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Author	Vivien Silvey
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Not Just Ensemble Films: Six Degrees, Webs, Multiplexity and the Rise of Network Narratives

Vivien Silvey, The Australian National University

In a scene from Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2006 film *Babel*, one afternoon a deaf-mute Japanese girl, Chieko, gossips in sign language with a school friend via her mobile phone's web cam. The scene's linguistically estranged nature encapsulates how language in itself is a technology, a system which reaches across borders of silence to allow understanding. We are only able to interpret language through shared knowledge of its systems and, in many cases, through the aid of devices which collapse the barriers of proximity in time, space, and in this case, vision. It is indicative of the contemporary paradigm of network society that this scene occurs within a film which explores worldwide repercussions of (mis)communication, and that *Babel* belongs within a genre which in recent years has frequently thematised systems of interconnection, exploiting digital narrative technologies and in effect practicing Fredric Jameson's concept "cognitive mapping" (Jameson 54). However, while they may appear to value difference and diversity, in many cases these films use cognitive mapping as a tool for totalisation, divulging narratives of smoothed-out differences and equalised circumstances. Within this emergent paradigm of interconnectedness continues the problem of how to relay the postmodern promise of endless complexity, without subordinating difference to a simplified reduction of totality.

As a representative tool of postmodernity, "cognitive mapping" is described as the ambition "to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" and to understand its interconnections and those of the individual's place in the world (Jameson 38). As an answer to postmodernity's fragmentation and schizophrenia, he calls for "[a]n aesthetic of cognitive mapping – a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (54). Globalisation, internet communities and the six degrees of separation theory conjointly express this paradigm. Subsequently, ensemble films have come to draw wider and wider circles between their characters. They steer

away from featuring any one main protagonist, instead assembling tenuous connections between diverse individuals in order to present the world as a web or system of interconnections.

Over the past twenty years, ensemble films have flourished. The 1990s saw *Magnolia, Twenty Bucks,* Robert Altman's *Short Cuts,* and the completion of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours* trilogy, while the 2000s has brought *Crash, Love Actually, Thirteen Conversations About One Thing, Things You Can Tell Just By Looking At Her, Amores Perros, 21 Grams, Babel, Code Unknown, Paris* and *The Edge of Heaven*, among others. Although ensemble films are not new, many from the past two decades share themes of interconnectedness and use narrative techniques which perform cognitive mapping. They feature an assembly of individual characters, each initially strangers to one another. We follow scenes from their personal lives, but as the films proceed we are shown how these strangers often unwittingly affect each others' lives both in the public and private domain. Their personal dilemmas mirror one another's and they often cross paths with one another on the street. In effect these interconnections, unrecognised by the characters but displayed for us, prompt us to consider the world as a map or system wherein we each are related to one another whether we are conscious of it or not.

Alissa Quart and Roger Ebert have described these and other films which use innovative narrative structures as in Quentin Tarantino's oeuvre and films like *The Rules of Attraction, Happy Endings* and *The Butterfly Effect,* as "hyperlink cinema", and the term has even earned itself a Wikipedia entry (Quart; Ebert; Wikipedia). In deference to the fashion of the internet, hyperlink narratives jumble up chronology and track the lives of multiple characters, presenting scenes in cross-reference with each other. Wendy Everett has termed these films "fractal films", emphasising their seemingly random yet ultimately ordered structures of complexity which are like those seen in chaos theory (162). Her article "Fractal films and the architecture of complexity" focuses on the ambiguities and complexities left open in European films of this genre. In conjunction with Everett's term "fractal films", I believe that the term "network" narrative (to which Alissa Quart also alludes in her article's title *Networked*) proves useful, in view of the fact that recent ensemble films' practice of cognitive mapping collides with the paradigm of network society. Whereas the films that Everett discusses hinge thematically on the ambiguities privileged in the fractal form, other films are not so riven with ambiguity or

complexity. In these cases the theme of network society is used to advocate utopian messages about "community", yet such films are often problematically reliant on narrative methods which could be seen to undermine rather than value complexity.

