

Pieter Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*

A Multivalent Symbol of Europe and the EU

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Pieter Bruegel's larger extant painting of the *Tower of Babel* of 1563 (the Vienna *Tower of Babel*) is a key part of the visual reception history of Genesis 11:1–9, the famous passage in which the Tower of Babel narrative appears. The painting has been analysed on many levels. It can be viewed most straightforwardly as an ambiguous evocation of the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel prior to its collapse. More metaphorical interpretations have ranged from a warning to the tyrannical ruler of the Low Countries, Philip II of Spain, to a reflection on the challenges faced by one of the first European metropolises, Antwerp.¹ Within these more metaphorical readings, Antwerp can be read as a symbol of Europe as a whole, which was also undergoing rapid development at this time.² The notion of the search for a European identity provides the context for the 20th and 21st century afterlife of Bruegel's image, in which the *Tower of Babel* today in Vienna unmistakably appears in both the authorised iconography of the EU as well as in anti-EU propaganda. In this contribution I'll discuss examples for both uses looking at different posters and an architectural form. The painting is therefore a fascinating example of how the reception history of a text like Genesis 11:1–9 can serve to highlight both its own multivalence and its ability to generate a multiplicity of readings.

The 20th-century images and media explored in this contribution are those which, generated by Bruegel's initial image, offer representations of Europe from a range of perspectives including secular and religious rep-

1 See Mansbach 1982 and Kaminska 2014 for differing interpretations.

2 See Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 181.

representations. The artists, satirists and polemicists who are featured all use Bruegel’s image as a lens through which to channel their own conception of Europe, and more specifically the EU. Interestingly, the artists featured who have created imagery in *support* of the EU, a self-consciously secular organisation, have chosen a religious image (of Babel) through which to explore their ideas about the EU. Thus, in a somewhat complex example of a strand of reception history, Genesis 11:1–9 has inspired Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* which gave a »snapshot« of a rapidly changing Europe in the late 16th century and in turn has played a not insignificant role in the EU’s symbolic self-legitimation as well as in negative representations of the EU.

1. From Babel to Strasbourg

In this contribution I will first explore what is sometimes referred to in reception history as the source text, in this case, Genesis 11:1–9. The main themes and interpretative points of interest within the text will be highlighted. This provides the biblical context for Bruegel’s Vienna *Tower of Babel*, which is itself the hinge point of the chapter, in that it represents an important visualisation of Babel according to Genesis which has itself enjoyed a lively reception history. There are of course many other contexts which have informed this image, including Bruegel’s own political, religious and geographical influences, as well as what is known about his patronage background. Possible influences on Bruegel and the creation of this image will be explored, as well as an alternative *Tower of Babel* that Bruegel painted in c. 1563–1568, known as the Rotterdam *Tower of Babel*. Following this, consideration will be given to some key contrasting interpretations of Bruegel’s *Tower of Babel* by the art historians Steven Mansbach, Joanne Morra, Barbara Kaminska, Koenraad Jonckheere, Elke Oberthaler and Sabine Pénot.³ Whilst a multiplicity of readings exists, all interpreters broadly agree that Bruegel was involved in using the *Genesis* story of Babel to present an image of 16th century Antwerp as a thriving yet complex and flawed European city, perhaps even as *the* archetypal European city of the time. Throughout this section, I will use the methodology of visual reception history in order to better understand

3 See Mansbach 1982; Morra 2007; Kaminska 2014; Jonckheere 2014; Oberthaler/Pénot 2019.

the ways in which Bruegel functions as a sophisticated interpreter of the biblical text via his juxtaposition of his own, resolutely European, context with elements of the biblical narrative.⁴ He may be understood as a visual exegete who has created new meaning from the source text, which in turn may help to illuminate facets of the Genesis story that are not immediately obvious.⁵

With Bruegel's image thus established as a key part of the visual reception history of the biblical Babel narrative, as well as representing a particular conception of European identity in the late 16th century, we will turn, in the second half of the paper, to an exploration of four 20th-century representations of European identity which have been inspired in different ways by Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*. These representations all relate to the EU, an organisation that in some ways may be regarded as synonymous with Europe by many, but which is in fact a relatively new institution, born (as the EEC) in the 1950s as an economic and political community, which arose for pragmatic reasons after the carnage of World War II.⁶ Thus throughout its short and complex history, attempts have often been made by those working for the institution to create and shape an EU brand to which its members can feel an emotional attachment, of which more below. The first representation explored in the second section of this chapter is thus the Strasbourg Parliament building, whose form has undeniably been influenced by Bruegel's image. This will be followed by an exploration of two posters promoting the ideals of the EU from 1983 and 1992 respectively, which are now housed in the Historical Archives of the European Union. Both posters use the iconography of Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel* to convey broadly positive messages about the EU.

Conversely, those who have opposed the EU on political and/or religious grounds have used these attempts at EU brand-building to highlight the institution's flaws. Finally therefore, we will explore a polemical anti-EU poster, whose artist and provenance is unknown but which has been widely

4 See O'Hear 2011 and O'Hear/O'Hear 2015 for other examples of my work in this field, which usually focuses on the visual reception history of the book of Revelation. See also Berdini 1997; O'Kane 2010 and Exum 2019 for more on this particular approach to art inspired by biblical texts.

