
4b. Foreign Affairs -- A Review of Sofia Coppola's "*Lost in Translation*" and Other Thoughts

(Duan WU)

Following exploration of intergenerational communication -- or the failure thereof -- in her directorial debut "*Virgin Suicide*," Sofia Coppola portrays, with stunning directness, in her new movie "*Lost in Translation*," a cross-generation extramarital affair between two people stranded in a foreign land. With a narrative style reminiscent of Rob Reiner's mock documentary "*This Is Spinal Tap*," "*Translation*" invites the viewers to step in and experience the tenderness and the trepidation of mutual attraction between the protagonists. Set in 21-century Tokyo, the movie pits the American culture against the Japanese culture, and offers some food for thoughts on cultural shocks.

Bob Harris (Bill Murray) is an aging Hollywood movie star who has passed his prime and in Tokyo for shooting whiskey commercials. Married with children, Mr. Harris starts to follow the seemingly inevitable progression into a classic midlife crisis where the passion of a twenty-plus-year marriage has long gone. Also having doubts about her own two-year marriage is another American staying in the same hotel -- a recent college graduate Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) in her twenties who accompanies her photographer husband on his assignments in Japan. Lost in a modern metropolis and besieged by tremendous language and other cultural barriers, Mr. Harris and Charlotte start a friendship that evolves into a love affair that ultimately transcends love affairs as we know them.

Painstakingly recreating reality, "*Translation*" presents the protagonists' hotel days that seem oddly familiar with their mundane defects that we find in our own lives where things happen without a script: a glimpse in the crowded elevator, a few boring nights in a hotel lounge with flawed acoustics, going to bed before getting to know each other, and arriving at the swimming pool as the other is leaving. Just like us in everyday life, the characters chance upon one another, develop a small crush or curiosity, are not sure if the other is flirting back, are not sure what to do next, and above all, procrastinate. Each day ends unfulfilled, imperfect, and seems just like a repeat of the day before. Yet the drama unfolds in the undercurrent: an acknowledging smile, a cup of saki from the other side of the lounge, and a second too long for polite poolside exchanges of pleasantries. Each time the elevator door closes, we find ourselves wonder out aloud with Mr. Harris: has/have he/we just missed the affair/love of his/our life? And suddenly we get it -- we are treading between an innocent crush and a guilt-laden affair, and tomorrow is always going to lead to either heart-wrenching romance or uneventfulness, but more likely, somewhere in between.

Is Mr. Harris showing integrity or hypocrisy as he struggles to keep his affair with Charlotte platonic? Is the foreign environment in which he finds himself influencing his behavior? The American culture surely offers inspirations that poke fun at traditional moral high grounds. Borrowing a line from Sybil Shephard's Show -- "As the great American philosopher Nike once said, 'Just do it.'" Mark McGrath of Sugar Ray, another pop culture player, sings in one of its songs: "Every morning there's a halo

hanging from the corner of my girlfriend's four post bed/ I know it's not mine but I'll see if I can use it for the weekend or a one night stand." But maybe the Japanese culture provides a point of reflection for Mr. Harris?

Not from his Japanese hosts anyway. To them, sex outside wedlock is an amenity that, like breakfast-in-bed, should be offered on a business trip. In one of the most hilarious moments (and there are plenty) of the movie, a female escort ostensibly hired by Mr. Harris' hosts offers her service to Mr. Harris. Attired businesslike, both in dress and demeanor, she gains entrance to Mr. Harris' hotel room. Once inside, she quickly stages a rape fantasy for her uncooperative American client -- "Please, Mr. Harris, let go of me!" the woman rasps in feigned urgency, all the while pulling Mr. Harris onto herself, knocking down a lamp or two in the process. This little episode epitomizes the contradictions in the Japanese culture. On one hand, it is uptight and super-formal: the bellhop bows after the taxi that carries the hotel guest, and women sitting in the hospital's waiting area keep their heads down to avoid eye contact even though they cannot help giggling at the foreigner who is trying to strike up a conversation with an elderly lady. On the other hand, a rush-hour commuter expects no interventions from others in finishing his pornographic cartoons in the subway car. Has Japan kept its cultural heritage pristine? Are the newly-weds being admired by Charlotte in the Kyoto temple going to be free from the marital woes she is experiencing?

"Translation" brings out my ambivalence towards the Japanese culture. On one hand, I marvel at Japanese' determination and efficiency unparalleled by any other society, except maybe the Germans. "Translation" provides many examples that attest to Japan's economic superpower status. The Shinkansen that carries Charlotte from Tokyo to Kyoto, for instance, operated at 125 miles per hour in 1964 already, and are heading to 300 miles per hour.¹ Amtrak still cannot guarantee a trip from Boston to New York City under three hours, which requires about 70 miles per hour. And what about those gigantic billboards where dinosaurs and elephants simply walk out of the clouds? The Japanese may not be the inventors of all technologies, but they have perfected the art of commercializing technologies into products, often in miniaturized versions.

