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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Lost in Japan:  
A Cosmopolitan Analysis of the Encounter with the  
Other in *Lost in Translation*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores through the lens of cosmopolitan theory the main characters' encounter with the Other in the foreign setting of Tokyo in the film *Lost in Translation*, particularly Bob and Charlotte's struggles in establishing a meaningful interaction with Japanese culture. With this purpose, the essay introduces a brief contextualisation of cosmopolitanism, focusing on its origins, some contemporary views on the issue and the significance of borders in cosmopolitan theory. Subsequently, an analysis of the film through cosmopolitan theory explores the linguistic and cultural barriers faced by the characters and that hinder their immersion into Japanese life as well as Tokyo's depiction through the characters' Western perspective. The dissertation concludes with the transformation the characters undergo throughout the film, a transformation closely tied to their developing connection which leads them to a better appreciation of Tokyo and the encounter with the Other.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitanism; Tokyo; *Lost in Translation*; the Other; Borders; Linguistic and Cultural Barriers; Transformation.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo de fin de grado explora a través de un análisis cosmopolita el encuentro de los personajes principales de *Lost in Translation* en Tokio con el Otro, en concreto las dificultades de Bob y Charlotte en establecer una interacción relevante con la cultura japonesa. Con este propósito, el ensayo introduce una breve contextualización del cosmopolitismo, enfocándose en sus orígenes, visiones contemporáneas sobre el tema y en la importancia de las fronteras en la teoría cosmopolita. Posteriormente, mediante un análisis de la película, el texto examina las fronteras lingüísticas y culturales a las que se enfrentan los personajes y que imposibilitan su inmersión en la vida japonesa, así como la representación de Tokio desde la perspectiva occidental de los personajes. Finalmente, se analiza la transformación que han experimentado los personajes a lo largo de la película, una transformación estrechamente ligada a la conexión que se desarrolla entre ellos y que los lleva a una mayor apreciación de todo lo que Tokio tiene por ofrecer.

**Palabras clave:** Cosmopolitismo, Tokio; *Lost in Translation*; el Otro; Fronteras lingüísticas y culturales; Transformación.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Lost in Translation* (2003) is an Oscar-winning romantic comedy-drama film written and directed by Sofia Coppola. It is the director's second feature film, after her directorial debut with *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), and her first feature-length original screenplay. Twenty-one years after its release, the film has become a major cultural referent because of its evocative portrayal of cultural alienation, existential longing and human connection in an increasingly globalized world.

The plot revolves around two US citizens, Bob (Bill Murray) and Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), who meet by chance at the Park Hyatt Hotel in Tokyo. Bob is a middle-aged actor who travels to Tokyo to shoot an advertisement for Suntory whisky. He is going through a midlife crisis, facing difficulties regarding his marriage and family life as well as his career. He is feeling frustrated, unfulfilled and stuck. Charlotte is a philosophy graduate travelling with her photographer husband John (Giovanni Ribisi), who is in Tokyo to work on a photo shoot for a band. She also feels lost and stuck. She seems disappointed with her married life, which is characterised by the absence of her husband and the lack of emotional connection between them. Despite the age difference between Bob and Charlotte, a special bond develops between them while in Tokyo. This bond is based on the recognition of each other's sense of alienation and displacement. The connection between them will grow as they explore Tokyo and Japanese culture together.

*Lost in Translation* was a major critical and box-office success. With a low budget of \$4 million, the film grossed more than \$9 million in its opening week in the United States and accumulated a worldwide gross of almost \$120 million (IMBd). It was chosen as one of the best films of the year by relevant US critics—in 2003 film critic Roger Ebert, for instance, gave the film four stars, describing it as “sweet and sad at the same time as it is sardonic and funny”. Kennet Turan from *Los Angeles Times* described it as “tart and sweet, unmistakably

funny and exceptionally well observed —[which] marks ... Coppola as a mature talent with a distinctive sensibility and the means to express it" (2003). Peter Travers, from *Rolling Stone*, also praised the film: "*Lost in Translation* is found gold" (2003), especially highlighting its intimacy. No aspect of the film left critics indifferent, being lauded not only for its thematic richness, lyrical screenplay and atmospheric cinematography but also for Coppola's directorial prowess and the nuanced performances of Murray and Johansson. Similarly, Joe Queenan, writing in 2004 for *The Guardian*, lauded it as "one of the few Hollywood films I have seen this year that has a brain; but more than that, it has a soul."

*Lost in Translation* is considered a breakthrough for Coppola's and Johansson's careers. Its success is reflected in the many awards and nominations it received. It won Best Original Screenplay at the 76th Academy Awards and it garnered other three Oscar nominations —with Coppola becoming the first US woman director to get an Oscar nomination for best director. It won several accolades at the Golden Globes, BAFTA, Independent Spirits and AFI awards and received numerous nominations across all major categories worldwide. Despite its enormous success, the film was also criticised for its portrayal of Japan and Japanese culture. In *The Guardian*, musician Kiku Day argued in 2004 how she wondered "whether the plaudits had come from a parallel universe of value", stressing how "[t]here is no scene where the Japanese are afforded a shred of dignity", with spectators "laughing at these small, yellow people and their funny ways". Similarly, according to *TV Guide*:

Coppola shows us Japan solely through the eyes of the characters, who see the Japanese as cartoonishly infantile, infatuated with asinine TV shows, karaoke and silly video games. It can be funny but the humour is too often based on stereotypical perceptions of Asians (2003).

