

# The Brightest Light in the Darkest Night

## An Analysis of Transcultural Communication Through Stuart Hall's Cultural Theories

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### ABSTRACT

The film *Babel* embodies the globalisation and multiculturalism of the world. This essay discusses cultural barriers and explores the possibilities of transcultural development and cultural identity. It employs a semiotic analysis to *Babel* to focus on the argument that fluid identity in the transcultural context can lead to new possibilities under global cultural and multicultural development, rather than negative and struggling aspects. From Stuart Hall's cultural theories, it analyses the positive and negative cultural exchanges in this film, and it is divided into two main sections. The first part investigates the reasons for the cultural communication barriers in the storyline at different levels: their cultural identity and how particular identities play a role in transcultural communication, which is explored through power theory and representation theories. The second part shows how cultural identity and communication conflicts are orchestrated by the director, for example, how the characters' diaspora experiences affect their cultural identity and why negative cultural barriers contain positive possibilities. In a transcultural world, we should remain open to different cultural identities.

**Keywords:** *Babel*, Cultural identity, Diaspora, Representation and Stereotype.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Babel tower in *Genesis* is a story about how the ancient people constructed a tower on the Shinar plain and were impeded by the Lord, who confused the world's language. The narration of Babel is ubiquitous. In a modern context, "to explain the origin and variety of the world's cultures," Babel has become synonymous with any sort of 'difference', not just limited to language [1]. The film *Babel* is one of the works which use Babel as a metaphor to present a story of transcultural conflicts [2]. The director uses a crossing narrative method to structure four tragedies happening in different cultures and countries due to the estrangement and the communication barriers. In the current globalised environment, the boundaries of 'culture' are blurred. Thus the analysis about cultural homogenization and conflicts has increased remarkably - most of the existing research of *Babel* in the communication field also focuses on its communication barriers and cultural conflicts. For instance, Olivier discussed the dilemma of inter-human and intercultural communication under the barrier of globalisation by teasing out the semiotic strands in the

film *Babel* [3]. Shan pointed out the crisis communication of humans through exploring *Babel* [4]. Other communication research of *Babel* also contained the analysis of the artistic creation. Shaw, for example, illustrated how *Babel* works to create a 'world cinema' gaze in the Hollywood framework [5], and Shaw also analysed the narrative structure and cinematography of the film [6].

In this essay, besides discussing cultural barriers, the possibility of transcultural development and cultural identity is covered. By taking a semiotic analysis of *Babel*, it argues that the fluid identity can raise new possibilities for global cultural development in the transcultural context, rather than negativity and chaos. It consists of two main parts. Based on the power and representation theories, The first part presents how the communication barriers are produced and analyses the reasons, on various levels in these storylines: what does their cultural identity consist of? And how does the special identity work in transcultural communication occasions? The second part demonstrates how the director arranged the cultural identity and communication conflicts. For

instance, how do characters' diaspora experiences influence their cultural identity? And why do the positive possibilities contain negative cultural estrangement?

## 2. THE DARKEST NIGHT

### 2.1. Morocco

This story happening in Morocco is a typical example of transcultural communication. An American couple, Susan and Richard, are travelling in a foreign country to repair the emotional problems in their relationship. When they order food, they have some interactions with the locals. Generally, Susan's attitude towards this contrary can be summarised as the American poorly understand Morocco, both objectively and subjectively. Richard quickly finishes ordering his food, while Susan still looking blankly at the menu and ask the waiter for some "fat-free food". The waiter seems to answer her question by saying, "all our food is very good here." Susan looks at the menu again with hesitation and finally orders her food and asks for a diet Coke, whereas the waiter said they do not have a diet Coke here. Judging from the food Susan asks for, Susan has a poor understanding of the country from the very beginning. She subjectively lacks the willingness to comprehend the local culture: and to try the local food, she maintains doubting negatively and chooses the familiar taste. "America standard" is also embodied in their conversation: Susan simply assumes that the same fat-free nutritious meals and diet coke that are often available in the United States should have been universalized and be produced in Morocco. This conversation between Susan and the local waiter reflects that they share a different cultural cognition. Stuart Hall elaborated the process of symbolic practice, also known as "stereotyping," which explains how this obstructed conversation happens.

