

Whispering retreat

Lost in Translation, written and directed by Sofia Coppola

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Lost in Translation is an ephemeral film that fails to leave much of a mark. Prodded to think about the film, one will recognize that there are some worthwhile as well as some troubling elements in it. But the film fails primarily at the emotional level, since what we see on the screen fades away so quickly. The audience will come out of the theater having laughed at a few jokes—mostly at the expense of the Japanese—having enjoyed the actors' performances, but fundamentally unchallenged and unaffected.

This is not, we hasten to say, because the film is deliberately cold and self-referential in a postmodern fashion. Coppola, to her credit, is after all trying to work through the difficult problem of alienation, not of some unavoidable and ultimately comfortable emptiness. This already suggests that we are alienated *from* something—and the film does express a sense of loss, as well as a struggle to identify and grasp it. But it comes through too faintly. What Coppola perhaps thought subtle is in the end simply feeble and unconvincing.

The story takes place in Japan, where the film was shot in its entirety. Bob Harris (Bill Murray) is an aging American film star who is paid handsomely to go to Japan to endorse a brand of whiskey in an advertisement campaign. Bob clearly is an unhappy fellow. We sense, without too many verbal cues, that he dislikes the job, his present surroundings, and his family life back in the United States—all in a melancholic vein well expressed by Murray's droopy facial expressions and resigned demeanor.

Jet-lagged and walking aimlessly in his hotel, Bob meets Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), a fellow American. Charlotte is a young college graduate who has followed her successful and self-absorbed husband to Japan. Though Charlotte is much younger than Bob, they share similar moods and outlook. They are both unfulfilled, drifting through life without much hope that any of their choices have made or will make a difference in the end.

They begin to find solace in each other's company. The circumstances conspire to make a sexual relation or a future together impossible. So Bob and Charlotte can only engage in a minuet of kindred souls: graciously hiding beneath the surface of their friendship all those possibilities that must remain unfulfilled. The end is suitably ambiguous. Bob whispers a few

words in Charlotte's ear, but we are not allowed to hear what he says. We suspect that only this very moment of intimacy matters, though it will not lead to anything.

These two characters and the delicate relationship that binds them are supposed to be at the center of the film, with Japan serving as a convenient background. But in fact, the depiction of Japan often gets in the way and stands out as a somewhat troubling issue. The film walks a fine line here, and some viewers will find the treatment of the Japanese people and culture malicious and condescending.

Tokyo, with all its flashy electronic displays, with its chaotic and crowded streets, appears lifeless—a place where one can only be desperately lonely. It sets the mood of estrangement that dominates the film. We see dinosaurs walk on the surface of a skyscraper. We see Bob, partly awed and partly dismayed, watching impossibly bright and concentrated lights in the street. There is nothing magical here, only eerily artificial. Coppola, who has spent a considerable amount of time in Japan, shows us Tokyo the way she might film an extraterrestrial civilization.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with this. However, Coppola's treatment of Japan is a high-risk maneuver, and she doesn't always execute it in a way that would preempt objections. A few of the scenes stand out.

While shooting a commercial, a Japanese director screams at length what must have been complex instructions to Bob. But the inept Japanese interpreter insists on translating them only with a couple of words. Later, a Japanese photographer wants more "Roger Moore" from Bob, who at first can't understand him because of his thick accent, then mockingly offers him some Sean Connery instead. A Japanese prostitute is sent to Bob's hotel room. With her terrible English, she commands Bob to do something to her stockings. We don't know if she tells him to rip them or perhaps lick them. She then ends up on the floor screaming and flailing her limbs about hysterically as Bob tries to escape her clutches. Bob is summoned as a guest in a bizarre Japanese television talk show. He is forced to play along with the host's incomprehensible and nonsensical antics. We laugh at most of this, then wonder if we should have cringed instead.