5 See O'Hear 2018, 205–206 for a consideration of some of the complexities of this approach.

6 Usherwood/Pinder 2018, 1–8.

disseminated on anti-EU websites and platforms, and uses Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* as a lens through which to critique the EU.

2. The biblical *Tower of Babel*: Genesis 11:1–9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, »Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.« And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, »Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.« 5 The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 6 And the Lord said, »Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.« 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.⁷

While a huge amount has been written on this passage, exegesis of the source text is not the focus of this paper.⁸ An overview of the text's main themes will suffice. The first theme that runs through the passage is an acknowledgement of the ever-growing abilities and ambition of humankind, mediated here through the language of building (vv. 4, 8). This is presented, in the context of the primeval narrative of *Genesis* as a whole, as something that is a timeless characteristic of humankind. Certainly, this was a fear in some cir-

7 NRSV. Babel appears ambiguous in this passage of Genesis: the root of the ancient Hebrew word alludes also to confusion or confused. As a name of the ancient Babylonian city, in Akkadian it means »gate of God«.

8 See Kidner 2008, 118–121.

cles regarding some of the great building projects of the Renaissance, which forms the contextual backdrop to Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*.⁹ Had humankind simply become too capable and what might the consequences of that be?

Secondly, everything human is revealed to be finite, and God's hand decisive and eternal. The builders of Babel are punished by God for their over-ambition and separated from each other (v. 9). In the face of this divine force, the builders of Babel show themselves to be meekly accepting (v. 8). Interestingly, particularly in terms of the Bruegel Vienna *Tower of Babel*, the Genesis narrative doesn't mention the destruction of the tower, although this is perhaps implied. The representation of God in this passage, to a modern reader at least, is unflattering. He appears almost jealous of what his created people have achieved. Some of the attempts to reverse the Babel narrative that we will explore below are perhaps consciously or unconsciously resisting this representation of the God of the Hebrew Bible.

Thirdly, the importance of communication and some sort of shared language is shown to be important. The language of the earth, which we may presume had been one shared language, is confused by God so that the builders can no longer understand each other and work together on their tower. In terms of the Genesis narrative, this is presented as a divinely ordained necessity and a fitting punishment but many readers and interpreters of the Bible have returned to this passage, not least those in the 16th century who, against the background of the Reformation, produced editions like the Antwerp Polyglot Bible (*Biblia Polyglotta*, 1569–1572). This Bible translation collated multiple languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Aramaic for the Old Testament, Greek, Syriac and Latin for the New Testament), and was supplemented by dictionaries and grammar study tools, such that it encapsulated the humanist ideal of »remedying Babel«. ¹⁰ The Polyglot Bible's creator and printer, Christoph Plantin, was also a friend of Bruegel, with both moving within the same humanist circles, such as the »Four Winds« group convened by Hieronymous Cock. ¹¹ Thus humanists, as well as more »orthodox« Catholics and Protestants cited the Babel narrative frequently post-Refor-

9 See Harris and Zucker at: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/northern/antwerp-bruges/v/pieter-bruegel-the-elder-the-tower-of-babel-1563> (accessed May 1, 2022).

10 Mansbach 1982, 52–56. See also <https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/bpbo/polyglot/>

11 Mansbach 1982, 51–2.

mation. Both sides saw sharp echoes of their own predicament in the narrative of the destruction of a united people into warring factions and the humanists especially considered ways in which harmony could be restored.¹²

3. Pieter Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*: A multivalent vision of Europe in the late 16th century

Pieter Bruegel produced three versions of the *Tower of Babel*, two on panel and one on ivory that has now been lost.¹³ It is the Vienna version of 1563 that is most well-known and has been most imitated, and which will be the focus of the ensuing discussion (fig. 1).

However, mention will also be made of the Rotterdam version (also c. 1563–1568?) in which Bruegel approaches the same subject matter in a contrasting way. Commentators have interpreted the painting variously as speaking to the legacy of the Reformation and the continued Catholic and Protestant tensions in 16th-century Antwerp, in part exacerbated by the rule of Philip II of Spain; as grappling with the impact of the translation of the Bible into the vernacular (see the Polyglot Bible of 1569–72) and humanist ideas in general, and as a reflection of the growth of the international European city (the metropolis), such as Antwerp, and the issues that this precipitated.¹⁴

Bruegel painted the Vienna *Tower of Babel* in 1563 for his most important patron, the Flemish merchant Nicolaes Jonghelinck. Jonghelinck owned sixteen of Bruegel's paintings and the Vienna *Tower of Babel* hung in his dining room, before being donated to the city of Antwerp after his death.¹⁵ Kaminska argues that the placement of this painting in the convivial setting of the Jonghelinck dining room, as well as the subject matter, the Genesis 11 Babel narrative of pride punished, would have been intended to facilitate learned conversation.¹⁶ Antwerp, where Bruegel lived for the most productive eight years of his life, between 1555 and 1563, had recently undergone a period of

