

From shooting two of film's biggest stars to getting lost in translation in Tokyo, the director of *Babel* reveals his inspirations

The windswept terrain of Morocco; the buzz of Tokyo; the harshness of the Mexican desert. English, Japanese, Spanish, Berber and sign language. Most film-makers would struggle to find any unity within so many locations and languages. With *Babel*, Alejandro González Iñárritu, a director who specialises in fractured storylines, seems to relish the challenge.

It gives nothing away to say that, as with Iñárritu's previous *21 Grams*, each of the stories in *Babel* ends in tears. A glamorous couple, Richard (Brad Pitt) and Susan (Cate Blanchett), find themselves in Morocco trying to repair their marriage. Susan is badly wounded by a bullet fired from a gun used by the two sons of a goat-herd, Yussef (Boubker Ait El Caid) and Ahmed (Said Tarchani). The incident triggers international alarm when it is reported as a terrorist attack.

Elsewhere, Richard and Susan's surviving children (Elle Fanning and Nathan Gamble) journey to Mexico with the family's housekeeper, Amelia (Adriana Barraza), whose son is getting married near Tijuana. They are accompanied by Amelia's nephew, Santiago (Gael García Bernal), who, on the drive back, is chased by border police. As he escapes, he abandons Amelia and the two children in the

Richard (Brad Pitt) carries his wife Susan (Cate Blanchett) to safety in a Moroccan village after she is accidentally shot

Alejandro González Iñárritu writes: "When I was a boy, my mother bought me a plastic figurine of Michelangelo's *La Pietà* from New York. All during my childhood I went to sleep and woke up with that figurine over my bed. I wanted Richard to carry Susan as a metaphor of the piteous image. Brad carried Cate down long alleys more than 50 times; Rodrigo Prieto, the cameraman, running behind them with a 50kg (7½st) camera on his shoulder. Some days later, when I wanted to reshoot the scene, it was the actors and Rodrigo begging me to take pity on them.

"In the original screenplay, the conflict between Richard and Susan arose from a past infidelity. Some weeks before the shoot, I suggested taking the drama to a more profound level, as would be the case in the crib death of an infant. When Brad reached Morocco, he had to assimilate at one fell swoop a new dramatic element in the script. Who was Richard? Why did he do what he did? Every day, under extenuating physical conditions, Brad had to dig to discover, and invent the vulnerable character he had built up for the screen.

Behind the scenes of

desert. Meanwhile, in Tokyo, a deaf teenage girl, Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi), inhabits her own emotional hell after the death of her mother.

As shown in these stunning pictures, taken from a new book that details the making of the film, *Babel* is a work of high ambition which has already been rewarded with seven Golden Globe award nominations. Here and over the next few pages, the director explains both how he shot key scenes and how he cast key players.

"In Cate's case, fiction and reality crossed radically. While in Morocco, her one-year-old son suffered a second-degree burn on both legs. Cate would have had to cope with the emergency care of a humble Moroccan hospital and so flew the child immediately to London. Two days later, assured that her son would be fine, she gave us a lesson in professionalism such as I had never seen and was back acting the part of Susan, a woman bleeding from a physical and emotional wound." ▶▶



SURREIN



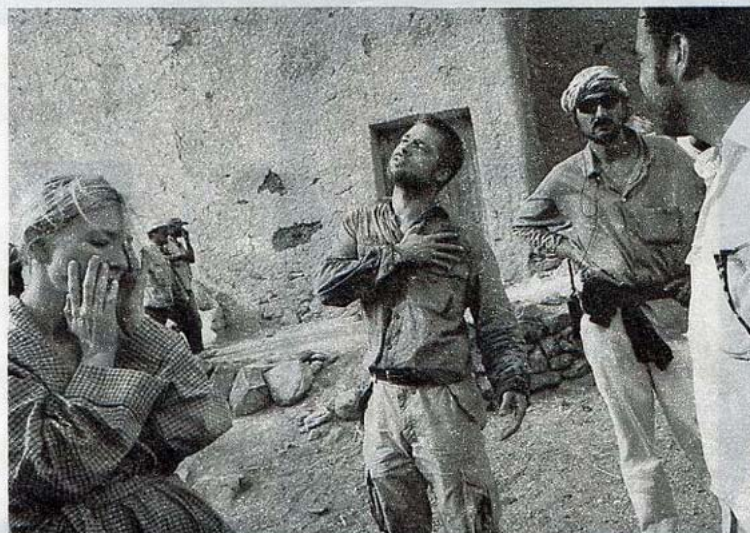
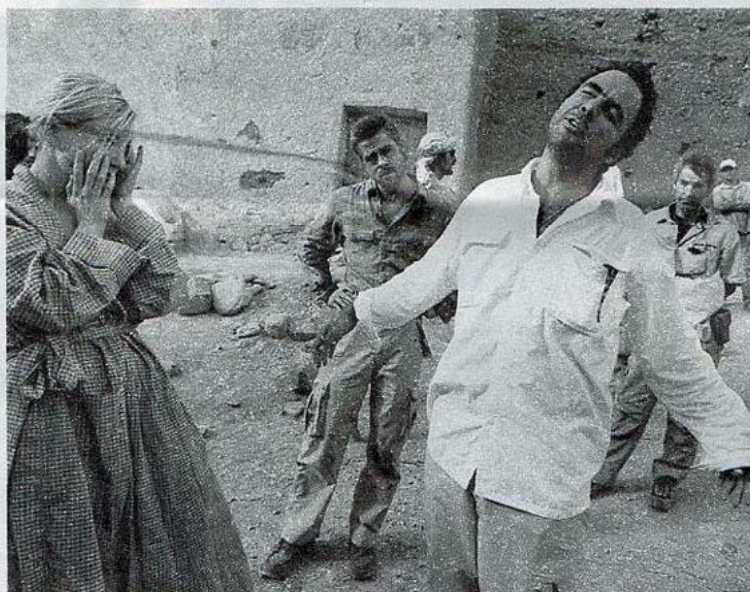
MOROCCO