In the 1960s Stanley Milgram tested his hypothesis that people living in North America are connected by no more than six degrees of separation. He sent out letters to roughly three hundred people in Boston, Omaha and Nebraska. In the letters he asked the recipient to send on the letter through their own acquaintances to a person they did not know in Boston. Milgram's results confirmed his hypothesis, as letters reached the intended recipient with the help of no more than six senders (Watts 37-9). His "small world" theory became known commonly as the six degrees of separation theory, and throughout the 1990s and 2000s has blossomed as an area of scientific and mathematical study for people such as Duncan J. Watts, Manfred Kochen and Ithiel de Sola Pool (who originally studied the small world problem, ten years prior to Milgram), Karl W. Deutsch, and Paul R. Williamson (316). With the rise of the internet, it has become increasingly clear that everyone holds connections, remote or close, with everyone else around the world. Technologies of communication and travel have perforated the boundaries of distance and time, allowing connections to spread easily around the globe, so that the six degrees theory now applies worldwide rather than locally. Globalisation and communication technologies have profoundly affected our perception of the world, altering it from that of the physical borders of nation states and continents to that of fluid relationships, interactions and interconnections across them.

This evolution of interconnectivity, during which the importance of physical proximity has been transferred into the ephemeral realm of communications technology (Virilio 382-4), is a paradigm clearly echoed in network films. These movies depict the connections between strangers, the similarities they share and the effects they unwittingly have upon each other. Whereas in previous ensemble films characters came to know (if they did not already) each other personally, in the network variety characters may remain strangers to each other. It is left to the audience to puzzle out the interconnections which tie them all together within a network. Like the "butterfly effect" proposition that a beat of a butterfly's wings can cause a tornado on the other side of the world, chains of cause and effect are prevalent in these films, as in *Pay It*

Forward one boy's kind deeds lead to a supposedly America – if not world – wide phenomenon of altruism.

The proliferation of these movies also reflects and draws upon our changing technologies, privileging DVD culture's capacity for the viewer's manipulation of sequential, temporal and "multiplex" logic (Naficy). This is a facet David Bordwell and Charles Ramírez-Berg have drawn attention to in their discussions of puzzle narratives (Bordwell 74; Berg 19). Similarly, technologies of cognitive mapping also mirror network narratives' structures. Surveillance tools like CCTV and Google Earth allows the viewer to zoom in and out of the world, to perceive it simultaneously on a specific, individual level as well as a collective scale. Global flânerie, or even global voyeurism, is an intrinsic part of this paradigm of network society, and illuminates Jameson's concept. These technologies allow the individual to cognitively map and envision his/her place in the world both individually and communally, precisely and generally, within the same frame.

Not only do network narratives display ways in which we conceive of the world as interconnected, but in their insistence on interpersonal parallels and globally shared familiarities and sympathies these stories also reflect the ways in which technologies have affected our social relationships. In her book *New Social Ties: Contemporary Connections in a Fragmented Society*, Deborah Chambers comments on the ways in which personal relationships have changed as a result of postmodernity. Discussing the way in which society since the Second World War has often been perceived as fragmentary and anti-communitarian, Chambers in contrast takes note of the fact that technological developments have led to increased long and short-distanced communications (93-102). She points out that studies of long-distance relationships in the 1980s and 90s drew the conclusion that "communities were not declining, but were being freed from the spatial boundaries of neighbourhood and kinship" (31). Instead of proclaiming a "death of community", Chambers focuses on the notion of friendship which has, she argues, defined the late capitalist era (21).

Drawing on Bryan Turner, who "talks of the Internet as a global market of strangers" where collective anonymity creates a sense of all-pervading community, and Jacques Derrida's

