

## **Representation of the urban imaginary of Tokyo in *Lost in Translation*.**

The urban imaginary is as the term describes; LiPuma and Koelble have conceptualised it as an intangible space which is continuously shaped by and within the relationships between a multiplicity of overlaid 'cultures of circulation' (of people, money, and goods), balanced by practices that aim to objectify (a) city as a whole (2005: 154). It is the representation of a city, a collective representation which may ironically be defined by the intersecting and fluid nature of the spaces in which the very circulation occurs (ibid.). Additionally, the imaginary has been conceptualised as being a personal and limited experience that cannot be expressed as a totality (Çinar & Bender 2007: xii). This essay will examine the representation of such an imaginary in relation to the city of Tokyo as it is depicted in the film *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003).

According to Çinar and Bender, cities are often reduced to a certain image – the map, which is in itself a rejection of the acknowledgement that cities themselves contain symbolic representational aspects (2007: xv). The clearly-marked boundaries on maps often lead them to be seen as replacements for the true complexities of representation of cities, disrupting the notion that space is not necessarily tangible, neither is it necessarily one-dimensional (ibid.). The title of the film suggests a rejection of the usage of maps. '*Lost*': on one hand, it implies confusion and lack of direction, while on the other it implies a willingness to be submerged in the experience of city as a space that can only be located in the imagination. '*Translation*' in relation to the film is immediately reminiscent of separate languages and in context, its barriers. However, Steiner states that 'any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation'; the meaning of the same word is coloured by an individual's subconscious personal definitions, rendering each usage unique and hence also in need of 'translation' (1998: 47), not unlike the notion of the urban imaginary as being something fragmented and personal (Çinar & Bender 2007: xii). With this analysis of the title in mind, certain questions may be posed in order to facilitate an investigation of the relationship between the urban landscape and the protagonists in the film. What has truly been lost in translation, why, and how are the answers significant in the representation of Tokyo?

The character of Bob Harris, portrayed by Bill Murray, is first seen in a taxi, going past a multitude of neon-lit buildings. The first (though blurred) impression of the city in the film is that of movement: Bob is being carried through it, while at the same time, the city moves past as well as around him. Modern Tokyo has been described as 'a city of flows', characterised mainly by the

never-ending movement of people (Waley 2006: 371). In the shot of a busy crosswalk in particular, the panning of the camera within the moving vehicle serves to create a layered, almost dizzying sense of motion, a blatant reminder that overlapping intersections and flows of buildings, vehicles, and human beings alike are inherently confusing in nature. However, Bob is evidently unimpressed by the view of the landscape; his lack of amazement or wonder introduces the city as a non-Western one that has, as Iwabuchi argues, lost its idiosyncratic status as a result of globalization (2008: 544). The intersecting circulation of people (LiPuma & Koelble 2005: 154) of Tokyo's urban imaginary is not unique or presented as unique in the character's experience. Such circulation is merely a homogenising effect of global flows, which have enabled people to become 'increasingly mobile', and international travel 'commonplace' for those who can afford it (Perrons 2004: 1).

The proliferation of neon signs depict Tokyo as a 'textual city' – 'a babble of disjunctive signs' (Waley 2006: 366). Yet, such 'tropes' are not unique to the city (ibid.). In the opening sequences of the film, a discernible reaction is finally drawn from Bob as he notices a large advertisement that features himself in it. Japanese text accompanies the photograph, but I argue that the inability to read and hence understand it is not a concern of the character's. Rather, his attention is coupled with an attitude of 'self absorbed indifference' (Iwabuchi 2008: 546). According to Waley, Tokyo as a textual city is, among other things, 'a space for episodic narratives' (2006: 366). However, the narrative which is unfolding in this opening sequence is not one that is concerned with the appreciation of cultural difference or hunger for cultural experience. It is a narrative which is not fueled by the recognition of such difference, but one which was prompted by narcissism. Bob's relationship with the city has been established as incidental; Tokyo is being presented as the background to his own personal narratives. In addition, the advertisement (in general) is representative of postmodern society's increasing obsession with the consumption of images as a symptom of consumer culture (Featherstone 1995: 75), a global trend in which 'transnational cultural formats' (in consumerist terms) are shared across nations and may be substituted for one another (Iwabuchi 2008: 546). Bob's fascination with the Suntory advertisement is testament to the fact that the image still retains its power as a language of its own – one that requires no translation. What has been lost is the inability to appreciate the image in a specific context (location) as a cultural signifier; two cultures have been placed 'on the same temporal level in the late modern capitalist world' (ibid.). When the relationship between two cultures can be simplified to mere spatial difference, one (in this case, Bob) is less inclined to look beyond the image for the subtle ways in which cultural perspectives may colour what is on the surface. The relationship that has been established is thus a superficial one.

In the film, both protagonists are often shown against the background of the city. From a distance, the aerial view of Tokyo appears devoid of activity. By night, it is filled with constellations of blurred lights. By day, it is the same 'featureless, drab, grey' landscape that it was once portrayed as by the media (Waley 2008: 362); the cold, ubiquitous Tokyo of the Fordist world is what Charlotte acquaints herself with when she sits by the window of her hotel room. The social imaginary, according to LiPuma and Koelble, is a matrix, a network generated by and maintained by people flows, in which a city's inhabitants (permanent or otherwise) 'imagine and act as urban-making collective agents' (2005: 155). These social imaginaries, so vital to the formation of the urban one, 'exist by virtue of representations of implicit understandings' and enable one to be aware of his or her position in society, both in relation to oneself and in relation to others (ibid.).