▶▶ **Youssef (Boubker Alt El Caid) aims a rifle out over the Moroccan landscape with his brother Ahmed (Said Tarchani)**

"One day in Tamnougalt's main square, Alfonso Gómez (second unit director) called me to have a look at a very special boy. He was Boubker. I explained to him that I was going to be giving him a test by saying some phrases to him and for him to answer me not with words, but to tell me with his eyes what he was feeling. 'Your mother died,' I said. His eyes filled with tears, and all of us were stunned by his expression. I knew I had found an actor for the part of Youssef. Afterwards, I found out that his mother had died seven years before. Without realising it, I had touched a very deep wound.

"Said and Boubker became like brothers, just as in the story. Said was rebellious, active and intuitive, while Boubker was introspective, rational and melancholy. With their earnings from the picture, Said bought a motorcycle and Boubker a computer.

"On the last day of shooting in Morocco, we were filming the evening scene in which Youssef weeps, imagining his brother has just died, as Said walks with his father along a sea of stony desert where I had placed an empty boat. This scene was a heavy emotional load for them. Earlier in the shooting I had filmed a scene of the boys playing with the wind as a gift of the mountains, and all these scenes together became the epilogue of their story. Upon finishing the film, neither Said nor Boubker was able to stop crying. We who had become their family were going to leave the next day. I promised both that we would be seeing one another in a year in some festival. Luckily, I was able to keep the promise. We saw each other at Cannes."





TOKYO

Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) takes a walk in Tokyo

"Just one single image gave me the idea for what was to be later transformed into the Japanese tale of *Babel*. I was walking in Hakone, a place made up of bodies of sulphurous water, withered trees, constant fog, black crows like flying dogs; the ground covered with the discarded black shells of the eggs boiled by people in the waters — an atmosphere worthy of a Kurosawa film.

"When I started down the mountain, I heard frightful guttural sounds. A retarded girl appeared through the fog walking slowly, helped by an elderly man. All the people going down were somewhat fearfully avoiding

her. The old man, on the contrary, was helping her along with great tenderness, love and dignity. I was moved by the image. On that trip and some months later, while travelling with my family, I saw quite a number of deaf mutes. I was struck by their way of gesticulating and the dramatic nature of their communication. It seemed to me an unknown language.

"The people of Japan, like the characters in their pictures, are what they do and not what they say. No father will ever say, 'I love you' to his daughter. As in good acting, feeling should be implicit in the action, not the words. For me, the words are the least important element of a scene. A well-written or well-directed scene

should be understood in silence, the action delineating the character.

"A year before starting to film, I began casting in Japan, where I was astonished by Rinko Kikuchi, but hesitated: I was obsessed with finding a deaf mute for the role of Chieko. During the following nine months, the Japanese casting director continued the search. Rinko, without notifying anybody, decided to take classes in sign language at her own expense. When I returned to Japan it was impossible for me to tell the difference between Rinko and a real deaf mute. Barely a few weeks before shooting, I told her the part was hers. Her emotion and tears were endless, profound and silent. It was my best deci-

sion since I started to make movies.

"All Chieko's friends in the film were deaf mutes. Finding them was not easy, but rehearsing was worse. I had an interpreter, from English into Japanese, and next to her, an interpreter, from Japanese into sign language. When I would ask something like, 'Did you ever imagine the sound of anything?' the first interpreter translated to the second one in Japanese, and this one transmitted the question to the deaf mute. The young woman thought for a few minutes and answered in sign language, which was then put into Japanese by her interpreter, and finally what the English interpreter told me was, 'In June'. This was *Babel* at its peak." ▶▶

MEXICO

►► The fence at Tijuana

"The fence around Tijuana is called *La Llagua* ("the gash"): an open wound several kilometres long built out of metal barriers from the prefab airports of the Vietnam War. The stupidest aspect is that it takes in part of the ocean so as to stop any terrorist in a submarine from getting in!