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the main characters' interaction with the Other in the foreign land of Tokyo in the film *Lost in Translation* through the lens of cosmopolitan

theory. As will be argued, both Bob and Charlotte fail to establish a meaningful and effective interaction with the Other, limiting themselves to interacting with each other. This essay starts with a brief contextualisation of cosmopolitanism, exploring its origins, some contemporary views on the issue and the role played by borders in cosmopolitan theory. This is followed by an analysis of the film through cosmopolitan theory. The analysis is divided into three sections. The first one explores the linguistic and cultural barriers that the characters face and how they hinder their immersion into Japanese life. The second section deals with the portrayal of Tokyo through the characters' Western perspective and how it acts as a reflection of their 'lostness' and modern life. The last section will focus on the transformation that the characters undergo during their stay in Tokyo and how it merely serves as a way of strengthening their own connection as fellow US citizens.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Cosmopolitanism and its origins**

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the concept of cosmopolitanism has gained significant prominence in a variety of academic fields and is key to the understanding and promotion of global citizenship. The origin of the term comes from the Ancient Greek term *kosmopolitês*, deriving from *kosmos* “world”, “universe”) and ‘*politês*’ (“citizen”), a term which is usually translated as “citizen of the world” (Online Etymology Dictionary). Cosmopolitanism can be traced back to the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope, who, when asked where he came from, described himself as a ‘citizen of the world’. The claim challenged social and political notions of identity at the time, which was mostly defined on the basis of one’s place of origin (Nussbaum 1997, 56). It was used later by the Stoics to refer to “a universal human community to which all individuals belonged” (Delanty 2017, 1). However, as Delanty points out, it did not involve a rejection of the local, but an expansion of the polis “into a wider and more universal political community” (2017, 1).

In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant became one of the major referents in the field. In his 1795 essay “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”, he advocated for the establishment of a cosmopolitan law that, for him, was key to the achievement of enduring peace. Kant regarded all human beings as equal members of a universal community (2001, 51). His conception of universal equality is based on his principle of universal hospitality, that is, the right for anybody to be welcomed upon arrival in foreign territory (instead of being treated with hostility) (1994, 50). Kant's emphasis on the right for all human beings to be welcomed in a foreign land highlights his conception of the world as a communal space and the need for shared universal rights and the development of a cosmopolitan law. During the Enlightenment cosmopolitanism reached its peak (Schlereth 1977). According to Delanty, it was characterised by a desire to develop a positive understanding between cultures that would bring East and

West closer, an embracing of cultural differences that constitutes one of the main tenets of cosmopolitanism (Delanty 2017, 1).

After facing a period of weakening in the interwar period, cosmopolitanism re-emerged after 1945, a moment in which solidarity among nations was fundamental, especially after the Holocaust and other atrocities and global threats (López Fuentes 2021, 38). The notion of individual responsibility towards all of humankind was brought to the fore, which led to the emergence of ‘crimes against humanity’ as a fundamental category in international law (Ulrich 2006, 45) and the foundation of global institutions such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 as essential in the consolidation of cosmopolitan principles.

## **2.2 Contemporary views of cosmopolitanism**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of both the Internet and new communication technologies opened a new era for cosmopolitanism. The interconnectedness it allows implies a potential blurring of national boundaries. The world suddenly became a smaller place in which being “a citizen of the world” could be easier than ever. This also involves a more frequent and accessible interaction with distant Others than ever, in just one click and with no challenging geographical borders or obstacles. As Alexa Robertson states, the impact of globalisation is making people cosmopolitan ‘by default’ (2012, 178). As a result, scholars such as Scott Malcomson advocate for a cosmopolitanism of the everyday. Instead of just an abstract ideal, “actually existing cosmopolitanism involves individuals with limited choices that decide to enter a world larger than their immediate surroundings” (Malcomson 1998, 240).

As many scholars point out, the Kantian understanding of cosmopolitanism has become just an aspiration towards universal human rights and citizenship, social justice and the appreciation and celebration of difference (Fine 2009, 20; Skrbiš and Woodward 2013, 40, 43; Appiah 1997, 635). Yet, this is an aspiration that some perceive as elitist, Eurocentric,

imperialist and homogenizing. For other scholars, cosmopolitanism is not an aspirational project but a mask, a performance for one's advantage or prestige that can be activated or not depending on many contextual factors and social situations (Skrbiš and Woodward 2013, 129 and *passim*). As a result, Nina Høy-Petersen and Ian Woodward describe cosmopolitanism as “messy, conflicting and often unpredictable” (Høy-Petersen & Woodward 2018, 656).

### **2.3 Borders: the ‘quilting point’ of cosmopolitanism**

Borders were and still are key to cosmopolitanism. As asserted by Anthony Cooper and Chris Rumford, the border is a ‘quilting point’ that allows the cosmopolitan experience and the connection of individuals to the world a reality (Cooper & Rumford 2011, 262). Cooper and Rumford advocate for a broader notion of borders, which does not restrict them to the geographical limits of the nation-state. For Cooper and Rumford, airports and maritime ports, motorways or even streaming platforms may become borders that need to be considered and addressed (263). As a consequence of globalisation, it is now easier and more accessible than ever for people to cross borders: “under conditions of globalization the ability to cross borders is not such an impressive achievement” (Rumford 2012: 245). Yet, that does not mean that borders have become irrelevant. In fact, depending on the identity of the border-crosser and the specific direction of the crossing, a border can be easy to cross or an unsurmountable obstacle.

