

THE INFLUENCE OF ART ON PERCEPTIONS OF URBANISM

DT106/2 – Urbanism

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INTRODUCTION

“Lost in Translation” is a 2003 film by Sofia Coppola. This film is set around a chance love affair between two characters played by Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson. Murray plays an aging and increasingly disillusioned actor, while Johansson plays the bright-eyed girlfriend of a celebrity photographer. Both are struggling with their respective relationships. The film is set against the backdrop of Tokyo, Japan, which allows for interesting parallels to be drawn between the American characters, and their temporary host country.

THEME ONE

A recurring concept in “Lost in Translation” is that of isolation. The two leads are alone in a foreign land, knowing nobody. Much of the film focuses on boredom, insomnia, solitude, and loneliness.

The film is largely set in the Park Hyatt Hotel in Shinjuku, Tokyo. Shinjuku is the primary business district in Tokyo, and possibly one of the busiest places on Earth: Shinjuku Train Station alone is used by almost 4 million people every day. It is a district of skyscrapers and big-business, narrow side-streets and seedy bars. Everything imaginable happens in Shinjuku.

Despite the ceaseless bustle and capacity for encounter, our two main characters suffer from isolation. The city is a place where family is de-emphasised, and friendship becomes more important – this is apparent in the film, as our main characters come together and bond over their respective boredom, insomnia, solitude, and ultimately loneliness. It is the perfect example of the ability of a person to be surrounded by others, and yet feeling like they are an island.

To delve into a bit of etymology: The word “isolate” comes from the Latin word “insula”, meaning “island”. The Park Hyatt Hotel acts as an island for these two Americans in Tokyo. Their experiences are largely controlled, and the type of people they meet largely predictable. The hotel acts as a sanctuary, a safe place in an unfamiliar world.

This idea of a personal island can be transposed to real-life, where people demand and need their own private space. In order to cope with the stimulus of the city, one must have a retreat. It is perhaps

ironic that in the places where private space is needed most – the very centre of cities – it is often most difficult to find.

The word “insula” of course means “island”. However, “insula” is also what a block of buildings was called in ancient Roman cities. This is relevant because it affords us another contrast with the Japanese approach to city navigation. Where Roman cities were defined by their rigid street structure and gridiron pattern, in Japan there is no such design. Even in Tokyo, apart from several key boulevards, most city streets weave in a haphazard fashion. Indeed, even today in Japan, it is quite normal for streets to go unnamed.

Instead, precedence is given to the block, which is also how addresses are given: every block has its own number, and within each block houses are numbered sequentially as they are built. It is often impossible to say which street one lives on; instead one states which block they live in – which “insula”.

As such, it could be put that Japanese cities are made up of thousands of these little islands. The hotel in the film is just another island within an island. And of course, Japan itself is a country of islands, lending support to the idea of a fractal pattern of human settlement.

Yet despite so much fragmentation, or perhaps aided by its isolation, Japan has managed to preserve a monoculture for thousands of years. It is only in the past half-century has it begun to Westernise, which leads to the next theme.

THEME TWO

There is a contrast in this film between East and West: Japanese culture juxtaposed with American culture. Between stereotypes and faux pas, the Western perception of Japan as an alien culture is continuously reinforced by Coppola. However, there are undeniable similarities too: the international hotel chain, the dominance of big-business, the adoration of celebrity.

As the film unfolds, Tokyo begins to look less and less exotic, and more like any other major global city. This brings up the question: as cities grow, do they lose the heterogeneity that makes them appealing and unique in the first place? A small town in Japan might have nothing in common with its equivalent in the United States, whereas Tokyo and Los Angeles might have many similarities. Ultimately, does it matter that this film is set in a foreign land, or did the director set it here purely to emphasize the concept of isolation?

As an island nation, Japan has been culturally isolated. It is only in the post-war era that it has begun to adopt elements of western culture, and indeed to export elements of its own. It has gone so far that the film’s karaoke scene might not look out of place in any other city in the world. Other than

language and physical appearance, is there anything intrinsically Japanese that the two main characters experience?

A capital city is that country's window-to-the-world, and as its international prominence grows, it begins to act more like its international counterparts. There is a homogenisation of function among the world's big cities, though that is not to say that there is a loss of local flair. Despite the similarities, and ignoring the film's over-reliance at times on stereotype, the city that our duo find themselves in is unmistakably Japanese – or at the very least non-American.

THEME THREE

The final theme is the nature of romance and relationships in the postmodern city. The characters played by Murray and Johansson share a fleeting relationship with each other. This brief affair echoes the decadence of Shinjuku, where all the action takes place. Historically, Shinjuku has been home to Tokyo's red light district, and many subcultures still call the neighbourhood home today. It is reminiscent of the hedonistic urban lifestyle of Japan's Edo Period (1600—1870) called *Ukiyo*.

Ukiyo describes the city life of the growing middle classes of this era. A form of woodblock printing known as *ukiyo-e* became popular, and is still recognisable today. This artwork lent itself to mass-production, and was accessible to the urban class of merchants and craftsmen. Indeed this class was the predecessor to Japan's middle class today – the vast majority of Japanese people consider themselves to be middle class.

Back to the film, and we can see that this depersonalisation is nothing new – it has been going on for centuries. The city allows for lower degrees of intimacy, and looser relationships. This allows for single-serving friends, as seen in “Lost in Translation”. At the film's close, we do not find out if the pair will ever see each other again, but it nearly doesn't matter.

CONCLUSION

Sofia Coppola's depiction of urban society attempts to be balanced. At times the Japanese stereotypes are played up for comedic effect; the title of the film is “Lost in Translation” after all. Nonetheless, both the positive and negative aspects are portrayed. We experience Tokyo through the eyes of the couple, both is boundless potential and its limiting isolation. The vastness and impersonality of the city is juxtaposed with people's necessity for intimacy and retreat.

Coppola succeeds in portraying the gestalt of the city, while being neither cynical nor exuberant. “Lost in Translation” raises many questions about urbanism and the city, and is an excellent film to boot.

PRESENTATIONS: COMMENTS AND CRITIQUE

Several themes came through for me during the presentations and panel commentary. The most notable one is how in many of the artistic works chosen, the city itself features as a character. This character goes through the same development from beginning to end of the work, starting as one-dimensional but quickly emerging as the most complex character possible. This is of course due to a city's history, its culture, the very people who live there. Over thousands of years, cities have changed, grown, become centres of power, and have fallen into decay. And yet they still stand. Whether because of fashion, or the ceaseless draw as an escape from poverty, cities will always be centres of diversity, a refuge for all types.

Many of the presentations dealt with the theme of the city as a dystopia. Certainly, while cities have dystopian elements, they also allow for the flourishing of independent thought and creativity. A comment was made on “urban dystopia” versus “technological development”; perhaps no place embodies this duality better than Tokyo, a city that readily adopts new technology like no other.

This ties in with other comments made on iconography in a city. While Tokyo has no landmark with quite the same status as the “Hollywood” sign, the lights of Shinjuku certainly conjure up an image of the city, at least for Western audiences. This in turn relates to potentially contrasting views of a city when viewed from within a certain culture and when viewed from without. This was mentioned in relation to referring to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro as “slums”, while those who live there themselves might not necessarily hold the same opinion.

What has emerged through the presentations and panel discussion is that while every city undoubtedly has its own character, culture, and history, there are nonetheless some universals within cities which apply no matter the place or time.