

Jet lag

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

The bedazzling first neon shots of Tokyo in *Lost in Translation* suggest a topsy-turvy version of Manhattan--weirdly familiar and yet alien, denser, even more vertiginous. Bob Harris (Bill Murray), a middle-aged movie star who's been flown to Japan to shoot a series of whiskey commercials, stares out the window of his cab and blinks through his jet-lag haze. This one-of-a-kind movie, written and directed by Sofia Coppola, is about trying to navigate through a foreign environment and finding the process mirrors your fear that you've been stranded in your own life, marooned on an unrecognizable shore, with no idea how to find your way back.

Bob's career has hit a rocky patch, and his 20-year marriage has become thorny with half-buried resentments. (When he arrives at his hotel, a note from his wife reminds him that he forgot their son's birthday, but she's sure the kid will understand.) In the hotel bar he meets 23-year-old Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), who's accompanied her photographer husband (Giovanni Ribisi) to Tokyo and is left alone for days at a time while he travels with the band he's shooting. Struggling to connect with this exotic culture she expected to find exciting and enlightening just makes her lonelier. After two years of marriage she's begun to realize that she and her husband are strangers to each other, and she hasn't settled on a career. Fellow refugees, fellow insomniacs, she and Bob become companions.

This is Coppola's second film. Her first was an adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Virgin Suicides*--perhaps the oddest adolescent narrative of recent years, in which five teenage siblings are imprisoned in their suburban house by their nutty mother, with tragic results. The film's plot didn't make sense, the characters were insufficiently drawn, the point of view was confusing, yet something about it clung to you afterwards--the images of the fragile, doomed girls, glimpsed through the rapt adoration of the local boys who wanted to rescue them. You could see that Coppola had an unusual talent for conjuring up plaintive, haunting moods, even if she hadn't figured out how to tell a story. (The talent isn't unexpected: she's the daughter of Francis Ford Coppola.)

When I first saw *Lost in Translation* I concluded that she still hasn't figured it out. Despite the superlative work of the two stars and the breathtaking cinematography by Lance Acord, who portrays the unceasing hustle of Tokyo with smoky clarity (as a sleepless traveler, unable to turn it off, might view it), I found the picture unsatisfying. The scenes felt like beads on a string; they didn't link up.

But the movie got under my skin, and I kept rerunning scenes in my head. So I went back to check it out. I discovered that the links of the story are indeed there, only they're not typical cause-and-effect connections. They're formed by the emotions that gather at the end of one episode and pour into the next--emotions shaped by the restlessness and unidentified longing of these two people.

What draws Bob and Charlotte together is a shared ironic humor. Hers makes her husband, John, impatient; he hates the way her tone constantly judges everyone they meet, like the airhead actress (Anna Faris) they encounter in the lobby. (Despite Ribisi's physical inventiveness, the movie is weakest in the scenes involving him and Faris; Coppola doesn't think much of these two, so she doesn't bother to humanize them.) Bob's irony is a natural asset, the keynote of his charm as well as a resource for hanging onto his sanity.

Murray, whose trademark is a kind of ironic extravagance, is hilarious in the scenes where he has to negotiate linguistic and cultural obstacles. But he's far more muted here than ever before, with an unaccustomed naturalistic expressiveness in the scenes where he and Charlotte let their guards down. That's easier for Charlotte; she has less self-protection to shuffle off. Johansson's acting has tremendous delicacy, and she has a radiant vulnerability that makes her throaty alto voice a continual surprise.

Nothing in *Lost in Translation* is predictable. Though Charlotte and Bob become soulmates, their relationship never turns physical. The movie is a sort of romantic comedy, but its prevailing tone is melancholy. It's reminiscent of *Before Sunrise*, Richard Linklater's marvelous film about the brief encounter of an American boy and a French girl, but whereas in that movie Vienna serves as a romantic catalyst, in *Lost in Translation* the characters are defined in opposition to Tokyo. And they're at different points in their lives, which means their relationship is unique to this place, and unsustainable. The evanescence of what evolves between them is part of what makes this improbably lovely film bittersweet.