On the other hand, I am disturbed by reports that radical nationalism and xenophobia only seem to gather strength in Japan. Not only does the Japanese government persist in refusing to correct its history textbooks to more objectively acknowledge Japan's war crimes in World War II, heads of the national government have even started visiting the shrine for war criminals. The people of Tokyo elected a former high-ranking member of the Liberal Democratic Party and prize-winning writer, Shintaro Ishihara, as their governor in 1999. Ishihara has been making derogatory comments about China and the Chinese people, and even suggested, as recently as July 2003, arresting and deporting the Chinese in Tokyo.² Governor Ishihara reportedly wrote in the front page of one of

¹ <http://www.railway-technology.com/projects/shinkansen/>.

² http://www1.hinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-07/19/content_246389.htm/.

Japan's largest newspapers referring to ethnic Chinese as having criminal DNA.³ As Joi Ito, who reported this on the internet, puts it: "Can you imagine Mayor Bloomberg getting away with saying this on the front page of the New York Times?"⁴

And apparently such xenophobic attitude is not only directed to the Chinese, but also to Americans. In "Translation," the sting of exclusion felt by Mr. Harris and Charlotte soon develops into suffocating loneliness. Everyone is very polite. Yet the abuse is systematic, prevalent, and sometimes subtle. It starts with language. The director of the TV commercial surely can tell that the female interpreter is translating only a word or two to Mr. Harris, yet he continues to bark orders in Japanese at Mr. Harris and demands Mr. Harris to improve when the problem is clearly not with him but the interpreter. And why does everyone continue to speak in length, again in quick-fired Japanese, when the Americans clearly do not apprehend a word of it? This becomes shocking when the perpetrators include the hospital receptionist and the doctor from whom critical information is sought. In my experience, people in other parts of the world, facing a similar situation, will start using gestures and drawings, or scurry off to find someone who knows your language, or at least slow down in hopes that you can catch a word or two. By deliberately ignoring the existence of a language problem, those Japanese are denying that there is any value in the foreigner's mother tongue and putting the blame of incommunication squarely on the foreigner. The subliminal message being sent is one of Japanese language's superiority. And by silencing a foreigner, a critical part of his cultural identity is stripped away.

Also there is deliberate disregard of a foreigner's other cultural identities. Mr. Harris is staying at a luxury hotel in Tokyo that must have seen its share of westerners. With his star status, one would think the hotel staff would find a bathrobe and a pair of slippers that roughly match his size? A more telling example is found at the site of still shots for the whiskey commercial. The photographer wants Mr. Harris to mimic a list of Hollywood names, yet refusing to take suggestions (Sean Connery v. Roger Moore) from Mr. Harris who is a real Hollywood personality even when it is clear that he knows a lot more on the topic (the photographer has never heard of Joey Bishop). By denying a foreigner authority or even a voice on his own cultural heritage, the photographer is again practicing cultural chauvinism.

Acts of cultural subjugation depicted in "Translation" go further to include denial of a foreigner's free will. One of the best scenes in the movie starts when a curious Charlotte wanders into a flower-arrangement class in the hotel lobby. The teacher thrusts a flower-stem into Charlotte's hand and instructs her, in Japanese of course, to place it in the vase. At first, Charlotte is a bit embarrassed and tries to decline the "invitation." When she realizes that the instructor is not at all interested in what *she* wants to do, her smile fades away, and is replaced with a cold expression of guardedness. That is the look of a

³ According to web reports posted at http://joi.ito.com/archives/2003/08/11/ishihara_says_chinese_have_criminal_dna.html/, the original column penned by Governor Ishihara appeared on the front page of the May 8, 2001 Sankei Shimbun.

⁴ *Id.*

disenfranchised person having been branded as an outsider but who still wants to sustain her dignity and composure.

The cultural lockout experienced by the Americans is not without irony as the American homeland culture can be just as overbearing and chauvinistic. Many Americans do not speak a second language. Most public signs are in English only, although I do note a remarkable increase in Spanish signs and announcements. If you think only the Japanese trivialize the American culture, think about the countless fashion-chasing Americans who tattoo onto themselves Chinese characters that they cannot even pronounce. And how about the omnipresent offering of “chai tea” in coffee shops across America?

But I digress. The American culture, being the melting pot it is, is not hostile to foreigners. On the contrary, it has a genuine interest in studying and understanding foreignness. In doing so, the American culture may oversimplify or assimilate aspects of a foreign culture, but it will not knowingly ostracize the foreign culture. In the case of Japan, however, there seems to be far more elements of xenophobia. Therefore, the story between Mr. Harris and Charlotte is a love story of two cultural prisoners (remember the prison-break joke by Mr. Harris?) in Tokyo that is sweet and bitter, but above all, shockingly realistic.

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