

Multilingualism in Hollywood Films Seen Through Naficy's Concept of Multiplex Cinema

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Introduction

Processes such as intensified transnational mobility and migration and the development and spread of information and communication technologies are having heterogeneous effects on modern societies in a wide range of fields – from politics and the economy to the media and entertainment industries, including filmmaking. On one hand, the film industry and its practices are shaping, and on the other hand, responding to the evolving, multicultural, and multilingual conditions of the modern world. The responses vary and depend on how filmmakers position themselves within the social and cinematic context of their working environment. In this paper, I concentrate on American Hollywood films, examining their response to the globalized conditions of contemporary societies through an analysis of their multilingualism. This aspect has historically been overlooked in Hollywood, primarily due to the global predominance of (American) English as the universal language. While English has retained its dominant position as the global *lingua franca*, the growing multilingualism of societies and individuals is becoming more evident, reflected in the increased use of different languages in Hollywood films.

The theoretical framework provided in the first two chapters of this paper, which examines the past and present sociolinguistic context based on an analysis of secondary sources, is essential for addressing questions regarding the historical role of language and multilingualism in Hollywood cinema, as well as understanding the

current changes in this role. I also endeavour to address the evolving landscape of multilingualism in films and the underlying motivations driving these shifts, utilizing the insights of film theorist Hamid Naficy (discussed later in the paper). Naficy draws upon his earlier concept of *accented cinema*¹ – a film that departs in style and production from the global mainstream² – to explore Hollywood’s adaptation to the altered conditions of a globalized world.³ Building upon the author’s thesis that certain contemporary Hollywood films, labelled as multiplex films, bear resemblance to accented films⁴ within the mainstream context, I delve into the destabilization of Hollywood cinema, attributed in both accented and multiplex films to factors like their multilingualism. I illustrate the potentially disruptive nature of multilingualism (coupled with other characteristics) through a case study of the multiplex film *Babel* (González Iñárritu, 2006),⁵ which I examine using a previously established theoretical framework. This film analysis also initiates a discussion on the motivations behind a more prominent incorporation of diverse languages within the traditionally monolingual, commercially-driven landscape of Hollywood, targeted at mass audiences.

The Global Socio-linguistic Context: The Hegemony of English and Multilingualism

The contemporary socio-linguistic context is marked by two interrelated yet contradictory features, both crucial for comprehending the evolving linguistic landscape of Hollywood cinema. The first feature is tied to the long-standing dominance of English, a concept revived by Robert Phillipson in the 1990s, known as linguistic imperialism⁶. English linguistic imperialism refers to the dominance of English through

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- 1 The term “accent” should not be interpreted solely in linguistic terms but rather in its multidimensional and nuanced connotations, as elucidated further in the *chapter on Naficy’s concepts of accented and multiplex cinema*.
 - 2 Naficy, Hamid. 2001: *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
 - 3 Naficy, Hamid. 2010: “Multiplicity and multiplexing in today’s cinemas: Diasporic cinema, art cinema, and mainstream cinema”. *Journal of Media Practice*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 11–22.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 - 5 While there are numerous Hollywood multilingual films produced to date (some of which are referenced in the paper), I’ve selected *Babel* for its presence in several analyses spotlighting cinematic multilingualism. Despite its age, it serves as an exemplar of Hollywood’s reaction to the globalized, multicultural, and multilingual landscape of modern societies (e.g. Atay, Simber. 2019: “Multilingualism and cinema”. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 155–156; Cronin, Michael. 2009: *Translation goes to the Movies*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 99–107; O’Sullivan, Carol. 2007: “Multilingualism at the multiplex: a new audience for screen translation?”. *Linguistica Antverpiensia, New Series – Themes in Translation Studies*, Vol. 6, p. 82; Naficy 2010, p. 16). Yet, the distinct characteristics setting it apart from mainstream cinema also render it suitable for applying Naficy’s conceptual framework.
 - 6 Phillipson, Robert. 1992: *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the establishment and perpetuation of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.⁷ These are primarily associated with the dominance of the UK during the colonial era and the subsequent military, political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the US following World War II.⁸ Despite shifts in international (political) relations and alterations in the socio-linguistic landscape, including the resurgence of previously marginalized languages⁹ and the growing prominence of multilingualism, Phillipson contends that English linguistic imperialism is still “*alive and kicking*”.¹⁰ Jie Zeng and colleagues, drawing from Phillipson’s insights, introduce the concept of linguistic neo-imperialism, underscoring how the persistence of the asymmetry between English and other languages is largely tied to English’s global proliferation as a neutral, universal lingua franca across various social spheres. This expansion spans global economics, politics, education, science and technology, as well as the media and entertainment industries, including Hollywood.¹¹

