, presumably to enjoy the moment and in order to not be isolated from her surroundings. Similarly, later in the disco sequence, the diegetic sound (high beat techno music) turns off again the moment we see Haruki, the boy that Chieko likes, kissing her best friend, as conveyed through Chieko’s optical POV. From this moment until Chieko runs out of the nightclub, the narration shifts back and forth between an objective POV, which shows Chieko staring at the two as the music continues to play, and her optical
POV—the two kissing with sound off. The repeated shift detaches Chieko from her surroundings as it identifies the spectator with her. In doing so, we get a better understanding of her psychology in terms of what it is to be deaf. As her eyes are drawn to the kiss, the off-screen sound doubles the effect of the loneliness she feels for being left out by the two friends she thought she could count on. In the same shot, the disco lights shift from vivid colors—red, yellow, pink, green—to black and white immediately when she sees the kiss, also externalizes Chieko’s inner state. The vivid lights surrounding her on the dance floor symbolize Chieko’s joy for a probable relationship with Haruki. The shift to black and white lighting as she recognizes Haruki kissing her best friend implies a return to her colorless life along with the collapse of her expectations and disappointment. In a similar manner, Babel uses subjectivity in the story strand of Yussef and Ahmed. As Ahmed’s body is carried away by the police officers, the camera focuses on Yussef watching the event in CU. The CU on Yussef’s crying face is followed by a subjective flashback, motivated by a memory of a happy moment between Yussef and Ahmed. The flashback allows us to understand the emotion of Yussef about losing his brother.

These three examples indicate that Babel not only uses POV shots to portray an event from outside but also uses optical POVs to reveal how events are recognized internally. This is one difference from neo-realist. The idea behind neo-realism, as a style, is that the spectator doesn’t get to see a character’s psychology. You as a viewer are there and have to figure out what is happening based on an outsider’s view. On the other hand, Babel constructs verisimilitude by inserting occasional optical POV shots within
four POV stories. Another way in which Babel departs from neo-realism is that the film never entirely shows an objective POV—a point of view that is not attached to any character. The shots that can be counted as such are the establishing panorama shots, such as of Tokyo, in extreme long shot (ELS). In these shots, the camera is stationary, the shot length is short, and there is no character appearance or an event unfolding. So rather than an observer’s position we get a glimpse of the landscape. On the other hand, in Open City, every once in a while, such as when Nazi soldiers arrive where Pina lives to evict the inhabitants into the courtyard, the camera shows the event in long shot (LS), independent from any character’s perspective. Even though we are told the stories of certain characters in Open City, we don’t identify with them the way we identify with Babel’s characters because of the distance the camera keeps from the event and the characters. In Open City, the camera motivates us to observe what’s going on rather than to identify with the characters. In Babel, besides the optical POV, the camera’s POV confines us to a character’s perspective and encourages identification.

If we go back to the open-ending analysis, the closure of Amelia’s story provides another example. The interrogation ends with Amelia being hurriedly deported from the United States. This is indicated in the scene following the one at the deportation office where Amelia sits on a sidewalk in Mexico waiting for her son while wearing the torn red dress she had from the wedding, and holding a bag of medicine. Her son arrives and embraces Amelia as she bursts into tears. Even though Amelia’s seems to be the most conclusive of all stories, her future is left uncertain since she has been hastily deported, left unemployed and without any belongings. Likewise, the story of Chieko lacks
resolution in that none of her attempts to have a boyfriend reach fruition. But it is especially hard to talk about a resolution in Chieko’s story, because, unlike other characters, she doesn’t grapple with any direct or indirect impact of the shooting, which was the core event that converged all the characters in the first place. The justification for her presence is the fact that she is the daughter of Yasujiro, the last registered owner of the rifle with which Yussef shot Susan. Quite extraneously, *Babel* provides a slice of Chieko’s life, a mundane day concurrent with the aftermath of the shooting, during which she copes with isolation intensified by the lack of a mother and inability to hear and talk.

The story of Chieko, quite irrelevant compared to other stories, functions to make the spectator aware of the fact that there are simultaneous realities going on in the world. While somebody (like Susan) might be struggling for her life, somebody else, Chieko, might be coping with her disability and loneliness, while another, Amelia, is deported. None of these traumas is presented as less significant than any other.

This slice-of-life sensation becomes even more pronounced at the end of the film. As Chieko and her father embrace on their balcony at the end of the day, the camera slowly dollies out until their apartment becomes just one window among many, first in the apartment building, and then in the surrounding city. In doing so, the film alludes to the existence of countless lives behind those windows. The dolly out suggests that the camera’s narrative function is like a microscope, in that it has magnified and observed a day of an ordinary person in Tokyo before it pulled out. The film also departs from Chieko’s life and ends at a point where she is still struggling with her main problem, isolation, which has not been resolved but has instead gradually worsen over the course
of events. The unresolved endings resemble actuality by simulating many unresolved cases in our lives. In real life too sometimes problems do remain unresolved, like Chieko’s –or at least it takes more than the screen time for resolution. After a long and close acquaintanceship, relationships may end overnight, just like Amelia’s with the children, or we might lose contact with someone, like Santiago. Unlike a Hollywood hero who makes the best decisions at all times, in life we may make poor decisions, just like Amelia and Yussef, which result in others’ suffering and our own.

The open-ending technique that characterizes every story strand in *Babel* is also a common feature of Italian neo-realist aesthetic contrary to the clear-cut ending or “narrative closure” of classical Hollywood cinema (Bordwell and Thompson *Film Art* 460; Bordwell and Thompson *Film History* 363-366; Bordwell *Narration* 157). *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948), for example, ends with Bruno and Ricci walking away from the crowd without a bicycle, the object which could move the story to resolution. The uncertain future of Bruno’s family doesn’t answer questions like ‘what happens to Ricci and Bruno next’ or ‘how will they make a living’. Likewise, the stories of *Paisan* end inconclusively. In the first episode the whereabouts of Carmela’s father are never revealed, and the plot never returns to the people in the church once Carmela is killed by Nazis. What happens to the American soldiers after they throw Carmela’s body off the cliff is also unanswered. In the next story, Joe, the African American soldier, drives off to an unknown destination as he leaves behind the Italian boy who, Joe just learned, has no home or parents and is thus compelled to live on streets and steal. What will happen to the little boy? Why did Joe decide to leave, and where is he headed? The
film doesn’t tell us. *Babel* incorporates an open-ending, a technique evident in neo-realist films instead of the clear-cut closure of a Hollywood film.

Besides an unresolved ending, a crucial tenet *Babel* incorporates from traditional neo-realist films is the endeavor for a realistic representation of their time period which is closely defined by social, economic and political challenges. *The Bicycle Thief*, for instance, shows the post-war poverty in Italy through the story of a worker and his son and the desperate search for the stolen bicycle necessary for their livelihood. Similarly in *Paisan*, unaware of one another, all the characters grapple with arduous socio-economic and political facts stemming from the war. Apart from Nazi soldiers, they are threatened by the extreme poverty and unemployment that Italians have to live with everyday. In one story, a young Italian woman in Rome, Francesca, is compelled into prostitution while in the Naples story, a boy, Pasquale, like his peers, has to steal (including from his best friend Joe) and live on the streets after both his parents are killed in a bombing.

Nearly sixty years after these films, *Babel* makes a similar attempt to offer an honest representation by looking at the socio-economic and political complications that define the era in which it was produced. But *Babel* broadens the scope from a single locality, like Italy, to multiple ones—within and among nations. Still, as in neo-realism, *Babel* chooses to uncover the current socio-economic and political conditions of the world through the lives of ordinary people coming from different social strata. The juxtaposition of Richard and Susan versus the African family, and later on Chieko in Tokyo, reveals a wide range of economic status generated by an uneven distribution of wealth (extreme poverty in Morocco versus extreme wealth in Tokyo and the USA). The
story of Amelia, a Mexican nanny working in the United States, echoes the socio-economic and political problems of the era in which the film was produced. The socio-economic problematic once more stems from the uneven distribution of wealth which this film argues generates illegal immigration of laborers to developed countries from the less developed ones. Later in *Babel*, the tension between the US police officer and two Mexicans (Amelia and Santiago) at the border crossing reflects an actual political tension between Mexico and the United States on the immigration issue. Asked whether the story of Amelia touches upon the current tension between the United States and Mexico, Iñárritu, who is also a Mexican, replies:

That [story] is very close to me. I have to cross into Tijuana every six months to renew my visa, and as you know, crossing that border has become a ritual of humiliation for many Mexicans who come into America. It is like the immigrant community has been completely abandoned by the mainstream communities. We don’t have any support. Unfortunately, we, as Mexicans are not even together as a community and that is very sad. But I am not interested in making a propaganda film. I just wanted to touch on something that is a very sensitive area for millions of people who have been living in unfair conditions as invisible citizens in the United States. (qtd. in Mitchell 42-43)

Gael Garcia Bernal, who plays Santiago, is Mexican as well. Asked if he has been in a similar situation when he tried to cross border the USA he says:

Yes, I've crossed in many places: Juárez, Tijuana, Tecate. It's sort of a ritual of humiliation. You get asked questions you don't know how to answer because they're ridiculous, like “Where do you come from?” I'm, like, “Are you serious? From Mexico. Where else?” (qtd. in Miranda and Keegan 71)

Given the responses of Iñárritu and Bernal, the treatment that the character Amelia and Santiago were exposed to at the border crossing originates from the actual experiences of two real world Mexicans (Iñárritu and Bernal) and thus substantiate the film’s presentation of the way Mexican immigrants are treated in the US. Other stories in *Babel*
emerge from the personal experiences of Iñárritu as well. In an interview, Iñárritu notes that he “culled ideas for all four segments from personal experiences after moving to the USA four days before 9/11.” Inarritu says “with my Turkish [looking] face, people wondered if I was a terrorist”. Iñárritu goes on to say that “he then decided to incorporate plotlines based on the disenfranchised and dislocated Mexican nanny he hired in Los Angeles to care for his kids, and the intense isolation he perceived in disabled teens he observed while publicizing 21 Grams (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003) in Japan” (Spines 36). Another socio-economic issue Babel touches upon is the unequal development produced by globalization. While some governments, like Mexico, grow dependent on developed countries via the remittances sent by their low-wage emigrants (Sassen, Strategic 46) others, such as Morocco, become dependent by serving the first world countries—the USA, France, Great Britain—in their homeland. For Morocco, tourism has been such a service industry which is mirrored in Babel.

Neo-realism chooses certain methods to pursue a realistic representation of its time period. Even though neo-realist directors cannot be rigidly gathered under a set of methods, in part emanating from a lack of a manifest, there are some overlapping filmmaking practices to which traditional neo-realist films generally adhere. These are on-location shooting instead of studio sets and the use of non-professional actors (Bondanella 31; Hallam and Marshment 40). Babel incorporates these two primary principles as well to construct verisimilitude. First of all, the film is entirely shot on-location just as Paisan was⁴ (Bosley 37). Iñárritu traveled to Tokyo, Tijuana, Morocco

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⁴ In a 1946 interview by Georges Sadoul, Rossellini states that personally he doesn’t like sets and that “Paisan was filmed entirely on location” (Rossellini 18).
and San Diego instead of structuring them in studio sets (Angulo A2). The interiors such as Chieko’s penthouse apartment, the disco-bar in Japan, as well as Anwar’s and the two brothers’ room in Morocco are also shot on location (Bosley 41-47). These interiors contribute to the verisimilitude the film is trying to create in that from the spectator’s perspective they look just as they would in the real world. The overwhelming ratio of exteriors to interiors (25 exteriors to 10 interiors) in Babel also shows a clear tendency towards recording exterior locations which comply with the classic neo-realist dictum of taking the camera out into the streets to photograph reality.

