The Search for Intimacy:
Loneliness in the Imagery of *Lost in Translation*

"What is lost in translation?" Renowned film critic Roger Ebert poses this wonderfully open-ended question in his review of Sofia Coppola's 2004 film of the same name, *Lost in Translation*. Though one could take many different approaches in responding to this query, the most obvious, at least in the context of a film critique, would be to describe the film itself: "what is *Lost in Translation*?" Ebert himself puts forward a fairly concise summary of the film's major themes in his review. Regarding Coppola's direction, he writes "she wants to show two people lonely in vast foreign Tokyo and coming to the mutual realization that their lives are stuck." The film revolves around two primary characters, aging movie star Bob Harris and the recently married Charlotte, both of whom lack any firm direction in their lives. Bob is a celebrity, long past his prime, visiting Tokyo to earn a quick paycheck for performing in a whiskey advertisement. Charlotte, meanwhile, is accompanying her husband, John, as he does a photo-shoot for a local band, while slowly coming to the realization that perhaps she was too hasty in her decision to get married. The film tracks these characters' independent lives, before bringing them together at around the story's midpoint. The rest of the movie follows their blossoming relationship over the course of a single week (Coppola). Equally important in Bob and Charlotte's development is the city of Tokyo, which almost acts as its own character. In a critique for the film journal *Sense of Cinema*, Wendy Haslem notes "Coppola is able to depict a sense of alienation that is highlighted by existence in a 'foreign' land." While the film does not critique Japanese culture, it uses Tokyo's outlandish characteristics to accentuate Bob and Charlotte's inability to make sense of the world. Yet despite being unable to truly find themselves, both Bob and Charlotte manage to find one another.

But while this provides an overview of the film's basic elements, the depth of Ebert's question requires more analysis than a simple plot summary. "What is lost in translation?" As it

is commonly used, this phrase refers to the small details of expression that are lost in the process of translating one language to another. However, as noted in a recent edition of *The Atlantic* magazine, this loss of expression can occur even without a translation to another language. In her article "Mixed Signals: Why People Misunderstand Each Other," Emily Esfahani Smith studies how, through their interpersonal interactions, people inadvertently convey ideas opposed to what they actually mean to express. Due to what psychologists call "the transparency illusion," most people live under the impression that their thoughts and intentions are crystal clear, even when in reality they have done very little to clarify either (Smith). Because of this, many people's inner views and feelings are lost in the process of translating them from thought into expression. Smith also notes that those people who are able to clearly convey their thoughts and make themselves well-understood generally live more fulfilling lives. The opposite situation, where people remain unable to satisfyingly express themselves, as is the case with Bob and Charlotte, can lead to feelings of extreme loneliness. As noted by Paula Karnick in her essay "Feeling Lonely: Theoretical Perspectives," it tends to be that "feeling lonely reflects the distance one feels between one's self and others" (1). As Bob and Charlotte's inner emotions are lost in translation, they become increasingly emotionally detached from those around them, further exacerbating their feelings of loneliness. Before meeting one another, neither is able to form a genuine connection, even towards those with whom they are most familiar.

Furthermore, the consequences of extreme loneliness can be difficult to bear. Within the measureless expanse of Tokyo, Bob and Charlotte deal with feelings of despair and uncertainty. It is only through the growth of their relationship, where they find a confidant who they can confide their emotions with, that the two are able to combat their shared loneliness. This aligns with Karnick's assertion that authentic and intimate relationships are the greatest barrier against

the sinking feeling of being lonely (1). Bob and Charlotte's relationship develops gradually, allowing them to not only grow closer to one at a natural pace, but also look inward and discover more about their own selves in the process. Perhaps they are not able to totally defeat the pervasive loneliness that ails them, but they nonetheless find solace in one another's presence. Along with Lance Acord, her director of photography, Coppola uses the imagery of the film to show the loneliness that her two protagonists face in the film's early stages, as well as the special bond they form in the film's latter half. Each frame contains various components that coalesce to mirror the characters' emotional states. Even if one totally ignores the film's dialogue, the imagery crafted by Coppola and her colleagues communicates more in the span of seconds than most films are able to express throughout their entire runtime. Through this imagery, Coppola illustrates the depths of loneliness experienced by Bob and Charlotte, and then the development of the intimate relationship between them that lies at the film's core.