The crossing of a border may represent the beginning of a transformation process that Delanty refers to as ‘the cosmopolitan moment’ or ‘cosmopolitan imagination’. This is the self-conscious transformation that is triggered as a consequence of the encounter with the Other (2006, 41). In Delanty's words, it is an exchange, “no matter how mundane or how brief, that allows people to cross over to the perspective of the other and thus become, even in the minutest of ways, a different person” (2006, 27-28 and *passim*). It is, therefore, a learning process “which invariably impacts upon external social, political and cultural conceptions of the world” (2006, 41). Similarly, for Meskimmon the cosmopolitan imagination is something

‘fully sensory’, through which “[u]nderstanding ourselves as wholly embedded within the world, we can imagine people and things beyond our immediate experiences and develop our ability to respond to very different spaces, meanings and others” (2011, 8).

Nevertheless, these international encounters with the Other are full of contradictions, and the reflexive transformation of the individual that Delanty talks about may not even occur. Borders separate us from others, physically as well as in linguistic and cultural terms, creating distance and complexity in the interaction or identification with the other. This impenetrability concerning the Other, sometimes also hindered by the lack of one’s effort and willingness, may prevent a successful or significant transformation. This is what Felicia Chan refers to as ‘untranslatability’, that is, the inability to understand the Other. Acknowledging this ‘failed’ transformation from the encounter with the Other is also a part of cosmopolitanism. Consequently, as Chan argues, cosmopolitanism involves learning to accept its paradoxes as well as “to grapple with the process of making ethical choices in the encounter with difference, to test the limits of one’s knowledge, familiarity and tolerance, and to be prepared to confront them” (2017, 142).

Everything discussed above establishes the groundwork for the analysis of *Lost in Translation* from a cosmopolitan perspective which will be carried out in the following section. Textual analysis will be used to explore Bob’s and Charlotte’s experience in Tokyo and the portrayal of the city in the film. As will be argued, Bob and Charlotte are transformed in the course of the film but their transformation seems to align more with Chan’s failed transformation than with Delanty’s.

### **3. LOST IN TRANSLATION**

#### **3.1. Borders**

As was argued in the previous section, borders are not just lines dividing two countries. In the interactions between individuals from different cultures or nations, some borders pop up, sometimes in the most unexpected places. In *Lost in Translation*, Bob and Charlotte, two US citizens, travel to Tokyo. The Japanese capital is represented in the film as a foreign land which is distant, both geographically and culturally, from the United States. As they interact with the local culture and its citizens and start to explore the spaces of the city, they soon come across cultural and linguistic barriers in this new and, for them, enigmatic environment. Japanese culture will have an alienating effect upon them that will act as a metaphor for the feeling of disorientation in their lives, as well as ‘an alternative playground’ for self-inquiry and transformation (Hooks 1992, 23). This section explores the complexities of cross-cultural communication in the film by analysing the cultural and linguistic barriers the characters encounter in Tokyo. As will be argued, these borders estrange the protagonists from local culture, accentuate the glaring disparities between the two cultures and ultimately impede meaningful communication with the Other, often resulting in relevant instances of miscommunication and lack of understanding.

The cultural barriers Bob and Charlotte face during their stay in Tokyo distance them from reaching effective interaction with the Other and heighten their feeling of dislocation. They arrive in a place which they perceive as ‘alien’ due to the lack of familiar symbols and signs both culturally, linguistically and in terms of its spatial configuration. This is the basis of what Kalervo Oberg refers to as ‘culture shock’. According to Oberg (1960), culture shock generally moves through four stages: Honeymoon, Rejection, Adjustment and Recovery. In the case of Bob and Charlotte, especially taking into account their short stay in the city, the second stage, Rejection, predominates. In this phase, individuals face the difficulties and challenges

that arise when dealing with cultural differences, which leads to frustration and fatigue due to the impossibility of understanding the signs, gestures and language. This situation that results from the differences between US and Japanese cultures generally leads to miscommunication, uncomfortable situations and ultimately a feeling of disconnection.

Charlotte has almost no interaction with the locals, which increases her feeling of isolation and loneliness. Charlotte's interactions primarily revolve around fellow US citizens, those with a shared cultural background. However, as the film develops, her meaningful interactions are exclusively restricted to Bob, with whom she develops a strong emotional bond marked by their shared feeling of dislocation and existential uncertainty. Bob, due to his job, has many more opportunities to engage in communication with Japanese people, which is the reason why this section will revolve around this character and the ways in which his lack of knowledge about (and one could say even interest in) Japanese culture and its language exacerbates his alienation.

