

Slippings of Tongues

By *Josef Woodard*, November 27, 2006

***Babel*. Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Gael García Bernal, Mustapha Amhita, and Adriana Barraza star in a film written by Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga and directed by Iñárritu.**

Reviewed by *Josef Woodard*

With *Babel*, the visionary Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu continues on his noble quest to affectively use the film medium to check humanity's pulse. If that ambition sounds overly grand, it is, and he sometimes steps over the line of credibility in the process, but ultimately wins us over with his message of hope amid the rubble of our fragmented contemporary world.

Babel is the third installment of a trilogy, preceded by *Amores Perros* (his masterpiece, so far) and *21 Grams*; clearly Iñárritu has honed his style of montage and the narrative cross-stitch between stories to a high degree. This time around, an accidental shooting of an American tourist in a stretch of desert in Tunisia triggers a wild ride of accusations and ripples across the world: west (Southern California and Mexico) and east (Tokyo) and forward and backward in time. In multiple languages and with locations in Morocco, Tokyo, and Mexico, *Babel* willfully attempts to crisscross the globe in an effort to show how surprisingly connected the world's peoples are.

On the dark side, it also illustrates how differences of language (including the particular language of the hearing impaired) can result in tragic misunderstandings and skeins of fear and paranoia. The universal love of our children is another constant theme, and some scenes involving innocent children thrown into the world's machinery are painful to watch, but central to the message.

Yes, and Iñárritu brings it all together with a sizable budget and enough star power to ignite marquee magnetism, with Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, and Gael García Bernal aboard. The most refreshing performances actually come from new sources, Adriana Barraza as a compassionate nanny without a green card, and Rinko Kikuchi as a tormented Japanese teenager recovering from the suicide of her mother. But actors are not what this film is really about; it's deeper and wider than that.

Once again, Iñárritu has used the unifying language of film, with its power of montage, to remind us that we're a troubled, angry species, but one also equipped with the salvation potential of compassion.