The second characteristic of the contemporary socio-linguistic context, which is partly related to the first, is multilingualism.¹² While individual knowledge of various languages and their presence and usage in society are not recent phenomena, globalisation, the advancement, and widespread adoption of information and communication technologies, as well as increased transnational mobility and migration, have rendered multilingualism more conspicuous today than in previous times.¹³

7 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

8 Zeng, Jie, et al. 2023: “English linguistic neo-imperialism in the era of globalization: A conceptual viewpoint”. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 14. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1149471/full>; accessed on 7 June 2023.

9 Aronin, Larissa in Singleton, David. 2008: “Multilingualism as a New Linguistic Dispensation”. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 3.

10 Phillipson, Robert. 2012: “Linguistic imperialism alive and kicking”. *The Guardian*, 13 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/mar/13/linguistic-imperialism-english-language-teaching>; accessed on 7 June 2023.

11 Zeng et al. 2023.

12 The concept of multilingualism is understood in diverse ways. Certain scholars draw distinctions between bilingualism and multilingualism, while others differentiate between individual multilingualism, which pertains to an individual’s ability to use multiple languages, and societal multilingualism, which refers to the presence and use of different languages within a society (Cenoz, Jasone. 2013: “Defining Multilingualism”. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol 33, p. 5). In this paper, I embrace a comprehensive definition of multilingualism, which encompasses the knowledge and use of two or more languages both at the individual and societal levels. This definition holds significance for comprehending two main aspects: Firstly, it sheds light on multilingualism within the filmmaking process, encompassing the linguistic diversity among film crew members and the linguistic diversity of the audience. Secondly, it elucidates film multilingualism, denoting the overt use of multiple languages within a film. This can manifest through the inclusion of linguistically diverse groups and individuals in the film narrative or through the multilingualism exhibited by these characters.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

Migrants and indigenous community members typically exhibit multilingualism, yet the proliferation of English as a global lingua franca and the broader advocacy for multilingualism suggest that its scope extends beyond these demographics. Presently, proficiency in two or more languages holds significant value and expands opportunities across various domains¹⁴—this encompasses the consumption of certain (recent) Hollywood productions, whose multilingual nature becomes comprehensible within the delineated socio-linguistic framework.

Hollywood in a Global Socio-linguistic Context

Phillipson's perspective on English linguistic imperialism positions Hollywood as a historical driver of this phenomenon.¹⁵ Ella Shochat and Robert Stam also point out that Hollywood has evolved into "*came to incarnate a linguistic hubris bred of empire*".¹⁶ Its enduring dominance, evident since the early 20th century and particularly accentuated post-World War II¹⁷, enabled Hollywood to narrate tales of other nations not in their native languages but in English, catering to both American viewers and audiences worldwide.¹⁸ In this regard, the proliferation of English as a global language has not only facilitated Hollywood's penetration into international film markets but has also made it even stronger through its cinematic productions.¹⁹ Moreover, the tradition of producing monolingual films in American English has been perpetuated by assumptions regarding the reluctance of American audiences to engage with subtitled content in cinemas.²⁰