Bob's feeling of estrangement is evident since he first arrives in Tokyo. For Bob, Tokyo is a city of "objects, riddles, and metaphors", which involves "an encounter with the unknown and unintelligible" (King, H. 2010, 3). While he is in the taxi, all he can see are the overwhelming and disorienting neon lights of the city and the unintelligible signs in Japanese that already act as a barrier between the US character and the foreign local environment. Once he arrives at the hotel, a group of Japanese hosts obsessively and enthusiastically greet him, bow and shake his hand, also offering him gifts and business cards. In Japanese culture, this is a sign of respect, hospitality and politeness. Yet, it makes Bob uncomfortable and uncertain as a consequence of the barrier that is created between him and Japanese society, due to the cultural differences between Western and Japanese social protocols and his ignorance and lack of effort in getting to know the local culture. Framing in the scene emphasizes the contrast and distance between Bob and the Japanese hosts. Japanese characters are on the same side of the

shot facing Bob, in a way that Bob and the Japanese are on opposite sides. The use of shot/reverse shot allows us to see either Bob's face and the back of the Japanese hosts or the contrary, Bob's back and the faces of the Japanese hosts. In order to further highlight the distance that exists, the Japanese staff's excitement and active attitude when welcoming Bob contrasts with Bob's passivity marked by a feeling of fatigue and disorientation. He engages in brief verbal exchanges with the Japanese hosts, providing them with minimal and somewhat terse answers. He avoids establishing further conversation, limiting himself to just saying 'Thank you' and expressing his desire to leave and go to his room. Additionally, he barely moves and keeps his distance with body language, which suggests discomfort and a lack of familiarity with his surroundings. He does not know how to act in this new environment, in which the lack of familiarity makes him feel overwhelmed. This can especially be seen when he receives gifts and cards from the Japanese hosts, which is shown by means of fast editing and close-up shots of their hands or of their faces, at the same time as they are being introduced to Bob by a Japanese woman. We get to see this exchange and bombarding of information through Bob's point of view in a way that stresses Bob's disorientation and the feeling of being an outsider in a foreign land.



*Figures 1 and 2: Bob's welcome at the hotel.*

The elevator scene at the beginning of the film also highlights cultural barriers and Bob's feeling of isolation. In this scene, Bob enters a crowded elevator at the Park Hyatt hotel. The elevator is full of elderly and serious Japanese businessmen. Bob, the only foreigner, is

made to stand out especially in terms of height difference. This differentiation is highlighted in the composition of the shot. Bob is placed in the centre of the shot, towering over the rest of the men who are surrounding him, which attracts the audience's attention towards him and his feeling of difference and displacement. Additionally, the Japanese businessmen are characterised and dressed in an almost identical way. The sartorial style of the Japanese extras is homogeneous in terms of style and colour and several of them also wear the same type of glasses. This, on the one hand, homogenises Japanese men and further differentiates them from Bob, who, apart from the evident difference in height and ethnicity, is wearing a darker suit and a bow tie instead. As the door of the elevator closes, a sense of discomfort and tension is evident, exemplified by the silence in the cramped space. Despite being in such close proximity, there is absolutely no contact or interaction between them as a consequence of the linguistic and cultural barriers that separate them. The tension of the scene is palpable for spectators. The scene marked by silence and discomfort, with all of the characters looking still in the direction of the camera. The scene serves as a metaphor for Bob's experience in Tokyo. Although he is physically surrounded by people, he feels alienated and disconnected from this foreign land, "a stranger in a strange land" (Ott and Keeling 2011, 370). The cinematic and narrative strategies in his scene encourage spectators to align with Bob rather than the Japanese, making them prone to laugh at his discomfort. It is worth mentioning how this scene will be mirrored later on in the film when Bob comes across Charlotte on the elevator.



*Figure 3: Bob in the elevator of the hotel, feeling disconnected and out of place.*

Bob also faces cultural barriers in physical terms. It seems that, as Thibaud puts it, “the world of objects is no longer taken for granted, it is rather experienced as surprising and unexpected” (2023, 58). He finds difficulty using the shower, which is lower than his head due to the height difference with the average Japanese person. He also has trouble using the cardio machine, which he cannot control since the commands are also in Japanese. These situations lead to moments of slapstick or physical comedy, evidencing Bob’s clumsiness and difficulty in adapting to the new environment. As Bergson asserted in *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1911), in which he explores the nature of laughter, “the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine”, identifying the rigidity and lack of flexibility of the human body as key sources of comedy (29). Another scene that reflects his resistance to navigating the new culture takes place when Bob incessantly switches Japanese channels with the hope of finding a US program, something familiar and comforting to soften his feeling of alienation.



*Figure 4: Bob's problems with the shower.*

As the title of the film suggests, *Lost in Translation* explores the issue of miscommunication and the inability to understand another language. The inaccessibility of the language acts then as a barrier between the main character and the Japanese environment. Miscommunication is evident in Bob’s filming of the Santori whisky commercial with a Japanese director. While speaking in Japanese, the director gives Bob specific instructions on how to pose with the glass of whiskey. However, much of the meaning conveyed by the director

is lost in translation when the interpreter inadequately and briefly translates the director's extensive orders simply as "with intensity". This leads to Bob feeling doubtful, confused and out of place. Bob's comments and suggestions are also ignored by the crew. The only moment in which some kind of understanding seems to emerge is when the Japanese director mentions US cultural references such as 'Rat Pack' and 'Roger Moore'. When the Japanese director attempts to communicate with Bob in English, Bob seems annoyed and frustrated at his 'erroneous' pronunciation, which results from the Japanese's tendency to replace the sound /r/ with /l/. This is used as a source of comic effect and mockery, which was not only criticised in reviews of the film —Nadia Jo for *The Stanford Daily* among others—, but also shows the lack of empathy and effort on the part of Western citizens firstly on not trying to adapt to the Other's culture and secondly in their inability to value the Other's effort at trespassing linguistic barriers and trying to establish interaction through the use of English (Llinás 2020, 63).