Loneliness is a complex emotion whose elements are oftentimes not fully grasped, even by those experiencing it. Ami Rokach, of the *Institute for the Study and Treatment of Psychosocial Stress* in Toronto, attempts to explore the many different facets of this widely felt, though rarely understood condition in a 2004 article for *Current Psychology*. The potential causes for loneliness are diverse and often compounded upon one another. Rokach offers an expansive list, the most relevant including a lack of belonging; an unfulfilled need for intimacy; estrangement from one's self; and a move to a different geographic or otherwise foreign location (38). Each of these causes factors prominently into the plot of *Lost in Translation* and undoubtedly contributes to the loneliness felt by both Bob and Charlotte. But what exactly does loneliness, an incredibly broad term, actually entail? Rokach writes, in the absence of adequate distractions, "[w]e live knowing that others do not fully understand us, and may not know us…

We are part of, yet distinctly separate from, all which is around us" (28). Coming to terms with this reality is no simple task, and can lead to the extreme degradation of any feelings of attachment. Although each person has their own peers and loved ones, the actual connections one holds are often far more slight than initially evident. Without a firm and unwavering link to another person, this feeling of separation can grow more and more intrusive. This is the problem that Bob and Charlotte face throughout the film, and their relationship with one another develops to be the only thing capable of lessening its burden.

Many people associate feelings of loneliness with the actual physical or social sensation of being alone, whether that means lacking a broader group of friends or living in an isolated community. However, it is unanimously accepted within the psychological field that one need not be alone in order to experience the agonizing pangs of feeling lonely (Rokach 29). Take, for instance, the following still-frames from near the film's start:

Neither character is actually "alone" in these images: Bob is in a packed elevator filled with prominent businessmen, whereas Charlotte overlooks the entire city of Tokyo, which nearly beckons her to come explore its depths. Yet these facts do not take away from the obvious loneliness that both characters feel. Bob's facial expression shows weariness and fatigue, while Charlotte curls up against the windowpane, vulnerable and exposed. Despite being surrounded

by a plethora of social opportunities, neither character is able to connect with the world around them. The images express this primarily through the use of height; Charlotte sits near the top floor of the hotel, high above the city below, while Bob is simply much taller than any other person in the elevator. This aesthetic decision on the part of Coppola and Acord underscores the detachment that both characters experience. Writing of the psychological consequences of this sort of loneliness, Rokach comments "if being alone and lonely is terrifying and painful, being lonely in a crowd is much worse." People generally expect loneliness to dissolve when around others; when they are unable to meet this expectation, feelings of "self-doubt, anger, and shame" often arise (Rokach 29). From the images above, these sorts of emotions can be identified in both Bob and Charlotte, who appear to lack any sort of confidence or self-assurance. These images express the first major element of the loneliness that plagues both Bob and Charlotte near the start of the film.

However, while Bob and Charlotte may not be able to feel in tune with city around them, they both technically have loved-ones who should be able to help assuage their loneliness. Charlotte's husband, John, is in Tokyo with her for the majority of the film, while Bob has been married to his wife back in America, Lydia, for twenty-five years (Coppola). Most would view the presence of these familiar figures as beneficial when feeling lonely and isolated. Yet, as evidenced by the following images, this is not the case for Bob and Charlotte:

