JAPAN THROUGH OTHERS' LENSES: *HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR* (1959) AND *LOST IN TRANSLATION* (2003)

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This essay is not actually about Japanese cinema. Instead, it will focus on how Japan and its people are represented in the cinemas of other nations, specifically: (1) a heavy French drama from 1959, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais, and (2) a light American romantic comedy from 2003, *Lost in Translation*, written, produced, and directed by Sofia Coppola. In some ways, because both movies narrativize a sort of cultural tourism and thematize a transnational "failure to communicate," both could be called "Lost in Translation."

The very title, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, is a transnational oxymoron, combining as it does Japanese and French, agony and ecstasy, death and love. Its dialectical juxtaposition of opposites is reminiscent of Georges Bataille's book title, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, which was first published in 1962, shortly after *Hiroshima Mon Amour* was released. The two protagonists, a Japanese architect (Okada Eiji) and a French actress (Emmanuelle Riva), are similarly contradictory. Indeed, although we never learn their real names in the film, he is called "Hiroshima" and she is called "Nevers," their respective hometowns, so both come to signify their nations, as well as individualized characters. He is played by Okada Eiji, who was deliberately cast because of his "Western-looking face" – his "French" profile, high forehead, and full lips. According to screenwriter Marguerite Duras, "A Japanese actor with pronounced Japanese features might lead people to believe that it is because the protagonist is Japanese that the French actress was attracted to him. Thus…we'd find ourselves caught again in the trap of 'exoticism,' and the involuntary racism inherent in any exoticism."[1]

She is played by Emmanuelle Riva, and we do not see her features for several minutes. Instead, the famous opening sequence of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* shows us the naked embrace of an anonymous mixed-race couple, interlaced body parts writhing in the throes of love or death, ecstasy

[1] Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 109.

Fig. 1. Scene from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

or agony, drenched in the sweat of passion or the glistening radioactive dust of Strontium-90. Whatever it might be, this dew provides a cold shower, so to speak, to what could have been a rather sexy opening, aided and abetted by Giovanni Fusco's melancholy music. When we finally see the lovers, they are talking about – what else? – Hiroshima. She says (with some passion) that she has seen everything in Hiroshima; his impersonal, contradictory voice insinuates that she has, in fact, seen nothing.

Fig. 2. Scene from *Hiroshima Mon Amour*

Their initial "failure to communicate" enunciates a common international theme of the period – personal alienation – but the fact that this discordance is specifically about a fixation on Hiroshima suggests that these two national representatives have a cultural divide between them. Indeed, the man has a point: Nevers has not experienced the true horror of the atom bomb; she has merely witnessed the commercialization and merchandising of the Hiroshima tragedy: the impersonal bus outing (the Atomic Tour) with its smiling guide; the museum (a sideshow of flashing neon lights and honky-tonk music); the recreated documentaries; and the Gift Shop. She has essentially been a cultural tourist who has absorbed images and representations, rather than first-hand experience of the phenomenon of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima.

Fig. 3. Hiroshima following the atomic bomb

The initially flat, incantatory quality of the voices, along with the man's accented French, suggests a linguistic estrangement that is belied by the passion of their tight grip on each other. Then, as the woman rebuts his claim, her voice becomes impersonal and so does the imagery – scenes from around Hiroshima: the hospital and its exhibits, Peace Square, newsreels, survivors, graphic medical procedures. And then we return again to the couple's embrace. Somewhere between He and She, between the Empire of Signs and the Cinéma Français, falls the shadow, the shadow of obscurity and ambiguity. As a modernist film, Hiroshima Mon Amour is nebulous, opaque, and inscrutable – like the clichéd notion of Asia.