definition of friendship as a self-sacrificial responsibility toward the Other, Chambers highlights the way that friendship (virtual or otherwise) more so than family or localised community plays a central role in contemporary relationships (113, 162-8). She cites Derrida's claim that "'we are offered an idea of friendship that moves beyond the dualism of communitarian political theory to conceive of sociality as the expression of difference and the need to share with and welcome the stranger'" (164). Chambers asserts that people are now commonly free to make friends with whomever they choose. Rather than having spouses and houses chosen for them by family as was common prior to the twentieth century, people now are freer via technology to travel and settle further away from family, and also via more liberal social norms freer to live with friends and treat them as family. As popularised in the 1990s television shows *Friends, Sex and the City* and *Seinfeld*, these "kidult" friends replace the role family was/is traditionally obliged to play, instead voluntarily offering intimacy and camaraderie. These people, who seem to have enormous amounts of spare time away from their jobs, represent how fundamentally friendship is now regarded and respected. Chambers describes this development as a marriage of capitalist individualism and communitarian, familial urges. She states that "[t]he friendship ideal, as a chosen relationship that transcends obligation, seems to fit neatly into a society characterised by expressive individualism. It represents a shift from *obligation* to *choice* in modern confluent relationships" (2). Being able to choose which strangers will become and remain friends, to the extent that (at least in virtual reality) any stranger could be a friend, notably alters our horizons.

Network films take up this conception of friendship, but also take it to a point where friendship itself is an abstract adhesive. Tenuous ties are common in these films, as we are led to see the transcendent patterns between strangers whose circumstances and emotions mirror each other. Fatih Akin's beautiful 2007 film *The Edge of Heaven* deliberates on people's paths crossing between Istanbul and Hamburg. They are all related through the hub protagonist Nejat, but also through their experiences of loss and death. A Turkish girl loses her mother, a German woman's daughter dies, Nejat's father is imprisoned as is the Turkish girl, and each find some sort of consolation in one another. Importantly, these mirrorings are not exclusive to the central stories, but occur on the narrative's peripheries. At one point Nejat, who was born in Turkey but lives in Germany, buys a bookstore from a German man in Istanbul, as it were swapping back to their points of origin. Such echoes which suggest a world burgeoning with interconnections and

parallels and metaphysical relationships are indicative of what Chambers describes as a society no longer dependent on relationships of physical or familial proximity. These films attest that strangers on the streets as well as across the globe all hold the potential to be considered as friends. Accordingly, at the end of the portmanteau film *Paris, je t'aime* the camera pans across hitherto unconnected characters as they congregate in small groups, tying the individual stories of love together. With its four-way-split screen *Timecode* follows people falling in and out of love, implying that each is on the same trajectory since a metanarratorial spiel alludes to Borges' similar doublings in his story *The Garden of Forking Paths*. *Love Actually* compares stories of romance around London, situating their ephemeral links within the appropriately transitory site of the airport. Love, the omnipresent theme, provides the adhesive for these networks. While on the individual story's level it might be romantic love or tragedy, on the whole it is typically communal love or friendship which binds these plural characters in network films.

Babel is so far one of the most ambitious of this genre, as it traverses the links between characters spread over three different continents. Close to the end of the film, the camera comes to rest on a photo of Chieko's father with a man in Morocco, to whom he gave a hunting rifle presumably a few years ago. As it turns out, this transaction has led to a series of tragic events around the world. Two young Moroccan boys fooling around with the rifle accidentally shoot an American tourist, Susan, who is travelling with her husband Richard. In the couple's absence back in America, their Mexican nanny Amelia has no choice but to take their children across the border with her to go to her son's wedding. Trying to travel back across the border, Amelia's younger son behaves recklessly, resulting in herself and the two children getting lost in the desert. Ultimately the American children are rescued, Amelia is deported, Susan is treated for her wound, the Moroccan children are captured and one is killed by the police, and Chieko finds solace from her sense of alienation in the company of her father as they gaze out over the lights of Tokyo's night sky.

Babel is the third film in Mexican writer Arriaga and director Iñárritu's trilogy, which started with *Amores Perros* in Mexico then moved to the United States with *21 Grams* (Felperin 41). These films have progressively broadened the ties between characters. In *Amores Perros*, the site of a car accident links three stories, and we are led to see the overlaps between each of

these characters' lives as they cross paths and share similar devastating experiences of love and violence. *21 Grams* suggests the interconnections exist on a further metaphysical level, as a bereaved woman falls in love with the man whose heart has been transplanted with that of her dead husband. The title itself refers to the urban legend that at the moment of death a body loses twenty-one grams, supposedly the weight of the soul. Again, three sets of characters are affected by a car accident and their lives become intertwined in a wretched revenge tale told out of sequence. While these two films centre around a specific, local site from which the ramifications radiate, *Babel*'s site of origin is displaced, set within a photo frame and an unspecified past. This graduation from local connections via specific physical sites of contact to indefinite, international origins and transnational connections signals just how pervasively the network paradigm applies.