Both shots from the film show the two protagonists with their loved ones: Charlotte is lying in bed with John while Bob talks with Lydia on the phone. Neither looks fully content. Bob wears a forced, almost wistful smile; his state of undress highlights his vulnerability to his wife's words. Her only presence in the film comes through the phone, highlighting her physical and emotional distance from Bob. Charlotte, meanwhile, lays right next to her husband, the man that is supposed to be the love of her life, and could not look less satisfied. As noted in the *Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, loneliness not only comes from the absence of interpersonal relationships, but also from a discrepancy between the quality of the relationships held and the quality of the relationships desired (De Jong Gierveld 485). Bob and Charlotte both have significant others long before they meet one another, but at their current point in life, these relationships are no longer as fulfilling as they once were, if they were ever totally fulfilling to begin with. As noted before, expectations regarding these types of relationships can lead to disappointment and increased loneliness. People typically anticipate marriage and other deeply romantic relationships to alleviate loneliness; but when these relationships fail to match the expectations set for them, one can feel even lonelier than they would have without them (De Jong Gierveld 492). As evidenced by these images, Bob and Charlotte feel disappointed by the lack of connection present in their current relationships, further worsening their loneliness.

It is only through their relationship with one another that Bob and Charlotte seem to have any hope of overcoming their crippling levels of loneliness. Yet relationships do not simply burst into existence; they are cultivated carefully, and oftentimes at a slow pace. Moreover, all relationships, even those that grow intimate, have a beginning. For Bob and Charlotte, this initial point of contact is thoroughly unremarkable, but is no less significant because of it:

Standing in the elevator, the two share a passing moment of eye contact, before looking away once more. They did not know one another before entering the elevator, and could hardly be said to know each other any better upon exiting. Yet in the context of the relationship that will grow between them throughout the rest of the movie, this moment may have indeed been crucial. In his textbook on the nature of intimate relationships, Rowland Miller writes that each first impression, no matter how minor, has the potential to shape the entirety of the relationship that follows. People make snap judgments (literally within the first second of interaction) about others, and these judgments often persist long into the relationship, even when new information demonstrates that they may have been erroneous (Miller 108-110). The viewer cannot be sure what impression Bob and Charlotte hold of one another following this brief moment of contact, but they can be sure of its importance in the larger scheme of their relationship. It is worth noting the similarity in setting of this image and of the shot earlier showing Bob "alone" in the elevator. In both frames, Bob continues to feel lonely; even with Charlotte's presence in the latter image, he still lacks any deep bond to alleviate his loneliness. Nonetheless, whereas the earlier shot shows Bob completely alienated from those around him, this later image presents a beacon of hope. This first point of contact between Bob and Charlotte sets the stage for the rest of their relationship and gives both the potential to overcome their shared feelings of loneliness.

However, while the first impression undoubtedly holds great significance for setting the framework of their relationship, Bob and Charlotte's first legitimate interaction acts as the clear first step in developing their intimacy with one another. It is necessary to note that this is only the first step of many, as this interaction on its own does very little to convey a real sense of closeness. This still-frame from their first meeting demonstrates this:

While the two are in relatively close proximity with one another in a private setting for the first time in the film, there is still an air of separation between them. The entire center of the frame is filled by a wall of "nothing" which concretely divides them. According to Miller's definitions, these characters are within each other's "personal zones" (~four foot distance) but outside what he labels a person's "intimate zone" (151). Although both characters would benefit from finding someone who understands them in this strange land, they are hesitant to dive straight into an intimate connection. This reluctance is consistent with the research of Harry Reis presented in the *Handbook for Personal Relationships*. Reis explains that although feelings of intimacy are critical in the cultivation of personal happiness, there are many factors at play within the human psyche that act as impediments to the growth of intimacy. He specifically notes that the fear of

exposure, abandonment, and loss of control can derail the development of many close relationships (376). Given both Bob and Charlotte's prior disappointments in these areas, it makes sense that they would avoid any hasty disclosure of personal feelings, no matter how desperate they may be to do so or how attune they are with one another's state of mind. While this image shows Bob and Charlotte in the incipient stage of their relationship, truly interacting for the first time, Coppola and company are careful to accentuate the psychological barriers that still exist between them.