Moreover, casting contributes to the verisimilitude of Babel. Instead of making the film with solely professional actors, like a classical Hollywood production, Babel blends non-professional actors with professionals. Iñárritu remarks that for the first time he employed many non-professional actors that he picked from the localities where Babel takes place, some of which hadn’t been in front of a camera in their life (Mitchell 42). Even some of these non-professionals were given principle roles such as Yussef, Ahmed, Mohammed, Hassan and Anwar in the Moroccan story. Babel also employs professional actors who are universally well-known stars: Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt. However, employing professional actors does not necessarily make a film less realistic. There have been Italian films, like Open City (Roberto Rossellini, 1945), in which, as Bazin says, an

5 Brad Pitt, who served as an actor in Babel, has reported that a lot of the characters in Tazarine were cast straight from the village (Jacobson). Similarly, “in Japan, Inárritu found many of the girls at a school for the deaf. In Morocco, he had muezzins make announcements from the minarets of mosques and in Mexico, his casting agent scoured weddings and marketplaces. They found Alfredo Macias, 19, in a local club. He plays the groom. Claudia Sylvia Mendoza, who plays the groom's grandma, was spotted at an Ensenada market” (Ali 64).
“amalgam of players”\textsuperscript{6} is inherent, that are still considered neo-realist. Just as \textit{Babel}, \textit{Paisan} has an ‘amalgam of players’ with non-professional actors in majority and professional actors in minority. Like \textit{Babel}, in \textit{Paisan} each story contains large numbers of non-professional actors in minor roles blended with a few professionals in crucial parts. These professionals were not stars but people who had theatrical experience: Dots Johnson (an American soldier in the Naples sequence), Gar Moore (the American soldier in the Rome sequence), Harriet White (the nurse in Florence), William Tubbs (the catholic chaplain) and Dale Edmonds (the character Dale, an American soldier in Po Delta). There are episodes in \textit{Paisan}, just like in \textit{Babel}, where non-professionals handle primary roles too. For example, Carmela and Joe, the two primary protagonists in the first episode (Sicily) or the African-American soldier and Pasquale in the second episode (Naples), were both non-professionals just like the non-professionals in the Berber village—Yussef, Ahmed, Abdullah, mother, sisters, neighbor Hassan, wife of Hassan—all of whom handled one story axis by themselves.

Realism depends on the purpose for which professional acting has been employed. Bazin explains why and when casting professionals contributes to the depiction of realism:

That someone is an actor does not mean he mustn’t be used. Quite the opposite. But professionalism should be called into service only insofar as it allows him to be more flexible in his response to the requirements of the \textit{mise-en-scene}, and to have a better grasp of the character. (Bazin 24)

In \textit{Babel}, the professional actors are called into service to perform characters that required professionals’ skills. Take for instance, the character Susan that Cate Blanchett

\textsuperscript{6} Blending non professional and professional actors (Bazin, v2, 23-24)
performs. Iñárritu says he needed somebody “to make people have empathy with her immediately, as a woman who is uncomfortable with her husband, uncomfortable with the place, uncomfortable with herself” and on top of that somebody “who could communicate these volumes about a character’s subtext without words” (Spines 36). Iñárritu goes on to say that he picked Cate Blanchett because she gave a successful performance of a similarly complex character in The Missing (Ron Howard, 2003) (ibid).

What Iñárritu seeks is a player who could communicate ideas and emotions via body movements and gestures, while relying as little as possible on words. And this could likely come from a professional, especially from somebody who already has proven successful with a similar performance. Cate Blanchett is able to convey various emotions—sadness, bitterness, stress, anger, guilt, loneliness, discomfort and insecurity—of a taciturn character, Susan, by relying heavily on her gesture and tone rather than words. In the sequence taking place in the Taguenzalt restaurant, her body movements and gestures demonstrates that she is sad and angry at her husband, lonely and uncomfortable at being in Taguenzalt even though the source of the problem has not been revealed in the conversation. After the gunshot, as the veterinarian approaches Susan to stitch her wound in Anwar’s house, Susan’s tone as she calls for Richard to stop the event and her visage portray both her fear and how much she depends on Richard despite her anger. Later on, it is only through her gesture and tone when she tells Richard that ‘she had to pee in her pants’ that we understand she is extremely embarrassed. The spectator can read the relief from Susan’s face as she and her husband are able to confront each other about their child’s death. Even though Susan has very little dialogue
and action in the film, her gesture and tone is able to express her psychology thoroughly to the spectator. Indeed, in the neo-realist approach, it is not the professional actor/actress or their acting skills but their star identity that should be avoided. Bazin says:

It is not the absence of professional actors that is, historically, the hallmark of social realism nor of the Italian film. Rather, it is specifically the rejection of the ‘star concept’ and the causal mixing of professionals and of those who just act occasionally. It is important to avoid casting the professional in the role for which he is known. (Bazin 23)

In an Interview, Iñárritu emphasizes the same concern:

My goal was for the audience to forget they're watching Brad Pitt, if that didn't happen, it would fuck the film. I always felt that if I could make it so that the audience can erase the sensation that they are watching Brad Pitt, then not only will Brad succeed, but the movie as a whole succeed…Why can’t I combine a big movie star in a scene with an unknown kid and have them be the same? That’s what the film [Babel] is about. (qtd. in Mitchell 46)

Iñárritu’s concern about Pitt’s stardom is in compliance with professional acting throughout Babel in that professionals incarnate ordinary characters to the extent where their star image almost disappear. Brad Pitt’s role in Babel doesn’t associate with his heroic, larger-than-life roles to which his stardom contributed greatly in films like Troy, Ocean’s Eleven, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and Spy Game. In Babel, Brad Pitt’s character, Richard, is a member of a relatively limited and privileged class (affluent, white, middle-aged American men), but he is nonetheless an ordinary, unremarkable, representative member of this class in the same way other characters are ordinary members of the social groups to which they belong. His and his wife’s commonplace names and surname, Susan Jones and Richard Jones, refer to this ordinariness. Babel wants to make the point that these main protagonists are unremarkable characters unlike Hollywood’s Mr. and Mrs. Smith, where the surname Smith is used to create a false expectation when the
presumed ordinary married couple—Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie—turns out to be an extraordinary one: professional assassins, and both the best in their fields. Throughout *Babel* Richard tries to keep Susan alive with all humanly effort. Contrary to a hero, he doesn’t have extra human powers or qualities to heal Susan or take her out of Tazarine. Rather than a hero who is powerful and firm, Richard is a life-like character, rendered helpless by overwhelming external circumstances. At times *Babel* reveals Richard’s humanity by showing his vulnerability. We witness him bursting into tears of helpless desperation (first when the tourist bus flees from Tazarine leaving Richard and the wounded Susan without a vehicle and then again when Richard talks to his son on the phone at Casablanca Hospital), something we wouldn’t likely see if he were a Hollywood hero. His male charm that played out in his previous star performances is also effaced substantially due to a non-heroic performance and to the aged make-up. These are all attempts to draw Brad Pitt away from his star image and closer to an ordinary person.

However, does the spectator or can the spectator forget the star image of Brad Pitt and entirely conceive him as an ordinary individual on the screen? This is the point where the star system works against the argument of *Babel* in that the spectator cannot but be reminded of his stardom once they see his face on screen despite any endeavor to suppress it. Bazin claims that even though an actor is able to play a role outside his familiar appearance, his face and some recurring mannerisms in his acting will remind the spectator of his stardom (25). The moment that we encounter Richard and Susan sitting at the restaurant in Morocco we cannot help but recognize them as Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. We also think that they will be the center characters of the story. The fact
that the performance of Cate Blanchett is to lie down on a floor for most of the film without talking draws more attention to Brad Pitt and thus to his star image as he is the most active one in the story.

The lives of ordinary people have been the subject matter of traditional neo-realism as well (Hallam and Marshment 40). Italian Neo-realism refused to tell the stories of larger than life characters, and instead focused on the everyday problems of ordinary people. Babel pursues a similar goal by introducing ordinary characters from around the world, like Richard and Susan, an American couple, Amelia, their immigrant nanny, Chieko and Yasujiro, Japanese father and daughter, and an African family. This time the characters are selected from a cross-section of class and economic conditions, unlike neo-realism whose stories are set amongst the poor and working class. Despite the class differences, each character in Babel grapples with a life-like obstacle more or less equal in severity. Susan and Richard, a suburban upper class couple, tries to leave behind the pain of their child’s death and revive their marriage in a holiday destination; Chieko, the daughter of a wealthy father, motherless and deaf mute, tries to cope with the loneliness coming upon her in a metropolitan city; the African family, though intact and happy, struggles with the coyotes eating the herd, their main source of low income; Amelia, a low wage immigrant laborer, wants to attend her son’s wedding in Mexico when she is obliged to look after two children in the USA. All of these are down-to-earth problems, like the stolen bicycle in Bicycle Thieves.

Babel also depends on coincidence, a feature that Bordwell and Thompson state neo-realism relies upon more than conventional Hollywood screenplays, which make
their plots “seem objectively realistic” rather than constructed (Film History 363). In *Bicycle Thieves*, the plot builds upon happenstance, such as when Bruno’s bicycle is stolen in a moment of distraction or when Bruno and Ricci accidentally spot the thief near the psychic’s house. Similarly, in *Paisan*, episode three unfolds from the chance encounter of the past lovers, Francesca and Fred, in front of a bar in Rome. In *Babel* the initial event that triggers a chain of ensuing events linking several characters is shown as pure coincidence. It is the moment when Yussef decides to target a tourist bus, which he assumes to be beyond the rifle’s range, and accidentally shoots Susan. The wounding of Susan delays the American couple’s return, causing Amelia to look after the couple’s children in the United States on a day she had taken off to attend her son’s wedding. The accident causes Amelia to take the children with her to Mexico, triggering the events that will end in her deportation, while the same accident causes Ahmed to die and Chieko to meet the detective. The development of the plot based on coincidences mirrors the unpredictable nature of daily life which contributes to the realistic appeal of *Babel*. But at the same time, *Babel* differs from neo-realism in that the accident in *Babel* is entirely a scripted event that is used to build up the story. In other words, it is not really an accident; it is an accident within the narrative. Neo-realism, on the other hand, understands the accidental more as a formal device to be able to capture the everyday spontaneously as an indicator of realism. It allows room for real world accidents by putting the camera on the street and letting people act. In these moments you have improvisations; you get passersby, a character doing something unexpected, all of which
develop the script. This also differentiates *Babel* from *Paisan* in that the latter strongly emphasizes spontaneity and improvisation.

*Babel* has no real room for the accident in the way that *Paisan* seems to have since the story itself was already scripted before the shooting of *Babel*. Guillermo Arriago, the scriptwriter of *Babel*, claims that the “film on the screen is ninety-six percent the screenplay he wrote” which means that there hasn’t been much improvisation (Cohen, *From Script* 41). Iñárritu talks about only one moment where an improvisation took place. That is the flashback at the end of the Moroccan story which is also the epilogue where Yussef and Ahmed are standing against the wind on the mountain top playing together. Iñárritu mentions that this shot was totally an outcome of a spontaneous moment. While shooting one of the scenes in the Berber village, he says, an intense wind appeared. As a result, Iñárritu asked the two brothers to play against it (Ross A9). There are also moments where Iñárritu repeated the same shot over and over again, a method counter to improvisation which draws the film closer to Hollywood filmmaking and away from neo-realism. Adriana Barraza, who plays Amelia, for instance, reports that her walk through the Mexican desert and her interrogation with the police officer required several takes—the first lasting eighteen days and the latter twelve hours—in order to get the most “realistic” performance out of her (Kuhn 9-10; Back Stage West 18-A; People 33).