Representation is a conception that occupies a significant place in cultural studies. According to Hall, a common sense of usage is "Representation means using language to say something meaningful about or represent the world meaningfully to other people." [7]. From this perspective, when people share the same meanings or conceptual maps, this group can be regarded as "sharing the same culture" [8]. Specifically, in the core stage of the cultural process, Hall brought two related systems of representation [7]. In the first system, "all sorts of objects, people and events are correlated with a set of concepts or mental representations," which people carry around in their heads. In fact, from concepts for objects that people do perceive to those obscure things that they never really see or feel, people organize, arrange, and classify these concepts in different relations. Another system is about language. Academically, Hall identified a "language" as a broad term that translates people's concepts into signs [7]. Thus, these two systems cooperate to support a group to share the conceptual map and represent and exchange meanings. In *Babel*, although the waiter enables to

communicate with Susan in English — which means that they share the same language system when they communicate, they are still disciplined by different social conventions. Hence they hold disparate conceptual maps and cultural perspectives.

After the food they order is served up, Susan's intense feeling became apparent in almost all movements and reactions. She empties Richard's glass while he asks for a glass of ice to match his coke and quickly took out the knife and fork that she brought from the USA and sets them up nervously. Behind the tense reaction, Susan's real view of Morocco can be seen. This attitude is self-explanatory: the country is backward, which means everything is not comparable to developed countries. This area is barren, and the water must be polluted. There is no possibility that their cutlery can reach her requirement. Thus, she prefers to believe in unopened Coca-Cola rather than local water, and she prefers to use the cutlery she brought from home rather than the local ones. Susan's strong sense of difference constructs her cognition that everything in Morocco is unreliable and thrustless. Susan's stereotypical views should not be seen for granted. Instead, the process of how a person establishes his impression on people he never met or places where he has never been a process worth investigating. Media is the main channel from which people's impression of unfamiliar things comes. As media representation frames issues or people from a certain perspective, it might also lead to misrepresentation and under-representation. In other words, stereotypes could be produced under the media's influence.

As mentioned before, people who share the same "things, concepts and signs" means they share the same representation system — people identify with other people who share the same representation system. The concept of "imaged community" was first proposed by Benedict Anderson when he talked about the forging of collective identity [9]. In his opinion, media is the main way for people who never met each other face-to-face while living in the same society or nation to realize each other's existence. For instance, some television news applies to a media representation which can easily build up a sense of sharing collective economic interests and cultural memories for people [10]. To reinforce this sense of national identity, Hall and Du Gay pointed out that some media strategies are frequently used to emphasise the difference from others since people can clarify their identity relationally — know "who they are" by establishing "who they are not" [11]. In other words, the marking of 'difference' is the basis of that symbolic order which people call culture. Saussure also pointed out that meaning depends on the difference between opposites, which means there is always a relation of power between the poles of binary opposition [12]. Therefore, the sense of difference shaped by media can be used to construct power relationships since it engages "feelings, attitudes,

and emotions and mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer [13]" In the film, Susan clearly distinguishes herself local environment. This sense of difference is not simply an "unlike" feeling. In fact, behind her negative impression of Morocco, there are unequal power relationships hidden in it. The condescending feelings and stereotypical cognition from the "developed country" caused her nervousness.

Once Susan gets shot in the local area, the American government immediately defines this affair as a terrorist attack. It hypes it through the media, while the truth is that two Morocco children's horseplay causes the whole incident. How the stereotypical concept of Morocco is shaped is visible through American media's reaction and discourse. The reason why tourists with Susan, who has a completely rigid attitude towards the Moroccan locals from this perspective, can be comprehended. They have heard of the tragedy in Egypt. They have come to a poor, backward country that is part of the same part of North Africa, mostly Arab, practising Islam, with a similar cultural background. They all look the same to foreigners, and what happens in one country happens in another. They look at local Moroccans with this prejudice. They focus on the presence of terrorists, which, of course, has to do with the frequent terrorist incidents in the world in recent years, which somewhat affects people's perception of Islamic countries. Ultimately, the deep-rooted prejudices that have been in people's minds for a long time have led to this scene. These inherent prejudices caused by media representation led to a different level of anxiety in transcultural communication and thus affected positive communication between people.

