

clientele does not represent progress. Otherwise, however, the issue of the effects of top-down “development” on women remains underdeveloped in this video. Also, at several points, translations from Filipino might have been rendered more completely and with less bowdlerizing.

I have viewed *The Golf War* three times, including once with students at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. Despite shortcomings, *The Golf War* succeeds as a political satire of “development”-driven tourist attractions by presenting the tragically high human cost of such projects. Aside from the video’s research value, it may be viewed and discussed in a fifty-minute class period. Asian studies teachers, futurists, planning and tourism specialists, and other social scientists can use *The Golf War* in undergraduate and graduate courses and community discussion groups. ■

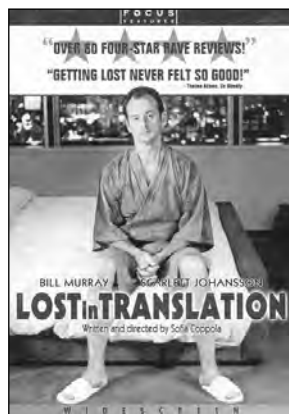
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Lost in Translation

Written and directed
by Sofia Coppola

Universal Studios, 2003

DVD and VHS (color)
1 hour, 42 minutes



Lost in Translation is Sofia Coppola’s most ambitious film to date. It depicts the interaction of two Americans,

both fish out of water in a hotel in Tokyo. Bob Harris (Bill Murray) is an over-the-hill American actor in Tokyo to film whiskey ads; “Charlotte” is a recent college graduate who has accompanied her photographer-husband to Tokyo and been left to amuse herself. Bob and Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) spend time together, develop an affection for each other, and part. In one scene they share a bed, but they never make love. Slight gestures—his hand reaching out tentatively to grasp her ankle, her turning away into an elevator—are supercharged. The film garnered four Oscar nominations—best film, best actor, best director, and writing (original screenplay)—and won for writing. Now in her early thirties, Coppola is the first American woman nominated for an Oscar for directing (she was also producer and screenwriter).

With a few exceptions, those under the age of twenty probably won’t choose to see *Lost in Translation*—there’s little action, sex, or profanity. I didn’t notice specific segments, short or long, that would lend themselves to classroom use. *Kill-Bill* and *The Last Samurai*

will affect our students, but *Lost in Translation* will be significant for its impact not on our students but on us. Here are one viewer’s thoughts after two viewings a month apart.

The glittering neon of downtown Tokyo, the sumptuous appointments of a five-star Tokyo hotel, the bullet train, imbecilic TV shows: is this Japan? Yes, of course. No, of course not. It *is* Japan, one of a thousand Japans; it *isn’t* the Japan anyone should mistake for *the* Japan, if such a thing exists. It *is* Japan only for those foreign visitors utterly insulated, determined *not* to make human contact. Charlotte makes forays into other Japans. She goes to a Buddhist temple (but complains afterward, in a teary phone call to a friend back home, that she felt nothing), to an *ikebana* lesson (in the hotel, no less), to Kyoto (the Heian Shrine); she has, she says, Japanese friends, but the only evidence is a bar scene and a *karaoke* party, with little human contact at either. Yes, she is more open to Japan (and to life) than Bob Harris, but the final image of her, blonde hair on the Tokyo street, wrapped in warm thoughts about the encounter with Bob, is of her isolation from her Japanese surroundings. The gorgeous vistas of Tokyo from her hotel room underline the fact that she’s on one side of the glass, Japan—life—on the other.

The setting is Japan and Tokyo, but it might be any empire of signs in other than Latin letters: Moscow? Athens? Istanbul? Shanghai? It is an essentialized Other, there not for its own sake but to highlight the humanity of Bob and Charlotte. Together, they are the Tom Cruise of *The Last Samurai*, the Kevin Costner of *Dances with Wolves*, the Richard Chamberlain of *Shogun*.¹ The audience focuses on them. It is meant to focus on them.

But what if—for a moment or two—we were to focus on the Japanese characters? The manic PR types, the karaoke partygoers,



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Drowned Out: We Can't Wish Them Away
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FILM REVIEWS

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the businessmen in elevators and bars: might not each of them be as disenchanting, lost, tired, empty, as the Caucasian leads?² David Plath wrote many years ago about the Japanese sense of themselves as underdeveloped selves in an overdeveloped society. (If that description doesn't fit Bob and Charlotte, what does? Shades of Walt Kelly's comment for Earthday 1970, "We have met the enemy, and he is us.") Had director Sofia Coppola wished, she could have taken *Lost in Translation* in a radically different direction and made a film in which the natives were something more than foils for the supposed humanity of the white leads.

The only human connection in the film, and it is a fleeting one, is between Bob and Charlotte. His relationship with wife and family is tenuous at best; hers with photographer-husband is more fragile still.³ Neither Bob nor Charlotte makes significant contact with Japan. In one bar scene, he enlists her in a metaphorical jailbreak—from bar, from hotel, from country. The true break, if and when it comes, will be not from Japan but from their own lives.

All of us who have experienced jet lag or hotel existence in a foreign land will recognize ourselves in *Lost in Translation*. But that is not its only merit. It does not hurry; it allows us the luxury of time. There is little action; there is much contemplation. It highlights not grand gestures but small moments. It focuses on the human interaction between two reasonably sympathetic characters. Others have written of Coppola's love for her male lead, the familiar face she frees up to express unfamiliar depth or shallowness—in any case, humanity. (I credit Coppola because when Murray ad-libs, notably in the sushi-bar scene, the movie degenerates into gross caricature.)

Her camera is almost as indulgent of her female lead, the unfamiliar face that becomes, in the course of the film, the director's canvas. The story has its origin in Coppola's own trip to Tokyo, accompanying her photographer-husband. Would that that trip had included a homestay of the sort that has given so many students and teachers a very different experience of Japan!

Lost in Translation could have been much more. It could have brought Japan and the Japanese within the ambit of the human. It could have treated its jet-lagged, underdeveloped leads as symptomatic of a greater human dilemma. It could have, but it didn't and doesn't. It's an impressive film, but its limitations are as striking as its achievements. ■

NOTES

1. Tom Engelhardt's "Ambush at Kamikaze Pass" (*Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 3.1:64-83 [1970]) is now over thirty years old, but it still has much to teach about Hollywood and the Third World.
2. I thank Josh Roth of Mt. Holyoke College for this point.
3. From an interview with Sofia Coppola on indiewire.com: "But I just liked those brief moments of connection when they're feeling so disconnected."

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