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2017

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Masaaki Takemura  
*Meiji University*

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### Recommended Citation

Takemura, Masaaki (2017) "Sofia Coppola, Lost in Translation (2003)," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*: Vol. 2: No. 4, Article 6.

DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2017-02-04-06

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/mgdr/vol2/iss4/6>

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### Cover Page Footnote

The author is grateful to MGDR co-editor Nikhilesh Dholakia with help in terms of "not getting lost in translation". He is also grateful to anonymous reviewers and editors of MGDR for additional assistance with English language.

# Markets, Globalization & Development Review



## ***Film Review***

# **Sofia Coppola, *Lost in Translation* (2003)**

Although Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* is a 2003 film, its cross-cultural relevance remains contemporary and important in a world where barriers to communicating across cultures persist and often take violent turns. Since MGDR deals with issues of globalization and culture in direct ways, a review of this 2003 film is suitable for the readers of this journal. What I present here is a look back at this acclaimed 2003 film from a 2017 perch, and with the eyes of a scholar from Japan with an abiding interest in cross-cultural issues.

## **Synopsis of the Oscar Winner**

*Lost in Translation* (2003), by Sofia Coppola, daughter of the celebrated filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola, had generated positive publicity and had been the recipient of the Best Original Screenplay award in the February 2004 Oscars ceremony. In that year, the film also garnered three additional and important Oscar nominations: Best Picture nomination, a Best Director nomination for Sofia Coppola, and a Best Actor nomination for Bill Murray.

In the movie, Scarlett Johansson, plays the role of Charlotte, a young college graduate from Yale, who is accompanying her busy professional photographer husband in a luxury hotel in Tokyo. Since her husband is always busy photographing at various locations in Japan, Charlotte feels lonely and somewhat abandoned. Everywhere she goes in a frenetic Tokyo, she faces language barriers, and Charlotte does not feel the joy of being in the big and bright metropolis. Bob Harris, played by Bill Murray, is an aging B-level Hollywood actor, who also happens to be in Japan for making a Suntory whisky commercial. Bob is taking a break from his wife, forgetting his son's birthday, and getting paid two million dollars to endorse a whiskey. Bob also stays at the same hotel as Charlotte and her husband, and he and Charlotte exchange coy glances and brief words at their very first encounter. They keep meeting at the New York Bar of the Park Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo, seducing each other – in all ways other than sexual intimacy – in the course of their loneliness. In the meanwhile, together and alone, they experience sometimes irrational, sometimes funny, sometimes curious Japanese customs. The film is absolutely a love story from Japanese point of view. The Japanese audiences who approved the movie regarded it as a true love story, with Tokyo's ridiculously hip, funny, cool and flashy urban culture as a backdrop.

While critically acclaimed in the West and earning the Academy Award, some critics in Japan were irritated by this film and acrimonious in their reviews, especially the Japanese movie critic Yasuhisa Harada who characterized it as "stereotypical and discriminatory." Another movie critic complained that "Bob and Charlotte did not (want to) understand different cultures, nor encounter real cross-cultural experiences. They were only interested in each other", and Japan provided a mere visual backdrop. Of course, not all critics in Japan were negative; some positive critical reviews also appeared in the Japanese media.

### **Comedy or Stereotype?**

The differences between positive and negative critics stem from the characterization of this movie: a comedy or a stereotype? While most viewers regard this film as a romance, and the majority view this *also* as a comedy, although some are extremely skeptical about the movie's characterization as a comedy (see, e.g., Day 2004). And, as cited above, some Japanese critics felt a sense of malaise and discomfort about this film, seeing it as a crass stereotype.

There can be several stances in terms of critiquing this movie. To classify these stances, suggestions from another reviewer, Hoday King, are useful. A professor of Film Studies and Art History at Bryn Mawr College, in her critique of this movie, Hoday King noticed the tendency for misguided comprehension and interpretation of this movie. With *Lost in Translation*, Coppola wavers (it seems deliberately, in hindsight) between insight into the comedy of cultural differences and clichéd cultural stereotyping (King 2005, p.45).

Here, King suggested that the movie provided something beyond both funny and common experiences from cultural differences, even as the film piles on a semantic overload of Japan cultural tropes. Experiences from cultural differences are always new and curious, but these are sometimes natural and common. Even in one's own hometown and country, one can find new and curious things. In this sense, the audiences should realize that – at least for the Japanese and for frequent Japan visitors – the movie did not express anything new in terms of Japan-West cultural difference experiences. Everything in the movie was what everyone always experienced in everyday life. Thus audiences – if they see this in literal terms – could come away with silly, even bad and harsh, impressions of the movie.

One way to categorize the stances to this movie is shown in Table 1. This table has two dimensions. The horizontal dimension represents possible perception about the type of movie this is: stereotype or comedy. The vertical dimension refers to attitudes resulting from the perception of

cultural difference. Many universities in USA have an adjustment program for foreign students who encounter unusual customs. The program mainly has four stages that take the student from excitement, hostility, adjustment and – ultimately – to adaptation. For our purposes, in this review of the movie, the attitudes toward cultural differences can simply be divided into two categories: ironic and positive. This gives rise to four stances about this film, discussed briefly next.

### **Ironic Attitude and Stereotype**

This is one extreme attitude to the movie. For those located in this box of the table, the film is common and trivial, and expression of cultural difference was boring and nothing new. For instance, in the beginning of the movie, when Bob arrived at hotel, many Japanese were waiting and were in the line to give their business cards to him. That is “meishi”, a Japanese custom which many know (Sherry and Camargo 1987, p.174), and thus, its use in the movie is deliberately clichéd.