The incorporation of other languages (and subsequent subtitles) is thus perceived as potentially compromising distribution or commercial viability in both domestic and international markets. Consequently, Hollywood films, irrespective of the linguistic environment depicted in the narrative or the linguistic diversity of the characters, are predominantly produced in English.²¹ Lukas Bleichenbacher writes that "*audiences and critics have mostly accepted this sacrifice of realism for the sake of comprehension*".²²

14 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

15 Bleichenbacher, Lukas. 2012: "Linguicism in Hollywood movies? Representations of, and audience reactions to multilingualism in mainstream movie dialogues". *Multilingua*, Vol. 31, No. 2–3, pp. 156–157.

16 Shochat, Ella in Stam, Robert. 1985: "The Cinema After Babel: Language, Difference. Power". *Screen*, Vol. 26, No. 3–4, p. 36.

17 Cronin 2009, pp. 7–9.

18 Shochat in Stam 1985, p. 36.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Bleichenbacher, Lukas. 2008: "Linguistic Replacement in the Movies". *Poznań Studies in Contemporary Linguistics*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 179–180.

21 Bleichenbacher 2008, pp. 179–180.

22 *Ibid.*

The prevalence of English hasn't precluded the occasional use of multiple languages in Hollywood films over its history. However, due to the factors mentioned earlier, such instances have been infrequent, with "foreign" languages often relegated to mere "ornament, to mark location or nationality".²³ The increased visibility of multiple languages in Hollywood films has become more apparent in recent decades.²⁴ There is a noticeable trend moving away from linguistic substitution, where other languages are replaced with English, towards a strategy of representation, where languages corresponding to specific characters or settings²⁵ are authentically incorporated. This shift is evident in the increase of films featuring longer dialogues in languages other than English²⁶, and multilingualism is now regarded as a "vehicle for plot and character development"²⁷. Films in which languages other than English are prominently featured include *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003), *Hotel Rwanda* (George, 2004), *The Interpreter* (Pollack, 2005), *The New World* (Malick, 2005), *Babel* (González Iñárritu, 2006), *Inglourious Basterds* (Tarantino, 2009), *To the Wonder* (Malick, 2012), and *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016). The growing acceptance and promotion of multilingualism in today's increasingly multicultural and multilingual globalized societies may help explain the increased inclusion of two or more languages (along with subtitles) in films, as well as the commercial and critical success of various multilingual films in both US and global markets. Hollywood filmmakers endeavour to depict this type of reality as authentically as possible, aiming to appeal to the broadest possible audience, including global viewers²⁸. This endeavour necessitates a departure from the cinematic monolingualism prevalent throughout Hollywood's history of film production.²⁹ Talking about last year's Oscars, Andrew Cheng, for instance, highlights the growing proliferation of Hollywood films as indicative of a broader acceptance of linguistic diversity and a concurrent shift toward linguistic authenticity. He cites

23 O'Sullivan 2007, p. 84.

24 Beseghi, Micòl. 2019: "The representation and translation of identities in multilingual TV series: *Jane The Virgin*, a case in point". V: Pérez L. de Heredia, María in Higes Andino, Irene, ur. *Multilingüismo y representación de las identidades en textos audiovisuales /Multilingualism and representation of identities in audiovisual texts*. *MonTI* Special Issue 4, pp. 147–148; Corrius, Montse, et al. 2023: "Translating Multilingualism in Mira Nair's Monsoon Wedding". *Languages*, Vol. 8, No. 2. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2226-471X/8/2/129>; accessed on 10 June 2023; Mingant, Nolween. 2010: "Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. A Blueprint for Dubbing Translators". *Meta: Journal des traducteurs*, Vol. 55, No. 4, p. 713.