However, as Bob and Charlotte continue to spend more time together and develop a more fully formed relationship, the barriers between them begin to erode. With each subsequent interaction, Bob and Charlotte's connection grows at exponential rate, chiseling away the walls that at first prevented them from becoming intimate. Reis defines an intimate relationship as a series of "dyadic connections that possess special properties deriving from, but extending beyond, the content of individual intimate episodes" (Reis 383). While Bob and Charlotte's relationship at its most basic level is comprised solely of the interactions between the two of them, the depth of their intimacy is far greater than the sum of its individual parts. The following images highlight this fact:

In spite of the relatively brief amount of time that Bob and Charlotte have known each other, Coppola's imagery here conveys a level of intimacy that has clearly grown beyond mere words. Not only are nonverbal cues able to express specific emotional messages, they oftentimes also intensify the emotions felt by both parties over the course of an interaction (Reis 373). The major component of nonverbal interaction in these images that shows Bob and Charlotte's intimacy is "touch." Miller notes that the frequency of touch between two people almost always indicates an increase in closeness and affection (150). The image on the left shows the first major instance of touch between Bob and Charlotte, when she casually rests her head upon his shoulder. Neither of them reacts much to this, mutually acknowledging that their relationship has achieved the level of intimacy appropriate for such an action. The image on the right where Bob gently caresses Charlotte's foot as they both drift into sleep, which occurs slightly later in the film, operates in much the same manner. While the concept of "sleeping with" another person often contains an implicitly sexual connotation, Bob's hand upon Charlotte's foot lacks any sort of eroticism. In spite of, or perhaps because of this, the move signals a level of tenderness that no sexual act could compare to. Coppola's use of this imagery, which employs touch as the primary indicator of budding intimacy, depicts the incredible progression of Bob and Charlotte's relationship over such a short period of time.

       The closeness between Bob and Charlotte grows increasingly intense as the film advances, with each interaction conveying more intimacy than the last. Coppola's imagery continues to use nonverbal forms of interaction to depict this intimacy, arguably culminating in the following image:

The main indicator here of their affection for one another is the level of eye contact. Reis identifies eye contact as one of the most significant expressions of intimacy, noting the level of trust and understanding that is necessary to expose oneself in such a way. He says that if either interactant is uncomfortable with revealing their inner selves, vulnerabilities and all, they will look away and end the exchange (373). Yet for the majority of this shot, Bob and Charlotte gaze unceasingly into each other's eyes, without speaking a single word. Indeed, words are hardly necessary at this point in their relationship, where they are comfortable exposing their inner feelings to one another through nonverbal cues. There is also a stark contrast between this shot of Bob and Charlotte in comparison to the shot from their first major interaction. While earlier they were hesitant to interact with each other on a genuine level, all of their emotional barriers have since been removed. Accenting this fact is the physical distance between the two of them (~one foot), which now fits into Miller's definition of an intimate distance (151). They no longer have any inhibitions or fears regarding their closeness with one another. Through these aesthetic decisions, Coppola shows the intense intimacy of Bob and Charlotte's relationship, and especially the extent to which it has grown since their initial interactions.

As evidenced through the film's imagery, loneliness can be an overwhelming sensation, and is difficult to suppress completely. But, in the case of Bob and Charlotte, although the development of an intimate relationship may not defeat their loneliness in total, it does bring them a sense of connection that they lacked beforehand; from this, they can feel content. Coppola expresses this sentiment perfectly in one of the closing shots from the film:

Bob and Charlotte hold each other in the middle of a bustling Tokyo street, their intimate moment visible to every passerby. Yet this does not bother them. This very well could be their last opportunity to truly be intimate with each other and, as a result, they embrace without any reservations. Like earlier in the film, countless individuals surround both Bob and Charlotte, none of whom they are able to connect with or genuinely relate to. In spite of all those with whom they interact on a daily basis, both remain separated from them on an authentic level. But unlike their position earlier in the film, Bob and Charlotte no longer feel lonely. Due to their relationship, the innumerable foreign individuals who fill their lives no longer matter; the only thing of real consequence is their bond with one another. Coppola sets their final moment of intimacy in this crowded setting specifically to underscore this feeling. Roger Ebert puts it best in his review of the film: "They share loneliness." In a world often devoid of genuine connections, perhaps this is the most that anybody could truly ask for.