12 See Morra 2007, 202.

13 See Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 179.

14 See Mansbach 1982; Morra 2007; Kaminska 2014; Jonckheere 2014; Oberthaler/Pénot 2019.

15 Kaminska 2014, 1; Orenstein 2001, 21.

16 Kaminska 2014, 1.



Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The (Great) Tower of Babel*, oil on wood, 114 × 155 cm, c. 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.¹⁷

rapid and unprecedented economic and demographic growth.¹⁸ This in turn had led to geographic expansion and architectural transformation. As a result of this economic, demographic and architectural expansion, Antwerp was one of modern Europe's first metropolises, full of diversity of nationalities and languages and ambition. There are nods to Antwerp in Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, in the busy harbour, some of the tower's architecture and the surrounding countryside. The geographical context to Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* cannot therefore be underestimated. Bruegel has re-cast the biblical Tower of Babel as contemporary Antwerp. Whether that implies a negative or a positive appraisal of developments in Antwerp depends on the commentator. The political context is also key. Since 1555, Flanders had been under the harsh Catholic rule of Philip II of Spain. Philip sought to suppress Protestantism in the region and in 1556 had enhanced the powers

17 Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Brueghel-tow-er-of-babel.jpg> (accessed May 8, 2022).

18 Kaminska 2014, 2.

of the Inquisitors, led by the Duke of Alba who referred to Antwerp as »a Babylon, confusion and receptacle of all sects.«¹⁹ Philip II himself was deeply unpopular in the region owing in part to the fact that he spoke only Castilian and needed a translator on his visits to the Low Countries. As will be discussed below, there has been speculation that the kingly figure in the bottom left-hand corner of the Vienna *Tower of Babel* is in fact Philip II of Spain. Bruegel himself was sympathetic to both Protestantism and humanism, as is evidenced in many of his paintings.

In Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, the tower itself undeniably dominates the image, a huge leaning structure that dwarfs the surrounding towns on the left and casts a shadow over the city and harbour on the right. Oberthaler and Pénot remark on the two contrasting scales used by Bruegel in painting: the huge dimensions of the tower are at odds with the tiny scale used for its environs.²⁰ The traditional landscape of the Low Countries is thus literally and metaphorically overshadowed by the tower. In the bottom left-hand corner of the image a regal figure and his entourage are shown the tower, while several workmen prostrate themselves before him, barely pausing in their work. All around and over the tower, workmen toil like ants, giving the impression of frenetic activity. The tower itself is full of contradictions in an architectural sense. Loosely based on the architecture of the Coliseum (which Bruegel had almost certainly seen on his trip to Rome in 1552–1553), the tower is in at least three states of completion.²¹ The lower central section of the tower (as well as some sections on the far right) consists of unhewn rock, while many of the porticos on the left look almost complete. Elsewhere the tower is covered in scaffolding and other Renaissance building machines, suggesting a liminal state: the work has begun but is far from complete. Indeed, as Harris and Zucker point out, as a result of the tower's precarious angle, it almost seems to be growing and falling down at the same time.²² In the Genesis narrative, the tower is also suspended in a liminal, unfinished state, after the workers left off building the tower (Genesis 11:8), an idea that Bruegel is surely reflecting in the many different stages of completion depicted in the painting.

19 Mansbach 1982, 45; Morra 2007, 207.

20 Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 177–178.

21 Mansbach 1982, 45.

22 See Harris and Zucker, see above footnote 9.

Turning now to some of the contrasting interpretations of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, Mansbach argues that it was intended as a critique of the autocratic rule of Philip II. In his view, Bruegel's image is only loosely based on the Genesis narrative, arguing that it was a point of departure for Bruegel rather than a straightforward source text.²³ Thus the usual interpretation of the image as a traditional biblical parable of pride punished is insufficient. Overlaid onto the biblical story is a »pictorial metaphor of the political and religious state of affairs in contemporary Flanders as seen by the humanist circle«. ²⁴ Thus the kingly figure in the bottom left hand corner, traditionally identified with the Jewish king Nimrod (following Josephus) is identified by Mansbach as Philip II.²⁵ As above, the harbour resembles Antwerp and the tower itself the Coliseum, a well-known symbol of Roman imperial might. In this interpretation, Philip II is therefore surveying his Flemish empire, its failure foreshadowed by the leaning, half-finished tower, which seems destined to collapse or to fall into decay (like Rome before it) in its half-finished, liminal state. It is therefore Philip II's hubris that is being lampooned here, rather than the hubris of humankind in general (as in Genesis 11). Mansbach's political interpretation of Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*, relies in part on his interpretation of Bruegel's Rotterdam *Tower of Babel* (c. 1563), which he presents as the positive counterpart to the slightly earlier Vienna version. He interprets the Rotterdam *Tower of Babel* as an image of Babel redeemed or remedied (fig. 2).

The Rotterdam *Tower of Babel* is much more architectural in focus. Although there are tiny worker figures climbing on the different levels, they are unfinished, almost ghostly in appearance and much fewer in number than the teams of tiny yet well-defined workers in the Vienna version. The structure itself is much more complete and has a much more solid air. Although it is unfinished at the top, where tower meets cloud (see Genesis 11:4), the structure is not an architectural failure in the same way that the Vienna tower undoubtedly is. Crucially, the kingly figure and his entourage is missing from this version. Mansbach argues, drawing upon Bruegel's links with the humanists, that the Rotterdam *Tower of Babel* represents an »ideal state in the absence of the tyrant's hubristic will« whereby unity can be found in diver-

23 Mansbach 1982, 43.

24 Mansbach 1982, 43.

25 See Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 176 for an overview of the textual and architectural context.