25 Bleichenbacher, Lukas. 2007: "“This is meaningless - It's in Russian”": multilingual characters in mainstream movies". *SPELL: Swiss papers in English language and literature*, Vol. 19, p. 121.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

27 O'Sullivan 2007, p. 84.

28 Bosseaux, Charlotte. 2023: "Multilingualism on screen: When liminality meets translation. The case of *Jane The Virgin* in French and Spanish translation". *Meta: Journal des traducteurs*, Vol. 68, No. 1, p. 58.

29 Beseghi 2019, pp. 147–148.

the multilingual science fiction film “Everything Everywhere All at Once” (directed by Kwan and Scheinert, 2022), which garnered multiple awards at the recent Oscars, as a case in point.³⁰ The film tells the story of a Chinese immigrant and is filmed in three languages – English, Cantonese, and Mandarin Chinese.

Even as multilingualism becomes more prominent in global societies, the prevailing dominance of English as a global lingua franca perpetuates linguistic inequalities in today’s socio-linguistic landscape. Hollywood plays a role in this dynamic in two significant ways. Firstly, the majority of Hollywood films distributed worldwide are predominantly in English. Secondly, when other languages are included in Hollywood productions, they often reinforce existing linguistic hierarchies, particularly through the frequent negative portrayal or stereotyping of non-English-speaking characters.³¹ Conversely, the emergence of multilingualism and the translation of recent mainstream films, including those previously cited, may challenge the traditional monolingualism of Hollywood cinema. Historically, Hollywood films have aimed for universality or neutrality, often centring on American English as the standard language. While this destabilization may not be total, given these films’ adherence to certain mainstream conventions, it can be heightened by the incorporation of unconventional elements reminiscent of what Naficy terms “accented cinema”.

Naficy’s Concepts of Accented and Multiplex Cinema

Accented cinema and the role of multilingualism

The notion of accented cinema, pioneered by Iranian-American film theorist Hamid Naficy, delineates the cinematic works of displaced, deterritorialized filmmakers. Since the 1960s, these creators have predominantly migrated from Global South nations to those of the Global North, particularly to urban centres, where they produce films.³² They share a liminal subjectivity and occupy a distinct position within both the social milieu and the film industry.³³ Discussing the latter, Naficy writes that accented filmmakers:

By and large, they operate independently, outside the studio system or the mainstream film industries, using interstitial and collective modes of production that critique those entities. As a result they are presumed to be more prone to the tensions of marginality

30 Cheng, Andrew. 2023: “‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’ and other Oscars 2023 films show a trend towards linguistic realism in Hollywood”. *The Conversation*, 13 March. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-and-other-oscars-2023-films-show-a-trend-towards-linguistic-realism-in-hollywood-200817>; accessed on 7 June 2023.

31 Bleichenbacher 2012; Cheng 2023.

32 Naficy 2001, p. 10.

33 *Ibid.*

and difference. While they share these characteristics, the very existence of the tensions and differences helps prevent accented filmmakers from becoming a homogenous group or a film movement.³⁴

The filmmakers Naficy discusses are not a monolithic group or movement; rather, they vary based on several factors, including the timing of their migration and their connection to their country of origin.³⁵ It is the existence and interplay of these similarities and differences that, according to Naficy, creates the *accented style*.³⁶ The collective style encompasses various aspects, including narrative structure, visual style, characters, content, themes, and plot. It extends to the portrayal of feelings linked to exile, the filmmaker's biographical and socio-cultural background, as well as the production, distribution, screening, and reception of the film.³⁷ Naficy outlines the accented film style in contrast to mainstream Hollywood cinema, which conforms to the dominant mode of production and aims to be standard, neutral, or ideologically unbiased. According to this perspective, Hollywood films, characterized by their realistic portrayal achieved through *mise-en-scène*, camerawork, editing, and entertainment value, are deemed ideologically unmarked or accentless. Conversely, alternative cinemas are perceived to carry an accent, marking them as distinct from the mainstream.³⁸ The accent observed in the films discussed by Naficy stems from the unique, deterritorialized position of both filmmakers and audiences, as well as from the artisanal, collective methods of film production.³⁹ The characteristics of the accented style, which filmmakers use to critique mainstream cinema, are evident in various aspects. These include narrative strategies that challenge the realistic portrayal of time, space, and causality typical in mainstream films, as well as aesthetics emphasizing smallness and incompleteness. Additionally, there's a critical juxtaposition of diverse worlds, cultures, and languages.⁴⁰