Later in the film, we see more of the city of Hiroshima – now a glitzy, Westernized metropolis presided over by the ruins of the famous

Genbaku Dome, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. The city has been rebuilt from the ruins, probably by architects like the protagonist, in the image of the victorious West: skyscrapers, bars, neon signs, and advertising. It is only fourteen years after the Bomb devastated Hiroshima (and Nagasaki), yet the memories are already fading. But, ultimately, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* is a romantic drama – a psychological and philosophical film – that treats Japan and the Japanese with respect, albeit from a European perspective and with New Wave French film techniques. Sympathy for the victims of the atomic blast (and implied antagonism toward the United States) is certainly preferable to outright negative stereotyping.

It has been said that "Drama + Time = Comedy." That may be true, because fifty-eight years after the bombing of Hiroshima, an American romantic comedy is released that takes place in Japan and does not invoke memories of World War II at all: Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*.

Like *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Lost in Translation* has a bit of a sexy Prologue also, a pre-credit shot of a Caucasian female derrière in translucent salmon-pink panties. This odalisque view is apparently provided for the scopophilic pleasure of the "male gaze," even though a woman directed the movie. It has been suggested that this image is an homage to the first scene of Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*,[2] which featured Brigitte Bardot's backside. The difference is that Godard was making a statement about objectification, while Coppola's postfeminist, postmodernist movie seems to be making no statement at all.

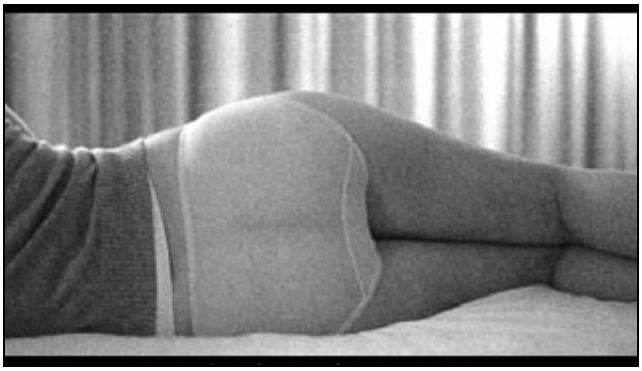

Fig. 4. Pre-credit scene of *Lost in Translation*

[2] Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Mépris* [Contempt], 1963.

Once the film proper begins – "WELCOME TO TOKYO" – we are immediately put in the literal point of view of our male Caucasian "hero": aging, washed-up movie star Bob Harris (Bill Murray), who is being paid $2 million to endorse Suntory whiskey. We see postmodern Tokyo through Bob's jet-lagged eyes (and gaze-object-gaze editing) as he cruises in a limousine: neon signs, incomprehensible ideograms. He even sees himself on a giant commercial billboard, an alienating late-capitalist Lacanian "mirror phase" if ever there was one.

Fig. 5. Busy Tokyo intersection

We also see a digital dinosaur walking on the video-screen surface of a skyscraper, and Bob, who is a metaphorical kind of dinosaur himself, is both awed and dismayed by the sight. There is nothing magical in this tourism, only the eerily artificial semes of the modern megalopolis. Coppola, who has spent a considerable amount of time in Japan, shows us post-bubble Tokyo the way she might film an extraterrestrial empire…or the sensory overload of Las Vegas.

Once we arrive at Bob's destination – the swank yet antiseptic Park Hyatt Hotel – the stereotypes begin. He is greeted by a polite Japanese entourage, who present gifts and the key to his hotel room. Bob sums it all up, "Short and sweet. Very Japanese." On the elevator, he towers over the natives. On the one hand, this modest sight gag suggests the superiority of the Westerner; on the other hand, it can be construed as a visual means to show the character's discomfort in a foreign land. Either way, it reinforces a clichéd depiction of Asians as diminutive. (By the way, the Park Hyatt now offers a $5,000, five-night *Lost in Translation* package that includes a

55,000-yen [$500] meal at its Kozue restaurant, a shiatsu massage, and a map to the karaoke bar, arcade, nightclub, and shrine seen in the film.)