"Thousands of crosses hang from it with the names of men, women, and children who were swallowed up by the desert or disappeared at the Mexico-United States border, the busiest in the world. When it is completed, it will be the greatest monument to intolerance in human history."

The bride and groom prepare for their wedding party in Tijuana

"Weddings in the north of my country are very different from those in the south. The ceremonies in Tijuana are cursory, dusty, without traditional rites or customs. I went to several weddings in the course of my research for *Babel* and tried to film Amelia's wedding while remaining as faithful as possible to what I saw: plastic cups and plates, lack of a single flower or decoration, and chairs of various colours on the ever-present

of the crew members had to be hospitalised for dehydration. Adriana began to feel ill, nearly fainted, and asked for an hour off to recover. I told her to go to the hotel and rest. 'No,' she said, 'I know what it means to lose a day and that it can cost a lot of money. Just let me have an hour.'

"She showered in her trailer and emerged in an hour and a half to continue with the scene. I had never witnessed such a level of commitment and incredible physical effort. We filmed some of the most painful moments for two hours and a bit more. Perhaps Adriana was thinking that if the immigrant did not have the option of a rest while crossing the desert, why should Amelia?"

Amelia (Barraza) is detained by the immigration police on suspicion of illegally entering the United States

"When we were filming the scenes of Amelia's detention by the immigration police, all the media were focused on the story of a young man of 17 from Oaxaco who tried to cross the Arizona desert with his mother. They were with a group and the mother's legs had given out and she

"When it is completed, the fence will be the greatest monument to intolerance in history"

dust. Brigitte Broch, my production designer, whose every touch breathes life into the set, did a beautiful job.

"All of those who appear in the wedding scene belong to the Carizzo community. I never saw livelier and happier people. Even though I was shooting for days and until six in the morning, there was never a complaint out of them. Nothing but smiles and nonstop dancing. For me, them and the entire crew, the wedding was indeed a fiesta."

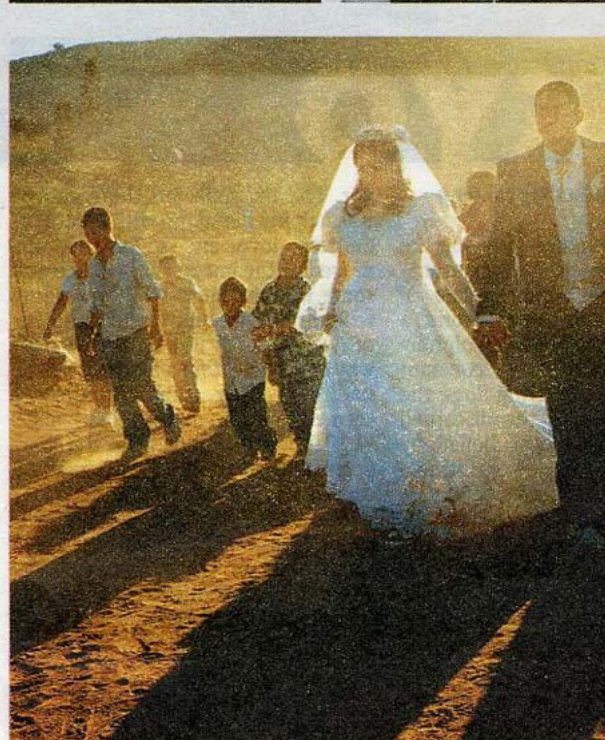
Amelia (Adriana Barraza) with Debbie (Elle Fanning) and Mike (Nathan Gamble) make their way across the desert between Mexico and the United States

"Adriana Barraza's heart has two slight infarcts. In order to do this scene, she had to carry a little girl weighing over 27kg (4st) many times on many days while running on the desert in a temperature of over 46C (115F). On one specially hot day, five

could go no further. The others abandoned her. Three hours later, the mother told the son to go for help or he would die, too.

"The youth walked for two days without water, was caught, and deported to Mexico. He had told his grandfather what happened, and the 70-year-old man travelled to Arizona and started a campaign for the rescue of his daughter. Ten days later, no traces were found except her white patent leather shoes, both femurs, and a towel with a design of yellow squares that the son had put over her face before leaving." ■

Babel opens on Friday. All the images used in this article feature in a book of photography from the film *Babel*, published by Taschen, £20, www.taschen.com. To order a copy for £18, including free delivery, call Times Books First on 0870 1608080. Win a five-night trip to Tokyo in our *Babel* competition, see page 23



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