Indeed, while the accent in the films analyzed by Naficy extends beyond language, it is, to some extent, rooted in the linguistic attributes of the filmmaker, the audience, and the film itself. This accent is evident not only in the literal accents of

34 *Ibid.*

35 Naficy identifies two migratory waves, spanning from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s and the 1980s to the 1990s, respectively (*ibid.*, p. 10–11). He distinguishes between exilic, diasporic, and ethnic filmmakers or films based on their connection to their homeland. Exilic films primarily depict life in the homeland, while diasporic films navigate between a lateral connection to the diasporic community and experience and a vertical tie to the homeland. In contrast, postcolonial ethnic and identity films focus on life in the filmmakers' adopted country (*ibid.*, p. 15).

36 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

the characters and actors⁴¹ but also in the diverse integration of various languages. Naficy writes that “one of the greatest deprivations of exile is the gradual deterioration in and potential loss of one’s original language, for language serves to shape not only individual identity but also regional and national identities prior to displacement”.⁴² Through the intricate interplay of migration, language, and identity, the author elucidates how accented filmmakers often opt to craft films exclusively in their first languages, despite the potential limitations this choice poses for distribution. However, more commonly, their cinematic endeavours embrace multilingualism, necessitating the inclusion of subtitles. Their accentuation is further underscored either by the lack of subtitles (or translation) (e.g. in *Calendar*[Egoyan, 1993]) or the express use of subtitles or other forms of typography; in some instances, texts may appear in English or combined with accented dialogues and/or voice-overs, such as in *Lost, Lost, Lost* (Mekas, 1976) and *History and Memory* (Tajiri, 1991), or they can be written in other languages, for example in *Homage by Assassination* (Suleiman, 1992) and *Measures of Distance* (Hatoum, 1988).⁴³ Multilingualism serves as one of the elements, alongside direct audience engagement, the utilization of voice-overs, and multivocality, that catalyzes the destabilization of the mainstream narrative system.⁴⁴ The crucial aspect is that in accented films, language transcends mere linguistic expression, becoming instead “a part of the plot and the self-reflexive agent of narration and identity”.⁴⁵

The mainstream counterpart of accented cinema: multiplex cinema and the role of multilingualism

If Naficy’s earlier work delineated a clear demarcation between the stylistic attributes of accented cinema and those of Hollywood, he later acknowledged the American film industry’s adaptation to evolving circumstances, as outlined in the preceding chapters of this paper. In his 2010 article, he discusses the resurgence of a new mainstream or Hollywood cinema, which he terms multiplex cinema. He correlates the emergence of the latter with two interconnected yet contrasting movements shaping large, globalized populations of displaced filmmakers and audiences: the post-digital movement, marked by the growing convergence, consolidation, and digitization of media, and the post-diasporic movement, characterized by the escalating global dispersion and displacement of people.⁴⁶ To illustrate how certain mainstream films assimilate accented traits and thereby develop an accent of their own, he repurposes the conventional usage of the terms “multiplexing” and “multiplex”.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p. 24–25.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

45 Naficy 2010, p. 15.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Hence, a multiplex film is construed as a mainstream counterpart to the accented film. A central attribute shared by both is the multiplicity and fragmentation inherent in the contemporary globalized milieu, a phenomenon intertwined with the characteristics and procedures of filmmaking, as well as expressed within the film's narrative framework.⁴⁷