Another relevant scene that shows both the cultural clash and communication issues takes place when a Japanese escort is sent to Bob's room by his business host. As he tries to reject the lady's sexual advances (who constantly says 'no' while approaching him), the cultural and linguistic differences leave him perplexed. In this scene, comedy stems from, on the one hand, the movie's allusion to the Western "eroticization of the East and the figure of the Asian seductress" and Bob's defiance of the stereotypical "Western, male protagonist" (King, H. 2010, 8) by not following her seduction game. On the other hand, as in the Suntory commercial scene, humour emerges from the linguistic confusion that comes from the female character's English pronunciation and Bob's inability to understand her. As in the previous case, she erroneously replaces /r/ with /l/, telling Bob to "lip" (rip) her stocking. For Maria San Filippo, the feeling of awkwardness in these interactions trespasses the screen since the film "allows such moments to linger onscreen well past the point of comfort" (2003, 27), amplifying the audience's feeling of discomfort as well as Bob's feeling of disorientation and

confusion derived from linguistic and cultural barriers. These barriers impede a successful interaction with the Other, leading instead to misunderstandings and exacerbating Bob and Charlotte's estrangement and alienation in the foreign and bustling Tokyo, which they will explore as 'flâneurs' and which, at the same time, will strengthen their bond.

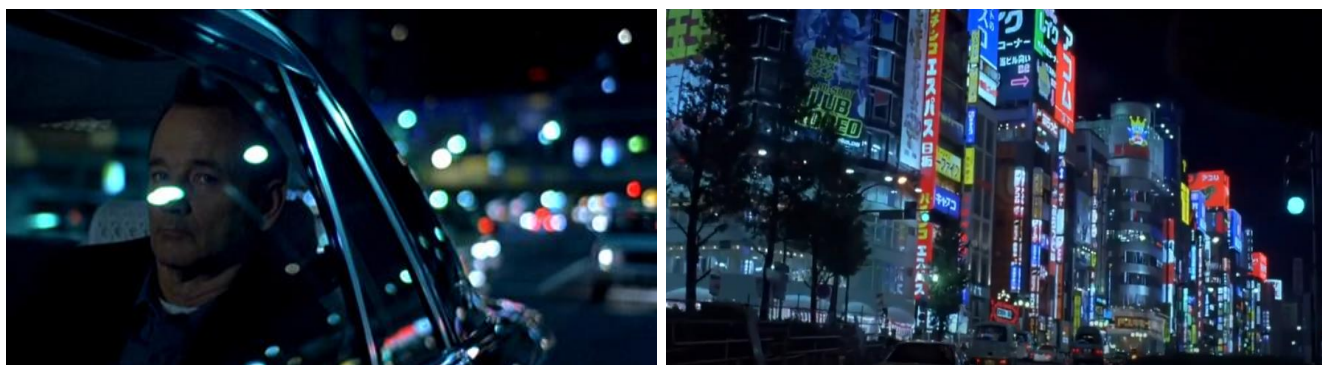
### **3. 2. Tokyo, the neon city**

Cities are usually regarded as centres of cultural exchange and diversity: places where diverse populations coexist (Grafmeyer and Joseph 2004). The cosmopolitan nature of the city is reinforced by processes of globalisation, as Jean-François Côté asserts, "metropolitan cities are primary trustees of these developments linked to the phenomenon of globalisation, they would indeed seem to be foregrounded in the representation of contemporary cosmopolitanism" (Côté 2005, p.239). In *Lost in Translation*, the experiences of Bob and Charlotte take place in Tokyo, the capital city of Japan and one of the most populous metropolitan areas globally. The film portrays the bustling urban experience of the city of Tokyo through a Western perspective, through the exploration of the space by the main characters who act as 'flâneurs'. This section will explore the role of the physical space in the film, how the city of Tokyo is portrayed by means of a non-Japanese perspective in a way that becomes a metaphor for modern life and a reflection of the characters' alienation. It will also tackle how the relationship of Bob and Charlotte with the city will evolve: from inhabiting the microcosm of the US hotel and the so-called *non lieux* (non place) to exploring other sides of Tokyo and its potential for enjoyment together.

In the film, Tokyo is depicted through the eyes of the West, leading to the construction of an imagined cultural space in which a specific ideology is embedded (Lefebvre 1991, 44). The imagined construction of Japan serves then as a metaphor for the characters' sense of disorientation, loneliness and alienation in their own lives. As Kearns (2015) states, the film makes use of "Tokyo's outlandish characteristics to accentuate Bob and Charlotte's inability

to make sense of the world'' (2). Their feeling of disorientation is exacerbated by the cultural and linguistic barriers they find in Tokyo, a city characterised by hypermodernity and unintelligible symbols that cannot be deciphered. They will face disorienting city-spaces, to which they react with both incomprehension and astonishment. Spectators will gain insight into Tokyo through Bob and Charlotte's navigation of the space, which allows them to experience the development of the characters' relationship with the city.