On the other hand, even though Rossellini had a general idea about what *Paisan* would be about before any shooting took place, the script, unlike *Babel’s*, was “never really fixed”, which is, according to Brunette, a quality “in accordance with the already emerging neo-realist aesthetic orthodoxy” (*Rossellini* 61). Compared to the four percent
change in *Babel’s* script; characters, locations and plot in *Paisan* were in continuously being altered, sometimes drastically, to “correspond more closely with the people and the places they found in the course of their six months spent traveling from one end of the country to the other”, something which Brunette claims soon became “standard neorealist practice” (ibid). In *Babel*, even though there was a pre-production shift in location (from Spain to Japan), unlike *Paisan*, it was arranged on paper before the crew traveled to those locations and furthermore, instead of corresponding with the real world (like in *Paisan*), the shift had taken place simply to avoid two stories in Spanish (Cohen, *From Script* 37). Moreover, whereas Rossellini had traveled to and observed the places and people before developing the script, Arriago claims that he wrote the script of Morocco and Japan even though he hasn’t been in those places ever (Cohen, *From Script* 39; Cohen, *Babel* A2). In that sense, *Paisan* is less constructed than *Babel* because it travels to location(s) from which the reality is going to be excavated. It observes those locations and locals some of whom will be used in the film. The script develops only after this observation. On the other hand, *Babel* first has a prepared script and then travels to the designated location(s) to visualize the script. *Babel* provides a reality that is established beforehand by the scriptwriter and the director, whereas in *Paisan* the real world has more to say about how the script is going to evolve.

7 The plot of the Naples episode was written only after the characters had been picked and met each other. Likewise, Rossellini entirely rewritten the monks episode after he encountered the real monks he was going to shoot. Rossellini found Carmela, the main character of the first episode, accidentally near Naples as he was passing by his car. She was somebody who has been living in primitive conditions and extreme poverty which is most likely why Rossellini insisted on keeping her despite the difficulty he had on directing her (Brunette, *Rossellini* 386)
Like setting and acting, lighting is an important element in the course of creating verisimilitude. Williams indicates that in the realist approach lighting looks “as neutral as possible, not aesthetic, not even dramatic, simply an honest light which would adequately illuminate the actor and the surrounding set” (44). Similarly, Bordwell notes that shooting authentic locations (streets or private buildings) made neo-realist cinematographers so expert that they frequently “avoided the three-point lighting system” (Bordwell and Thompson, Film Art 460). This is evident in the way both Paisan and Babel use lighting. In Paisan, the lighting is completely neutral, and because it is so mundane it is hard to recognize. It is not overtly placed as to emphasize an element of mise-en-scene, create drama, or express the inner state of a character. It just functions to adequately illuminate actors’ faces and locations for the spectator to identify them. Lighting in Babel contributes to the creation of verisimilitude as well. Like Paisan, the lighting in Babel doesn’t have a function other than illuminating the characters and locations\(^8\). In Forging Connections, Rodrigo Prieto, the cinematographer of Babel, stresses that the essential concern in Babel was to make it look real before he goes over each decision taken with regard to lighting determined by this primary goal. Lighting was not a problem as most of the film takes place in exteriors where there is already natural light. However, for interior locations, Prieto talks about the technical apparatus he had to equip in order to accurately portray what eyes see in real life onto the film. Prieto gives the scenes inside Anwar’s house, where most of Susan and Richard’s narrative takes place, as an example of one of the hardest locations to light. Particular to these shots, he emphasizes the fact that he used

\(^8\) The only exception to this is the lighting in the night club underscoring a shift in Chieko’s emotions.
“practical sources as much as possible” since the most vital elements in *Babel* are that “camerawork and lighting have a sense of realism and immediacy” (41). I will let Prieto explain how these practical sources worked out:

When we scouted the location [guide’s house], I took many digital stills to see what the available light looked like, and I noticed the bounce light from the windows seemed to sort of come from the ground, so I decided to create a sense of fill light bouncing from the ground to bring some light into the actors’ eyes. We put one 6K Par on each window going through full grid that we angled as close to the window as possible without making it visible. Then we bounced two 400-watt Jokers into bleached muslin on the ceiling, and from below we used four Arri Sky Panels going through fill grid to give them a very low intensity. (ibid)

The artificial lighting mentioned above is totally unrecognizable and works for the creation of a natural appearance of the characters and the setting. Anwar’s small house, like the village, is deprived of electricity, so there is no source of light except the sunlight coming through windows. The amount of lighting in the room complies with this fact in that most of the room is dark. We can hardly see characters’ faces or identify objects when they are away from the windows or when windows are closed all the way (such as when Anwar’s grandmother shuts all the windows including the door to prevent the curious children outside from gazing at Susan). Even when characters come close to the windows or the open door, the dim light is able to illuminate character’s faces only weakly, just as much as indirect sunlight would be able to illuminate through windows. Prieto goes on to say that he tried to use the natural lighting for the bus interior. In order to do that, he says, he blocked the direct sun with least manipulation like “creating a rig over the bus that extended out like a shelf over the windows”, covering Susan’s side, which would have blown out on her otherwise (Bosley 40). Prieto also recalls that he
asked for a change in the scene depicting Amelia and the children’s night time walk into the desert because the anticipated source of light [moon] would necessitate intense artificial lighting. Hence, in order to make the scene look real, says Prieto, he proposed that instead of the moonlight, Santiago could give them a flashlight he already had in the car and that could be their only light source (Bosley 47). The choices the director and the cinematographer make in terms of lighting clearly show a tendency to create verisimilitude within the available circumstances with the least alteration as possible in terms of lighting.

Although the effect of natural lighting in Babel cannot be distinguished from that of a Hollywood lighting, there is a difference in pre-production in that Babel shows a clear tendency to not resort to artificial lighting (three-point lighting) unless they have to, whereas Classical Hollywood filmmaking has been accustomed to use three-point lighting. In that sense, Babel and neo-realist dictum are similar since both try to avoid three-point lighting system. But the two are also different because in neo-realism the goal was never to create the look or effect of realism. The goal was to go out and shoot in the streets with whatever light is available. Neo-realist filmmakers were not concerned about concealing the artificial lighting to convincing the spectator that the image is realistic. This is evident in many neo-realist films. In Bicycle Thieves, for example, the artificial lighting used is obvious because it projects on the streets and facets of the buildings as Bruno and Ricci wander around the city. Likewise, in all of the episodes in Paisan, the artificial lighting can be traced from the sharp shadows the figures cast on the setting or on other characters. In addition, some scenes are overexposed while others are
underexposed. These infer that the director doesn’t give as much importance to visual quality to achieve realism as he gives to the narrative content.

Another point where neo-realism and *Babel* differ is their style of editing to create verisimilitude. The neo-realist approach seeks to capture reality intact, so they refuse to manipulate it through the use of montage (Brunette, *Cinematic Realism* 35). Instead, they rely on what Rossellini calls ‘the art of waiting’, following and watching a character, with camera movement and in longer takes for instance, to let the reality reveal itself (*My Method* 62-63). Rossellini indicates that this method is counter to that of the ‘commercial film’ (that is Hollywood and Italian film at the time) before he explains the method of the commercial film:

Usually in the traditional cinema a scene is constructed like this: an establishing shot, in which the environment is defined; the discovery of an individual in that environment; you move closer to him (medium shot); then a two-shot; a close-up, and the story begins. I proceed in a manner which is exactly opposite to that: I always begin with a close-up; then the movement of the character determines the movement of the camera. The camera does not leave the actor, and in this way the camera affects the most complex journeys. (63-64)

The claimed method of Rossellini is manifested in *Paisan*. In the Naples episode, to tell the story of Carmela and Joe, the camera tracks Carmela and Joe from one corner inside the ruin to another (from staircase to the window) as they try to communicate. In the scene where the two sit by the window and continue talking to one another, the narration does not cut to closer framings or show the dialogue in shot reverse shot (SRS), like continuity editing would, but rather preserves the two characters in a medium long shot (MLS) while they talk in a long take until the conversation is interrupted by Joe being shot. Long shots and long takes like in this scene prevail in *Paisan*. However, continuity
editing constructs *Babel*. This is evident in the introduction of Susan and Richard’s story. Just as Rossellini posited, an establishing shot defines the environment, the holiday destination in Taguenzalt, showing a big restaurant tent that waiters and Western tourist come in and out of, which is set against the rising mountains and green field at the background. Then, as Rossellini posited, we discover the main characters, Susan and Richard, seated against this background under the tent in MLS. Then, the space is broken into closer views where each starts ordering food in a closer shot (MS) to the waiter. After the order, the couple starts conversing about why they are in Morocco, and this dialogue is conveyed through a series of SRS in tighter frames (MCU-CU on Susan and MS-MCU on Richard). The construction of the scene is an example of classical continuity editing. The same scene also conforms to other codified rules of continuity editing, such as eye line match and the reliance upon the 180 degree principle. The scene’s actions—the couple ordering food, the couple conversing—never cross the axis they are placed on initially. The SRS showing the couple conversing also employ eye line match. When Susan talks to Richard who is off screen at times, she looks right corresponding to where he is. The following shot shows what is being looked at, Richard, over Susan’s shoulder, as he returns her gaze talking to her.

*Babel* not only uses continuity editing methods within stories but also among them to produce smooth transitions. A graphic match is one of these devices. It ties the first story (Morocco) to the subsequent one (San Diego). The last shot of the first episode’s story, where Yussef starts running away from the camera on the left hand side of the frame having realized somebody is shot inside the bus with a red pale tee-shirt
graphically matches with the subsequent shot in San Diego which starts with Mike running away from the camera on the left hand side with the same color of tee-shirt. Another graphic match is in the transition from the Tokyo story to the Morocco story. In this instance, a shot of Chieko and the detective embracing in Tokyo cuts to Mohammad embracing his wounded son in Morocco. Joining two shots which are similar in character placement and color eases the shift from different geographies and storylines while it masks editing.

Another device Babel utilizes among stories is a sound bridge whose purpose is to create smooth transitions (Bordwell, Film Art 289). For instance, the prayer sound of the muezzin coming early over the ending of the previous shot, Amelia and the children thrown to the desert at night by Santiago, prepares the spectator to the Moroccan story while preventing an instantaneous change in time between the two events (night at Mexico, morning in Tazarine). In the same way, the dynamic music of the following story (Mexico) comes early over the ending of the preceding shot in which the two brothers are nervous and lying on the bed in silence. The effect of these sound bridges is that the transition from one story to another, from silence to dynamic music, is gradual and smooth. Thanks to the sound bridge, editing is hidden in these scenes. The more editing goes unnoticed the less the spectator is reminded they are watching a film. This is a product of artifice, rather than reality intact. Thus, classical editing functions in Babel to create the illusion of reality by concealing the film’s constructed world. Another reason why continuity editing in Babel is invisible is because it has been the most familiar technique to the audience (Thompson 203).
In addition to shots comprised of natural *mise-en-scene* and spliced with invisible editing, a hand-held camera merges with a fast camera movement (pan, tilt) to catch an ongoing action. This empowers the realistic style because it bestows an impromptu, documentary like quality to the scenes. The opening scene of Susan and Richard, which I analyzed above, provides one example to this characteristic prevalent throughout *Babel*. When Richard orders food the camera is extremely shaky and his face is half occluded by the waiter’s back. After Richard orders, the hand-held camera quickly pans to Susan and roughly to the menu she is holding in an effort to keep up with the event. After she orders, the camera continues to shake as it records their conversation in SRS. Hand-held camera, seemingly offhand composition and quick camera movements resemble the work of the directors of direct cinema who prefer hand-held camera, which enables them to record actuality anywhere, anytime and as long as it takes, sometimes at the expense of high quality shots that a better vantage point or mounted camera could give. A natural effect arises from this imperfectness that *Babel* creates by camera movement seeming like a documentary.