Fig. 6. Bob (Bill Murray) in elevator with Japanese businessmen

Once in his room, Bob listens to Western classical music on his TV, making no attempt to absorb the local culture. He hangs out in the hotel lounge, where the musical group is "Sausalito" and he ends up sleeping with its chanteuse, an American redhead. (Later, he watches *La Dolce Vita* on TV, plays golf near a misty Mt. Fuji, listens to Western rock music, and partakes of other Occidental pastimes, rather than explore Japanese culture.) Even when he does consume the native culture, it is usually an unfulfilling experience: disappointing food in a sushi bar, a weird melee in a nightclub, a drunken performance at a karaoke bar that plays the Sex Pistols, a strip club with American techno music, and constant insomnia. (Indeed, "Sleepless in Tokyo" could have been the title for *Lost in Translation*). He even tells his wife, "It's not fun. It's just very, very different." Actually, what he experiences is not so different, since most of his "tourism" is confined to doing comfortable and familiar things.

Later, in the photo shoot and prostitute scenes, Coppola plays on two cultural clichés: (1) the tendency of translators to abbreviate long monologues into a few pithy words, and (2) the difficulty many Japanese have in pronouncing R's and L's in English. The hip, Westernized photo shoot director screams at length, giving verbose instructions to Bob, and the interpreter translates it all as, "Turn and look into the camera." (As it turns

out, the translator is doing Bob a service by abbreviating the director's words: they are laced with insults.) Later, the director again gives lengthy notes, which are translated as "Right side, with intensity" and "Slower, more intensity." Indeed, the Japanese in this movie are more intense than the bored, discombobulated American tourists. The director finally ends the session by yelling, "Cutto! Cutto! Cutto!" (or *katto*, following katakana romanization). In a subsequent session, a photographer tells Bob to mimic "Flank Sinatla" of the "Lat Pack" and "Loger Moore" of James Bond fame. Bob gives him Dean Martin and Sean Connery instead. (Incidentally, Bob Harris is not the only celebrity to make a quick yen this way: Sean Connery hawked Suntory Whisky, as did Francis Coppola and Akira Kurosawa; Leonardo DiCaprio publicized the Orico credit card; Harrison Ford sold Kirin beer; Anthony Hopkins promoted Hyundai/Honda Cleo; Brad Pitt marketed Rolex, Roots Beer, and Honda; Meg Ryan plugged Purpeau face cream; Sylvester Stallone advertised Nippon ham; Arnold Schwarzenegger pushed Cup Ramen; and even Andy Warhol praised TDK tapes.)

Fig. 7. Bob filming a Suntory Whisky commercial

Later, Bob's hosts send a prostitute to his hotel room. This depiction of "Ingrish" pronunciation with a "Dzapaneese" accent (à la Mickey Rooney in Breakfast at Tiffany's) confirms a longstanding stereotype, even if it is based on a real difficulty that many native speakers of any language have in adjusting to a new tongue. Here, the manic hooker begs Bob to "prease" "lip" her stockings. She then ends up on the floor

screaming and flailing her limbs about as Bob tries to escape her clutches. This is clichéd inscrutability, with intensity!

When Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) develops a foot bruise, Bob refers to it as "brack toe." Sofia Coppola justified this blatant linguistic humor as follows: "I know I'm not racist. If everything's based on truth, you can make fun, have a little laugh, but also be respectful of a culture. I just love Tokyo….Even on the daily call sheets, they would mix up the R's and L's – all that was from experience; it's not made up." Yes, and some black people like watermelon and some Italians are in the Mafia. Producer Ross Katz also addressed the issue: "We've shown the film in Japan, to a Japanese audience. The response was great." And, yes, some gay men laughed at the over-the-top drag queens in *La Cage aux Folles* (1978).