Fig. 2: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The (Little) Tower of Babel*, oil on panel, 60 × 74 cm, c. 1563–1568, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.²⁶

sity.²⁷ As already mentioned above, the Polyglot Bible of c. 1569–1572 was an ambitious humanist project also endorsed by Pope Gregory XIII (although later opposed by some Spanish Theologians and denounced to the Inquisition).²⁸ In the main, however, the Polyglot Bible represents a prominent exercise in diversity and unity (drawing upon the work of Catholic, Protestant and even Jewish theologians in its creation), which is seen by Mansbach as crucial context to the Rotterdam *Tower of Babel*. Mansbach therefore encourages us to see the two paintings as representing two sides of Babel, the first a critique of personal and universal hubris (as in the Genesis narrative) and the second

26 Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Tower_of_Babel_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_\(Rotterdam\)#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_\(Rotterdam\)_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Tower_of_Babel_by_Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_(Rotterdam)#/media/File:Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Tower_of_Babel_(Rotterdam)_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg) (accessed May 8, 2022).

27 Mansbach 1982, 49.

28 Mansbach 1982, 53.

a representation of utopic future hope or Babel remedied. While the second side of Babel is certainly not found in the Genesis narrative, it is a notion that held currency in late 16th-century Europe, as the humanists and thinkers on both sides of the Reformation grappled with the linguistic (and other) consequences of the schism, the rise of the metropolis and increasing population diversity. Interestingly, the motto of the EU, which came into use in 2000 is »united in diversity«. Thus Mansbach's interpretation of Bruegel's Rotterdam *Tower of Babel* suggests that the notion of a united yet diverse Europe, far from emerging in the late 20th century, was prefigured by Bruegel, or at least existed within the context he was operating, at the end of the 16th century.

Morra agrees that in 16th-century Antwerp Babel was viewed as a »symbol or reflection of the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by an economically prosperous, cosmopolitan, multicultural centre.«²⁹ However, she rejects the concrete juxtaposition of Mansbach's position on the two Bruegel paintings in favour of a more nuanced reading. She argues that there is not enough evidence to identify the kingly figure in the Vienna version as King Philip II of Spain, preferring instead to view this figure as an allegory of sovereignty more generally. Oberthaler and Pénot also argue that, given that Jongelinck was almost certainly the painting's patron, combined with the fact that he was close to the holders of power in Antwerp, suggests that Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel* was in fact *not* intended as a direct attack on King Philip II (*pace* Mansbach).³⁰ Rather, sovereign power, of which Philip was one example, is presented as ailing and contradictory, just like the tower in this image. In a reversal of Mansbach's position, Morra views Bruegel's Rotterdam *Tower of Babel* not as an example of Babel remedied but rather as a representation of the linguistic, epistemological and genealogical challenges to traditional authority that were taking place in late 16th-century Europe.³¹ She dates this image to 1568, a year after the Inquisition arrived in the Low Countries, led by the aforementioned Duke of Alva.³² Alva executed thousands for heresies, which included Bible translation. In this reading, Bruegel's second *Tower of Babel* therefore represents the impossibility of linguistic and religious unification. This is not Babel remedied but the ruins

29 Morra 2007, 203.

30 Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 180.

31 Morra 2007, 212.

32 Morra 2007, 210.

of Babel, symbolic of a moment of historical crisis in the Church’s authority. Thus, the visual reference to the Church in the form of a tiny Catholic procession on the third level of the tower, is uniformly negative, binding the Church in its conservatism and repression to the failure of Babel.³³

Meanwhile, Kaminska argues that the Vienna *Tower of Babel* is more stable than other scholars have argued.³⁴ This more positive reading of the painting is supported by Oberthaler’s and Pénot’s contextualisation of the painting within Bruegel’s wider oeuvre. While Bruegel is well known for his inclusion of motifs of torture and death in his work, such visual references are totally absent from this painting.³⁵ Indeed, apart from the dark cloud floating in from the left, which can be interpreted as a *memento mori* motif, almost all of the imagery is harmonious: the builders work in harmony, there are even two tiny couples holding hands!³⁶ This observation adds weight to Kaminska’s contention that, in this work, Bruegel paints in praise of the collective efforts of the many tower builders. And further, that when the finished painting hung in its convivial context, in Jonghelinck’s dining room, it represented an answer to the problem posed by the Babel narrative: namely, how to create a harmonious and prosperous community founded upon Christian and humanistic values?³⁷ This is, of course, a question that continues to challenge those who work for and with the EU, although the EU’s values today are founded on secular and not Christian values. In both *his* extant images of Babel Bruegel implies that a successful metropolis must be founded upon good communication, primarily in the linguistic sense. The harmonious working of the builders across the painting, and even their physical contact, imply that the building of this impressive and ambitious tower was only possible because of their ability to communicate effectively. In its original context, therefore, the Vienna *Tower of Babel*, in its architectural solidity, both reverses the biblical narrative, as well as providing a reminder, for those who knew the ending of the Babel story, of the disastrous effects of the lack of communication. The visual references to Antwerp in Bruegel’s Vienna *Tower of Babel* (the harbour and the recognisably Brabant city on the left) serve to

33 Morra 2007, 213.

34 Jonckheere (2014, 189) agrees that Bruegel’s Vienna *Tower of Babel* is more than anything the depiction of an ambitious building project.