In spite of some unfortunate moments, Coppola doesn't just crudely counterpose the strangeness and alienation of Japan

with the familiarity and humanity of the United States. Early in the film, Bob proposes to Charlotte a breakaway—to flee from the bar, the hotel, the country. But we soon realize that Bob has little to go back to. He complains that instead of peddling whiskey, he “could be doing a play somewhere.” But where, really? The prevailing sense of dislocation isn’t a simple matter of going back home to the United States. In the end, Charlotte proposes to Bob that he should stay in Japan with her, though that also would be no answer.

Moreover, Japan and its people aren’t presented as uniformly strange, always as subject of mockery and contempt. While going out with Charlotte, Bob finds some genuine moments with young Japanese people in spite of language and cultural barriers. We see him actually enjoying himself while barhopping in the company of young Japanese. A later scene in a hospital is also significant. It begins and threatens to end with what, by then, is a tired and offensive shtick. Bob and Charlotte don’t understand the receptionist, who, unfazed, continues to talk and wave forms in their face. Then we see Bob in a waiting room next to an older Japanese woman who doesn’t speak English at all. But this time we don’t laugh at her. Somehow, the two can communicate, and it is the woman who laughs.

Overall, one gets the feeling that, in the midst of all the dubious representations of Japan, Coppola really wanted to say something about America. But in the end, it’s not clear what this is; and consequently, one wouldn’t feel compelled to defend the film from accusations of an insensitive portrayal of Japan. Its “strangeness” seen through American eyes could have been developed in interesting ways. But Coppola has not worked through this question enough to express something insightful. She only vaguely and weakly points the audience in that direction.

One could pose this question as a thought-experiment: Would it be possible to produce a film that plays the same joke on Americans, and what would it look like? There is, after all, plenty that is not just strange and alienating, but outright demeaning and abhorrent circulating through American popular culture—the Jerry Springer Show, “Shooting Bambi,” all the ugliness that flows out of extreme social inequality in so many revolting forms. But it is difficult to imagine such a work. Many people in the world know something about “America,” and a few words in English. American people and culture would appear to be immune from this sort of treatment. Few would look at an American tourist without a sense of (perhaps eerie) familiarity.

At one level, we could then say that America functions as the main engine of cultural transformation. What we see as strange in Japan is a refraction of some element found originally in the US. The Japanese videogame arcade is depicted in the film as a strange and alienating place. But actually, it provokes the same feelings pioneered and trademarked by Las Vegas. In one of the first scenes, Bob runs into young Japanese people in cowboy hats and leather. This strikes him, and is presumably meant to

strike us, as strange. But that look is borrowed from American culture. Who is mocking whom, then? The alienating character of Japanese life is itself a refraction of America, and alienation in the face of Japan’s strangeness is merely one facet of American self-alienation.

But this sort of “translation” is a far more complicated matter since American popular culture is itself the product of multifarious national influences. Moreover, these influences tend to be hidden, since contemporary American popular culture hardly ever appears as the sum of the historical processes that produced it. Instead, it tends to abhor “history” and project a certain kind of vulgar timelessness: it recycles and processes influences mechanically and without acknowledging them.

This suggests a certain desolation and emptiness at the heart of a culture that can never be “national.” American popular culture is everywhere and nowhere, and inevitably familiar, but only in its vacuousness. It occupies the commanding heights of global cultural production, but from there it transmits mostly emptiness and artificiality. Perhaps that is the contradiction Coppola was groping toward. Bob and Charlotte’s alienation isn’t inflicted on them by Japan, but it can’t be purely existential either. We suspect there is something distinctly American about it, but the film doesn’t help us to pursue that line.

Instead, Coppola encourages us to be content with Bonsai truths: a moment, a glance, a few fleeting but genuine feelings. Thinking back to the very first shots of the film, there is even reason to suspect that the film’s dreamlike qualities are meant to be taken literally. We know the artistic type. It is part of a widespread tendency to worship the god of small things, expressed, for example in German filmmaker Tom Tykwer’s films. These artists are beating a general retreat: away from the dizzying heights of history and society, into interiority and intimacy, with the hope of catching a glimpse of the human condition in miniature scale. Coppola expresses this tendency more honestly and skillfully than most, and precisely because of this ends up demonstrating its limits very clearly.



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