Fig. 8. Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) and Bob in hotel bar

In *Lost in Translation*, Japanese conformity and regimentation are also satirized when Charlotte walks the bustling streets of Tokyo in a drizzle, the only blonde in sight, and the only person without an umbrella. Nonetheless, she at least ventures out of the hotel. She wanders Tokyo alone like a flaneuse, seeking to soak in both the bright lights of postmodernity and the traditional Buddhist temples and ceremonies. In contrast, Bob generally sticks to the hotel's bar, too world-weary to attempt the cultural translation work necessary to venture out (He even tells Charlotte, "I'll be in the bar for the rest of the week"). But as the two grow more intimate, they begin to experience the labyrinthine city together – lost, but at least lost together. With constant references to Buddhism in the background, the two Westerners seem to seek answers to their existential

koans, though only with the aid of each other – and Charlotte's self-help CD, *A Soul's Search* – as their masters.

The city of Tokyo is really the third main character. The high-rise hotel windows provide sweeping views of the skyline, day and night. The voyeuristic vista from Charlotte's window, which she gazes out of often, is like the central tower of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon in its incredible access to vision but also in its dissociation of the seer from the seen.[3] The hyperreal Tokyo cityscape is on view for her (and Bob) but she remains anonymous and alienated from it, a voyeur or cultural tourist.

Fig. 9. Charlotte gazes out over Tokyo

Thus, *Lost in Translation* becomes one of those films in which the setting itself takes on a certain subjectivity. Viewers are offered many point-of-view shots of the urban anxieties and attractions from inside taxis, as well as from more intimate perspectives: inside Tokyo-dwellers' apartments, nightclubs, and restaurants. Coppola's eyes for the city parallel a fascination many Western filmmakers have had with Japan's capital city. Several sequences almost precisely mimic scenes from Wim Wenders (*Tokyo-ga* and *Until the End of the World*) and Chris Marker (*Sans Soleil*), other visual essays that depict Westerners lost in Tokyo. Taken together, such scenes beg the question of what it is about that hybrid, transnational megalopolis – at the border of East and West – that inspires the modern Western filmmaker. On the one hand, this movie could have been set anywhere; on the other hand, it could only have been set in Tokyo. The idea

[3] Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 29-95.

of being "lost in translation" works well there, especially with no subtitles to tell English-speakers what the Japanese are saying. As such, there are no real Japanese characters here, only Tokyo itself, a city that speaks louder than anyone in the film.

Critic Alice Lovejoy suggests that in *Lost in Translation*, "Japan is not Japan itself but rather a canvas onto which these Americans' emotions are mapped."[4] Through Charlotte's drowsy eyes, Japan is a dream space, an impressionistic kaleidoscope that includes the crowded Shibuya Crossing, the Tokyo subway, an ikebana class, and the shinkansen track to Kyoto's temples. Tokyo, with all its flashy electronic displays, with its chaotic and teeming streets, still appears lifeless – a place where one can only be desperately lonely. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this. However, Coppola's depiction of Japan is a high-risk maneuver, and she does not always execute it in a way that would preempt protest about racism (or at least insensitivity). When Bob is a guest star on a bizarre real-life television talk show, *Matthew's Best Hit TV*, starring the foppish "Johnny Carson of Japan," he plays along with the host's incomprehensible and silly campy antics. We may laugh, and then wonder if we should have cringed instead.

All these scenes leave *Lost in Translation* open to the charge of "orientalism," and there have been many such critiques of the film because it keeps Japanese characters at a real distance. In fact, there was an organized campaign to prevent the film from receiving any Academy Awards. The organization Asian Mediawatch complained that, "the Asian-American community is abuzz with concerns that the movie…mocks the Japanese people."[5] The group's spokesperson bragged that they had kept odds-on favorite Bill Murray from winning the Best Actor award from SAG (which went to Johnny Depp) and from the Academy (which went to Sean Penn). While the charge of exoticizing (racism lite?) is not completely inaccurate, the point of view here is emphatically that of Bob and Charlotte, two persons lost in another world. To bring more specificity, more character development, to the Japanese characters would have been to sacrifice the Americans' personal disorientation. In other words, the exoticism may be more existential than cultural.