In doing so, multiplex films depart from the traditional (mainstream) realist style, which typically exhibits temporal, spatial, and causal coherence. Instead, they embrace fragmentation across time and space, narrative and character development, resulting in a plethora of locations, storylines, cultures, and language.⁴⁸ Multilingualism thus stands out as one of the defining characteristics of a multiplex film, adding to its intricacy and consequently lending it its distinctive accent.⁴⁹ This cinematic multilingualism can be associated with multilingualism in the filmmaking process, given that multiplex film crews, much like those in accented films, are frequently multicultural and multilingual. Such multilingualism also influences audience reception: “*The more languages you know, the more privileged you feel as audience members and the more you feel individually addressed by the film and treated as an insider to the film.*”⁵⁰ Individual multilingualism is therefore highly valuable in the context of film viewing, as it enhances comprehension, as will be demonstrated in part through the analysis of the multiplex film *Babel*, discussed below.

Babel as a Multilingual Multiplex Film

Babel, a drama directed by Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu and written by Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, serves as the concluding instalment in their “Trilogy of Death”, which began with *Amores Perros* (2000) and continued with *21 Grams* (2003). It was produced through a collaboration between American, Mexican, and French companies. Shot across three continents, the film featured a multicultural and multilingual crew, as well as both established Hollywood actors and local talent.⁵¹ The film achieved both commercial success and critical acclaim, earning numerous awards, including the Golden Globe for Best Drama, seven Academy Award nominations, and the Academy Award for Best Original Score. Additionally, Alejandro González Iñárritu received the prestigious *Palme d’Or* for Best Director.

The film unfolds across four distinct locations, each featuring its own storyline, which are presented in parallel without a clear chronological sequence. These

47 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

narratives are intricately interwoven, with varying degrees of explicit connections between them. The first story unfolds in a remote Berber Moroccan village, where two boys, Yussef and Ahmed, play with a rifle purchased by their father, Abdullah, from his friend Ibrahim Hassan. During their play, Yussef accidentally shoots and seriously injures an American tourist aboard a passing bus, initially sparking fears of a terrorist attack. The second storyline follows Susan Jones, an American tourist who is fatally shot, and her husband Richard Jones, as they journey through Morocco in an attempt to mend their strained marriage, which has been deeply affected by the loss of their newborn son. The couple also has two other children, who remain in San Diego under the care of their Mexican nanny, Amelia. The third narrative unfolds in both the USA and Mexico, portraying how Amelia, prompted by Susan and Richard's delayed return due to the incident, takes their children to Mexico for her son's wedding, where they are looked after by her nephew Santiago. The fourth storyline, set in Japan, notably diverges from the others. Throughout much of the film, we follow Chieko Wataya, a Japanese teenager who is deaf and grappling with the recent suicide of her mother. Initially seemingly unrelated to the other narratives, it later emerges that the rifle used by Yussef to injure Susan belonged to Chieko's father, who had entrusted it to his hunting guide, Ibrahim Hassan, during one of his trips to Morocco. Additionally, a scene in Japan unveils news of Susan's survival, indirectly revealed through television coverage seen at a bar frequented by Detective Kenji Mamiya.

The film delves into various facets of today's globalized societies, including transnational mobility and migration, cross-cultural encounters and tensions, the physical dispersal of individuals contrasted with their virtual interconnectedness, and international political relations and conflicts. In addition to exploring these themes, *Babel* actively harnesses the global diaspora and digital landscape to experiment with non-linear storytelling, disrupting conventional notions of time, space, and causality. Through its interwoven narrative threads spanning different locales and cultures, and its integration of multiple languages, the film embraces multiplicity and fragmentation. In doing so, *Babel* exemplifies multiplex cinema, diverging from the traditional linear style of mainstream Hollywood films and contributing to a partial destabilization of cinematic norms, akin to the accented film genre.

