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Lost in Translation

Abstract

This is a review of *Lost in Translation* (2003).

Two Americans "stuck" in a high-class hotel in Tokyo meet and, over the course of a week, share food and drink, existential quandaries, a couple karaoke renditions of the Sex Pistols and Roxy Music, and a non-conjugal night in bed. Thus is the simple plotline of Sofia Coppola's second feature film. *Lost in Translation* continues some of the brooding of her earlier *Virgin Suicides*, but here Coppola offers more ways out, more possibilities for coping with life's transitions. Even so, the ritual mechanisms for these passages are far from orthodox, and the subtle creativity of the film is exquisite.

The two main characters, Bob (Bill Murray) and Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), create a curious chemistry between them, with the relationship ranging from father-daughter to fellow tourists to lovers. Both, significantly, are at turning points in their lives. Bob is middle-aged with a wife of many years back in the States who occasionally phones and, as they plan to remodel their house, FedExes carpet samples to him in Tokyo. Charlotte is somewhere between graduation from university (a philosophy major at Yale), and life in the workaday world indicative of adulthood in the U.S. For the time being she is in Tokyo as a tagalong to her celebrity photographer husband (Giovanni Ribisi). Despite their age difference of thirty or so years, both Bob and Charlotte are stuck having to handle their life's passages alone, without the help of their legally intimate partners.

Charlotte wanders Tokyo alone like a flaneuse, seeking to soak in the contradictory affects of bright lights and Buddhist temples and yet, in a telling phone conversation with a friend back home, not being able to feel anything. She has gone to Japan for something of a wanderjahr (or maybe just a wanderwoche), though is unable to exert any control over the stimuli she receives in her wandering. Bob, on the other hand, generally sticks to the hotel's bar, being too well trod of other countries and tired in life to attempt the cultural translation work necessary to venture into the streets. But as the two grow more intimate they begin to experience the city together, lost, but at least lost together. With continual visual and verbal references to Buddhism in the background, they each seem to quest for answers to their own existential koans, though only with the aid of each other as fallen and frail masters.

The city of Tokyo is really the third main character and *Lost in Translation* becomes one of those films where the setting itself takes on an almost sublime subjectivity. While handheld cameras are often used to make a film appear more subjective, here the focus does not stay steady as the object of the gaze overpowers the subjective viewpoint. Viewers are offered many point-of-view shots of the urban anxieties and attractions from inside taxis, and given more intimate perspectives inside Tokyo-dwellers' apartments, nightclubs, and restaurants. Coppola's, and cinematographer Lance Acord's, eyes for the city match a

fascination many western filmmaker's have had with Japan's capital city. Several of the scenes almost precisely mimic scenes from Wim Wenders (*Tokyo-ga* and *Until the End of the World*) and Chris Marker (*Sans Soleil*), other films depicting westerners lost in Tokyo. Taken together, such scenes begin to beg the question as to what it is about that hybrid Japanese city--at the border of west and east, past and present--that overwhelms the modern western filmmaker to the point of making the camera almost incapable of agency.

This leaves *Lost in Translation* open to a charge of "orientalism," and there have been striking criticisms of the film because it keeps Japanese characters at a real distance (and, honestly, the "lip my stockings" scene was probably a bit gratuitous). While the charge of exoticizing is not completely inaccurate, it must be stressed that the point of view is emphatically that of Bob and Charlotte, two persons lost in another world. To bring more specificity, more character development, to the Japanese characters would have been to sacrifice Bob and Charlotte's personal disorientation. In other words, the exoticism was more existential than cultural. On one hand, it could have been set anywhere; on another it could only have been Tokyo. Mixed with the metaphor of being "lost in translation," and filmically followed through with a lack of subtitles to tell English-speaking viewers what the Japanese characters are saying, there are no human

Japanese characters here, only Tokyo itself, a city that speaks louder than any character in the film.

Ultimately, the eponymous "translation" is not a linguistic one, but refers to the points of transition for each character in their lives. Bob and Charlotte are lost people, living out a classic example of what Victor Turner referred to as "liminality": neither here nor there, in and out of time, and potentially dangerous. They are jet-lagged, tired, without their status quo partners, at transitional periods in life. In the end, what *Lost in Translation* shows is we humans' abiding need for ritual, and for the liberation that only comes through involvement with the *communitas*, even when it is transitory and spontaneous.

Wonderfully ironic, the closing scene between the couple occurs (as one expects from films in which potential lovers meet in foreign locales) in the rain as Murray heads to the airport. But their whispered, hidden words leave the viewer with their own koan.