The indomitable and overwhelming nature of the bustling capital is evident in the second scene of the film, which lasts nearly five minutes. Bob has just arrived in Tokyo and is travelling from the airport to the Park Hyatt Hotel in a limousine, from whose window he gets his first impressions of the city, especially "the overwhelming textures of Tokyo-neon" (King, G. 2010, 52). Tokyo's towering skyscrapers, advertisements and the brightness of the neon lights at night highlight the bustling nature of a city that never sleeps, which contrasts with the contemplative, exhausted and jetlagged Bob. Tokyo is depicted as hypnotic, dream-like, massive and unintelligible. What is interesting in this scene is that it already projects the distance that exists between Bob, a U.S. citizen, and the city of Tokyo. The window of the limousine acts as a barrier between the safe and familiar space of the limousine for Bob and the enigmatic Tokyo. Bob is physically and emotionally distanced from the city outside, which reflects his isolation and alienation and his perception of Tokyo as an outsider. The window then stands as a barrier that impedes further interaction with the Other and that needs to be overcome. By means of point-of-view shots of Bob and a captivating soundtrack, the film manages to immerse spectators into Bob's feeling of awe and strangeness towards the enigmatic city, full of excess and messages in Japanese that cannot be understood by Bob nor spectators.



Figures 5 and 6: Bob observes Tokyo through the window of the limousine.

The first part of the film is characterised by alienation and disorientation, by the refusal to engage and delve into the new and foreign environment. Bob and Charlotte stay secluded in the familiar space that the hotel represents and where encounters with others are scarce. The hotel is a haven away from Japanese culture. Instead, it works as a microcosm of Western culture, as shown by its New York bar and French restaurant. The hotel can be considered a *non lieux*, a concept developed by the French anthropologist Marc Augé (1992, 69). Non-places, contrary to anthropological places, are those places of transit linked to consumerism in which individuals remain anonymous. They do not offer potential for meaningful interaction and end up being ephemeral lifeless places of loneliness and displacement. Non-places include motorways, airports, shopping malls and hotel rooms among others. In Tokyo, a symbol of hypermodernity and depersonalization of the individual, non-places have come to become a part of the city's backbone (Llinás 2020, 63). In the representation of Tokyo in the film, the metropolis seems to be constituted exclusively of non-places, including the hotel, the metro, the video arcade, the hospital, trains, motorways and big avenues full of advertisements (Cerrillo 2009, 10).

Focusing on the hotel, the nucleus of the narrative, all of its areas are lifeless, transitory and meaningless imitations of the West. None of these areas promotes further interaction. Instead, the interactions they lead to are superficial and in the case of Bob, dominated by

economic interests. The hotel rooms, although also impersonal, still have some potential for the development of the individual's identity, personal reflection and intimacy. It is in their rooms, their private spaces, when the characters can be more vulnerable and open up emotionally, voicing their anxieties, emotions and crises. In fact, these are the moments in which we get to know the characters more deeply and witness how their relationships develop, negatively in the case of Charlotte and her husband, whose relationship is deteriorating and positively concerning Bob, whose connection consolidates in their emotionally intimate moments in their rooms. Their different attitudes towards Tokyo are also reflected in their rooms. While Bob does not make any noticeable changes to his room, signalling his detached attitude and unwillingness to engage with the city, Charlotte decorates her room with floral arrangements, attempting to create a sense of home and comfort in an unfamiliar environment.

The hotel rooms also become spaces for the contemplation of Tokyo, especially for Charlotte. The second time we see Charlotte on screen (when neither Charlotte nor Bob have managed to step out of the hotel yet), Charlotte, sitting on the windowsill, contemplates the city at night while she listens to her husband snore. A cut shows the same image of her, observing the distant Tokyo but in the light of the morning and in reverse position. She contemplates then the two sides of Tokyo: day and night. These shots are static with Charlotte framed between the window frames, in a way that resembles a photograph (Ferriss 2023, 30). While the initial focus of the shots is on the views of the city itself, the focus slowly turns towards Charlotte. This conveys Charlotte's vulnerability and smallness in relation to the immense Tokyo, which can be seen as overwhelming, and symbolic of her 'lostness' and desire to find her place in the world (King, G. 2010, 104). Therefore, Charlotte's isolation is highlighted, in the window and film frame, in her hotel room, in the city and in her marriage (Ferriss 2023, 30). The presence of the window as a barrier that separates Charlotte from the city needs also to be stressed, which mirrors Bob's arrival in Tokyo in the limousine. There is

a shared sense of imprisonment and confinement from the bustling city, with both characters contemplating it from a distance without establishing further interaction with it.



*Figures 7 and 8: Charlotte contemplates Tokyo through the window of her hotel room.*

The city is depicted as a spectacle with an appealing energy that will draw Charlotte into it. Unlike Bob, who shows little interest in the city and whose excursions are mainly indoors or work-related, Charlotte shows a contemplative and inquiring attitude, with great interest in observing the details of each place she visits. As Paz (2010, 73-64) points out, her will to explore the city constitutes a symbol for the exploration of her own identity. She acts as an observant and wanders through Tokyo, acquiring the role of a *flâneuse*, spectators of the city that “stroll down the city streets, absorb and process the world in front of their eyes, and do so for the benefit of the viewer of a film or the reader of a novel” (Klemm 2011, 228). Their vision of the city is subjective. It depends on their identity, one that will be affected by their experience of the city. In her excursions, Tokyo is kinetic and characterised by movement, unlike the static nature of the hotel: cars, trains and the subway constantly moving, pedestrians crossing busy streets and neon lights flashing non-stop (Ferriss 2023, 58).