Nevertheless, while the relationship that begins and then flourishes between Bob and Charlotte is undoubtedly poignant and clearly expressed through Coppola's imagery, some people may find it hard to relate to the pair's struggle to conquer loneliness. Ebert discusses in his review that many viewers of the film have asked him what he thought it was about, unable to derive much deeper meaning from the plot. However, although these viewers may not realize it, Bob and Charlotte's plight holds a great deal of relevance in our modern era. In her article, Rokach writes "[o]urs is the age of relationship… today it is relationships which appear to be the main, if not only means, by which self-esteem can be affirmed" (27). Supporting this claim is a series of studies cited by Reis in the *Handbook for Personal Relationships*. According to a comparison of two surveys conducted by Veroff, Douvan and Kulka, the first in 1957 and the second in 1976, the appeal of intimacy grew significantly as the twentieth century progressed

(Reis 386). Perhaps if Bob and Charlotte had lived in an earlier era, their feelings of loneliness would not have been as intense, and their need for genuine relationships less demanding. Yet due to a vast variety of factors, society changed and as a result Bob and Charlotte's culture, our culture, became increasingly dependent on intimacy. Rokach hypothesizes the cause of this societal shift:

> "As our technology improves, as mankind matures, and as we come to understand more about the magnificent universe that houses our tiny planet, we come to realize the extremely small stature and impact that each of us has upon life and the living. The present structure of modernized Western society appears to magnify the alienation and separateness that man feels while at the same time being aware of his need to belong, be need and lead a meaningful and satisfactory life." (38)

Rokach, in essence, attributes society's growing feelings of alienation and desire for intimacy as a side-effect of the relative ease with which we can now learn more about the individual's place in the world. A combination of increased scientific knowledge, emotional understanding, and psychological depth has led to many more people experiencing the same feelings as Bob and Charlotte. Because of this, while some viewers may not immediately relate to *Lost in Translation*'s story and themes, its connection to the state of modern society should actually make it all the more impactful.

Although the phrase "lost in translation" may hold several different meanings, the answer to Roger Ebert's previous question becomes clear after viewing the film's early imagery: it is the very essence of Bob and Charlotte's personal identities that ends up lost while translating their thoughts into expression. Due to this loss of self, both characters end up enduring the

excruciating pain of emotional loneliness; they lose much of their connection to the outside world in the process. But instead of concentrating on what is lost, Coppola's film encourages the viewer to instead focus on what is found. In spite of their inability to adequately express themselves or make meaningful social connections, Bob and Charlotte manage to find one another and, by extension, find themselves. Coppola and her crew carefully utilize images to convey the development that Bob and Charlotte undergo while finding each other, progressing from fear and hesitation to affection and absolute trust. This thematic journey resonates with remarkable force in our modern society, where the risk of losing oneself is especially great. But as the imagery in Coppola's film so touchingly conveys, we need not worry, because there is always hope that one can be found.

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Research Reflection Essay

I had been looking forward to writing the final research paper for my University Writing course from the moment I read over the syllabus. My course, *Reading Without Words: The Image as Text*, involved the analysis of various forms of imagery and how their aesthetic components resulted in a concrete argument/idea. This was a topic I was quite interested in, and the topic for our final research paper was wonderfully unrestricted: we had free-reign to choose practically whatever image(s) that we desired and construct an argumentative essay regarding its content and connection to society. In the end, I decided to write my final essay on the imagery within one of my all-time favorite films, *Lost in Translation*. The film delves into themes of loneliness and intimacy in remarkably poetic way, and I was certain that I could derive these very same ideas from its imagery.