One of the pivotal aspects of the film contributing to this partial destabilization, particularly for our analysis, is its multilingualism. *Babel* features dialogue in Arabic, English, Spanish, and Japanese (both spoken and signed), with snippets of Berber and French also included. This linguistic diversity disrupts the notion of a value-neutral mainstream film, typically achieved through the predominance of English as a universal language. Notably, English does not hold linguistic dominance in the film; instead, it shares prominence with Japanese, Arabic, and Spanish. Furthermore, akin to Naficy's observations regarding the accented film, *Babel* experiments with subtitles as a characteristic of multiplex cinema. This underscores that, while the use

of different languages and subtitling in *Babel* aligns with the quest for linguistic realism, it also reflects broader cinematic experimentation rather than a mere response to audience expectations. The title “Babel”, drawn from the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel, which symbolizes the discordance of languages and the ensuing challenges in human communication, encapsulates this notion. It serves as a metaphor for the multilingual environment⁵² mirrored in both the linguistic diversity and thematic content of the film being examined. *Babel* delves into themes of interpersonal communication and misinterpretation, epitomized through the personal narratives of its diverse characters and their encounters with different languages. For instance, in a scene where the injured Susan is examined by a Moroccan veterinarian, the use of Arabic initially hinders Richard’s comprehension of Susan’s medical condition, with the tour guide, fluent in Arabic, initially providing inaccurate translations into English. The absence of subtitles during the Arabic dialogue between the veterinarian and the guide further impedes full comprehension for viewers reliant on English or those unfamiliar with Arabic. Similarly, untranslated Spanish and Japanese sign language in certain scenes contribute to the film’s exploration of language’s enigmatic role. Silent sequences from the perspective of Chieko, a deaf teenager in Japan, and untranslated dialogue between her and her peers underscore this linguistic complexity. In these instances, viewers not proficient in Japanese sign language, Arabic, or Spanish are “robbed” of part of our understanding, just as we are “robbed” of part of our understanding in Egoyan’s *Calendar* as an example of a film with an accent, simultaneously mirroring the challenges faced by characters like Chieko in navigating communication barriers. In essence, speakers of the languages featured in the film hold a privileged position when it comes to untranslated dialogue, while subtitles elsewhere guide the attention of the (assumed) English-speaking audience. This is evident in televised content shown in scenes taking place in Japan, where only news about the American tourist shooting is subtitled, leaving the remaining content accessible solely to Japanese-speaking viewers.⁵³

In the film *Babel*, we witness elements characteristic of an accented film, as defined by Naficy in his 2001 work, or it can be perceived as an example of a multiplex film. As the latter represents the mainstream counterpart to the accented film, the question arises: How do films like *Babel* navigate away from excessive “accentuation” and potential commercial failure? Marina Hassapopoulou suggests that for such

52 Atay 2019, p. 144.

53 In addition to its exploration of direct language interactions, the film delves into broader intercultural and communicative misunderstandings within a wider social, cultural, and political framework. Two examples illustrate this. Firstly, the defiance of Amelia, a Mexican migrant who speaks English, against the American authorities, leading to her threat of deportation due to circumstances related to her crossing of the US-Mexico border. Secondly, the portrayal of the shooting incident as a terrorist attack by the media, unveiling a politically driven misunderstanding between Morocco and the US.

films to attain broad audiences and commercial success, they must strike a delicate balance between “otherness”, achieved through diversification and distinctiveness that enhances the film’s competitiveness on the global market, and elements familiar to the audience. In the case of the film *Babel*, this diversification and differentiation are achieved through the previously mentioned fragmentation of time and space, the non-linearity and partial disconnection of the narrative, as well as cultural diversity⁵⁴ and multilingualism. On the other hand, it is precisely this sense of “otherness” in the film that necessitates the inclusion of familiar elements. Given the global dominance of Hollywood, audiences worldwide are drawn to familiar faces. As a result, the film features two Hollywood stars, Brad Pitt in the role of Richard Jones and Cate Blanchett portraying Susan Jones. In the film, we observe familiar tropes such as the objectification and victimization of women, characteristic of Hollywood narratives. Moreover, there is a deliberate emphasis on cultural otherness. However, despite the geographical, cultural, and linguistic diversity depicted, which challenges the hegemony of the US and English within this context, the overarching narrative centres around the shooting of an American tourist. This central focus “forces us to recognize the centrality of Western identity in the film”.⁵⁵ The shooting of the American tourist serves as the convergence point for all the fragmented narratives within the film. As the stories unfold, connections gradually emerge, culminating in an anticipation for the film’s resolution—a familiar element characteristic of classical storytelling—which promises a revelation of events.⁵⁶ In the end, the film provides a semblance of closure, particularly in the central storyline. Susan survives and eventually recuperates. However, the fates of Yussef, Ahmed, and Chieko are left unresolved, while Amelia’s narrative concludes tragically with her deportation to Mexico⁵⁷.