35 Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 179.

36 Oberthaler/Pénot 2019, 179.

37 Kaminska 2014, 13–15.

sharpen the painting's message. It is not communication in a general sense that is important but rather good communication in the service of their collective project, the international metropolis of Antwerp. Like Antwerp in this period of rapid development, Bruegel's Babel is conditional and unsecured.³⁸

Jonckheere also argues that Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel* was intended as a prompt to humanist discourse, although in a different vein to that proposed by Kaminska. He points to the frequency of the Babel metaphor in religious discourse on the art and architecture of the time, and in particular in disputes about iconoclasm.³⁹ When viewed from within this specific cultural context, Bruegel's Babel can be interpreted as a warning against idolatry. He cites the materiality and splendour of the tower and the amount of human labour involved in its construction in support of this idea. The viewer knows that the tower is doomed to failure and so the painting as a whole appears to sit in judgement on the grandeur of both Europe's classical and Catholic past, with its temples and great cathedrals. The Reformers, it is implied, offer a different way forward, one which will return the Church to its spiritual and humble beginnings, and rid it of »idoltrous edifice[s]«. ⁴⁰

While all of these interpretations have their merits and drawbacks, they all speak to some of the main themes from the original Genesis narrative (the ubiquity of human ambition, God's ultimate control and the importance of communication), as well as to the project that Bruegel was wittingly or unwittingly involved in, that of helping to tease out and define the shape of Europe's post-Reformation identity, crystallised here in the form of the city of Antwerp. The representation of Europe that emerges in his two Babel paintings is one of a multicultural, religiously observant city (Antwerp), invested in cutting-edge and ambitious architectural and engineering projects, but whose future hangs precariously in the balance if hubristic leadership and/or lack of effective communication.

We will now explore how Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*, and thus by association the Babel narrative, reappears in a very different 20th-century European context. As will be seen, however, many of the same concerns, such as those pertaining to questions of how to create unity from diversity and the importance of effective communication amongst multilingual groups, remain the same.

38 Kaminska, 2014, 15.

39 Jonckheere 2014, 199–200.

40 Jonckheere 2014, 199–200.

4. Exploring Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* iconography in EU architecture and poster art

Although the Tower of Babel has been visualised by many other artists (e. g. Lucas van Valkenborch, Gustav Doré, and M.C. Escher to name but three well-known examples), it is the Bruegel image that has had the furthest reach. It is an image to which both artists and architects working for the EU itself, as well as its detractors, have returned several times as post-World War II Europe has grappled with its identity again and again. As Salgó argues, European integration in the form of the EEC and then the EU was a special act of unification which required its own imaginary.⁴¹ The task of building a European identity has always been a difficult one as the pull of the national imaginary and its associated visual culture will likely always be stronger. Those involved in the EU brand-building project had to find ways to draw people into the European family. Such symbolic legitimisation has been found (to name but a few examples) via the European flag, money (on banknotes and on coins), stamps, architecture, the euro-lottery advertisement, posters, and more recently digital imagery.⁴² The idea of broken unity followed by renewal, Europe conceived as an epic phoenix if you will, has been a central strand of European thinking throughout its history and one that those involved in the EU brand-building project have embraced.⁴³ Hence the attraction of the symbolism of Babel. Although the biblical narrative starts with renewal and ends with the dispersal of the peoples and the implied destruction of the tower, the chronology of the source text has perhaps become less important than the ideas that it evokes, of human ambition and progress, of diverse peoples and of the importance of communication.

The first example of official EU iconography which draws upon the iconography of Bruegel's 1563 Vienna *Tower of Babel*, in order to provide positive symbolic legitimisation for the EU, is the Strasbourg Parliament building. In 1991 the Parisian firm Architecture Studio won a competition to design the Strasbourg Parliament building, also known as the Louise Weiss building (fig. 3).

41 Salgó 2017, 98.

42 Salgó 2017, 40.

43 Salgó 2017, 23–25.



Fig. 3: European Parliament Building, 1999, Strasbourg.⁴⁴

The description given on the firm's website is tantalisingly vague. They talk of expressing the »culture of Europe and its history« through the building, of embodying the foundations of western civilisation and the Baroque, whilst demonstrating the progression from geometric to elliptical thinking.⁴⁵ However, many other commentators, including the aforementioned Salgó, have commented on the similarities not only between the Strasbourg Parliament building and the Coliseum but also between the Strasbourg Parliament building and Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*.⁴⁶ It is the unfinished aspect of the top of the building that is so striking. While this may be intended to evoke an ideological transition from the nation state to one Europe, which is a work in progress (indeed it may now be in reverse after the UK's recent exit from the EU in January 2020), it also gives the building an unfinished quality that immediately evokes Bruegel's tower. While the architects who

44 Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wiki_loves_the_European_Parliament_in_Strasbourg#/media/File:14-02-04-Parlement-européen-Strasbourg-RalfR-046.jpg (accessed May 8, 2022).

