Watching Babylon Again

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In 2003 when the United States invaded Iraq it became necessary for me to consider how to watch Babylon, understood as a physical location, a metaphor and a metonym for Iraq, for the Orient and for Empire itself. I worked fast, thinking that this would be a moment that needed to be captured before it was quickly forgotten. I was right and I was wrong. The invasion and occupation of Iraq has generated immense quantities of images but there has been paradoxically little consequence. In the end what we have seen is, to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, a banality of images. There are images of everything and none of them seem to have mattered. Nonetheless, this watching cannot be refused. The occupation of Iraq will last for decades, we are now told, perhaps a century. As much as it would be convenient to forget Iraq, to overlook it and to concentrate on the beauties of art, Babylon insists on being looked at. Its location is not a given. It is always already in fragments, spread across space and time.

So watching Babylon, again, is no easy matter. Our modern viewing devices are mostly designed to give a single coherent view of what is being watched beginning with the panoptic prison in which every prisoner is watched without being able to see the watchers moving on to the omniscient viewpoint of the cinema and now the global monitoring of television news. How do we watch a fragment? In what ways can we see a fragment without imagining the whole? A painting, says the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, is a lure for the gaze, it allows us to suspend engagement and to be absorbed by the whole. To see fragments we must do the exact opposite and be highly conscious of our looking, as if peering into a kaleidoscope or another device that makes it clear that our manipulations are creating what is being seen. It is the averted viewing used by astronomers in which seeing is done from the edges of the eye. Or perhaps you take a device that seems larger on the inside than the outside and place into a space designed for looking at objects from past time in the present. A cabinet of curiosities within the museum is a *miise-en-abyme* (the image repeating within the image over and again) suitable for the paradox of watching Babylon. Babylon becomes a fractal pattern that recedes just as you get close to it into another layer of meaning and display.

Babylon is a place, an idea and a means of enforcing the law. The place is located in what is now Iraq, just south of the modern town of al-Hillah. It was a legendary city even in ancient times, the site of epic battles and the exile of the Jews. Following the American-led invasion of 2003, there was a military base on the ancient site, known as Camp Babylon, staffed first by US soldiers and later by Polish troops. According to a British Museum report, Camp Babylon and operations ran out of Camp Babylon caused "widespread damage and severe contamination to the remains of the ancient city of Babylon." There are many ironies here: a museum containing antiquities from all over the world, many of which were removed by force and many of which are now reclaimed by their original creators, is now claiming to speak for cultural preservation. By the same token, the aesthetic occupation of Iraq has contradicted the claim that this was a war fought for civilization. Indeed, archaeological sites all over modern Iraq are being systematically looted, making them worthless for the historical record.

At the same time, many thousands of properly documented objects are still missing from the shuttered Baghdad Museum. In a sense, this dispersal is itself the modern history of Babylon. From the first modern archaeological expeditions to the site in 1789, European and North American visitors have removed ancient artifacts by the ton, the larger the better. Anyone wanting to understand Babylon must now visit London, Paris, New York and of course Berlin. For the Americans, Babylon is to be condemned because it was so often celebrated by Saddam Hussein, whereas Iraqi religious authorities are not concerned with relics of the pre-Islamic past.

If that last attitude seems short-sighted recall that in Washington DC's National Gallery of Art, there are no pieces made by indigenous artists, although Italian, French, Spanish and German work abounds.

Above and beyond the physical site, the idea of Babylon is a mirror of empire. It shows the grandeur and the decadence of imperial desire to the rulers and the ruled alike. From the time of Gilgamesh, the control and settlement of the lands of others has been considered the work of Babylon. It is a work devoted to excess, to luxury and display. On the walls of the Ishtar gate, Nebuchadnezzar admonished those in the sixth century BCE who could read his script to understand that "I magnificently adorned them with luxurious grandeur for all mankind to behold in awe." Sheer luxury becomes the power to intimidate. Two and half millenia later, American aircraft and missiles demolished much of Iraq in a policy known as "shock and awe" in which the sense of amazement was caused by destruction rather than by decoration. For the invaders, ornament was crime.

What this enterprise fails to understand is the metaphorical place of Babylon in empire. In this version, Babylon is the empire that is destined to fall, always on the verge of being invaded by tougher, less hedonistic warriors from without. If those invaders were once the United States, the American Babylon seems unlikely to fall but will rather simply disappear. Walter Benjamin, Berliner of Berliners, anticipated such dilemmas in *The Arcades Project*, his monumental study of the modern. In a convolute entitled "Ancient Paris," Benjamin quoted the nineteenth-century art critic Théophile Gautier: "The modern Babylon will not be smashed like the tower of Lylak; it will not be lost in a sea of asphalt like Pentapolis, or buried under the sand like Thebes. It will simply be depopulated and ravaged by the rats of Montfaucon." In other words, the armies of devastation would be transformations in the modern global economy that would render once thriving cities ghost towns. All over the American Midwest, Gautier's prophecy is being fulfilled as the former manufacturing heartland is simply being abandoned. In Cleveland—admittedly an unlikely candidate for Babylon—a city that was recently the fifth largest in America now has 15,000 vacant lots of land in its central areas.

