Lost in Translation: Crash Course Film Criticism #7

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=2wRcDM_5rjs
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Movies come in all shapes and sizes. Some are big and loud and thrilling, while others are small, finely crafted gems. And there are few love stories as soft-spoken and full of soul as Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*.

It's a movie that sneaks up on you, using artistry that feels so natural that the precision of its craft is only clear if you think about it afterward. This film also wrestles with complex questions about modern consumer culture and how cinema can authentically portray a woman's point of view.

And did I mention it's funny? Even as it tugs at your heart.

[*Crash Course Film Criticism* intro]

Writer-director Sofia Coppola had only made one feature film before she began working on *Lost in Translation*. That film, *The Virgin Suicides*, was based on a book by Jeffrey Eugenides.

It tells the story of the mysterious and doomed Lisbon sisters in 1974 Detroit, as remembered by the neighborhood boys some forty years later. It's a complex, dreamy movie that establishes Coppola as a master of tone, perspective, and imagery.

With *Lost in Translation*, Coppola both expanded her scope – exploring the eclectic world of contemporary Japan – while also focusing the drama on two central characters.

Scarlett Johansson plays Charlotte, a 20-year-old woman who's come to Tokyo with her rock-and-roll photographer husband, played by Giovanni Ribisi. A recent college graduate and philosophy major, Charlotte is adrift, not only in this foreign city but in her marriage and even in her life.

Bob Harris is a movie star. Or he *was* a movie star. Now he flies to Tokyo to spend a week shilling for a high-profile Japanese whiskey company – recording commercials, making talk show appearances, and suffering from insomnia.

In one of the film's many ironies, Bob is played by Bill Murray, who was once a major movie star himself. Unlike Bob, Murray has emerged from the height of his fame into a late career full of meaty roles that are often as sorrowful as they are funny. And his Bob Harris is no exception.

This film is patient. We spend a lot of time getting to know Charlotte and Bob alone before they ever meet each other. We see them trapped in the interior spaces of their luxury hotel, dealing with spouses who don't seem to be on the same wavelength, and mesmerized by the lights and sounds of the city.

When they do start to interact, it's tentative: a smile in an elevator, a look across a crowded lounge, and eventually a brief conversation at the bar.

When Charlotte's husband heads out of town for a few days to work, Charlotte asks Bob to come out with her and some of her Japanese friends. The two have an easy, funny rapport. They seem to recognize something in one another, like kindred spirits.

Charlotte: So, what are you doing here?
Bob: A couple of things. Taking a break from my wife. Forgetting my son's birthday. And getting paid two million dollars to endorse a whiskey when I could be doing a play somewhere.

Charlotte is an old soul, and Johansson plays her with an effortless, mournful charm that belies her youth. Bob begins this film as a sad sack, until Charlotte draws out his youthful charisma. And Murray makes both sides of his character feel genuine, funny, and moving.

As their relationship deepens, the movie never quite goes where we expect. Bob and Charlotte comfort and confide in one another, essentially falling in love. But they never cross the line into a physical affair.

Although we do see them struggling to figure out how physical love fits into their connection. Near the end of the film, they share an awkward set of goodnight kisses in an elevator. But they seem to be grappling with what's expected of them, rather than any deep-seated sexual desire.

In fact, the one thing that ruptures the bubble of their relationship is when Bob sleeps with an over-the-top lounge singer. But Charlotte seems just as upset by his betrayal as she is by the fact that she feels jealousy at all.

Charlotte: Well, she is closer to your age.

In the film's now-famous climactic scene, Bob catches a glimpse of Charlotte from the car on his way to the airport. Feeling unsatisfied in their initial goodbye, he leaps out of the car, runs across traffic, and catches up with her.

They embrace, clinging to each other for a brief moment, and then Bob whispers something in Charlotte's ear. And we don't get to hear it. But it must have been good, because when Bob gets back to his car and Charlotte walks away, they both seem more content, as if a weight had been lifted.

It's like their connection will somehow last as they navigate the rest of their lives and relationships. The ultimate bittersweet ending.

Now, our job as critics isn't just to figure out what a film means. It's also to figure out how that meaning is created. Writing in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, critic and scholar Todd McGowan makes a compelling case for reading *Lost in Translation* as a critique of global capitalism. That's right, capitalism, we're going there.

He writes: "Bob and Charlotte are able to connect during their stay precisely because they each realize that the excess that bombards them throughout Tokyo conceals a fundamental absence."

Throughout the film, both characters seem to be alienated from the bustling city that surrounds them. Bob gazes in wonder at the neon lights of Tokyo in the opening scene, utterly overwhelmed, and Charlotte is frequently sitting at her hotel window, looking out at the city's urban sprawl as if it's all too much.

And when she does go out, the film assaults us with the loud noises of an arcade, the blaring music of a bar, and the cacophony of some intense Tokyo traffic.