On this last point, I was correct: the imagery in *Lost in Translation* was totally conducive to the topics that I wanted to write about. I had a fantastic time re-watching the movie and examining which shots were particularly important to the formation of the film's major arguments/ideas. However, the true difficulty lay in a different area: the research. Even though I closely identified with the themes within *Lost in Translation*, loneliness and intimacy are primarily psychological phenomena. The problem: I have never taken a psychology class in my life (I took a half-year sociology course in high-school, but my experience there didn't prove very helpful for this paper). I anticipated the research to be difficult going in to the paper, though perhaps underestimated exactly how complex these topics were. It was only through the resources provided to me through the GW library system that I was able to find the appropriate sources for my topic and make sense of the vast amount of information at my fingertips.

My first real exposure to the support provided by the library system at GW was during our class's session with the librarian attached to our course, Tina. At the beginning of this session, Tina asked for a few people to volunteer their topics (which she had reviewed via blackboard beforehand) to act as examples while she showed the class how to use the many different research avenues at our disposal. Knowing that my topic was going to be ambitious, given my lack of experience in the field, I volunteered mine. For much of the class, Tina used my topics to demonstrate how to use Google Scholar, the various research databases, and the library search catalog. Afterwards, Tina also worked with me for a little while individually, in order to help me figure out exactly how to narrow down my topics of research. This was very helpful, considering how broad "loneliness" and "intimacy" are as search terms. In particular, she taught me how to properly compound search terms on top of one another in order to get the best results. As a result of this session, I had much firmer footing going forward.

In general, the library databases were the most helpful part of the research process. As I mentioned before, not only did I have no real experience in this topic before, but my starting points were also incredibly broad. However, using the databases at my disposal and the various tools within them, I was able to find the most pertinent information with relative ease. Right off the bat, I wanted to limit my searches to within the last thirty or so years, to make sure that the information on psychology I got was relatively up to date. In addition, the research databases provided suggested terms to combine my searches with, allowing me to efficiently narrow down my results to what would be relevant to the formation of my argument. From this process I studied roughly ten sources with considerable depth, four of which I then incorporated into my final essay. Using the library's catalog search, I also found a textbook on intimate relationships that I used in much the same way as the results from the databases.

With my research in place, I was able to start combining the argument I wanted to make with the images from the film. As I expected, there were many shots that fit in perfectly with the information that I had picked up, articulating a concise argument as if they were framed with these very psychological concepts in mind (maybe they were!). As I began to construct my outline, I had to drop several research sources along with various shots from the film. It was difficult to part with the study I put into these sources/shots, but it definitely made my argument more concise and in turn more effective. Even though at this point I had enough bulk information to begin the paper, I decided to hold-off a little bit longer. Instead, I decided to go through my remaining sources one more time and wrote down around fifty particularly significant quotes. This was a tiresome process, but turned out to substantially expedite the writing process, since I had the most pressing tidbits of information available whenever I needed them. Despite the fact that it delayed my ability to actually start writing the paper, it is a tactic I fully intend to use the next time I embark on a project requiring significant research.

Once I completed my final draft, I realized my paper turned out to be somewhat different from the majority of the other papers in my class. While most other papers used their image(s) as a starting point before diving into significant research regarding their societal context, I took an almost inverse approach. I started with my research regarding society-at-large, and then used this information to conduct an in-depth analysis into my selected images. However, while my paper put the emphasis on my own personal analysis, the research process was just as critical in making it an effective piece. I am very proud of how I was able to use the psychological field, which I had very little experience in, to accent the visual themes of *Lost in Translation*'s imagery. Furthermore, I am certain I wouldn't have had the same amount of success without the resources afforded to me by the GW libraries.