



Movie Club

Lost in Translation (2003)

1. Bob is aged and beshevelled, someone with “a hard-earned acceptance of life’s limitations.” (Schwarzbaum, L. [September 10, 2003]. ["Lost in Translation"](#). *Entertainment Weekly*.) The much younger Charlotte has a simplicity and curiosity, yet finds herself equally in a state of ennui like the sullen Bob. When Charlotte says to Bob “I’m stuck. Does it get any easier?” Bob replies “No... Yes, it gets easier.” What is the cause of this shared detachment and bemusement with life? How does the setting in a foreign land where they are both culturally, linguistically socially isolated add to the narrative? Is it the setting that is responsible for their state, or does it merely exaggerate it for some narrative impetus? What is really the cause of their shared despondency?
2. We see numerous instances of things being lost in spoken translation. This is most emphasised with the scenes where Bob is doing the ads for Suntory whisky, where the director gives long, imploring explanations of what he wants from Bob, invoking emotive language and the spirit of Humphrey Bogart (A translation is available in Rich, Motoko [2003-09-21]. ["What Else Was Lost in Translation"](#). *The New York Times*.) None of this is passed on, with not even the audience presented with this information via subtitles, involving the audience in Bob’s bemusement. When a translation of the director’s drawn out, animated direction is provided by the interpreter it is rendered simply to “he wants you to look at the camera”. Bob is aware that the translation is faulty (“That’s all he said?... Is that everything? It seemed like he said quite a bit more than that.”) but is unable to do anything about it. What does this interaction reveal of what gets “lost in translation”? Is it a language or cultural exchange that breaks down, or is it more the inability of the middle-man, the translator, to express these subtleties? Are there other times in the film where things are lost in translation? Does it become easier for Bob and Charlotte (think of Charlotte at the flower workshop in the hotel, or Bob on the talk show)?
3. Much of the film occurs in the hotel looking out over the Tokyo cityscape. When Bob initially arrives he is in the back seat of a car that likewise separates him from the city while giving him a unique view of it. Charlotte also spends a great deal of time looking out on the city from her room’s window. When she ventures out she goes to a traditional garden and shrine, and remarks later that she “didn’t feel anything”. Both then seem to retreat into the safe haven of the hotel. This adds to the sense of isolation, cocooning Bob and Charlotte in an environment that is somewhat familiar. However, it is this same cocooning that means they are incapable of adjusting, acting as a barrier that adds to their sense of disorientation, further distancing them from it, strangely placing Tokyo within a glass box like an exhibit, even though, paradoxically, it is Bob and Charlotte who

are the exotics in the glass display case. They eventually break away from the hotel to have a night out, experiencing the many aspects of the Tokyo nightlife. This is further complicated, as it oozes a sense of artifice, with much of the nightlife having hints of Americana like the karaoke of American pop songs. And the final scene of the film is on a Tokyo street, with Bob and Charlotte being the clear focus among a sea of other faces. Do they ever embrace the difference of their situation, or does it never move beyond a sense of isolation? Do they bond with their surroundings as they bond with each other, or are they simply a venue? To what extent is the isolation responsible for their bonding, that is, would it have occurred in another, more familiar setting?

4. The film has some links with *Casablanca*. The director of the Suntory advertisement explicitly references the film and Bogie when directing Bob. But the film has more parallels. Charlotte and Bob, like many in *Casablanca*, are refugees, although in *Lost* it is more a sense of emotional marooning, not being quite able to leave their respective situations, not being able to quite place their fingers on what is causing that sense of isolation yet finding this limbo draining. And like *Casablanca*, Bob and Charlotte, understand by the end that they cannot stay together, with a final bittersweet scene that is also becoming iconic. Are there any other links? How do the references to *Casablanca* alter or add to your viewing of the film? What do you make of the fact that the reference to *Casablanca* is in Japanese (with the director) with no subtitles?
5. Compare the conversations that are being had between the different parties. With many of their interactions with Japanese characters, Bob and Charlotte tend to be lost for words, but as with the scene with the director, there is a lot being said that just doesn't get through. Now think of Bob's interactions with his wife. The conversation is overwhelmingly trivial (a large amount of effort is placed on his study carpet) and when there is an element of emotion or sincerity, this is greeted with hostility (Bob: "I don't want all that pasta. I would like to start eating like Japanese food." Lydia Harris: [*icily*] "Well, why don't you just stay there and you can have it every day?"). Now think of John's interactions with people including Charlotte. They are also often aloof, lack genuine meaning (Kelly: "I'm under Evelyn Waugh"... Charlotte: "Evelyn Waugh was a man.") and when there is a conversation going on it again takes on trivial matters (Kelly: "John, John. You are my favorite photographer." John: "Ohhh..." Kelly: "No. You are. I only want you to shoot me. It's true." [*both laugh*] Kelly: "Oh my God, I have the worst B.O. right now, I'm sorry." [*both laugh again*]). How do these conversations compare with Bob and Charlotte's interactions with Japanese people? How do they compare with Charlotte and Bob's conversations with each other? What is it about Bob and Charlotte that make it possible for them to have genuine interactions with each other? Is it their despondency that opens them to such interactions, their need to find someone else who is lost?
6. The ending has been much written about and discussed, but unlike *Casablanca* which has many quotable and enigmatic lines ("Here's looking at you kid"; "This could be the start of a beautiful friendship") *Lost* closes with a less certain, but by no means less confident, note. What do you think Bob said to Charlotte? What do you make of Charlotte's reaction? How does this impact your interpretation of what is being whispered to her? Are we meant to know? Do you think the screenwriter knows? Does the fact that we don't know what is said add to the significance of what is being said (i.e. if it was clear and simply, would it be as impactful)?