In conclusion, *Babel* pulls different formal elements together to achieve verisimilitude. POV story strands revolve around a converging event and accumulate objective information while optical POVs within the story strands give us the psychological depth of certain characters. The access to what the film sets as truth from two sights, from outside and inside, from POVs and optical POVs, is the interplay between objective and subjective reality that strengthens the sensation of realism in the spectator. This method is different from neo-realism in two ways. First, in the neo-realist
approach the camera is not as confined to the character’s perspective as in *Babel*. During action the camera may wander off from the character and start recording the buildings, the crowd and passersby to provide a spontaneous moment or at least to get a shot that doesn’t convey anybody’s perspective. What is on the screen in neo-realism is simply what it is, and the spectator should struggle to decide the truth. On the other hand, in *Babel* there is a truth established beforehand. The cues are arranged in such a way as to have the viewers conclude what the film had originally established as ‘truth’. The world of *Babel* seems highly objective for it provides various facets of an event from several POVs, but in fact the film’s “objectivity” is derived from repeatedly confining the spectator to the subjective perspectives of separate characters.

Secondly, non-heroic characterization and lack of resolution are the elements network narrative and neo-realism share which are inherent in *Babel*. While the non-heroic characters mirror the viewers to themselves in everyday life, the lack of resolution recalls those moments in the viewers’ lives where conflicts are left unresolved and efforts turn out fruitless in our everyday lives. The function of open-ending in *Babel* conforms to the way this device functions in neo-realism. That is, to project the unresolved event into a timely and on-going socio-economic conflict in the real world. For *Bicycle Thieves*, this might be the on-going unemployment and poverty in Italy during the film’s time; in *Babel*, this is the on-going tension between the United States and Mexico in terms of illegal labor immigration. The open-ending in fictive stories corresponds with those issues in the real world that are also currently unresolved. The open-ending also turns the spectator closer to the unpredictable and complex nature of life rather than away from it.
Third, shooting on-location and mixing non-professional actors with professionals are those elements that *Babel* incorporates from neo-realism. By using these devices, the neo-realist approach seeks to capture the historical moment in which it was produced. *Babel* incorporates these elements for the same purpose. By using authentic individuals, locations and professional actors in service of this authenticity, *Babel* produces an imitation of the real world to make a convincing argument about its social, economic and political problematics. Natural lighting is another device that *Babel* uses to look realistic. This is a step towards neo-realism in that both refuse to use three-point lighting of Hollywood cinema. Lighting in *Babel* and neo-realist films also functions primarily to illuminate the subject matter and the location rather than to create a drama with it. However, there is also a step away from the concept of neo-realism in that while *Babel* minimizes or conceals the artificial means so that it can look real, the primary concern in neo-realism is to capture reality with the narrative regardless of visual verisimilitude. Happenstance is another formal element in neo-realism that *Babel* simulates to generate a life-like representation. However, there is again a conceptual difference in the way happenstance functions between *Babel* and neo-realism. In neo-realism spontaneity in the real world contributes to the development of a rough pre-established script. Whereas, *Babel* presents an accidental event which had been scripted beforehand.

Finally, continuity editing contributes to the construction of reality in *Babel*. Continuity editing, also known as invisible editing, effaces the constructed world of *Babel*. By adhering to 180 degree rule, eye line match, and establishing shots breaking into closer shots, the spectator doesn’t recognize the device that links the shots to each
other and gets caught up in the story. Other devices such as graphic match and sound bridge blend the story strands into a seamless whole. At the same time, continuity editing works together with the style we associate with direct cinema like hand-held camera, off-hand composition, zoom in/out. In doing so, Babel pretends to be documenting an event as to produce the sensation of actuality, immediacy and spontaneity of the subject matter.
Chapter 2: Historical Specificity in Babel

The first chapter examined the techniques Babel uses to create verisimilitude. By way of similarity and contrast, I showed that the film blends certain elements from four different cinematic modes—network narrative, traditional neo-realism, direct cinema and canonical storytelling—to construct a realistic representation. This chapter will now examine the creation of verisimilitude in terms of the thematic content of Babel. I will argue that the film’s network narrative structure conveys a set of socio-economic and political issues corresponding to the time period in which Babel was produced. In doing so, the film captures this historical moment by describing a set of contemporary issues. First, the film suggests the economic contrast between multiple geographies within and among nations across the globe through cross-cutting. Second, the multiple perspectives allow the film to discuss undocumented immigration as a socio-economic problem that stems from the global economic gap. Finally, the film shows a process through which the narrative of an event is distorted as it is transformed into a news item by global media.

2.1. Mapping Economic Disparity Among Geographies

Babel displays a set of geographic spaces mapped according to a system of economic disparity. Economic disparity is a topic which has been explored within and between countries around the world. Some scholars suggest that it is decreasing (Pinkovskiy and Sala-i Martin; Thomas); others suggest the opposite (Giddens; Sassen, Globalization; Cassen; Faux and Mishel; Fox). Even though the conclusions vary, the common denominator of these studies is the fact that substantial economic disparity today
exists around the world. Contrary to the abundant research of these issues within the social sciences, directors only recently have started addressing contemporary inequality in multiple geographies around the world. _Babel_ will be examined in terms of the way it depicts the varying levels of economic inequality across multiple geographies. The goal of this section is to look at the question of inequality in the story world of _Babel_ from a socio-economic point of view. It will be argued that the way the multiple geographies are edited together, via cross-cut, illustrates the economic disparities in today’s world.

_Babel_ ties together four countries across the globe – The United States, Mexico, Morocco and Japan— and diverse locations within these countries – San Diego (the Unites States), Tazarine (Morocco), Taguenzalt (Morocco), Quarzazate (Morocco), Casablanca (Morocco), El Carrizo (Mexico), Tijuana (Mexico) and Tokyo (Japan). Taguenzalt, where the film begins, is a Berber village in Morocco. Compared to the other places in the film, it is the most impoverished. Off-screen sound of footsteps and wind are what first introduce us to Taguenzalt before we see an old man (Hassan) walking on a field of soil and stone surrounded by mountains. Along his walk in this vast space, we neither see nor hear anything that implies civilization (a building, a restaurant). From the beginning, Taguenzalt is coded as a barren space. Hassan finally reaches his destination, a small rural house. There he sells a rifle and some ammunition to Abdullah, a goat herder. The house is nearly empty inside. There is no furniture. Everybody sits on the ground. As Abdullah and Hassan bargain, the cooking is done by the women of the family on the ground over a can. In addition, the house is made up of stones and the main entrance, an old wooden door, doesn’t close all the way. The home has no sanitary
facilities or running water. Clothes are hand washed by women with soap outside in a puddle, revealing the primitive standard of living.

The primitive space of Taguenzalt is further emphasized in long and extreme long shots when everybody goes outside to test the rifle. In the scene where Hassan, Ahmed and Yussef take their turn firing at a rock in the far distance, the LS reveals the vast, open space before them. There is nothing surrounding them except stone and soil. After Abdullah ask Yussef and Ahmed to kill some jackals preying on the goats, the film depicts the two boys, tending the herd, then targeting a car and finally the bus. All of this is shown through extreme long shots which reveal Yussef and Ahmed once more in the middle of a vast, open space, surrounded by the Atlas Mountains and devoid of any manifestations of capital. Atmospheric sound contributes to the vast and empty geography, especially when silence is interrupted by the sound of the goats, wind, a rooster’s crow or the echo of a fired bullet. While testing the rifle, Yussef accidently shoots Susan, an American tourist inside a passing tour bus. The bus stops as we hear female passengers scream. Yussef and Ahmed, realizing they must have shot the bus or someone in it, run away.

At this point the film cuts to another space. Now we are in a modern house in San Diego. Two children (Mike and Debbie) and a nanny are playing hide and seek. The two spaces (Taguenzalt and San Diego) portray opposite living standards and the juxtaposition of one after another emphasizes their difference. Contrary to the interior of the rural dwelling, the house in San Diego is surrounded with painted walls, and decorated with curtains and paintings. There is brand-new furniture and technological
devices like a plasma television, phone, computers and kitchen appliances. In the following scene, as Amelia puts the children to sleep, we see that their room is filled with toys and furniture including two separate beds with clean sheets for each. On the other hand, Yussef and Ahmed sleep together in a single, handmade bed which is the only piece of furniture in the room. The house in San Diego symbolizes wealth reified in the modern style of the house, toys, furniture, clothes and so on, and hence a high standard of living. The juxtaposition of San Diego to Taguenzalt emphasizes the latter’s poor living conditions.

*Babel* continues to highlight the sharp economic divide between regions by intercutting between them. From San Diego, the narrative shifts to Quarzazate, another region in Morocco. The narrative provides the perspective of Susan and Richard about what happened until the point at which Susan is wounded by the bullet. The landscape of Quarzazate is very similar to Taguenzalt in that it is a vast area surrounded with mountains. There are some small adobe houses scattered around. Taguenzalt has been a destination for tourists for years, and the film depicts it as such. We witness a group of western tourists scattered around a bazaar. Some stroll around the market place with cameras as villagers wait under the sun to sell them pieces of cloth, while others are pursued by villagers trying to sell hand-made ornaments. In the next shot, a tourist enjoys herself on a villager’s camel while her friend takes her picture. Still more tourists, like the American couple Susan and Richard, sit under a tent waiting to order food. The food service—from the oriental chairs and tables, to English menus, English-speaking waiter, Coke, bottled water, ice cubes and even the tent that protects tourists from the torrid
sun— is designed solely for the comfort of Western tourists. In *Contemporary Political Economy of Tunisia and Morocco*, Gregory White posits that one of the ways to improve peripheral economies like that of Morocco and Tunisia, which were wrecked by French colonization, is to establish close economic and social ties with an integrating bloc of advanced-industrialized countries and the European Union. For Morocco and Tunisia, a tourism economy oriented to European consumers has been one of those ties. However, White goes on to say that these developmental strategies have made Morocco and Tunisia dependent on, and vulnerable to, European economies, which is also what *Babel* argues. Further, the economic achievement gained from such strategies is primarily shared among “a thin segment of affluent elites” while the vast majority of Moroccans and Tunisians are left out (White 171). *Babel* alludes to the Moroccan economy’s dependence on advanced industrialized countries by placing the villagers in Quarzazate in service of European (French, British) and American tourists (Susan and Richard). The tourists are also provided with an air conditioned bus which takes them from one destination to another. By way of contrast, we are shown that Moroccans don’t have the same comfort even when they share the same space with the tourists. The bus window which sharply divides western tourists and Moroccans, and through which Susan looks, shows villagers carrying objects either on foot, or on a donkey under the torrid sun. Like the bus, the tent brings together a crowd of western tourists and a handful of Moroccans at their disposal (like the tour guide Anwar and waiters) as it excludes a majority of villagers who stand or sit on the soil under the sun to sell stuff within the same area.
Yussef’s bullet later strikes Susan inside the bus, so she is taken to the nearest town, Tazarine. Tazarine, just like Taguenzalt, is a village in extreme poverty in Morocco. As the bus changes its route and takes the turn into Tazarine, we are provided with some panoramic shots. It is comprised of small adobe houses surrounded by nothing but soil and stone. The goat and sheep herds juxtaposed with a CU of a turkey indicate farming as the primary source of living. Richard takes Susan into one of these adobe houses which belongs to Anwar, the tourist guide. The interior shows features of primitiveness in that Susan has to rest on the floor because there is no furniture. There is no electricity, gas, or water in the room either. In addition, due to the absence of a hospital, a medical center, an ambulance, or a doctor in the village or nearby, Susan must receive stitches without anesthesia from the village’s veterinarian in order to avoid bleeding to death. The availability of a veterinarian and the lack of a doctor in the village indicate the priority that the source of income (farm animals) gets at the expense of human health in a place of extreme poverty.