45 See <https://architecturestudio.fr/en/projets/str2-parlement-europeen/> (accessed May 1, 2022).

46 Salgó 2017, 198.

designed the Strasbourg Parliament building may not have formally named Bruegel as an inspiration, can we read into their re-appropriation of Bruegel's tower a conviction that Babel could be remedied or reversed via the EU project? They have turned the ambiguity of the Bruegel image, inherent in the tower's unfinished and potentially precarious nature, into something to be celebrated, by leaving it intentionally unfinished. The design of the building thus suggests that the hubris of the original Babel might thus be overturned by the democratic *communitas* of the EU.⁴⁷

The idea of the EU offering some sort of reversal of the Babel narrative and of Bruegel's *Vienna Tower of Babel* had been foreshadowed in some of the EU's promotional posters, such as this one, produced in West Germany by Klaus Staeck in 1983 (fig. 4).⁴⁸ In this image, Bruegel's *Vienna Tower of Babel* has been fully reproduced. However, out of the top of the tower grows an enormous red-wine bottle and to the left of the bottle is written »Europa ist mehr als die Weinschwemme« (Europe is more than a wine glut). Since the 1960s, Europe has had too many vineyards producing too much wine. In 1978, the EU banned the planting of additional vineyards and began the process of distilling surplus wine into industrial alcohol. By the late 1980s, with the growth of other wine markets, the EU was paying vineyard owners to remove grapes (known as »grubbing up payments«).⁴⁹ The surplus wine began to be referred to in the late 1970s or 1980s as a glut. Although little is known about Klaus Staeck, given his context (as someone living and working in West Germany, a country whose government had always enthusiastically championed the EU brand) as well as the fact that he had taken an EU commission in producing this poster, it seems reasonable to suggest that *Europa ist mehr als die Weinschwemme* is using the Bruegel *Tower of Babel* iconography to promote a positive view of the EU. The poster invites the viewer to look past the issues that Europe was facing at that time, with regard to wine (and other agricultural) surpluses, and embrace the positive aspects that closer European economic and political unity had to offer. Whether Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* is being presented as part of the negative aspect of the

47 Salgó 2017, 199.

48 See the Historical Archives of the European Union, www.eui.eu (accessed May 1, 2022). With many thanks to Archivist Juan Alonso for his help with my research on these two posters.

49 See <https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=1593> (accessed May 1, 2022).



Fig. 4: Klaus Staeck, *Europa ist mehr als die Weinschwemme*, poster on paper, 1983.

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EU (the wine glut etc.) that needs to be put to one side or whether it represents the positive side of the EU (unity in diversity etc.) is unclear. Either way, the notion of the positive aspects of the EU somehow representing the idea of reversing or remedying the Babel narrative is clearly conveyed here.

The second poster we will explore dates from 1992 and is part of a series of fourteen posters which offer reflections on the themes of diversity and unity in Europe (fig. 5).⁵⁰ Dutch in origin (the creator, »Nagel« cannot be traced), the poster series is part of the Nicola Di Gioia Poster Collection, which is now housed in the Historical Archives of the European Union. Di Gioia was a former European Commission Officer for the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission in Rome from 1962 to 2003 and during his career, he collected over one thousand posters that had been

⁵⁰ See <https://archives.eui.eu/en/fonds/472636?item=NDG-302> (accessed May 1, 2022).



Fig. 5: Nagel, *Waar ligt de taalgrens?*, poster on paper, 1992.
 © Historical Archives of the European Union.

commissioned by the EU from 1957–2003. The posters span a range of topics from cultural and identity policy to economic policy to education and technology. His collection was donated to the Historical Archives of the European Union upon his death. The Dutch poster series entitled *Hoe vliegen we door de Europese Unie?* (meaning roughly »How do we navigate the EU?«), ranges from the serious (how to heal the scars of past wars and of the partitioning of Europe under communism) to the comical (how to deal with the many different speed limits that exist in the EU). The archivists of the Historical Archives of the European Union categorise the posters as »positive« or »negative« in terms of their representation of the EU, and this series has been categorised as »positive«.⁵¹

In the poster entitled *Waar ligt de taalgrens?* (roughly: »Where is the language border?«), the twelfth poster in the series, a cartoon figure stands before a replica image of Bruegel’s *Vienna Tower of Babel*. The tower has been superimposed onto a cartoon landscape. Behind the tower, instead of sky, there is

51 See <https://archives.eui.eu/en/fonds/460416?item=NDG> (accessed May 8, 2022).

a montage of texts in excess of fifteen European languages which discuss the plurality of languages that exist within the EU and the necessity of respecting minority languages. The poster's title *Waar ligt de taalgrens?* helps to elucidate the image. A language border is a boundary that can be drawn between two language areas that may exist in the same country, such as between the French and Flemish speaking areas of Belgium. Although the two language areas are part of the same country, there are often tensions between the two areas, due to the dominance of one language in economic, political and/or social terms. The EU had recognised the need for linguistic fairness early on in the process and mandated that all legislation must be published in all languages spoken in the EU.⁵² Indeed, there is a section on the European Parliament site devoted to the idea of »Many tongues, one union« and their attempts to respect linguistic diversity.⁵³ However, in reality English and French have been the dominant common languages of the EU, with German coming in third. Thus, achieving effective communication strategies within the EU that please all member states, proved, and no doubt still proves, a complex task.⁵⁴

