

## THE 10<sup>th</sup> PLAGUE OF TOURISM

The Old Testament God who destroyed the tower of BABEL doesn't seem so bad when he's compared to the *deus ex machina* of the film named after it. At least no one in the Babylonian kingdom had a tour bus.

BABEL centers around an American couple, Richard and Susan (played by Cate Blanchett and Brad Pitt), taking a bus tour of Morocco in an attempt to repair their broken marriage. Susan is continually upset by the small inconveniences of travel in a third world country (lack of diet coke, drinkability of the water, etc.) Staring out of her air-conditioned tour bus at the Moroccan countryside, she seems almost completely uninterested in the people on the other side of the glass. All that changes when a bullet, shot by two young Moroccan boys, shatters her window and hits her in the neck.

The bus takes Susan to a rural village where she waits for medical care while her husband, Richard, tries to navigate the waters of an international incident. Amelia, Richard and Susan's Mexican nanny, is stranded with their children in California on the same day as her son's wedding in Mexico. A teenage girl in Japan makes inappropriate advances towards older men and mourns for her dead mother in a story that won't be connected until the end of the film. The two young Moroccan boys try to avoid the police. Things, well, things just don't really look so good for anyone.

BABEL practically begs its audience to empathize with its main characters. Each one of them has a headline grabbing detail that explains their potentially off-putting behavior. The prickly tourist, Susan, is also a mother mourning her baby. Richard, her husband, is a man whose wife lays bleeding on the floor of a village where he doesn't speak the language. Amelia is a mother who wants to see her son get married. The Moroccan boys are just kids fooling around who make a mistake. The teenaged Japanese girl is a deaf girl whose mother is dead. You would have to have a heart made out of stone to not to hope they ended up okay.

The breadth of the languages BABEL speaks makes up for the fact that some of its connections are a little too clean, a little too easy (the world just doesn't tie itself up in the same knots as the screenplay), but it can't make up for the fact that the characters are missing one layer of depth. The film is essentially a series of stories about people with good intentions making dumb mistakes, but unfortunately, this can't account for all the world's misery. Sometimes people shoot to kill.

I often got the sense that BABEL wanted to go deeper than it was going. It hints at the larger issues of America in the world. On the border, Amelia gets into a police van full of Mexicans, and it suddenly dawned on me that the whole time I was so concerned about the survival of the two white children, I had forgotten that (as a border cop later points out to Amelia), many other children were probably in the desert that night. They just exist on the edge of the screen rather than at the center. BABEL is smart enough to acknowledge this failure, but it's too in love with its characters to truly correct it.