## **2.2. Mexico**

This section mainly analyses the transcultural communication and conflicts between Americans and Mexicans. Through the character clue of a Mexican nanny Amelia, who works in the United States, a transcultural communication between the United States and Mexico is connected. In the film, Amelia takes care of the American couple's children, Debbie and Mike, while the parents are going on a trip. During this period, Amelia takes them back to her home in Mexico as she cannot find anyone to look after them while she must attend her son's wedding. These two children were born in the United States, a country with a fast-growing economy, and are influenced by their parents' dominant culture and values. When they get into Amelia's nephew Santiago's dilapidated car on the way to Mexico, these two white American children, who are totally unfamiliar with this contrary, are shocked and stared out of the window with curiosity at the strange world. The director arranged *mise-en-scène* factors here to highlight the difference between the two cultures: the exotic faces, oddly shaped and dilapidated buildings, colourful settings, the noise of speaking Spanish which blared out

from the crowd on the street, and the Mexican *nan-diegetic* music that used in this film scene all illustrate how different the atmosphere is, comparing with the USA where Mike and Debbie accustomed to. They feel apprehensive about this environment. As the Morocco story in which people tend to have negative stereotypes to an "underprivileged" region, Mike and Debbie also have stereotypical views on Mexico. Their impressions of Mexico partly come from their mother Susan, as Mike repeats in Santiago's car: "Mexico is dangerous". Thus, like the last story, the children's first reactions to this completely unfamiliar culture are negative and passive. In addition, this negative image of Mexico and the children's resistance to this foreign culture is not entirely due to their mother's indoctrination. It is a conflict between two cultures under an unequal power relationship.

When the wedding is accomplished, Santiago drives the Children back to America. A misunderstanding at the border check led to a tragedy: Amelia and the children are stranded in the desert, and finally, Amelia is driven out of the United States. During the transition check, the police check their car more rigidly, which might because that the police are accustomed to believing a drunken Mexican is likely to have a problem. This prejudice makes the police particularly wary and sensitive when talking to the people in cars. Hence their conversations are guided by this inherent perception. Moreover, the conflict arose when the US border police judge them to be child traffickers based solely on cultural differences such as skin colour and language. The influence of their own culture led the US police to stereotype the relatively backward Mexican country. This conflict can be seen here and when Amelia is abandoned by her nephew in the desert between the United States and Mexico while crossing the border and has to look around for help. In most of the characters' viewpoint in this film, Mexico is a "dangerous" place with a high crime rate. Stereotypical behaviours trigger a series of tragedies due to their preconceived impression. These subtleties reflect the seriousness of the cultural clash between the two countries.

## **3. THE BRIGHTEST NIGHT**

### **3.1. Morocco**

The American couple finally insists on the end until the recovery aircraft come and escort them back to America. In the film, the guide undoubtedly plays an important role in the transcultural exchange, not only by rescuing the American couple when they need help but also by his uncompromising commitment to the situation after many tourists have abandoned them exchange so effective. As a tour guide, he is familiar with the languages of Europe and the United States and has an understanding of each other's cultures and customs. Hence he is familiar with the small group of tourists on board and can clearly sense the differences between the

two groups. In this case, he will consider the problem in a complex way and take a more sophisticated approach. The role of the tour guide in the intercultural exchange between the two parties is undeniable. His functional role makes him more aware of the differences between the groups and uses the information to make the exchange as smooth as possible. For example, he tries to adopt a soothing and gentle attitude when translating the words of the local doctor. Furthermore, the guide is an English-speaking Moroccan, which facilitates negotiation and communication between the locals and Richard. The Moroccan guide can communicate with Richard in a second language without creating barriers that reduce the anxiety and uncertainty created by Richard's communication. As quantity and quality of communication are high, it is more effective in curbing Richard's anxiety and uncontrollable emotion.