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[4] Alice Lovejoy, "The Two Souls Adrift in Tokyo Forge an Unlikely Bond in Sofia Coppola's 21st Century Brief Encounter," *Film Comment* (July-August 2003), p. 11.

[5] Kiku Day, "Hit Film Gets Lost in Racism Row" (http://guardian.co.uk/Oscars/story).

It is difficult to deny, however, that throughout the film, Japan's "alien" culture provides the comic relief; that is, Japan and the Japanese are the butts of most of the jokes. Some gags are relatively tame, such as the hotel drapery that opens automatically in the morning, the expressionless automatons at pachinko parlors, or the drunken patrons at a tasteless strip club. Sofia Coppola obviously found Japan's idiosyncrasies to be quite comical, but she also takes serious satirical aim at three shallow Hollywood types – Charlotte's workaholic husband, Bob's obsessive, home-decorating wife, and narcissistic Kelly (Anna Faris), an air-headed starlet who happens to be in Tokyo too. This may be Coppola's idea of "equal-opportunity" comedy, a "fair and balanced" approach.

There is no denying, though, that the two American characters and the delicate relationship that binds them are at the center of the film, with Japan serving as a convenient background and foil. But in fact, the depiction of Japan often gets in the way and stands out as a somewhat troubling issue. The film walks a fine line here, and some viewers will no doubt find the treatment of the Japanese people and their culture malicious and condescending.

In spite of some unfortunate moments, Coppola does not just crudely counterpoise the strangeness and alienation of Japan with the familiarity and humanity of the United States. Moreover, to be fair, Japan and its people are not always presented as uniformly strange, or always as the subject of mockery and contempt. Out with Charlotte, Bob finds some genuine moments with young Japanese people in spite of language and cultural barriers. He actually enjoys himself while barhopping with the young Japanese, especially one named "Charlie Brown," but that character's humanity is undermined because he has the name of an American comic strip icon. The scene in the hospital is also significant. It begins and threatens to end with what, by then, is a tired and offensive shtick. Bob and Charlotte do not understand the receptionist, who, unfazed, continues to speak Japanese and wave forms in their faces. Then we see Bob in a waiting room next to a Japanese elder who does not speak English at all. But this time we do not laugh at her. Somehow, the two communicate, and it is the woman who laughs.

Overall, one gets the feeling that, in the midst of all the dubious representations of Japan, Coppola really wanted to say something about America. (This is perhaps why the movie begins with an American in panties.) This may also be why the film focuses on two Yanks "stuck" in Tokyo, who, over the course of a week, have a platonic "brief encounter,"

that ranges from an ersatz father-daughter bond to being fellow tourists to becoming near-lovers. They share food and drink, existential quandaries, a few karaoke renditions of the Sex Pistols and Roxy Music, and even a non-conjugal night in bed. (It should be noted that the Bob-Charlotte liaison is a far more beguiling and culturally honest tease than that shown in *The Last Samurai* [2003]).

Fig. 10. Bob in his hotel room

Is Bob portrayed as boorish and America-centric because he is, and because Americans are? One does not feel compelled to defend the film against accusations of an insensitive portrayal of Japan. Its "strangeness" seen through the eyes of ignorant American tourists could have been developed in interesting ways. But Coppola only vaguely points the audience in the direction of a critique of American incuriousness. Yet the movie is certainly not in the same xenophobic league as, say, *Know Your Enemy, the Japanese* (1943); *The Purple Heart* (1944); or *Black Rain* (1989).

One could pose this hypothetical question as an experiment: Would it be possible to produce a Japanese film that plays the same jokes on Americans? There is, after all, plenty that is not just strange and alienating, but downright demeaning and abhorrent in American popular culture – our politics, the "Jerry Springer Show," reality TV shows, and all the ugliness that flows out of extreme social inequality in so many revolting forms. But it is difficult to imagine such a "turning-the-tables" satire coming from Japan. Many people in Japan know something about the U.S.

and a few words in English. Yet the American people and their culture appear to be immune from this sort of treatment.