However, instead of juxtaposing Quarzazate with Tazarine, the narrative intercuts to another country, Japan, immediately after Susan is shot. The high tension and screams in the bus shift to the silence of a volleyball match in Tokyo. The establishing shot of the gymnasium in ELS-LS emphasizes the spacious and modern space. It is wide enough to accommodate several players in three distinct matches side by side. The players have all the necessary equipment for the match, including neat and new sports uniforms. The building has a shiny hardwood floor surrounded by bleachers and gigantic windows with
wide steel pipes and lights on the ceiling. The setting is mostly gray and blue—cold, steely colors.

Chieko is one of the players in the volleyball match and also the main protagonist of the Tokyo story. The fact that she is a student is indicated through the school uniform she puts on after the match. In San Diego, we were informed that Mike is also a student, given the conversation with his father over the phone about what happened that day at school. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Yussef and Ahmed go to school. They have to work to support the family by tending the herd, just as their peers in Quarzazate, three young boys (extras without speaking parts), must try to sell gifts to the Western tourists. The opportunity the two children have in the two First World countries is juxtaposed with the deprivation of the other two children in peripheral regions. *Babel* presents education as associated with the economic inequality which manifests itself as either opportunity (San Diego and Tokyo) or deprivation (Tazarine and Taguenzalt) within individual’s lives (Yussef, Ahmed, Mike, Chieko). Education is crucial enough to have prevented the accident as well. If Yussef and Ahmed were at school instead of tending the herds up in the mountains, they wouldn’t have tested the range of the rifle, wouldn’t have targeted the bus, and thus would not have shot Susan. In actuality, Morocco suffers from troublesome educational and health care systems (White 170). *Babel* situates the first deficiency as the partial cause of the conflict (if Yussef and Ahmed were at school Susan might not have been shot) while setting the second deficiency, the poor health care system, as the main conflict of the film. Because even though Yussef wounded Susan, it is the lack of health care in Tazarine that prevented her
from receiving prompt and adequate treatment. The narrative resolution involves Susan being taken to a hospital in Casablanca.

There are two panorama shots in the Tokyo story which demonstrate the economic conditions of the city. In the first one, an erect building fills the middle right portion of the shot while a highway stretches out diagonally from the foreground to background left. There are many cars and trucks on the highway flowing slowly because of the traffic. On top of the highway, there is the railway system cutting the scene horizontally. The horizon is cluttered with several vertical buildings and skyscrapers which obstruct the sky. There are a few trees pushed to the left edge of the frame. The only thing we hear is the hustle and bustle of the traffic (car horn, railway sound, highway noise). The second panoramic shot is almost a duplicate of the first. In a tight composition, several buildings with gigantic billboards cut the upper middle half of the screen lengthwise. The metro system traverses the middle of the shot while the railroad, hectic traffic and people dominate the bottom half of the frame. One barely sees the sky, and there is no trace of green. Both settings are overwhelmingly gray, including the sky. The gray color resembles the cold gray colored gymnasium.

In *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Saskia Sassen claims Tokyo as one of the three global cities. According to her view, global cities are the heart of the global economy. In them, global capital agglomerates, leading to the production of advanced technology, manufacturing and service industries. This accumulation of capital manifests itself in the architecture of Tokyo in *Babel* via several skyscrapers, means of transportation and advanced infrastructure. The overwhelming gray color emphasizes that
it is an industrial city. The agglomeration of capital is so intense that investment clutters the cityscape. Tazarine and Taguenzalt, on the other hand, are devoid of ‘capital’ because their space has not been filled with industrial products. The narrative of Babel implies that industrialization is two-fold. It is beneficial because it creates the necessary services (medical care, transportation) a person, such as Susan, might need to stay alive. In that respect, Tokyo is an advantageous place. On the other hand, industrialization is a process of advancement at the expense of the natural environment. The area of trees at the bottom edge of the frame which is almost entirely enclosed by products of industry in a panoramic shot of Tokyo illustrates this cost. Tazarine, Taguenzalt and Quarzazate, on the contrary, preserve their natural habitat. The juxtaposition of Tokyo with Tazarine means to bring side by side two geographies that are on the opposite ends of the economic spectrum. This cues the spectator to recognize the economic gap between them.

The spatial distribution of labor is another indicator of the level of development. In Taguenzalt, the means of income is farming, and the family does the work manually (tending, milking and skinning the herds), which takes a long time before a sale can take place. Only one time throughout the film does the Moroccan family sell what they produced. It is when the father hands a pile of skins to Ahmed and sends him to their neighbor to ask if they are interested in purchasing them. The longer takes and stationary camera shots while the family does various chores indicate the slow process of production and stagnant economy of the locale. As soon as we cut to Tijuana, Mexico, which Amelia, Santiago, Mike and Debbie are about to enter by car, the succession of cuts within the sequence accelerates; the sound of wind shifts to a vibrant music keeping
pace with the increased number of cuts to symbolize a shift from a stagnant to a faster-paced economy. These rapid and successive cuts show us Mexicans selling manufactured products (bottled water, vases, newspapers and flags) to drivers waiting in line to cross the border; a road construction worker is excavating the ground with a jackhammer, barbers are cutting hair, a shoeblack is polishing shoes, prostitutes on the sidewalk are waiting for customers, a painter is framing and selling portraits on the street while piled beef stakes are sitting on a buffet counter for the next customer. These short sequential shots indicate that there is a fast, labor-intensive economy on streets. While concrete buildings, railroads and jalopy cars are products of industrialization, the existence of a chicken hutch behind the wedding house in El Carrizo implies that the area is still in transition (from farming to industrialism). In addition, Santiago rings a chicken’s neck and pulls its head off in that hutch for the wedding in front of some children (Mexican and two American, Mike and Debbie). The fact that only Mike and Debbie are shocked by his act indicates the distance most people have from their food in developed countries where chicken is manufactured in factories and purchased in markets. The sound of chickens in that hutch also echoes the chicken hutch of the Moroccan family which generates a link between the two spaces (Tijuana and Taguenzalt) in terms of development.

Contrary to Taguenzalt and Tijuana, Tokyo has no image or sound of a farm or poultry animal. The atmospheric sound in Tokyo consists of industrial devices such as train, highway, car horn, automatic subway doors and automatic announcement system. Anthony Giddens remarks that the more advanced an economy, the more clever its
economic processes become less labor-intensive, more automated and even robotized (25). Sassen says that “mechanization and computerization in Tokyo have transferred skills to machines” (The Global City 221). The sound of automatic subway doors and announcement system in downtown Tokyo when Chieko is meeting friends illustrates this fact. Also, in contrast to Taguenzalt and Tijuana, nobody in Tokyo performs manual work on the street. The people on the street are usually in black suits, presumably on their way to work in the office buildings surrounding the city. Yasujiro, Chieko’s father, is in a suit throughout the film, and we presume from the meetings mentioned and his clothing that he is a business man. These characters might be what Sassen refers to as “professional workers,” who are necessary for the expanding highly specialized service sector of Tokyo (The Global City 274). Banking, finance, management, accounting and law are some of these highly specialized services. Gentrification, which is the rise of hotel, large scale luxury office, skyscrapers, residential developments and fashionable, high-priced shopping districts are also, according to Sassen, the result of the growing financial industry in Tokyo. The elite high-rise apartment in which Chieko and Yasujiro live, several skyscrapers seen from their balcony and the office buildings Chieko is surrounded with when she is out all reflect the highly developed economy of Tokyo. The production of such sites generated the demand for maintenance, cleaning, delivery and other types of low-wage service workers (Sassen, The Global City 280). The doorman at Yasujiro and Chieko’s building represents such a low-wage worker whose sector is generated by, and depends upon, high-income professional workers like Yasujiro.
The places Chieko goes in Tokyo are further representations of a modern city. She lives in a residential area which is controlled by a doorman. Her apartment is on top of a skyscraper where a full view of the glorious city can be seen. Steel entrance doors, multiple plasma televisions, laptop, designer furniture and video cell phone are some of the high technology products Chieko uses every day. The relative wealth is not particular to Chieko, but is meshed into Tokyo’s public space. In the restaurant where Chieko and her friends meet, it is common to see plasma televisions at each table, a surround sound system which delivers techno music to every corner, and the separate bar room to have a drink, watch a movie on big screen TV or play arcade games. The dance club she goes to at night provides a similar kind of technology with vivid disco lighting, laser show, surround sound system and a professional DJ.

*Babel* articulates the levels of development by drawing contrasts between costumes as well. What villagers, notably Hassan, Anwar and the Moroccan family, put on are old, worn-out and dirty. Within two days, each Moroccan family member (Abdullah, his wife, Yussef, Ahmed, two sisters and a baby) continues wearing the same clothes. On the other hand, Chieko changes her clothes with each new activity: volleyball match, eating with friends at the restaurant, and going out for the evening. Her clothes are new, trendy and clean. Mike and Debbie also put on new, clean clothes for every new occasion during the day: hide and seek, bedtime, going out into the neighborhood and attending the wedding. While Mike and Debbie are wearing clean pajamas when they go to bed, Yussef and Ahmed sleep with the same clothes they wore during the day. Amelia’s clothes are in relatively good condition compared to the
Moroccan family. She changes her day time clothing, a plain tee-shirt and a tracksuit, to pajamas at night. For her son’s wedding, however, instead of buying a new dress, she wears a sixteen year-old dress which has had to be altered to still fit her. The condition, style and number of the clothes that characters possess directly correspond to their level of income. The Moroccan family doesn’t change clothes, and Amelia changes only occasionally while Chieko, Mike and Debbie frequently put on different outfits.

A further example is transportation. When we are introduced to Hassan Ibrahim at the beginning of the film, we first hear off-screen footsteps on a presumably stony landscape over a black screen before seeing him walking—a scene lasting thirty two seconds. Restricting the spectator to the sound of footsteps codes the act of walking as the important piece of information particular to that land—Taguenzalt. The long take showing Hassan on foot makes the spectator confront the relatively long time which must be spent travelling in this region. Abdullah and Hassan, the latter with a goat draped over his shoulders in return for the rifle, leave the village on foot for work just after Hassan sells him the rifle. Yussef and Ahmed are always on foot throughout the film as well. After Yussef shoots Susan, the juxtaposed extreme long shots where he and Ahmed run back to their home with the herd reveal the long commute they must make on foot. Even when the boys run away from the police, they climb up the mountains without the aid of any transportation vehicle. Because the police are traveling in Sport Utility Vehicles (SUV), the boys and their father cannot escape on foot. On the other hand, throughout the film, Chieko travels either by car or subway in Tokyo. The longest she walks is the distance of a cross walk which takes her about five seconds. Indigenous people of
Tazarine are in similar conditions with those in Taguenzalt in that they are predominantly on foot even when they carry heavy bags. People so seldom possess vehicles. For example, as Susan looks at the scenery after she orders at the restaurant, in ELS, there is an indigenous person biking in the middle of the desert to the horizon. Provided the speed of the bike and the lack of a visible destination at the horizon, the shot implies he has a long way to travel. Once Susan and Richard are out of the tour bus because Susan has been shot, Richard is condemned to walk or run back and forth in Tazarine due to the lack of other transportation in the area. Likewise Susan’s life is put on danger because the area lacks adequate transportation to the nearest hospital. Thus the film alludes to the fact that the living standard of an area, which includes the means of transportation, is so vital that one’s life might depend on that in an emergency.

2.2. International Labor Immigration

Multiple geographies juxtaposed in a certain way depicts the uneven distribution of wealth among and within nations. Tenets of network narrative—multiple protagonists and interlaced stories—unfold the life of Amelia, the Mexican nanny of Richard and Susan’s two children. The narrative follows Amelia after Susan’s shooting to show the point where Amelia’s life is effected by the accident. Her perspective of the event, presented through network narrative, acquaints us with her life, her problems and her desires as an immigrant worker. Her motivation for immigration and the problems she encounters (including her eventual deportation), overlap with the experiences of many of her real life counterparts. Her subjective experience is inclusive of a collective experience
shared by many in dispersed locations and determined by the dynamics of global processes. Via the character Amelia, Iñárritu draws attention to current socio-economic and political paradox to which countless Mexican labor immigrants in the US has been exposed.