The scope of these network films holds enormous implications for how cultural differences which have long divided societies may be viewed under the paradigm of connectedness and multiculturalism. In a mark of utopianism, *Babel* asserts that this interconnectedness has the potential to render barriers inconsequential. Idealistically, communication permits understanding and resolution. Just as we piece *Babel*'s fragmented episodes together into a coherent timeline and figure out how seemingly separate stories are ultimately linked to one another, the film's thematic polemic is of the need for the resolution of disparity through means of communication. *Babel* laments on miscommunications which lead to misconceptions about terrorism, illegal border-crossing, personal suffering and racial prejudice. The two young Moroccan boys' foolish actions are misinterpreted as deliberately threatening and consequently they are shot at. Amelia is unable to convince the U.S. authorities to let her claim responsibility for Susan and Richard's children, and the officer refuses to be swayed by her plea that living in America and caring for these children is her livelihood. Only through reaching understanding with others are characters' situations alleviated. The American couple learn to trust, depend upon and discover mutual respect with a Moroccan family while around them other tourists and the American government become paranoid about terrorism. Chieko writes a note to a man who has witnessed her suffering, allowing him insight into her feelings. If only, the film pleads, if only everyone in the world were able to understand each other then we would find solutions to these problems and heal the rifts that prolong pain and prejudice. The networks

between these disparate characters afford opportunities for such healing, the chain of events begs to be uncovered and the points at which mistakes were made and misunderstood beg to find illumination. Through network society and communication, *Babel* argues, the world can work together to find peace.

Throughout *Babel* the diversity of languages underscores the network genre's theme of disparity translated into conjunction. English, Mexican, Berber, Arabic, Japanese and Japanese sign language are all used within the film. The fact that it is a mixture of languages, rather than what Arac would call a "global" English (as when actors affect foreign accents but speak English) (Arac 24), is integral to the titular biblical parable of the tower of Babel. *Genesis* 11:1-9 recounts that once all people spoke the same language and tried to build a tower to reach God. As punishment, God demolished the tower and split people's languages so that they could not understand each other (NKJV, *Gen.* 1-9). The film's message can be considered as the need to mediate this rift, as the tagline claims: "If you want to be understood, listen" (IMDB). However, while *Babel'*s multiple narrative strands may appear to value diversity and multiplexity, under its schemata of interconnectedness this network film gestures towards totalisation. In the final scene, the camera pulls back from Chieko and her father's newfound understanding to linger on the overwhelming multitude of Tokyo's night lights. This transition from the intimate to the sublime grants us space in which to contemplate the complexity of the tangle of life, not just that of Tokyo but of the whole world. Behind the endless lights exist endless other stories, each somehow connected to the other. Each story and person, *Babel* suggests, is part of a whole and shares the common desire to be understood. Up close, everyone's circumstances are different, but in the camera's sublime opening out it is inferred that everyone shares the same fundamental need for acceptance. This totalising gesture risks undoing the film's own complexity, reducing diversity to simplicity, postmodern plurality to neo-transcendentalist singularity.

Despite the honourable intentions of Hollywood's multicultural network films such as this, subliminal codifications often work against their messages of tolerance and understanding, while their relativist philosophies may be misused to erase complexity. Jameson's "cognitive mapping", posed as a representative tool, has blossomed into a generic trope, but with problematic results. Hamid Naficy has remarked on this phenomenon of multicultural multiplex

films, saying that: "In the case of foreign directors in Hollywood [including Iñárritu] ... Hollywood has changed in order to remain the same" (Naficy). Whether consciously or unintentionally, these Hollywood-marketed and appraised network films like *Crash* (which won the 2006 Oscar for best motion picture) and *Babel* (which was nominated for seven Oscars in 2007) maintain conservative politics. Hsuan L. Hsu notes in regard to *Crash*, a similar network film which explores racial tensions between a cross-section of Los Angeles society, that despite its apparently multicultural relativist perspective it nevertheless subordinates non-white characters and privileges a white male hero (148). Its pretence of diversity belies "a false totality that substitutes melodramatic plots...for demographic scope or historical depth" (149). The film arguably perpetuates the Anglo-phallocentric narrative its multiplex form at first sight seeks to dispel.