Why then has the designer of the poster chosen to juxtapose these reflections about language borders with Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*? In the European imagination, or perhaps more specifically the imaginary of the EU, as evidenced in the preceding discussion, Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel* represents both the biblical Babel narrative and the notion of the creation of all the languages of the earth *as well as* in some sense being a symbol of the EU and its attempts to bring unity from diversity. In fact, in all three examples discussed in this section (the Strasbourg Parliament building and the two EU-commissioned posters) the artists' use of the Bruegel *Tower of Babel* iconography tends much more strongly towards the latter understanding. Indeed, the religious significance of the Bruegel image seems all but forgotten. While these observations are based on a small collection of examples, the fact that the Bruegel Babel iconography appears across a range of media and across several decades strongly suggests that it had become a sort

52 Caviedes 2003, 252.

53 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+IM-PRESS+20071017FCS11816+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed May 1, 2022).

54 See also the movement to establish Esperanto as the official language of the EU in a move to break the dominance of English within the union, which is perceived by many as politically and financially unjust.

of visual shorthand for the ongoing efforts to create political, economic and linguistic unity across the EU.

However, reading such images is rarely straightforward. While the poster is categorised as »positive« by the archivists of the EU's Historical Archives, it would seem to be more nuanced. The cartoon everyman figure on the left (who has replaced the kingly figure in the Bruegel painting) gazes up at Bruegel's tower. He is gazing at an edifice that seems to be falling down at the same time as being built, as in the original of which it is a copy (although it is notable that the designer has considerably straightened Bruegel's tower), and which represents human progress and human failure simultaneously. In many ways the tower is therefore an appropriate metaphor for the EU's attempts to establish linguistic fairness and unity across the fifty-something languages spoken in the union. It is no doubt a flawed project, but one which, like the tiny builders in Bruegel's image, gives rise to ingenuity and pockets of hope and progress, and which will continue as long as the EU itself exists. Given that the EU is a self-consciously secular organisation, God and his eventual judgement of the tower is of course absent from this visual metaphor but it must be said that neither is there a strongly felt divine presence in the Bruegel image. This is perhaps why it is such an apposite source image for the secular strand of reception that it has given rise to. A more overtly religious image could not have been appropriated in the service of EU brand-building in the same way.

5. Uses of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* iconography in anti-EU propaganda

The perceived rebellion against Christianity inherent in the brand-building of the EU is the subject of the last poster we will explore. This image, which is fraught with questions surrounding its provenance and authenticity, needs to be situated against a background of Christian internet fundamentalism, of the sort espoused by British Pentecostal, David Hathaway, who has a large YouTube following (around 200,000). Hathaway's articles and videos depict the EU as Babel and as Babylon, which are both under the control of Satan (also identified with Islam).⁵⁵ Hathaway provides a plethora of scriptural

55 See David Hathaway, 00:25:00–00:49:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66uCnNwLJtM> (accessed May 1, 2022). See also Capper 2014, 6.



Fig. 6: EU Parliament, *Construction Site Poster*, 1992, unverified source.

support for his position, as well as visual and material examples produced by the EU. The fact that the Strasbourg EU Parliament building seems in some way based on Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*, is used as evidence of the EU's satanic impulses and rebellion against the divine will.⁵⁶ As is a curious poster apparently produced by the Council of Europe in 1992 (fig. 6).

This poster, known as the *Construction Site Poster* is captioned with the phrase: »Europe: Many Tongues, One Voice«. At the centre of the image, the EU Parliament building, designed in the unmistakable likeness of Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel* stands unfinished, a crane on the right-hand side signifying the ongoing works. In the bottom left-hand corner of the image, in place of the Renaissance craftsmen of Bruegel's painting, are a small army of modernist, almost cubist figures, including a mother and her baby, a work-

⁵⁶ See Capper 2014.

man and a businessman with a briefcase. These figures are variously embracing, watched over by a pair of slightly sinister technocrats situated in the middle ground of the poster. In many ways this poster encapsulates many of the facets of European brand-building, as mediated through the symbolism of Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*, that have already been discussed. There was also a big push towards greater European integration after the signing of the Maastricht treaty of 1992. As above, the Parliament building was designed between 1991–1992, building work began in 1995 and it was officially opened in 1999. Thus, the timings of the poster, produced apparently in 1992, which looks forward in hope to the as yet unfinished building, also makes sense. In which case, this poster, with its innovative design and high production values, would represent the ultimate reclaiming or remedying of the Babel narrative by the Council of Europe, in the service of the EU ideology of »unity in diversity« and of successful intra-European dialogue. The Judeo-Christian God had destroyed Babel but the EU can re-build it!