While a city is home for the wealthy like Chieko and her father, it is also the home for low-wage workers like Amelia. Amelia is an illegal Mexican immigrant in San Diego. It is not a coincidence that Amelia works in San Diego, one of the largest cities in the United States. Sassen suggests that “economic globalization has multiple localizations, many of which typically go unrecognized” (Strategic 43). She states that ‘global cities’ are strategic sites where the current dynamics of globalization can be traced. One such current dynamic in global cities is the formation of “alternative circuits” (Strategic 46)—that is low-wage service work done primarily by undocumented immigrants. The shift from manufacturing to service economies in developed countries created high salaried city workers like accountants, lawyers, marketing specialists, consultants, agents and entrepreneurs in business, finance, advertising and high-technology sectors (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Gender and US 6-7; Sassen, The Global City 173-174). The high-income service sector raised the demand for a low-wage service sector (Sassen, The New Labor Demand 157), for the former necessitated various daily servicing to maintain its professional and private life that could only be provided by the latter (Hondagneu-Sotelo, Gender 7). The jobs may vary from building and cleaning to protecting the corporate towers, residents and offices of high-income workers, as well as
taking care of children and producing luxury goods (Sassen, *New Labor Demand* 157; Sassen *The Global City* 255; Salzinger 272).

Third world laborers have responded to this demand, for they have been struggling with the adversities of their economy such as high unemployment and low wages compared to cost of living⁹. Hence, a mass wave of international migrant labor has moved from the developing countries to the major cities of developed countries across the globe, a process named “transnationalization of labor” by writers such as Chavez (2) and Sassen (*Strategic*). Subsequently, this displaced Third World labor led to the formation of alternative circuits, especially in global cities around the world (Sassen, *Strategic* 44-45). Within this context, Amelia, a third world low-wage immigrant, represents countless Third World low-wage labor immigrants who belong to alternative circuits produced and dispersed around the globe.

More specifically, Amelia represents undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States. In *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society*, anthropologist Leo Chavez conducts a detailed research of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States located especially in San Diego. In an effort to conceptualize the movements of Mexicans, Chavez contemplates their motivation for immigration. In the interviews he conducts the most common reason for migration given by both Mexican men and women is economic hardship (12). In Mexico, wages are low

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⁹ Third world’s devastated economy is up to the implementation of such policies associated with globalization in an effort to accommodate world economy. Among these policies are free trade agreements, provisions and solutions of multinational organizations such as IMF and WTO, focus on export-dominated economy, opening up domestic economy to foreign firms, structural adjustment program (See Hondagneu-Sotelo *Gender*; Giddens 213-23).
in comparison to the cost of living, and there is a large pool of unskilled workers relative to small supply of jobs. Chavez claims that “most would prefer to remain in their own country, but worsening conditions there have made survival at home virtually impossible for many” (viii-ix). The economic desperation was intensified by the 1982 financial crisis which devalued the peso and obliged Mexico to pay off a large amount of foreign debt, which in return caused the Mexican government to “invest little capital in the creation of jobs, a situation which continued into the 1990s” (Chavez 30). Other factors, such as the structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the provisions of World Trade Organization (WTO), the opening up of the Mexican economy to foreign firms through “free trade agreements” —especially the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—all exacerbated the situation by increasing food prices, generating high unemployment, deteriorating wages, bankruptcy of a large number of firms and shrinking resources in states to meet social needs; consequently raising inequality and fostering north-bound Mexican migration (Acevedo and Espenshade; Sassen, Strategic 47-50; Faux and Mishel; Hondegnau-Sotelo, Romero, Ortiz 124). As a result, like many of her fellow-citizens, Amelia presumably headed to the USA, where she can earn “seven to ten times as much working on the US side of the border as on the Mexicans side” (Chavez xi), and where demand for cheap labor was at a premium (Schaeffer 106).

Besides wage disparity, “proximity” has also been a crucial determinant for prospective migrants (Schaeffer 107). Mexicans, for instance, tend to migrate to the US instead of other developed countries, simply because the US is closest (ibid). Babel indicates that Amelia’s life had already been determined by geographic proximity by
placing her specifically in San Diego, which in real life is “America’s gateway to the Third World. Just thirty minutes from downtown San Diego is downtown Tijuana, Mexico” (Chavez xi). *Babel* mirrors this fact by showing the quick car ride Amelia, Santiago and the children make from San Diego to Mexico through the border crossing at Tijuana. The ride to Mexico sequence, included in Amelia’s story strand, begins by emphasizing the political boundary, the ‘wall’, which divides Mexico (Tijuana) from the United States (San Diego). On top of the wall set on the foreground, there sits a Mexican, with his backpack, one foot on the Mexican side, the other on the United States side of the border, waiting for an opportunity to cross.

In real life, due to this close proximity, San Diego has been attracting heavy northbound immigration, mostly illegal, which, in turn, has caused tension between the two countries at local, federal and state levels (Stepner and Fiske 91). Chavez’s research show that many Mexicans try to cross the border illegally and, as a result, some are arrested by the border patrol during the attempt while others are deported later. *Babel* first alludes to the risk of being arrested through a shot of a border patrol jeep stationed behind the wall on the side of United States preceded by the Mexican on top of the wall trying to cross the border. Later, the film addresses the issue via Amelia on her way back to the United States from Mexico after the wedding. Reentry to the United States becomes extremely difficult compared to her smooth departure. An array of events leading to her deportation begins when her nephew Santiago pulls into a US border inspection station. The border officer, in a hostile manner, asks for their papers, where they are coming from and headed. Meanwhile he notices the children sleeping in the back
seat and asks who they are. Scared and annoyed by the hostile manner, Santiago replies that the children are Amelia’s nephews. The officer recognizes the lie because Amelia doesn’t look like them. This raises suspicion and hostility towards Santiago and Amelia. First, Santiago is asked to open the trunk. The officer’s suspicion corresponds to the behavior of actual border patrol agents towards immigrants working in the US. Jorge Diaz, an immigrant working as a gardener in the US whom Chaves interviewed, says that his trunk has been opened as a result of an agent’s suspicion of him carrying people in the trunk or drug smuggling (170). The officer in *Babel* continues to look into the glove compartment and even Amelia’s purse after searching the trunk. Meanwhile, a female officer walks a dog around the car. During these actions the officers withhold information from Amelia and Santiago about what they are looking for. The information Jorge Diaz gives from real life experience explains the intention of the officers in the film: they must be looking for drugs, somebody in the trunk or anything that will give them a reason for arrest. The fact that Amelia lacks a letter of permission for the children and that Santiago is intoxicated generate tension between the two parties, leading Santiago to trespass the border during inspection. From this point, Amelia and Santiago become suspects. Santiago, panicked and scared, abandons the children and Amelia in southern California desert located nearby the border.

Amelia and the children have to spend the night out in the desert. In the morning, realizing that unless she finds help they all likely will die, Amelia asks the children to stay put beneath the shade of a tree and starts wandering around the desert to find help. The real arrest of illegal immigrants is indicated in the scene where Amelia is arrested by
a border patrol officer that she finds after her lengthy trek through the desert. The scene is designed to produce identification with Amelia when she tries to alert the officer that there are two children in the desert and that they will die unless they get help. The officer, however, concentrates on merely arresting her. After the arrest, the officer wants her to take him to the children. As Amelia tries to find the spot where she left Mike and Debbie, another officer in a SUV full of arrested illegal immigrants pulls over. He approaches Amelia and asks if she is with them, pointing at the people inside the SUV. Immediately after he points, the following shot is one inside the vehicle. Now we are looking outside at the officer pointing, Amelia, and the other officer through the vehicle’s black fence from an arrested would-be immigrant’s POV. In the following shot, we see the owner of this view, a young Mexican similar to the one seated on the wall earlier in the film. He is juxtaposed with the shots of other immigrants inside: a woman with a baby on her lap and other young male immigrants. In this way, not only does Babel allude to a current economic issue at the border crossing—the economic desperation causing an impasse for Mexicans (entry, deportation, re-entry)—but also shows it from the POV of the other: Amelia or the young Mexican inside the police car.

We next see Amelia at the police station. An officer interrogates her with hostility and misunderstanding similar to that of the border patrol. He informs her that because she has been living and working in the US illegally, the government of the United States is determined to deport her immediately. Amelia replies that she has been living here for sixteen years. She has all of her belongings in the US, rents a house, and has made a life here. The officer says she should have thought about all of this
beforehand. After this statement Amelia says she wants to talk to a lawyer, but the officer says if she attempts to take this to trial he can assure her, she will only be prolonging the inevitable. He recommends she accepts voluntary deportation. This scene takes reality as a reference point to show the experience of arrested illegal immigrants. “When illegal immigrants are apprehended” states Chavez “they are offered two alternatives: They can sign a voluntary departure, after which they are escorted out of the country, or they can exercise their right to a hearing before an immigration judge to argue for a suspension of deportation”. In *Babel*, the agent directs her to accept the voluntary deportation. In reality this is the case as well in that when arrested, illegal immigrants are often exposed to what Chavez calls “a great deal of pressure to sign a voluntary departure form” (164-169). For recent immigrants voluntary deportation is less of a problem than for long-term residents, like Amelia, who has been in the United States for sixteen years. After staying seven years or more in the United States, immigrants can be granted legal residence upon request. However, if deported voluntarily the amount of time they stayed in the United States is erased, and they have to start from scratch (Chavez 163). Amelia’s deportation signifies the point where her sixteen years of effort and sacrifice—working in a foreign country, separated from her children, relatives, friends, and homeland—eventually amounts to nothing. The nullification of years of sacrifice and effort is indicated in the scene immediately after her deportation. She is deported without having been able to bring back any value from the United States. Even her dress is the one that she had bought sixteen years ago before she migrated to the United States.
Furthermore, Amelia’s fate is determined by the gender dynamics of immigration when the alternative circuits “started incorporating increasing numbers of women” (Sassen, *Strategic* 56). The shift to service sector jobs, the rise of American women in the workforce and the rise in the average number of hours of work in the United States have all increased the demand, not only for ‘low-wage’ but also ‘female’ workers in paid domestic jobs as care providers, maids and housekeepers (Hochschild 140; Repak; Schaeffer 115; Sassen, *The Global City* 255; Sassen *Strategic* 47). This demand initiated a “feminization of labor”, a term borrowed from Sassen. This means an increase in the female low-wage worker emigration to developed countries, notably the US, from Asia (China, India, Philippines), Latin America (Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Haiti) and the Caribbean (Parreñas; Chavez; Schaeffer; Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Doméstica*; Salzinger). Hochschild’s study, for instance, focuses on the case of Vicky Diaz, a 34 year old Filipino mother-of-five who left her family behind and immigrated to the US to work as a nanny for two children of a wealthy family in Beverly Hills. Similarly, Parreñas, in *Servants of Globalization*, presents a collection of interviews with several low-wage Filipino migrants who provide elderly care, childcare and house cleaning in private homes in Los Angeles. Chavez, meanwhile, shows several cases of female Mexican immigrants in San Diego working as maids, housekeepers, and nannies (see *Shadowed Lives*). Finally, Hondagneu-Sotelo examines Latina domestic workers (nannies, maids and housekeepers), mostly Mexican, in the major cities of the United States, like Los Angeles. All the literature summarized above emphasizes the
physical and emotional hardship these domestic female laborers share, the isolation and intense longing for families, especially for their offspring.