One of the places Charlotte visits is Shibuya, one of the major districts in Tokyo. The film pays special attention to the means of transport that Charlotte uses to travel across the city, another type of transitory non-places key in the immense metropolis, which provides us with the whole experience of Charlotte getting to know and moving through the city. We see her studying the map of the subway, trying to make sense of the labyrinth and its unintelligible

signs, highlighting her feeling of disorientation as a reflection of the one at the heart of her life. She is now both physically and emotionally lost. The feeling of disorientation is conveyed by the use of framing and editing. A wide-angle shot shows her from the distance waiting for the subway on the platform. Suddenly, a speeding subway train rushes through the frame. This image is quickly replaced by a shot that shows the inside of the train, in which we can see Charlotte and the rest of the passengers. Next, another shot shows Charlotte exiting the train pushed by the crowd, followed by another shot of her moving up the escalator and a final shot now in the street in which she anxiously looks around. This sequence of shots, which lasts 30 seconds, has a disorienting effect on viewers because of the use of rapid editing and the movement produced by handheld camera (Ott & Keeling 2011, 371). According to Ott and Keeling, in this scene, “the audience identifies with the look of the camera, which moves through its surroundings—all the while being bumped, squeezed, and shoved by fellow travellers. The camera locates the audience in the scene not as a spectator, but as a participant” (371). This contrasts with the following sequence, in which she visits the Jugan-ji Temple, a Buddhist temple located in Tokyo’s Nakano Ward, not far from the hotel and Shinjuku, one of Tokyo’s central hubs. The sequence combines point of view and non-subjective shots in a way that it is, like the city itself, shot from a distant and detached manner that impedes a closer look and better understanding and immersion into the city and its culture. Charlotte observes monks chanting but from a distant touristic gaze, without close-ups that could draw attention towards them. This older and serene Tokyo contrasts heavily with its chaotic and bustling surroundings.

The film depicts not only the technological and dynamic side of Japan but also a more traditional one, as can be seen in Charlotte’s visit to Kyoto. Here the use of space contrasts with the frenetic energy of the city. Charlotte visits a temple, a shrine, witnesses a traditional Japanese wedding, walks across a lily pond and ties a wish to the branch of a tree. The frenetic energy of the city of Tokyo is replaced here by silence and stillness. It would be easy to imply

that the visit to Kyoto will move Charlotte since the scene is presented with a lot of potential for a transformation to take place. Yet, the film focuses on the numbness and emotional and cultural alienation of Charlotte, who as she says later to Bob, is not able to feel anything.



*Figures 9 and 10: Charlotte's visit to Kyoto.*

Later on Charlotte and Bob decide to experience nightlife in Tokyo. Unlike the feeling of alienation and dislocation that characterises the previous scenes of the film, now the attitudes that predominate are those of intensity and energy. The characters decide to further engage with Tokyo and the potential it also offers. The slow-paced interior scenes at the hotel in which action is scarce are now replaced by fast-paced, action-packed exterior scenes in which the characters run. Until this moment, the city had been shot out of focus and from a distance, as a lifeless and alienating space that served as a metaphor for modern life. As Ott & Keeling (2011) assert: “as Charlotte and Bob set off together to experience the city, Tokyo is transformed from a social metaphor into a pulsating environment, a universe teeming with life, diversity, intrigue, and attraction” (372). On their first night out, there is greater interaction with the city and its culture, they meet some of Charlotte’s Japanese friends and go to bars, clubs and end up singing in a karaoke bar. On their second night out, they explore the Shibuya area, one of Tokyo’s popular commercial and entertainment neighbourhoods. However, although these excursions lead them to further exploration of the city and to discover its potential for enjoyment, they still remain numb to the influence of the city and the Japanese culture. As will be argued in the next

section, instead of a cosmopolitan transformation, their encounter with the foreign culture strengthens the bond between the two US citizens.

### **3. 3. Cosmopolitan transformations**

As Delanty argues in relation to cosmopolitan theory, the crossing of borders may lead to the so-called ‘cosmopolitan’ moment, a moment of internal transformation through the encounter with the Other (2006, 41). However, this does not seem to be the case for the characters of *Lost in Translation*. As we have analysed, they barely hold any meaningful interaction with the Other. The ones they face are superficial and marked by cultural and linguistic barriers, as the scenes mentioned above show. First they see Tokyo from a distance (and sometimes through glass) and when they finally decide to go out, they focus on their connection and the enjoyment between each other, instead of trying to better integrate and immerse themselves into Japanese life. Their situation then relates more to Felicia Chan’s concept of “untranslatability”, according to which the impenetrability of the Other impedes effective communication, sometimes hindered by one’s lack of effort in overcoming the barriers and which leads to a ‘failed’ transformation (2017, 142).

In the case of Bob and Charlotte, the transformation they undergo comes from the interaction between them, fellow US citizens, and their shared experiences of alienation both in their lives and in Tokyo. Their initial connection seems to be based on recognizing their pain in each other’s eyes, and, although unable to find themselves, they find each other. They are connected since the beginning of the film, even before they meet, by their shared experiences of loneliness and isolation. Tokyo then emerges as “merely the setting or backdrop for the exploration of missed or potential encounter between these two compatriots” (Burman 2007, 193). As Marston (2018) claims, the film exclusively focuses on “the soul searching of the

white American characters” (177), an emphasis guaranteed by the stereotyped portrayal of Japanese people and culture.