As Hsu has detailed, the relationships in *Crash* are racially defined, occluding the film's message that a "raceless aesthetic" is in order (149). He states that "*Crash* normalizes white privilege not only by presenting a cornucopia of hate speech, but also by suggesting that all races are equally intolerant" (148-9). The white male hero is a man who on separate occasions sexually and/or verbally abuses two (different) black women. Yet we are led to sympathise with him because he is taking care of his cancer-stricken father, and ultimately he redeems himself when he rescues the woman he sexually abused from a burning car. By contrast the Persian shopkeeper Farhad, whose store is vandalised and who expresses racially-fuelled frustration at the Mexican locksmith, is eventually moved to fire a gun at the locksmith. The locksmith's daughter comes into the line of fire and Farhad believes that he has shot her, but as it turns out his own daughter had put blank bullets in the gun. Rather than redeem himself, as the white man could, Farhad, configured as an other trying desperately to fit in to American culture, narrowly avoids making a mistake. He learns his lesson, whereas the hero proves his worth.

Conservative politics lie behind each of *Crash*'s relationships, dictating the measures of success with which individual others are able to 'assimilate' into the dominant society. Indeed the very organisation of the film into snapshots of troubled American citizens, each trying to connect with some idea of community and belonging, relegates difference to the background in favour of a type of relativism which in fact reiterates sameness, assimilation and conformity.

Although the victimised Persian shopkeeper Farhad is racist towards the similarly victimised Mexican locksmith, this tension is erased when their daughters both save them from violence. Don Cheadle's character cares for his sick mother just as Mat Dillon's cares for his sick father, the good cop played by Ryan Philippe becomes just as prejudicial as Mat Dillon's bad cop. The film's central line, that people "crash into each other, just so we can feel something" is belied by its form, which connects characters metaphysically. The final wide shots reveal the ensemble's interactions and sometimes unwitting influences, casting the city as a maze which gathers together its inhabitants in mysterious ways. In such points of illumination, it is a case of 'everyone is different, but also the same'. These connections work to deflect the tensions of racism and cultural difference, perpetuating the idea that a community comprises people who are mirror images of each other rather than distinct individuals. Under this banner of connectedness, *Crash* gathers its variations on racism, openly criticising yet subliminally reinstating a hierarchical valuation of American society.

It is easy to see how *Babel*, like *Crash*, relies on cultural stereotypes and privileges the first world characters with happy endings while those belonging to the third world receive tragic ones. There are the rude, prejudicial and paranoid tourists from America, England and France, whereas Richard and Susan are contrasted as the victims who come to trust the Tazarinian villagers. There is the illegal Mexican immigrant Amelia, with a hot blooded reckless son and a deep devotion to the American family. The two young Moroccan boys, their Islamic identity a substitute for that of Middle Eastern-ness, are depicted within the tropes of ignorant, tragically fated savages. Portrayed at first in terms of liminality, as the young teenager Yussef spies on his sister undressing, masturbates on a hillside, and with his brother foolishly competes to shoot the tourist bus, ultimately they come to appear sadly misunderstood, as Yussef's brother Ahmed is killed and he and his father surrender themselves to the police. And the stereotype of emotionally alienated Japanese people is reflected in Chieko's story, with her stigmatised deafness, mother's death and loneliness which translates into her attempts to be recognised sexually – her body the only thing she can use to communicate with others since her voice is ignored by most others.