### **Ironic Attitude and Comedy**

This combination seems like an unusual one, but attitudes are often unusual. In this combination, though audiences realize the film is a comedy, they cannot laugh because the results of cultural differences are just irrational and illogical. Even sometimes they interpret typical Japanese customs – which director Sofia Coppola expressed frequently in the film – as malicious style. For example, a call girl (a prostitute, in Japanese) was sent for Bob from his sponsor, resulting in rapid-fire comical oscillation between seduction fantasy and rape accusation. Furthermore, in Bob's first elevator scene, a woman is wearing a kimono the wrong way. Left side of kimono must cover over right side. The audiences that catch these attempts at comedy or satire often criticize these as ugly, or painful and overly elaborated clichés (e.g., Day 2004).

### **Positive Attitude and Stereotype**

This cell refers to positive attitude to different cultures, but classifies the movie as a stereotype. Audiences show agreements with the movie scenes of the cultural differences they encountered, but such cinematic expressions were not new, nor impressive. For example, Bob asked Charlotte, "Why do they switch the "R"s and "L"s here?" She replied, "Oh, for yuks... You know, just to mix it up. They have to amuse themselves. 'Cause we're not makin' 'em laugh." They just agreed with such experiences, thus they feel alienated from the sites and spots where they existed in Tokyo.

### Positive Attitude and Comedy

In a sense, the last cell here shows the most entertaining attitude among these four stances. Audiences know the results of cultural differences are always funny, and then they can laugh at funny aspects of the Japanese customs – fully complicit in the knowledge that the depictions are deliberately overelaborated so as to be comical. Audiences in this cell are practically enjoying their time as they view the movie.

**Table 1. Four Stances for ‘Lost in Translation’**

		Movie Type	
		Stereotype	Comedy
Attitude to Cultural differences	Ironic	Clichéd	Ugly
	Positive	Alienated	Laughingly Comic

### What is Lost in Translation?

Though above critical stances are interesting to me, I am rather more interested in asking: what, really, is lost in translation? Murakami and Shibata (2000) honestly confessed the difficulty, thus the challengeable nature, of all translation. In general, there is no perfect translation. Here, this means that every interpretation from one language to another language cannot help to eliminate some part of meanings from the original meaning. Even though there is loss, this loss in translation can express more than what we say, or can express, in movies such as this.

The famous scene in the film, which is deliberately staged to show the “lost in translation” aspect, is perhaps not appropriate to evaluate the loss in translation. It is the scene where Bob, at the commercial shooting scene, has to rely on a translator because the energetic and brash young Japanese film director speaks only Japanese.

(The film director asked his interpreter to translate the directions he gave. Originally, the directions were in Japanese)

Director (in Japanese):

Mr. Bob-san...

As the setting, you are sitting on the couch in the den.

And, there is a Suntory whiskey on the table. Are you alright?

Then, impress gently looking at a camera, with controlled passion but gently, as if you could meet with your crony, someone like Bogie in

Casablanca, 'here's, looking at you, kid'... and say...

"Suntory time."

Interpreter (in English):

He wants you to turn, look in camera. Okay?

Bob:

Is that all he said?

Apparently, NO!

This is not *Lost in Translation*, but *Loss of Translation*. If the movie and Sofia Coppola would like to express *Lost in Translation* by this scene, it did not achieve the goal, at least for this Japanese native reviewer, but perhaps created a rather ugly situation of poor translation.

Or, was this deliberate on the part of the director? Like the familiar piece of cross-cultural humor, where the minister from a foreign country delivers a long joke, the translator says only one sentence, and the audience bursts out laughing. Impressed with this, the minister asks the translator: "How did you manage to translate my long joke in one sentence?" The translator replied: "I just told them that the minister has told a joke... please laugh."

*Lost in translation* could trace its origins to Robert L. Frost (1874-1963). In a symposium of poets in 1959, he defined a poem as follows, "I could define poetry this way: it is what is lost – out of both prose and verse – in translation." Now, this classic line has often been cited as a definition as poetry. Poetry is what is lost in translation.

Compared to the 'old days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century', many of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are global citizens who can move wherever we want. People easily can experience many different cultures in their lives. However, as Ritzer (1993) claimed, under this condition, consequences would be different from our expectations. Every city is getting similar. Main streets in globally famous cities have Tiffany like 5th Avenue, Luis Vuitton like Avenue des Champs-Élysées, and Apollo Theater like Soho, London. Even missing things are more important than remaining things for foreigners. Originality and authenticity of the regions are both diminishing. That means that cultural differences shall continue to be diluted, and then, all things will be similar, perhaps ultimately creating a clichéd world.

To me, in this film, Charlotte and Bob seemed to be enjoying Japanese culture to some extent, in Karaoke and night life in Tokyo. No *Lost in Translation* there, they just enjoyed. A party and spree is defined as lost in translation, here, beyond the barriers of language. Only dance,



sing, and drink – the transcultural fun aspects remain. If anything, the movie managed to express solitude and loneliness even in the bustling, noisy, super-frenetic context of Tokyo; alienation in the midst of frenzy.

It has been over a decade since *Lost in Translation* played in movie halls. Even Japanese critics can watch and evaluate it calmly now, with the benefit of hindsight in a world that has globalized a lot more since 2004. This time, I watched the movie three times with detailed script. I did not feel anything discriminatory in terms of the movie expressing Japanese customs and culture. All those scenes have likely happened, over and over. Ordinary Japanese still speak such kinds of Japanese-dialect English and show such attitudes to foreigners. We do not notice the switching of L and R.

Laugh. Enjoy the movie as is!

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