The local guide places the injured Susan in the dilapidated home of an elderly couple. The elderly Moroccan woman and a veterinarian help ease the pain of Susan's wounds and keep her from bleeding to death with simple medical treatment. When Susan is finally saved, Richard takes out his wallet and offers the locals money in return for their selfless assistance, but the poor Moroccans refuse. Nevertheless, the Moroccan felt it was his duty to save others in distress, and Richard's sincere farewell embrace with the guide shows his change in attitude towards Morocco.

### 3.2. Mexico

The Mexican nanny Amelia is also a character with a complicated cultural identity. Amelia, as a Mexican, was hired by an American couple and lived in the US for 16 years. So, Amelia plays a big role in the film because she is a typical diaspora who has lived in both Mexico and the United States for many years. She has a Mexican cultural identity and an American cultural identity. She has an in-depth knowledge of both cultures, so her cultural identity is characterised by complexity and diversity. She takes Debbie and Mike into Mexico and introduces them to Mexican culture. And Debbie and Mike are getting to know Mexican culture because Amelia, who has looked after them for many years, is acting as a link between the American children and the Mexican cultural traffic. During the wedding in Mexico, Mike and Debbie manage to integrate into the group, catch chickens together, play together, and face the impact of the different cultures. Still, in the end, they were not prevented from communicating. All the people at the wedding got on well with each other. It was at this time that the prejudices of the American children towards Mexico were slowly dispelled.

"Culture" is one of the most complex concepts without a fixed definition. Under this intercultural context, Keesing's definition of culture is a valid interpretation because it links culture with

communication theories and emphasizes the complexity and diversity of cultural identity [14]. He regarded culture as "an ideational subsystem within a vastly complex system" instead of "a collection of symbols". In addition, he also believed that the particularity of culture is different among individuals. Hence culture is "not all of what an individual knows and thinks and feels about his world". Besides, "not everyone has the same theory of cultural norms" and "not everyone knows all areas of culture" [14]. Different cultural exchanges have both differences and similarities in his argument, which means cultural identity is multidimensional and mixed. Therefore, under his definition of culture, various transcultural situations of individuals and nationalities can be both considered.

The Moroccan guide and Mexican nanny above are two examples that represent the group of people who have complicated and diverse cultural identities. Hall divided opinions towards identity into two basic ways [15]. In the first one, identity is a rediscovery instead of a cultural production, which means identity will be affirmed and repudiated by a cultural group's dominant identity. Cultural identity in this way is solid and firm. The second viewpoint attaches great importance to the fragmented and fractured characters of identity, thus regarding cultural identities as "never singular but multiple across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourse practices and positions" [16]. In *Babel*, the characters' cultural identity is not fixed. On the contrary, it is continuously reconstructed during the experiences of characters. The diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transforming and reshaping difference. These characters in *Babel* played a significant role in enhancing the positive communications between different cultures.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This essay discussed the difficulties while communicating transculturally through analysing *Babel*. This film presents communication barriers that stir up questions about cultural communication in an unequal power relationship. Nevertheless, these barriers in the film cannot represent the mainstream of the world. In fact, what gives this film a deeper meaning instead of a simple tragedy is the positive side that hides behind it. Although a series of misunderstandings led to misery and communication estrangement, the reconciliations at the end of stories indicate further effective communication. During the experience in Morocco, Susan and Richard realised how important they are to each other. Hence this couple achieved their purpose of repairing their purpose. In addition, in another storyline, the Japanese daughter felt the police's care, thus changing her mentality and opening her heart to her father. As the director's acknowledgment at the end of the film: for my children, the brightest light in the darkest night, transcultural

communication has its own development prospect. This essay presents both the negative and positive sides of communication and argues that there are infinite possibilities for cultural development in this increasingly globalized world. Cultural communication is a complex process and should be taken into value.

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