Alone, and faced with urban space that has been rendered anonymous by sheer volume and lack of dominant urban style, Charlotte's relationship with Tokyo is that of a non-participant in the social imaginary. She and Bob are indifferent towards the landscape. As Iwabuchi has mentioned, the protagonists are representative of transnational indifference of 'The West' and its lack of attempts to understand Japanese culture (2008: 546). However, I argue that this relationship has been established due to the nature of postmodernity; architecture is just another form of commodity to be consumed (Boyer 1994: 5). When presented with a view of Tokyo that effectively alienates one from the social imaginaries that exist within, it is nothing but an unfathomable labyrinth, and yet one which is altogether a familiar sight. The urban imaginary of Tokyo is presented as having no roots in the architecture of the city itself: the social imaginaries of the inhabitants and their impact on the city have not been translated into a physical form that would enable Tokyo as a tangible totality to be a product that stands apart from the heterogeneity of postmodernity.

It is only when the film's protagonists leave the globalized cultural-pastiche confines of the hotel and start to immerse themselves in the city proper that a much more different representation of Tokyo's urban imaginary may be explored. Charlotte invites Bob to join herself and her friends for an outing, which begins in a crowded nightclub in the heart of the city. From the start, English is established as the primary language of communication, resulting in what appears to be a display of 'linguistic complacency' on the part of the two Americans, appearing as the stereotypical Western tourist who expects people worldwide to be capable of speaking English (Crystal 2003: 17). However, it is not so much complacency as indifference. Iwabuchi argues that the Japanese people in the film are mere 'props' that serve to heighten the unintelligibility that Bob experiences (2008: 545), but on the contrary, the function of the nightclub scene is to construct a social imaginary in which English as a global language has become a symbol, or symptom of Globalization (Crystal

2003: 1). It is in this scene that conversation between the protagonist and Japanese people takes place out of the context of business – that Tokyo is not presented as unique in its assumption of English as the default language for communication. The shot in which Charlie Brown introduces Bob to more of his friends is framed from the American's point of view; the Japanese people are seated, and hence literally have to look up at Bob. The coos of admiration coupled with the upward gazes may be interpreted as conforming to a Western Orientalist narrative, but if there is anything being objectified, it is the American. Iwabuchi mentions a 'global reciprocal glance', driven by the commodification of nations (2008: 549). However, what is taking place in this scene is not as neutral as a mutual glance. Rather, it is orientalism in reverse, only that the object of power and knowledge (Morley & Robins 1995: 161) no longer has a specific location imaginary or otherwise (e.g., 'The Orient'), but is now situated in the production of English as a global language (Crystal 2003: 1).

BOB

My Japanese is getting better. We started speaking English.

The protagonist as he appears in the urban landscape is a tool for practice. And as the French-speaking Japanese man demonstrates, the indifference is mutual when there is common ground, perceived or otherwise. The desire for understanding has been lost in the translation of thoughts to a common language, as having a shared tool for communication has been mistaken for actual communicating.

According to Waley, Tokyo is a city that invites consumption 'as if the whole city were a marketplace' (2008: 374). This results in the desire to participate in the consumption of culture, no matter how obligatory.

CHARLOTTE

And, um, there were these monks and they were chanting.

And I didn't feel anything. You know?

The experiences that Charlotte brings up in connection to Tokyo ('shrine', 'monks', 'ikebana') are common associations with Japan's culture and history. Bognar, as quoted by Waley, states that 'The megalopolitan marketplace is restless and anxious to gobble up all things, especially easily identifiable styles and products in order to convert them into marketable images' (2008: 374). Her relationship with the city is that of consumer and product, and her perceived need to participate in this constitutes her experience of Tokyo's urban imaginary due to the elliptical nature of one

character's perspective. Reference to this scene reappears in the film later on, when Charlotte wanders into a room in the hotel where a course on *ikebana* is taking place. She is the only Caucasian in the room, as both instructors and those being instructed appear to be Japanese. The scene is reminiscent of the *nihonjinron* literature, the self-orientalizing explanation of Japanese culture so popular with the Japanese people themselves (Iwabuchi 2008: 547). The scene implies indifference not on the part of the foreigner, but on the part of the Japanese. Although Charlotte is given instruction as well, she has been excluded from the cultural knowledge that imbues the art of flower arranging. The city is indifferent to the protagonist of the film, unintentionally denying her the sense of inclusion in the social imaginary by inviting her to take part in the consumption of a cultural sign, without offering more. The tables have turned and the Orient, once produced as an object of power and knowledge (Morley & Robins 1995: 161), is now withholding the elements that projected it as an object of desire in the first place. Here, it is the meaning of silence that has been lost in translation, with neither party truly communicating or making an attempt to; the polite indifference of the *ikebana* instructor is interpreted as exclusion.

In conclusion, it is impossible to have a totalizing representation of the urban imaginary in *Lost in Translation*, as the concept of the urban imaginary itself has been characterized as limited to the perspective of the one who experiences it (Çinar & Bender 2007: xii). A review of the film describes the protagonists as 'a couple of grumps who distrust anything un-American' (Burgess 2004), dismissing the characters' states of minds as stemming from suspicion. However, the film has demonstrated that the city itself is not entirely blameless – the inhabitants are content to be just as self-absorbed and indifferent to its foreign visitors, perpetuating the sense that to desire for cultural exchange or understanding is an exercise in futility. The urban imaginary in the film is a representation of superficiality, as the protagonists are caught up in the flows of products and people while simultaneously being excluded from them.

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