This is shown already at the beginning of the film when Charlotte and Bob see each other on the elevator. In this scene, the elevator is crowded with Japanese people, both men and women, with Charlotte and Bob standing out as the only Western characters. The tight framing emphasizes the spatial confinement of the characters, which mirrors their sense of entrapment in their personal lives. The scene heightens the emotional tension and the character’s need for connection both in their lives and in the foreign land. Bob and Charlotte are symmetrically placed within the frame, each one at each side of the elevator. The elevator is shot from Bob’s side. The framing directs the spectators’ focus towards Bob, who is in the foreground, and Charlotte, located on the other side of the elevator but still in close proximity to Bob. Their positioning as well as the fact that they are the only foreigners that stand out in the elevator already foreshadows their future connection. At the beginning of the scene, everything is out of focus except for Bob, which allows spectators to focus their attention on him. Bob yawns, turns his head, spots Charlotte and stares at her. With his head turned from the camera towards Charlotte, our focus turns to her, who is looking up until she also sees Bob and they share a shy smile in the tense atmosphere of the elevator. They both seem disoriented, disconnected and longing for mutual understanding and affinity. Their accidental encounter turns into a moment of connection, recognition and mutual understanding in an environment that is ‘alien’ and isolating for them. Their sameness in an unfamiliar environment, both in terms of nationality and psychological state of disorientation, isolation and crisis draws them together, which leads them to simply interact with each other, and which impedes them from developing further interaction with the Other. According to Saito, their situation is an example of those transnational experiences in which a “cross-cultural encounter does not occur and mutual understanding can never succeed” (2015, 438).



*Figure 11: Charlotte and Bob encounter for the first time in the hotel's elevator.*

It could be said that even if the transformation they undergo is restricted to the relationship between them and they do not manage to fully immerse themselves in Tokyo, a small transformation regarding communication with the Other can be observed near the film's end, when Bob and Charlotte go to the hospital. While waiting for Charlotte at the hospital, Bob sits next to a Japanese woman and tries to interact with her. Due to the impossibility of establishing a verbal interaction, they find an alternative and start communicating by means of gestures and without the need for translation (Thibaud 2023, 59). There is then a genuine attempt at communication and cultural exchange at the end of the film, through Bob's imitation of the Japanese woman's sounds and the effective use of gestures, which allows them to break the linguistic barrier that distances them and impedes mutual understanding. He has then undergone a subtle change during his stay in Tokyo and may be now more ready to try to engage with the Other. Even if his attempt at communicating is still superficial and subtle, it is a moment that shows potential for change and engagement with a foreign environment. Bob's transformation is closely tied to the bond he develops with Charlotte, a bond based on familiarity, mutual understanding and emotional support, which combined with Charlotte's curiosity and enthusiasm for exploring Tokyo will encourage him to emerge from his state of numbness. As they explore the city together and their relationship strengthens, their initial detachment and view of Tokyo as an alienating and overwhelming space are replaced by the

appreciation of Tokyo as a vibrant and multifaceted place full of new experiences and possibilities for interaction. Bob's initial indifference evolves to a genuine interest and openness towards others, now willing to enjoy the interaction with the locals and even laughing in the face of linguistic barriers. His facial expressions change noticeably, he smiles more, makes gestures and seems more approachable and relaxed, able to better enjoy Tokyo with Charlotte by his side and influencing her in the same way.



*Figure 12: Bob communicates with a woman through gestures at the hospital.*

#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Lost In Translation* deals, through the experiences of Bob and Charlotte, with the complexities of the encounter with the Other and our longing for connection and mutual understanding, especially in an era increasingly dominated by alienation and dislocation and intensified by the unfamiliar metropolis of Tokyo in which the characters are located. The film depicts Tokyo as a metaphor for the characters' internal crisis and as a catalyst for their developing connection. The film portrays a 'failed' encounter with the Other, with the characters not fully immersed in the city's life and unwilling to establish a meaningful interaction with its culture and citizens.

The first section of this dissertation has dealt with the complexities of cross-cultural communication, an increasingly frequent phenomenon nowadays, which is dominated by linguistic and cultural barriers that the characters need to overcome in the foreign environment of Tokyo if a successful interaction with the Other is to be achieved. These barriers estrange them from local culture and lead to encounters characterised by misunderstandings and lack of understanding, as Bob's filming of the Suntory commercial and his welcoming and elevator scene demonstrate.

The second section of this dissertation has focused on the portrayal of Tokyo from the Western perspective of the characters, who explore the spaces of the city adopting a 'flâneuse' position, especially Charlotte, who contemplates both sides of the city, its modern and bustling side but also its traditional side during her visit to Kyoto. The relationship of the characters with the city develops as the emotional connection between Charlotte and Bob strengthens. The initial distance and disconnection from the overwhelming and disorienting city, which they only observe through the protective shield that the windows of the limousine and the Western microcosm of the hotel represent, is slightly replaced by a stronger will to leave non-places behind and explore the potential of the city together. The city then emerges as a metaphor for modern life and a reflection of the characters' internal alienation and disorientation.

The last section of this dissertation examines how, even if they venture into the city together, they do not fully immerse into Japanese life. Bob and Charlotte do not hold any meaningful interaction with the city or with its citizens, instead, they only focus on each other, fellow US citizens, not willing to reach a successful encounter with the Other. Their bond emerges as a consequence of their mutual understanding and recognition of their similar situation of disorientation both in life and in Tokyo. However, by the end of the film it can be seen how they have undergone a small transformation through their connection with each other. Their connection acts as a catalyst for change, emotionally opening them towards a more positive and engaging attitude towards Tokyo. They explore the city together, adopting a position that allows them to appreciate everything it has to offer. They attempt to break the linguistic barriers and even learn to find and share amusement in the challenges posed by an unfamiliar environment.

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