Conclusion

In the paper, I’ve demonstrated how, within broader societal contexts, Hollywood has progressively departed from the convention of producing monolingual films centred around ostensibly universal, neutral American English. The notion that American audiences were reluctant to engage with subtitled content in cinemas, which historically rationalized the practice of crafting monolingual films, was merely one among several factors contributing to the prolonged neglect of incorporating

54 Hassapopoulou, Marina. 2008: “Babel: Pushing and reaffirming mainstream cinema’s boundaries”. *Jump cut: a review of contemporary media*. Available at: <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/Babel/index.html>; accessed on 7 June 2023.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

57 The chronological sequencing of the narratives is significant here; we discover Amelia’s deportation before the uplifting news of Susan’s survival, despite this sequence not aligning with the actual chronological order of events.

diverse languages into Hollywood productions. It is essential to consider the additional hegemony of English in the global context, a dynamic which Hollywood both exploited and perpetuated through its dominant position in the global film industry. While the disparity between English (as the global lingua franca) and other languages persists both in broader social contexts and within Hollywood, the growing prominence of multilingualism in societies and among individuals over recent decades has also led to a corresponding increase in multilingualism within Hollywood cinema.

Upon closer examination of multilingual Hollywood films aligned with Naficy's concept of multiplex cinema, it becomes apparent that multilingualism serves as a destabilizing factor in the classic Hollywood film style. This effect is further amplified by other accentuated elements such as temporal, spatial, and causal incoherence, as well as narrative non-linearity, exemplified in films like *Babel*. On the contrary, unlike accented films, this destabilization in multiplex films cannot be total since they still operate within the framework of Hollywood and therefore aim to reach mass audiences globally. As demonstrated through the example of *Babel*, this inclination necessitates the inclusion of certain Hollywood-esque elements, while simultaneously fostering a trend towards multilingualism. In contrast to accented films, where these inclinations stem from genuine subjective experiences of migration and deterritorialization among filmmakers and viewers, Hollywood's incorporation of multilingualism (along with other characteristics typical of multiplex films) is, according to Naficy, more akin to a form of "cultural tourism and imperialism".⁵⁸ The motives behind integrating diverse languages into a single film are thus tied to the aim of maximizing profit across varied markets within the altered landscape of contemporary globalized societies. As Naficy underscores:

Indeed, cinema has not just returned, it has thrived, becoming, along with the rest of pop culture products, the biggest export item for the US next to aerospace. As an industry, an institution and a set of practices, cinema has evolved, adjusted, adapted, adopted, assimilated, grown vertically and horizontally, took over, was taken over, privatized, diversified and synergistically converged in myriad ways. In what might be considered as a great operational example of Gramsci's theorization of hegemony, it changed in order to remain the same: cinema.⁵⁹

The Hollywood film is therefore adapting to the changing circumstances influenced by globalization, migration, the expansion of ICT, and more. Among these changes is the increasingly visible multiculturalism and multilingualism of societies and individuals, which Hollywood films must address to maintain their audience base and ensure their continued hegemonic role within the global film industry.

58 Naficy 2010, p. 18.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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