

2005

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Custom Citation

King, Homay. Review of *Lost in Translation*, written and directed by Sofia Coppola. *Film Quarterly* 59 (2005): 45-48, doi: 10.1525/fq.2005.59.1.45.

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Lost in Translation

Director/writer: Sofia Coppola. Producers: Ross Katz, Coppola. Cinematographer: Lance Acord. Focus Features/Universal.

Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003) is littered with familiar signifiers for an unfamiliar Japan: streets ablaze with neon pictographs, bowing concierges bustling after guests in a high-tech hotel, pop-star hipsters with multicolored hair sporting synthetic fashions. Marketed as a comedy, the film prompts snickers of amusement from its Western audience. But its humor did not translate well with Japanese audiences: the film's Japanese distributor, Tohokushinsha Co., opted for a delayed opening at a single Tokyo movie theater, with a website trailer as its sole advertisement. Local critics were not laughing either: Yoshio Tsuchiya called the film "stereotypical and discriminatory"; the writer Kotaro Sawaki noted that the Japanese characters "are consistently portrayed as foolish."¹ Indeed, the film's Orientalism is marked enough to have prompted the Los Angeles-based non-profit organization Asian Media Watch to launch a campaign against its four Academy Award nominations. Despite such protests, the film garnered the award for best original screenplay, and the majority of American critics have continued to rave about its nuanced representation of cultural alienation.

With *Lost in Translation*, Coppola wavers between insight into the comedy of cultural difference and clichéd cultural stereotyping. On occasion, the balance tips in her favor. *Lost in Translation* does not claim to represent Tokyo authentically, objectively, or thoroughly; rather, every image has the fresh quality and provisional status of a first impression. But nor does the film sufficiently clarify that its real subject is not Tokyo itself, but Western perceptions of Tokyo—in particular, the fantasies that two lonely Americans project onto the



Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson—two lonely Americans in *Lost in Translation*

city and its residents. When Japan appears superficial, inappropriately erotic, or unintelligible, we are never completely sure whether this vision belongs to Coppola, to her characters, or simply to a Hollywood cinematic imaginary that has been offering up such images of the East at least since Cecil B. DeMille's 1915 *The Cheat*, as described by scholar Gina Marchetti.² We remain unsure whose pair of murky glasses we are wearing, lost without reference points in a Pacific-wide ocean of fantasies.

It was of course the late Edward Said who wrote the book on Orientalism. While his study concerns Western Europe's relation to the Arab world, rather than the United States' relation to East Asia, Said's text is still an illuminating one in this context. "Everyone who writes about the Orient," Said cautions, "must locate himself vis-à-vis the Orient." This location, Said continues, is not spatial, but rather discursive, subjective, and perceptual. It includes "the kind of narrative voice" the author adopts, "the type of structure" the text assumes, and "the kinds of images, themes, and motifs" that circulate within it, all of which, according to Said, ultimately conspire to "contain" the Orient: to "represent or speak on its behalf."³ In a way, we could say that a film like *Lost in Translation* breaks from the tradition of Orientalism that Said is describing because its author never clearly locates herself in relation to the city and people she films. We feel like aloof tourists at one turn and intimate locals at the next. Coppola's camera adopts an ambiguous attitude, combining dazzled humility with bemused condescension. At no point, it is true, do we securely occupy the confident position of the superior Western gaze upon the non-Western. But the film ends up containing the Orient and "speaking on its behalf" in another way: by representing it as a space where an American may get lost, but without being significantly changed or unmoored by the experience. As Scarlett Johansson's character puts it, she "doesn't feel anything" when she encounters her cultural others.

Our guides on the journey are Bob Harris (Bill Murray), a fading, B-level Hollywood actor who travels to Tokyo to shoot a Suntory whiskey advertisement, and Charlotte (Johansson), a recent Yale graduate, already bored in her marriage, who has accompanied her music-producer husband on a trip to film a video. Both characters have lost their bearings, the compasses of their desire momentarily set adrift by the very images through which they had previously defined themselves. Charlotte and Bob meet by chance in the New York Bar of the Park Hyatt Hotel, where lounge singers croon tepid versions of American pop songs as tourists sip their American cocktails. Charlotte recognizes Bob from his movies. Along with the setting, this dose of the familiar provides an antidote to their homesickness and insomnia that will spark an eroticized yet sublimated friendship.