At one level, we could be said that in this age of globalization, America functions as the main engine of cultural transformation. What Coppola sees as strange in Japan may just be a refraction of some element found originally in the U.S. For instance, the Japanese videogame arcade is depicted in the film as an alienating place, but it provokes the same feelings pioneered and trademarked by Las Vegas – and American arcades. In one of the early scenes, Bob Harris notices some Japanese young people wearing cowboy hats and leather. This strikes him as strange. But that "fashion statement" is borrowed from U.S. culture. Who is mocking whom, then? In such a mise-en-abyme structure, the off-putting character of Japanese life is itself a refraction of America. Thus, *Lost in Translation*'s representation of alienation in the face of Japan's strangeness becomes merely one facet of American self-alienation.

But this sort of "translation" is itself a far more complicated matter, since American popular culture is itself the product of multifarious national influences. Moreover, those influences tend to be hidden, since contemporary American pop culture rarely appears as the sum of the historical processes that produced it. Instead, it tends to abhor history and projects a certain vulgar timelessness, recycling and reprocessing influences mechanically, without acknowledging them.

This suggests a certain desolation and emptiness at the heart of a culture that can never be truly "national." The American culture industry is everywhere and nowhere – familiar, but only in its vacuity. It occupies the heights of global cinematic production, but from there it transmits mostly emptiness and artificiality. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein's comment on Oakland, "there's no there here." Perhaps that is the contradiction Coppola was groping toward. Ultimately, Bob's Weltschmerz and Charlotte's estrangement are not inflicted on them by Japan, but they are not purely personal either. There is something vaguely American about their ennui, but the film doesn't help us pursue that line.

Instead, Coppola encourages us to be content with Bonsai truths: a moment, a glance, and a few genuine but fleeting feelings. It is part of a widespread international postmodernist tendency to obliterate the modernist interest in history and society, in favor of a focus on interiority and intimacy, with the hope of catching a glimpse of the human condition. Coppola may express this tendency more honestly and skillfully than some, and, as a result, she ends up demonstrating its limitations very clearly.

In the end the question is, is Japan a metaphor for the globalized world in this film? [6] Are we all strangers in a strange land, perpetually lost and desperately trying to make meaningful connections with others on this small planet Earth? Does *Lost in Translation* deal with such big existential themes and universal ideas, as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* assuredly does? I would argue that although *Lost in Translation* is from Universal Studios, it is not a universal picture. Being an equal-opportunity racist or a cynical humanist is no reason to denigrate an entire people on screen. After all, the indexical nature of the cinema, its Barthesian "reality effect," means that, on screen, Tokyo is Tokyo, not Never-Never Land.

[6] In addition to the sources cited, the author consulted the following: Roy Armes, *The Cinema of Alain Resnais* (New York: Barnes, 1968); Wendy Haslem, "Neon Gothic: Lost in Translation" (http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/31/lost_in_translation.html); John Francis Kreidl, *Alain Resnais* (Boston: Twayne, 1968); James Monaco, *Alain Resnais* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Mark Olsen, "Sofia Coppola: Cool and the Gang," *Sight and Sound* 14/1 (2004), p. 14; S. Brent Plate, "Review of Lost in Translation," *Journal of Religion and Film* 8/1 (2004); Motoko Rich, "Land of the Rising Cliché," *The Age* (January 17, 2004); Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2002); Emanuele Saccarelli, "Review of Lost in Translation," World Socialist Web site, October 3, 2003 (http://www.wsws.org); Mark Schilling, *Contemporary Japanese Film* (New York: Weatherhill, 1998); Paul Smith, "Tokyo Drifters," *Sight and Sound* 14/1 (2004): 13-16; John Ward, *Alain Resnais: Or, the Theme of Time* (London: Secker & Walburg, 1968); and Linda Williams, "Hiroshima and Marienbad: Metaphor and Metonymy," *Screen* (1978): 34-39 (http://www.hotelchatter.com/country/Japan).