At this point, I would like to share my own experience as it holds close pertinence to the subject at hand. My grandfather had a stroke in 2006 which necessitated the attention of a full-time care-taker. In our effort to find an apt, affordable and a long-term care-taker, my family and I had the chance to meet and live with several female domestic workers from Russia, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Moldova and Uzbekistan, all of whom had immigrated to work in my home city of Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey. Nearly all were married and had at least one child who was taken care of by relatives in their homeland. In the conversations I have had with them, longing for their children was their main issue, and saving money was their single incentive to stay in Turkey\textsuperscript{10}. The reason why I gave this personal experience is because Amelia is an accurate/life-like representation of illegal immigrant women, not only in Latin America but also in Turkey. For the same reasons, Amelia too had to leave her son and two daughters in her hometown before migrating to the United States. Like her real-life colleagues, she suffers from displacement, yearns for her children, and looks for opportunities to get together with them in temporal occasions (like the wedding). Actually, it is this displacement that leads to her unfortunate ending (her deportation from the United States) when she decides to attend her son’s wedding in Mexico, no matter what.

\textsuperscript{10} Even though, different local causes contributed to the Eastern bloc outmigration, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and its foreign debt, it is not different from the Latina outmigration in terms of the dislocated lives emerged for a better living.
Parreñas defines mothers mothering for someone else’s child in a foreign country as the “globalization of mothering”; Hondagneu-Sotelo calls it “transnationalization of motherhood”; Hochschild the “global care chain”. The life of these mothers turns into a commodity when they are compelled to sell their motherhood at the expense of mothering for offspring at their places of origin (Shiva 118). Their children back home are raised by someone else –either relatives or care-takers, typically for a long period of time (Hochschild 136). During her interrogation, Amelia says she has spent sixteen years in the United States and that she has been looking after Susan and Richard’s two children since they were born. Therefore, she must have left her own son back in Mexico when he was around three years old. As opposed to the clear existence of a care-taker for Susan and Richard’s children, the person who took care of Amelia’s three children for sixteen years is not mentioned. The plot doesn’t tell us of any relative of Amelia that took care of her children. This emphasizes the priority First World children get in the process of global care-taking, while the future of caretakers’ children is left ambiguous. In all of these ways, multiple stories in network narrative allow the film to unfold the issue of international labor immigration through an immigrant’s perspective.

2.3. Miscommunication and Global Media

The title of the film refers to ‘The Tower of Babel’ in mythology. According to that myth, in ancient times, the whole earth spoke one single language. Human beings decided to erect an enormous tower in the city of Babylon in solidarity, its top reaching to heaven. The tower was not built to worship God but instead as a triumph of human
accomplishment. God, furious by the attempt, came down, confounded peoples’ languages and scattered them around the earth. Since then, human beings have spoken different languages around the earth and lost the ability to communicate with each other.

_Babel_ indicates that media is one of the means which contributes to and sustains human miscommunication in today’s world. It realizes this by showing the course of an event followed by the media representation of that event in different places. Yussef and Ahmed, in one story strand, test the range of the rifle up in the mountains. They start firing at targets, one of which is a bus appearing in the far distance. Assuming the bus is out of range, Yussef takes a shot and accidentally hits Susan inside the bus. Immediately after Susan is carried to Tazarine, Richard contacts Susan’s family in the United States, and tells them to call the embassy right away. During the waiting period that follows there is media coverage through a local radio in Morocco conveyed by an off screen female voice. She says: “Today near Tazarine there was an incident. An American was shot. Authorities say it could have been a robbery. But the American government was quick to suggest a terrorist link. Minister Hassan Hazal has said that ‘terrorist cells have been eradicated in our country and one act of vulgar banditry followed by superficial evaluations the US places on it cannot ruin our image or the economy.’”

Morocco, in actuality, is one of the African countries to have encountered fundamentalist terrorism and in which active terrorist organizations still are operating. Jo-Ansie K. van Wyk reports that Morocco, together with Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, receive financial assistance from The North Africa Initiative (NAI), complemented by the

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11 These groups are: Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), Salafya al-Aihadya Jihad, Assisrat al-Moustakim and Jama’at al-tawid wal-jihad bil-Magrib (Cordesman and Burke 12;The Military Balance 466; Wyk 127)
US Middle East Partnership Initiative to combat terrorism. Morocco, with $6.5 million, has been the largest receiver of the financial assistance and one of its successes is “the uncovering of cells of the group Salafya al-Aihadya” (134). Babel’s reference to the existence of terrorist cells in Morocco thus corresponds to the actual terrorist activities within the country.

This beginning of this first news report is also the last accurate media report we hear of the shooting. After waiting for a while Richard is informed by a local police officer that no ambulance is coming because the United States has stopped the one coming from Morocco to send its own helicopter. When Richard calls the United States embassy, saying he and Susan need help right now, the US official says he is trying to do everything he can; the event is all over the news, but there are some political problems that need to be resolved before they can send a helicopter. From this piece of information we are informed that the event has already gained an international outreach via television news, though we are not yet given the content of the news.

When the promised helicopter finally reaches Susan and Richard in Tazarine, it takes them to the rooftop of the nearest hospital in Casablanca, where Susan and Richard encounter the US ambassador and an array of reporters waiting for their arrival, some trying to take pictures and some reporting the event live. The live broadcast reporters on the rooftop are Americans. As soon as the helicopter lands on the rooftop, and its door opens, we hear a male news reporter, saying “The sources of the attack are not yet known…” His voice is quickly superseded by another reporter, this time female, as if she complements the words of the previous comment “…but it is clear that Moroccan and US
government officials are working quickly to secure the area for all citizens”. What she means by that is revealed in the following shots as we see two bodyguards situated by the roof door at a distance. She says, “…locals reported Susan Jones, American mother of two…” just before the rest of her speech becomes unclear. Susan, meanwhile is carried through the array of reporters to the hospital. These series of shots are important for a couple of reasons. First, this is the moment where Susan becomes accessible to Western media through which the news will have a global outreach (as will be seen in later scenes). Second, it is important to notice the contrast between the news we hear on the radio back in Tazarine and reports on the rooftop. While Inárritu provides abrupt pieces of news coverage on the rooftop of Casablanca Hospital, he allows us to get the full and clear information given by the radio news. This might suggest the value the director gives to both pieces of information in terms of their accuracy. Local radio news deserves attention because it reports the situation as it is, objectively, whereas the following reports start to distort the truth.

In the subsequent story strand, which is Chieko’s story, we see that the news of Susan’s shooting has reached Japan. Now the image of Susan is on a television set behind the counter in a Japanese buffet as a Japanese reporter gives information on her health condition. The reporter says: “Susan Jones, who was wounded in a terrorist attack in Morocco, was discharged from Casablanca Hospital this morning local time. The American people finally have a happy ending after five days of frantic phone calls and hand-wringing”. Two inferences can be made from this shot. First, it has taken a short amount of time for the news to travel across distant geographies (from Morocco to the
USA and then to Japan). Secondly, the news has been inaccurately reported; we have already known, from the perspective of the two brothers, that the shooting has nothing to do with a terrorist attack.

In the World News Prism, Hachten and Scotton analyze the innovations in technology that broke out at the end of the twentieth century. They posit that innovations like the personal computer, internet, cell phone and communication satellites have changed the way people and nations communicate around the world. That is, with high speed data transmission via such technology, a news event can instantaneously be transmitted to another part of the world. However, some side effects also emerged. They note that “the accelerating speed and efficiency of news media transmission have often created severe strains on the standards and ethics of responsible journalism” as getting the news first has superseded getting it right (xiv). The result is superficial and inaccurate journalism (ibid). The scene where news reporters surround Susan and Richard on the rooftop exemplifies such a side effect. The shot gives away the essential concern behind the gathering: to be the first to capture Susan in the shot –as she is carried to the hospital—while peppering it with adscititious remarks. In fact, what happens on the rooftop is identical to what Hachten and Scotton call parachute journalism:

A story breaks that captures the world’s attention: widespread famine in Niger or Ethiopia, genocidal warfare in Sudan or Rwanda, civil war in Congo. The foreign press arrives, often in large numbers, covers the story, shoots pictures and video, and then abruptly leaves. This kind of reporting, typically seen on television, fails to provide needed context and follow-up that such stories require for public understanding. (125)

Media fails to communicate a foreign news piece—Yussef’s intention for using the rifle. The event is interpreted as a terrorist attack. Why a terrorist attack? Via this presentation,
Iñárritu relates the fictional event of Susan’s shooting to the historical event of September 11, 2001. Immediately after 9/11, international terrorism became one of the top stories of the foreign news agenda because it attracted and still attracts a lot of attention from the public.

McChesney states “over the past two decades the US news media have become consolidated into the hands of a very small number of enormous media conglomerates and they expect to generate maximum returns from their assets” (99). Hence, media tends to pursue news which will bring high revenue. Foreign news is normally expensive and does not bring in revenue, unless it is about “American lives—as soldiers or terrorism victims” (Hachten and Scotton 45). Within this context, it might be inferred that the unusual attention Susan received in global media is dependent on the fabrication of a link to terrorism. *Babel* indicates a situation where media could manipulate a foreign event to its own advantage under the motivation of a profit-seeking mentality, which is the nature of today’s news. The film further emphasizes this motive when the news broadcast in Tokyo abruptly cuts from the piece on Susan’s shooting to a piece showing a large department store in which a Japanese consumer happily shops. The juxtaposition reveals the similar weight given to these two events once they are on television. Susan’s story, like that of the Japanese consumer in the following shot, is transformed into an adventure story with a happy ending to attract the spectator’s momentary attention. The shot implies

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12 Hachten and Scotton write “since 9/11, the cable channels have been competing fiercely. During the first week of coverage, CNN pulled in a near-record number of viewers. CNN was first among all cable networks for the week 10-16, pulling in 3.07 million cable and satellite households. That was one million more households than second-place Fox News Channel (FNC)” (43).
that both news pieces are products of consumerism. Susan’s news report joined together with a report about shopping reflects a life-like representation of today’s media coverage as Hachten states in *The Troubles of Journalism* the “intermixing and overlapping of news and entertainment is a central concern about today’s journalism and is so widespread today” (xix). He uses the term “infotainment” for this phenomenon that develops in some news media as a result of the pressures for profit making and organizational survival (ibid). Within this context, *Babel* critiques the television world news reporting not only for distorting the truth, but also using the distorted truth to generate profit.

The misconception Susan’s news report on individuals is indicated in the scene where we see the Japanese detective watching the news from the buffet unaware of the fact that it was not initially a terrorist attack. In addition, Chieko zaps through television channels, and the image of Yussef pops up as the culprit for Susan’s wounding. The multiple perspectives on the same event have already bestowed us with the knowledge of Yussef’s actual intentions. But Chieko is not aware of the way the event unfolded, so she is confined to the information given on television, which is likely to lead her and those watching the news to think Yussef is a terrorist.

To sum up, *Babel* brings out the socio-economic and political realities of the time period in which it was produced. One of these realities is the uneven distribution of wealth across the globe. Multiple stories provide multiple geographies with varying degrees of economic standing. *Mise-en-scene* reveals the economic conditions of these geographies. Cross-cutting puts these geographies in relation to one another. The way
stories are juxtaposed contrast geographies to bring out the uneven distribution of wealth across the globe. This maldistribution causes either the opportunity or lack of education, technological advancement, infrastructure and health care. Converging stories reveal that the economic gap creates countries whose citizens are dependent on the citizens and governments of more developed countries. The tourism economy oriented to Western consumers gives Morocco revenue at the expense of a more independent economy. The tourist guide, Anwar, represents the extension of this dependency.