When Bob shows up for his photo shoot, he is confronted with the images that Japanese culture has projected onto him as a representative of Hollywood masculinity. The photographer commands him to assume various iconic poses—a James Bond wink, a Dean

Martin swagger—as he reluctantly tips his glass for the camera. The scene is acted and shot for humor at the expense of the Japanese perception of what a desirable American male looks like: how he sits and gestures, what kind of suit he wears, what kind of whiskey he drinks. The more Bob gives the photographer what he wants, the more he is emasculated, both because he is following the orders of a man who cannot correctly pronounce "Rat Pack," and because the images he recreates seem antiquated and fey by contemporary American standards. But this emasculation does not stick to Bob. It is returned to sender: attributed to Japanese naïveté rather than to its American source.

Many scenes in *Lost in Translation* would seem to present opportunities for the mirror to be held up in the other direction. But because point of view is limited to Bob and Charlotte, we see more of their incomprehension than that of their hosts. The camera emphasizes Bob's bewildered reaction to the bowing greeters at the hotel, his face an amalgam of jet lag and sarcasm. When a call girl arrives at his hotel room, the camera seems to share his vaguely repulsed indifference. The film prompts us to read this incident, as well as his quick exit from an after-hours strip club, as a comment on Japanese sexuality and gender roles rather than on American prudishness. The film focalizes these images through Bob: it is the greeter, not he, who looks ridiculous; it is the dancer who is overly salacious, not he who projects this image onto her. Other scenes in the film—Bob's appearance on a Japanese television show, for instance—share in this attitude.

There are a few scenes where we get an inkling that the incomprehension is mutual, a flicker of understanding that the West might also be an exotic enigma for the East. In a scene at a hospital waiting room, for instance, a stranger asks Bob in Japanese how many years he has been in Japan. Failing to understand, Bob can only mimic a few syllables; his interlocutor bursts into laughter. The tables are turned: West now imitates East. But on the whole, *Lost in Translation* makes but minimal efforts to rewrite the myths of Asia that Hollywood film has been recycling for nearly a century: the Orient as primitive, feminized, and eroticized; Asian citizens as alternately silly or perilous, enigmatic and cloaked in artifice. Such myths can be traced to historical factors such as the Opium Wars, nineteenth-century immigration patterns from China, the traumas of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. But they also fulfill a psychical need, a projection whereby Hollywood's Tokyos and Chinatowns become a kind of cinematic dumping ground for anything that defies Western comprehension.⁴



Set adrift on the streets of Tokyo ...

How, then, does one make a film about one people's projections onto another, one culture's fantasies about another, without reproducing those very projections? How does one represent what is lost in translation from both sides? The task may ultimately be impossible: to strip away those projections entirely would require a vision unencumbered—and unenhanced—by the human psyche. But Coppola's earlier film, *The Virgin Suicides*, handles an analogous transaction more deftly. In *The Virgin Suicides*, a group of adolescent boys fantasize about the five beautiful sisters who live across the street as, one by one, these sisters take their own lives. Wanting to communicate, but not knowing how to crack through the walls of the girls' enchanted castle, the boys can only watch and send coded messages by phonograph. The sisters remain a mystery; their actions are never fully explained. But if they are reduced to Ophelia-like ciphers of tragic girlhood, it is because this film is not really about them: it is about the boys' fascination with them. *The Virgin Suicides* is about the boys' struggle to sift through the thickly layered images of 1970s idealized femininity—Brady Bunch sisters, Barbie dolls, Karen Carpenter, echoes of the von Trapp family—and find the human beings underneath. This story is equally important to tell, because, as the film makes clear, the girls' own subjectivities are not distinct from but shaped by these very images.