However, there are other aspects of the poster which raise concerns as to its authenticity. First, the Historical Archives of the European Union have no record of the poster and I can find no evidence of it having been produced by the Council of Europe. It mostly appears on anti-EU and fundamentalist Christian websites. Second, as pointed out by Brian Capper, an expert in the symbolism of UK and European Christian fundamentalism, the ring of EU stars above the Parliament Building are inverted.⁵⁷ Inverted stars or pentagrams are traditionally a symbol of Antichrist and would suggest that the creators of the poster were not after all the Council of Europe but in fact anti-EU propagandists who sought to convey the idea that the EU was in some way an agent of Antichrist.⁵⁸ In a sense the true provenance of the *Construction Site Poster* is not important. It has been accepted as authentic by those in anti-EU movements and discussed by Glenn Beck on Fox News⁵⁹ and also appears on two Christian fundamentalist sites with large followings,⁶⁰ as well

57 This information arises from an email conversation with Dr. Brian Capper, Reader in Christian Origins, Canterbury Christchurch University, August 26, 2019.

58 Jasper 1992, 254. See »Pentagram«, *New World Encyclopedia*, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Pentagram&oldid=1017792> (accessed May 8, 2022).

59 See <https://www.mediamatters.org/glenn-beck/beck-compares-photo-eu-building-illustration-tower-babel-amazing> (accessed June 13, 2022).

60 http://www.khouse.org/enews_article/2003/515/print; <https://www.mediamatters.org/glenn-beck/beck-eu-tower-babel> (both accessed May 1, 2022).

as being reproduced and discussed in William F. Jasper's *Global Tyranny... Step by Step: The United Nations and the Emerging New World Order*.⁶¹ All of the aforementioned journalists and outlets use the 1992 *Construction Site Poster* as evidence of the EU's pride and rebellion against God. In their view, via constructing a Parliament Building and creating further iconography about it that connects it directly with the Tower of Babel, the EU had issued a direct challenge to divine authority, for which it could expect serious punishment. While this may seem preposterous to those steeped in the secular European imaginary, without the fact that the EU and the EEC before it had, in various media, purposely used imagery of Babel, mediated through Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel*, to help to shape and express the new European identity, such conspiracy theories would not have been possible and certainly would not have gained such traction amongst fundamentalist circles. It is undeniably strange that this resolutely secular institution should have returned to this rather negative biblical image in pursuit of a new (positive) image for Europe. But as with Bruegel, some three hundred-odd years earlier, the challenge of attempting to reverse Babel remains an intoxicating one.

6. The *Tower of Babel* in the European imagination: Revived, redeemed and rejected

In the foregoing analysis we have explored the source text of Genesis 11:1–9, otherwise known as the Babel narrative, and a key element of its visual reception history, Bruegel's Vienna *Tower of Babel* of 1563. As well as being a multifaceted interpretation of the source text in its own right, the painting was also part of a wider project of European identity-building in the wake of the Reformation and European economic and demographic expansion in cities such as Antwerp. While commentators have not agreed on an interpretation of Bruegel's image, one possible interpretation, put forward by Mansbach, is that in his second Babel painting, the Rotterdam version, Bruegel was pointing forwards to a utopian future in which the destruction of Babel might be remedied via a reunified Europe. Whilst it is very unlikely that the late 20th-century architects responsible for the design of the Stras-

61 See Jasper 1992, 254–255.

bourg Parliament building or the designers of the EU-commissioned posters that we explored were familiar with this strand of art-historical interpretation, it seems credible that such ideas had entered the European imaginary in a more amorphous way. In any case, all three artists (and architects) seem to be suggesting much the same idea, that Babel can be redeemed via the EU, via their appropriation of Bruegel's Babel imagery. Of particular interest is these artists' and architects' use of well-known biblical imagery, mediated via Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* iconography, in their search for a visual language with which to communicate some of the positive aspects of the self-consciously secular EU project. We are thus given a direct insight into how some of those at the heart of the EU project desire us to imagine Europe, perhaps as a sort of quasi-religious community, and conversely, how some of the most strident opponents of the EU were able to take this imaginary of Europe and turn it into anti-secularist polemic.

And finally, as a reception historian, one is bound to ask how (if at all) the selected visual history of Genesis 11:1–9, which has been explored herein, helps to illuminate or elucidate the source text. I would argue that all of the visual media explored in this paper, to varying degrees, represent a critique of the source text. Even the Bruegel images, and particularly the earlier Vienna *Tower of Babel* invite us to see the positive aspects of the tower-building and the strongly-felt sense of positive communication amongst the builders and tradesmen which exist alongside the undoubted hubris of the project. The jealous, capricious God of the Babel narrative in Genesis is rejected in favour of a more conciliatory interpretation in which it is unclear whether the tower will fall or not and in which, as mentioned above, God is strangely absent. The 20th-century examples go further still in suggesting that the divine destruction of Babel can and should be reversed and that the Tower of Babel, here a metaphor for the EU, can and should be rebuilt. These representations therefore present an outright challenge to the narrative of Genesis, which it would be interesting to bear in mind for future exegesis of the text. And of course, this rebellious challenge to the Genesis 11 narrative is exactly what is rejected by Christian fundamentalist opponents of the EU, who find therein the proof of the EU's alignment with Satan.

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