The multiple stories and perspectives allow Babel to discuss another economic and political issue: international displacement of labor. The film shows that as a result of economic desperation, while some (like Anwar) serve to the citizens of the developed countries in their homeland, some (like Amelia) migrate to where the First World customers are. Many interviews and studies demonstrate that the character Amelia is a life-like representation of the countless Mexican low-wage workers compelled to immigrate to the United States because of their country’s economic desperation. Studies also show that not only Mexicans but also many other Latin American laborers, both men and women, face displacement as a result of economic desperation. Amelia is also a plausible representation of the world economic market’s recent demand for female low wage laborers (as nannies, maids, housekeepers, caretakers). The problems she encounters in Babel (displacement, longing and deportation) mirror those of her actual counterparts.

Finally, Babel directs the viewer’s attention to the globalization of news. The film argues that media may create faulty understandings of the world by disseminating
inaccurate pieces of information. Scholars suggest that inaccuracy remains a contemporary issue as far as global news is concerned—an issue which emanates from the profit-seeking mentality of global media, and which is facilitated by the advancement of technology. *Babel* alludes to this by depicting a path through which an event (shooting of Susan) is reported as something that it is not (terrorist attack) at the hands of western media. The interpretation of the shooting as a terrorist attack also echoes 9/11 attack in the United States, happened in 2001.
Conclusion

Network narrative is a novel storytelling method that surged in 1990s. Scholars have primarily attempted to explain the method in terms of the economics of the film industry. The consensus is that network narrative is something new to sell a new generation of consumers that is becoming increasingly bored with the usual devices of mainstream and independent films. Further approaches to understand the subject matter have included: dissecting the components of the new formula, pointing out how network differs from mainstream storytelling methods, and subdividing network narrative films according to the various combinations of individual components. However, scholars have paid less attention to how each formula functions conceptually once the formula has been laid out. The current research on network narrative lacks the in-depth analysis of a network narrative film’s formula as a way to grasp its symptomatic meaning. Thus, this thesis has examined network narrative film, and in particular Babel, to make sense of its formal structure extending to its conceptual meaning.

I argued that Babel re-creates actuality as a set of social, economic and political problems of its era, impacting lives across the globe. The first chapter shows that Babel fuses various formal elements in its formula to provide a simulacrum of reality. The first set of elements comes from within network narrative. These are multiple protagonists, multiple story strands, multiple perspectives, emphasis on coincidence and lack of closure. Multiple protagonists provide subjective perspectives around the same event which gives a multi-faceted view of the event suggesting a seemingly “objective” perspective. The optical POV shots give further in-depth understanding of a character’s
psychology. Moreover, lack of strong closure is an attempt to mimic daily life (rather than a conventional Hollywood film) where problems sometimes are left unresolved.

*Babel* also has some close affinities with the neo-realist approach such as shooting on locations and mingling professional actors with non-professional actors. Actors and locations found in the real world set up the authenticity with which *Babel* is able to argue for its realism. The fact that both professionals and non-professionals play ordinary characters tangled up in down-to-earth problems encountered in everyday life enhances the feeling of realism. Although the stardom of some professional actors plays against this ordinariness and authenticity that the film is trying to create, the film is trying to suppress their star persona by blending them with non-actors in non-heroic roles and plain physical appearances. Another strong similarity between *Babel* and neo-realism is that both depict ordinary individuals whose lives are closely attached to and defined by the economic and political adversities of their time period. For *Paisan* and *Bicycle Thieves*, for instance, several difficulties characters encounter in their daily lives (poverty, unemployment, and the choices they make as a result (prostitution, stealing) emanates from the economic and political adversities of post World War II Italy. In a similar vein, *Babel* illustrates the obstacles that the characters encounter in daily life that stem from the broader economic and political conditions of the film’s time period.

I have also looked at how the incorporated components of the film function differently in *Babel* than in neo-realist films. The comparison of *Babel* in particular to *Paisan* showed that *Babel* brings the spectator to a manufactured reality by having the spectator share the character via POV and optical POV shots. On the other hand, neo-
realism doesn’t resort to character identification and seeks to have the spectators observe the characters and arrive at their own truths. *Babel* also takes on happenstance narratively. It depicts a fictive coincidence as though it happened spontaneously. Like the accidental shooting, the whole story was scripted beforehand, and nearly no improvisation altered the preestablished script. Unlike *Babel*, in the neo-realist approach as exemplified by *Paisan*, an accident is a phenomenological experience. There is a rough script which is expected to develop by the spontaneous moments during the shooting phase. Neo-realism provides more room for happenstance develop a script with traces of reality whereas *Babel* presents a reality established beforehand by the scriptwriter and director.

*Babel* also differs from neo-realist films in terms of lighting and editing style. The film chooses to create the sensation of reality by minimizing the traces of artifice on the screen. Thus, *Babel* holds onto a natural light source as much as possible in order to appear realistic. In neo-realism, evading artificial lighting (three-point lighting) is a means of rejecting commercial filmmaking. Like *Babel*, the lighting in neo-realism functions to illuminate characters and their surroundings. However, the neo-realist approach is not concerned with masking lighting when necessary because its goal is not to appear real. In *Paisan, Bicycle Thieves* and *Open City*, the lighting used to illuminate characters and the setting can be traced from the strong shadows it cast over characters and setting. The lighting is also apparent in the underexposed and overexposed shots. In *Babel*, relying on a natural light source is a choice made for the sake of appearing
visually realistic in order to convince the spectator of the film’s verisimilitude—a choice sometimes made at the expense of having to revise the film’s script.

Like lighting, editing also helps conceal the artificiality of the world *Babel* presents. Continuity editing, the primary purpose of which is to “allow space, time and action to continue in a smooth flow over a series of shots” composes *Babel*’s story world (Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art* 231). In order to hide editing and generate the feel of a single unified reality out of four separate stories, *Babel* employs aspects of continuity editing within and across story strands: the 180 degree principle, eye line match, SRS, establishing shots breaking down to tighter shot scales, graphic match and sound bridge. Moreover, the film blends direct cinema style within this continuity editing structure via offhand composition, zoom in/out reframing and hand-held camera, all of which convey the images as if they were spontaneously captured rather than constructed. This also enhances the sensation of realism throughout the film.

However, within this simulacrum of reality *Babel* touches upon the timely social, economic and political controversies around the world. As elaborated in the second chapter, the primary problematic *Babel* addresses is the unequal distribution of wealth across the globe. The film addresses this issue by choosing nations (Mexico, Japan, Morocco and The United States) that are disparate in terms of proximity and development, and to cross-cut among them in order to make the economic gap apparent in the setting. Cross-cut for instance reveals how Tokyo, a global city, is disproportionately advanced and industrialized with respect to the primitive conditions of Tazarine. Similarly, the film joins the sequence of Quarzatate with San Diego as to
emphasize how modern and developed the latter is compared to the former. The film achieves this contrast by juxtaposing two regions that are always on different ends of the economic spectrum. The film never joins together two regions that are similar in the level of economic development, like Tokyo with The United States or Quarzazate with Taguenzalt or Tazarine. The costume of the characters contributes to the contrast made across geographies. While characters belonging to economically developed regions put on new clothes and change them frequently, the number and quality of the clothes characters wear diminish as the film shifts to lesser developed realms. Opportunity for schooling is another issue *Babel* touches upon. The film indicates that economic development impacts schooling. The cross cut which contrasts geographies also contrasts the lives of the children within those geographies. While Chieko, Mike and Debbie are portrayed as students via their costume, setting and narrative, Yussef and Ahmed are never referred to as such but are instead part of the workforce within their family. The lack of schooling in the story world of Yussef and Ahmed alludes to the deficient educational system in Morocco. *Babel* underlines this deficit even more by placing the lack of schooling for Yussef and Ahmed as a partial cause to primary complication: Susan’s injury. The other cause which exacerbates the film’s complication and delays the denouement of Susan’s recuperation, stems from the lack of health services in Tazarine, the area where she is shot. The film constructs this primary complication around the lack of local educational, health and transportation services, all of which are in close relation to the nation’s economic standing. Morocco, which Tazarine belongs to, is one of the countries that had been devastated by French colonization. After gaining independence
Morocco established close economic and social ties with advanced industrialized countries, mainly through its tourism sector, in order to improve its economy. However, as Gregory White states, not only did this strategy make the Moroccan economy dependent upon advanced industrialized countries and the European Union, but the economic gains of this strategy are shared among only a thin tier of Moroccan elites while the majority have been left out (171). *Babel* carries this economic fact to the plot as it picks up a real-life tourist destination, Quarzazate, where Moroccans are in service of European and American tourists.

Apart from the absence of health and transportation services in Tazarine, Susan’s life is threatened and her recuperation delayed by the political tension between the United States and Morocco. The United States government basically prevents the Moroccan government from sending an ambulance to Tazarine because it interprets the accident as a terrorist attack. It is argued that, in doing so, *Babel* alludes to 9/11 terrorist attacks that happened four years before the film was released. It visualizes the repercussions of a historically specific phenomenon which has led the United States government to be paranoid with regard to Arab and Muslim countries, and creates a situation in which this paranoia threatens ordinary lives.

Global economic inequality generating alternative survival strategies is indicated through the story of Amelia. To be able to make a living, some citizens in peripheral economies like Morocco’s, serve tourists from advanced industrialized countries, while others from the periphery survive by migrating to the developed countries as a cheap workforce. As the interviews suggest, low wages and high unemployment in Mexico
compel its citizens to work in various low-wage jobs in the United States, which still pay more than what they would be getting in their homeland. Amelia is portrayed as one of these Mexican immigrants who came to work in the United States. Geographical proximity is a crucial determinant for outbound migration. Mexicans tend to migrate to the United States because it is the closest developed country. *Babel* takes this information as a reference point and locates Amelia in San Diego, the United States, which is adjacent to Tijuana, a border city of Mexico which has been a gateway for Mexican immigrants.

As studies also show, many female immigrants work as nannies, housekeepers and maids in the United States. The high demand for female domestic workers has given Mexican mothers the incentive to migrate in order to support their families. In that sense, the portrayal of Amelia, a mother of three and the nanny of the two children of an American couple, is a life-like representation of her actual counterparts. The interviews indicate that one of the primary consequences of displacement for immigrant mothers has been longing for their families, particularly the offspring that they left behind. *Babel* alludes to the immigrant mothers’ weighty decisions to live apart from their families via Amelia, by placing her dilemma (the desire to be with her son in Mexico or to take care of the children in the United States) as the center complication of her story strand.

Likewise, Amelia’s deportation from the United States further mimics the reality that many undocumented Mexican immigrants face in real life. The interviews show that, like Amelia, the apprehended illegal immigrants were pressured to sign voluntary deportation agreements which nullify the immigrants’ years of toil and sacrifice in the United States. The last shot visualizes this phenomenon as Amelia is deported without
any value to bring back with her to Mexico after sixteen years of effort. Amelia is a life-like representative of Mexican illegal immigrants. Multiple perspectives, one of which unfolds Amelia’s life, acquaint the spectator to Amelia as an immigrant laborer. Her perspective allows Babel to addresses the ways in which global economic inequality negatively impacts ordinary lives.

The final historically specific theme Babel addresses is the motivation of global media in twenty first century. By creating a fictive story and showing how inaccurately it is conveyed across geographies via television, the film alludes to the underlying profit-seeking mentality of the news media. Given the scholars’ statements, the distortion of Yussef’s intention is a life-like exemplary for the likely behavior of mainstream media as far as foreign news goes, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Babel alludes to this historically specific problematic about global media via the network narrative. The components of network narrative (multiple protagonists, multiple locations, converging space and time) makes possible not only to demonstrate the repercussions of an event in one location on other geographies, but also the way an event’s media image develops and travels across these geographies. Thus Babel produces a simulacrum of the real world in order to discuss the timely social, economic and political problematics of its time period.
Work Cited


Hochschild, Arlie Russell. “Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value.” Giddens and Hutton 130-147.