Babylon is not just empire. It is also a form of law. It was the site of the first known codification of the law by Hammurabi in c.1760 BCE. The stele (or stone tablet) on which his rather fearsome laws were inscribed was taken as a trophy to Iran in the twelfth century CE and from there has found its way to the Louvre in Paris. There is something intriguing in the idea of the origin of law being placed into a museum. What is the foundation of law, what gives it its force and enforceability? The very antiquity of the law seems to preserve it from such questions but there is uncertainty about its future. Given the widespread use of the injunction "necessity has no law" (*necessitas legem non habet*) in the current crisis, it may also be time to place Western law codes into a museum or curiosity cabinet. It is interesting in this context to recall that for the African diaspora religion Rastafari, "Babylon" is the name for both the global system of capitalism and especially its police. For Rastafarians, "Babylon" in both senses is the source of their oppression and the target of their resistance. As reggae music has spread these ideas across the globe from the island of Jamaica, people as different as London punks and Maori activists in Aotearoa New Zealand have come to understand Babylon as their enemy. The irony is that in this case the ultimate example of Babylon would be the United States, especially in its self-assumed role as what former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright called the "global policeman." The police control what there is to see, telling us to "move on, there's nothing to see here." Watching Babylon knows better, knows that there is certainly something to see, only that we are not usually permitted to see it. It must be glimpsed while we pretend to drive by, looking straight ahead.

The right to look at Babylon is now available only in the museum. That looking has its limits because the museum object is by definition out of circulation. The new museum world

created in the era of global tourism has suspected that looking at non-commercial objects is not sufficiently exciting. Now we are offered a "museum experience" centering on gift shops and restaurants as much as on displays. A recent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, caused controversy when the fashion designer Marc Jacobs was allowed to sell his products within the galleries supposedly devoted to an exhibition by the Japanese artist Murakami. It was perhaps a belated recognition of a change that has long since become standard, namely that knowledge as represented by the museum is now a central feature of the global economy and inevitably becomes commercialized. The cabinet of curiosities reminds us that this relation of knowledge, display and wealth is nothing new. It cannot be said that the museum has lost its innocence because it never had any to lose.

The evasiveness of Babylon is literally primeval, from the first era and it was the God of the Old Testament that first discovered it. After the Flood, the hunter Nimrod mysteriously appears to begin the building of Babel—where had he been during the Flood, how had he survived it? We do not know. As the Babylonians set about building their Tower to make themselves a name, God has to "come down" to find out what they are doing. In his displeasure, he scatters the Babylonians "all over the face of the earth." We are all from Babylon in this sense. How is possible that God did not know what was happening? Was God different before Babel? Did some more egalitarian era come to end with the triumph of a single God over a single language? For Jacques Derrida, the philosopher of difference, Babel indicates the "impossibility of finishing." If something is finished, we put it in a museum. If nothing can be finished, what is a museum after all? Across Berlin, one can find the Jewish Museum, designed by Daniel Liebeskind to represent the "void" left by almost total eradiction of the Jewish community in the Third Reich. Many felt that the building would have been better if left empty, which would have had the paradoxical result of creating a Jewish Museum without Jews. There were terrible words coined for such ideas half a century ago and similar ideas are circulating now directed towards the immigrant, the gypsy, the Muslim or other stereotypes. The museum cannot choose between truth and myth but must work between these presumed opposites in pursuit of something more elusive and more necessary. The museum needs to show us how not to finish and to remind us that, whether or not we think we are done with it, history is not done with us.

In the 1990s, a new Babel was being built in our excited minds, a digital tower of images that could become the new universal language. In the present crisis of war, market collapse and assertions of governmental control over all modes of communication, the ending is unclear. The Authorized Version told us that Babel came down because the Single Truth (free market capitalism or whatever version of religion you adhere to) had mandated it. In Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Babel* (2006), efforts to cross borders, whether national, linguistic or romantic meet with disaster. In a complex global narrative, an American couple take a vacation in Morocco in an attempt to revive their marriage that spirals into chaos when Susan (Cate Blanchett) is injured by a bullet fired at their tour bus by two boys playing with a rifle. All those involved, from Mexico to the United States, Morocco and Japan, fail to connect despite being mediated by phone, television, Internet and the film itself. What emerges from the babble of *Babel* is the very lack of communication that results from global mass communications systems. Unlike earlier visualizations like Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon*, which detailed one event seen from multiple points of view, *Babel* failed because its director/editor was the only one who could "see" the story, leaving the viewer passive and confused. Babylon has to be watched from many points of view. But the imperial Babylonian alternatives from the past are all around us now: autocracy, fundamentalisms. That Babylon must not be our mirror, still less our imaginary. The Babylon we need is the place of exile, remembered in paintings, songs and poems for two and a half millennia. It is a place of scraps of memory, half-forgotten hopes and a determination not to give in. It is

larger on the inside than the outside. Watching Babylon is something to be done out of the corner of your eye, keeping it safely to one side, as you find another way ahead. Good luck.

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