These stereotypes inform the story arcs, as each provides a moral lesson about tolerance of the other. Read like this, the other is largely configured in opposition to a white American

standpoint. The American and pseudo-American authorities are the villains to the Mexican and Moroccan characters (in Yussef's story the policeman with his sunglasses, range rover, brutal violence and officers who open fire, can be seen as symbolising Western corruption). On the other hand, Richard and Susan are portrayed as good Americans since they learn to respect and trust in the Islamic other (as they already do with their Mexican nanny). Seemingly the odd one out in this equation, Chieko, herself an other to the world around her, nevertheless is shown to reach out for inclusion and respect within the rest of her society. *Babel* aligns its audience's sympathies with characters who seek to transcend the boundaries between the dominant culture and the transnational other. Iñárritu has stated that "*Babel* is about the point of view of others" (Iñárritu 7) However, the results (Iñárritu also insists he made the film from the 'sensibility...of someone from a Third World country' (7)) are indicatively bittersweet. The Mexican and Moroccan attempts to garner understanding are thwarted, Chieko comes to terms with her sense of alienation, and the American tale emerges as the successfully transnational and humanist victor. It appears that the boundaries are difficult to cross except for those who already belong to the dominant culture and are willing to condescend to the level of the other. Despite its appeal to the network society paradigm, *Babel* indicates that transnational and multicultural relationships are by no means rid of the old tensions between the dominant culture and its others.

The question remains, how can a film which uses cognitive mapping to indicate a relativist totality escape the criticism that it sublimates difference? As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out, and as the gross generalisations which my analysis has hopefully illustrated, there is a danger in reading too much into racial stereotypes and ignoring characters' individual qualities. They stress that "[s]uch reductionist simplifications run the risk of reproducing the very racial essentialism they were designed to combat" (Shohat and Stam 199). Instead they suggest that examining the "multivocality" – meaning the different voices and discourses – within films may yield a more useful and appreciative analysis (215). Since *Babel* is fundamentally about multivocality, this approach helps to address how the film's separate segments work in relation to one another, and how as a whole they attempt to fulfil he purpose of Jameson's cognitive mapping.

Unlike *Crash* the parallels in *Babel* are not characters' mirror images but stem from a core problem, the failure of communication. Iñárritu's film opts for tragedy rather than utopianism, emphasising the pain and trauma which foolish actions and miscommunication create. Lost in the desert, distressed at the fact that they are hiding from the border police, the boy complains to Amelia "you're not bad!", to which she responds "no, I'm not, but I've done some very stupid things". *Babel* presents a world stricken by division, in spite of the technologies and languages we have at hand to mediate the estrangements. Each story reaches some type of closure, either through surrender or empathy. But as the final scene implies, and as the grief felt by each character is acknowledged (even the American couple, who have lost a child), this by no means signals a definitive utopian answer to the conflict and trauma experienced. Rather, communication is merely a means to alleviate grief but not a guarantee of repair. *Babel* can be seen as a protest against the boundaries and misunderstandings between cultures and people, and while it relies on certain tropes or stereotypes, it nevertheless offers each character his/her own voice. The importance of this multivocality is that it expresses difference, rather than reductionist "equivalence" (Semati and Sotirin 182). Cognitive mapping, then, can be used without succumbing to its superficial tendency towards totalisation. Its intended aim to grasp the different voices and positions within the "impossibly totality" is represented in these stories which leave conflict open. Whereas some network narratives subordinate characters' differences to a superficial relativism, others are able to capture the problem of the urge towards totalisation, acknowledging instead the need for the expressions of difference and diversity as a way of protesting injustice.

Reflecting the paradigm that the internet and communications technologies have brought about, network films, as opposed to ensemble films, conceive of the world as a web of metaphysical interconnections. In these stories, as in the ephemeral realm of the internet, strangers turn out to be closely related, not by blood but by chains of cause and effect, forming a society not of independent individuals, but of transcendental friendships. The technology of network society has had a profound impact on cinema, putting in practice Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping. No longer linked by grounds of physical or familial proximity, these films explore the perceptions of new social ties which are shaping our lives, allowing us to conceive of our place in the world simultaneously locally and globally. However, despite the potential that

cognitive mapping holds for voicing complexity, multiplex network films which follow old tropes of hierarchical, racially and gender coded relationships run the risk of reducing and sacrificing complexity to renowned Hollywood conservatism. The promise remains in multivocal narratives, as long as they resist reductionist relativism and continue to assert each individual's perspective.

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