But when she finds moments away from it all, she seems more at peace, like in a quiet hallway outside a karaoke lounge, at a shrine hidden in the city, or when she stumbles across women practicing ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement.

Bob is even more steeped in excess. He's even a part of it. His picture is plastered all over billboards and the sides of buses, his old movies play on TV, and he participates in a loud, garish Japanese talk show.

He also keeps getting messages from his wife back home in Los Angeles with questions about colors, fabrics, and decor, as she remodels his office. Eventually, a FedEx box arrives with carpet swatches, a dozen basically indistinguishable shades of burgundy. The moment is played for laughs, but it only increases Bob's sense of being overwhelmed by commerce.

So what does all this excess mean? McGowan suggests that our desire for excessive things and experiences is actually a product of a global capitalist system. And that system only functions when we're constantly hungry for more.

By this interpretation, *Lost in Translation* is a film about unsatisfaction. Bob is unsatisfied in his work, Charlotte doesn't even know where to start, and they're both unsatisfied in their marriages.

At the same time, both of their spouses personify the quest for excess, from Bob's wife's focus on carpet squares to how Charlotte's husband relishes his role as a photographer promoting glamour and music.

In McGowan's reading, our heroes connect by rejecting a never-ending quest for material satisfaction, and they fill their lives with small quiet moments instead.

In a sense, they find meaning and forge their relationship in absence, not excess. They find joy in spontaneity, like a race across traffic, an off-key karaoke performance, or an unexpected ikebana ceremony. These moments can't be planned, can't be replicated, and, most importantly, can't be bought.

This focus on the power of absence is felt throughout the film, which follows the pattern of a traditional romance, from the meet-cute to the climactic trip to the airport. But at each major turn, the story withholds key romantic beats. Like, Bob and Charlotte never consummate their relationship. Or when Bob races after Charlotte in the final scene, he's not doing it to sweep it off her feet for a happily ever after.

And his whisper is the ultimate expression of absence. The film builds to a climax that withholds the final piece of information from us, and in doing so gives that absence incredible value.

It's also really important to note that this is a film about outsiders in Japan, directed by Sofia Coppola, an American who's an outsider herself. And because of that, something else gets lost in translation.

This movie relies on some cultural stereotypes for comedy and plot. For instance, the call girl who tries to talk to Bob and Brooke in English is a caricature. The audience is meant to laugh at her mispronunciation, which doesn't have any other purpose in the story.

And while Asian traditions, like temples or ikebana, are glorified, the film also implies that many modern Japanese people have forsaken these "good" parts of their culture for ridiculous excess, which is a really reductive perspective.

So, even if it wasn't intended, this movie sometimes uses Japan as a backdrop and Japanese people as gags in ways that reinforce stereotypes, which can be harmful.

Now, it's also worth looking at the characters and relationship in *Lost in Translation* through a feminist lens. The year it was released, Sofia Coppola became the third woman ever nominated for a Best Director Oscar. And Todd Kennedy makes the case in the journal *Film Criticism* that Coppola's films seem to be building a feminine, if not feminist, film form.

The foundational text of feminist film criticism by theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema is overwhelmingly films made by men for men. In these films, women are usually objects of desire or derision. In other words, they're eye candy or someone to laugh at.

The camera takes the point of view of the male gaze, putting audiences in the perspectives of the male characters within the film as they, and by extension we, look at the women.

Kennedy argues that Sofia Coppola cleverly uses the language, grammar, and tropes of mainstream cinema and the male gaze to force us to step back and consider our expectations and complicity in that form.

A great example is the first shot of the film, in which Scarlet Johansson is photographed from behind, lying on a bed. She's in a sweater and vaguely translucent panties.

Kennedy writes, "This shot would seem to match Mulvey's description of a typical Hollywood scene in which the camera is active/masculine and the female character is passive/feminine, an object of desire. However, Coppola holds the shot for 36 seconds, which is forever in film time, before the title of the film shows up."

And Kennedy goes on: "What is interesting about this shot is that it lasts so long as to become awkward, forcing the audience to become aware of, and potentially even question, their participation in the gaze."

Time and again, the film inverts the usual Hollywood presentation of women on screen. Charlotte appears half dressed a number of times throughout the film, but these images aren't sexualized. Instead, we're asked to gaze with her at the world outside her window.

So, while the outward aesthetic is familiar to mainstream cinema, our perspective doesn't slip into the male gaze tropes. And these are just a couple of examples of how Coppola's central female character is allowed to be a whole, complex human.

Charlotte is wrapped up in a warm, funny, bittersweet film that never condescends to her for a laugh and has got a lot more going on than just pretty pictures.

Next time, we'll take a journey with Sofia's father into the heart of darkness itself, the Vietnam War as seen through the film *Apocalypse Now*.

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This episode of *Crash Course* was filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these nice people. And our amazing graphics team is Thought Café.