Lost in Translation might have benefited from a similar treatment—from a clarification that its Japan is but an amalgam of signs and images. It might also have benefited from the influence of earlier films that address the theme of Western perceptions of the East. Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (1983), Leslie Thornton's

Adynata (1983), and Wim Wenders' *Tokyo-Ga* (1985) and *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (1989) come to mind. Of particular relevance is *Tokyo-Ga*, which documents the filmmaker's trip to Japan in the spring of 1983. Initially, Wenders goes to research Yasujiro Ozu, but he soon becomes entranced by the landscape as a whole: he films Pachinko parlors, indoor golf ranges, and a factory where artificial plastic foods are produced. Part essay, part travelogue, *Tokyo-Ga* is narrated from multiple "locations," in Said's sense. Wenders speaks to us in voiceover as pilgrim, film historian, and poet-philosopher. At one turn he applies the researcher's detached gaze to Japanese athletics; at another he reveals the depths of his love for Yuuharu Atsuta's cinematography. But at each point, Wenders specifies the context of his perceptions and marks his relationship to them. Like Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs*, a book of meditative fragments inspired by a similar trip, *Tokyo-Ga* makes clear that it "in no way attempts to represent reality itself." Rather, it could be said, in Barthes' words, to "descend into the untranslatable . . . without attempting to muffle its shock."⁵

An example of this occurs when Wenders shows two sets of images of the Shinjuku neighborhood in Tokyo, filmed first with his own lens, and then a second time with the 50-millimeter lens preferred by Ozu. "Another image presented itself," he tells us, "one that no longer belonged to me." Soon after, Wenders happens upon a group of Japanese teenagers in 1950s styles of dress, earnestly lindy-hopping as the music of Elvis Presley sounds from a boom box in a public park. At no time, however, does Wenders' camera smirk at them. Rather, it seems to marvel at the inextricable mixture of

East and West, and at the emergence of the past into the present in such an unexpected and vital form. Unlike the photographers and karaoke singers in *Lost in Translation*, these dancers are not foreign copycats mimicking and pirating a superior American ideal. Rather, their rockabilly masks are donned with all the self-consciousness of Kabuki actors. They do not transcribe 1950s America; they translate it.

Lost in Translation, on the other hand, emphasizes what is mimicked without understanding, what escapes translation. Sensations of incomprehension, of loss of control, of forgetting even the time of day, tend to dominate. These sensations, the film makes clear, can be highly pleasurable, and even transformative when one is open to them. Coppola's images of Tokyo streets viewed through the windows of taxis reveal a carnival of sirenlike signs, ablaze and saturating the skyline. During an extended nightlife sequence, Bob and Charlotte rent a karaoke room in a high-rise building; its façade appears as if sectioned into hundreds of television screens. This image calls attention to its representational status, its status as sign rather than reality. Cityscapes that appear to defy the laws of Western perspective, curving off-ramps that seem to defy gravity—these are rendered all the more exhilarating because Bob and Charlotte cannot read them, and thus may appreciate them for their visual properties. Such images revel in the feeling of lostness without attempting to muffle its shock with cheap humor.

One scene in *Lost in Translation* appears to quote another of Wenders' films, *Paris, Texas*. This is a kindred film in that it represents a European perception of a foreign place, the American West. In one scene, the eight-year-old Hunter sits in the window of a Houston, Texas, hotel listening to a tape recording that his father has left for him: a goodbye letter. Hunter's body outlined against the views of an alien city, the disembodied voice of his father both bridging and highlighting the sense of disconnection—these qualities are also apparent in an image of Coppola's, in which Charlotte sits in her Tokyo hotel-room window talking on the telephone to a relative back home. The reference is subtle enough that the quotation cannot be vouchsafed; I cannot really tell whether I am projecting it onto Coppola's film. But perhaps this is what *Lost in Translation* can teach us: that an authentic essence can never be fully distinguished from the barrage of signifiers that are slathered onto it. The trick, then, is to chart that risky territory with care, and with openness to new ways of seeing.

NOTES

1. Yoshio Tsuchiya, trans. Fumie Nakamura, film review in *Yomiuri Shimbun* (April 19, 2004); Kotaro Sawaki, film review in *Asahi Shimbun*, quoted in V. A. Musetto, "'Lost' in Translation," *New York Post* (May 21, 2004).
2. See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
3. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 20.
4. For more detailed studies of the psychical mechanisms that underlie this type of racialized subjectivity, see Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and David Eng's *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).
5. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 3.

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ABSTRACT *Lost in Translation* was big in the States, but less so in Japan, where its racism deterred critics. While clearly trafficking in stereotypes, the film does depart from Hollywood's tradition of Orientalism by indicating that its Tokyo is actually a fantasy version projected by Americans abroad. Still, the film lacks the complexity of its European predecessors.