

From Extraordinary Viewers to the Ordinary: Film Questioning Us

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Abstract

We have desire to perfectly analyse a film, observe scenes broken into pieces as evidence to explain all the events and behaviours in the film. The desire implies that we tend to see our own ordinary lives in the same way. The film, Lost in Translation tells us to resist such a worldview. Just as successful communication is not a matter of the precision of direct translation, possible ways of transformation should not be analytically planned and premeditated. The film works as a device not only to tell us how we live our ordinary lives but also to make us sensuously experience them in frustration caused by biddeness of transformation as in the case of Bob and Charlotte, the two main characters in Lost in Translation.

INTRODUCTION

When we watch a film, we recognize ourselves as a viewer of the world. Viewers are offered information individual characters cannot know, which makes it possible for viewers to be a judge of every event in the film in terms of ethics, aesthetics, or entertainment. In that sense, viewers are extraordinary existences in watching a film. But, how about when we see the world in reality? Don't we try to see the world in the same way as we watch a film? We may think the world can be analyzed into pieces of information and the more information you gain, the more clearly and correctly you see the world. It seems that we have desire to be a viewer – not a character – of the world. There, an extraordinary viewpoint is sought for, as if a film is entertaining because such a desire is temporarily met. In this essay, it is described how the film *Lost in Translation* resists such an analytic view. The film thematizes human transformation, but we cannot analyze our own transformation as we analyze a film. How human transformation is experienced is described in connection with the nature of our language that is one part of main themes of the film. The film's resistance makes us experience and rethink how we go through human transformation not in an atomically analyzable way.

IS TRANSFORMATION ACCOMPLISHED?

The film, *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003) is one which resists to be viewed analytically. A good way to understand its resistance begins with a question such as “is transformation accomplished at the end of the film?” Charlotte and Bob are both stuck in and bored with an ordinary life and relationship when they come to Japan. They happen to meet in a hotel and get to know each other. They gradually build a special bond through interaction with each other and hanging out for a night in Tokyo. In the last scene, they say goodbye to each other, hug,

kiss and leave in opposite directions. We see them cry and smile. The background music is refreshing. Taking into consideration the scene's atmosphere or their facial expression, it seems appropriate to claim that something has changed in them. They have gone through transformation. Yet, there remain some questions. What kind of transformation did they undergo? What exactly did they acquire? How do we as viewers justify the claim that they have successfully transformed. Facing those questions, we may start to collect evidence to prove the transformation – or otherwise, the possibility of status quo. For example, Charlotte visited temples twice. In the first visit, she is shocked that she cannot feel anything – that is what she tells to her mother on the phone (0:13:23). In the second visit, her satisfying smile (1:15:46) expresses she enjoyed something calm and spiritual. You may notice that Bob's dressing does not suit him throughout the movie – a suit weirdly fastened with clips in a commercial shooting scene, nightgown worn in a sloppy way, and T-shirt inside out in a night party with Japanese young folks – while he dresses neatly in leaving. All those film directions can be evidences of their successful transformation. The confirmation of transformation by such evidence would lead to further questions, such as what exactly makes their transformation happen or how can we tell that the transformation happens in a real world without easy evidence searched for in a film if the movie expresses some message to its viewers. Then we seem to be stuck because there are no obviously identifiable scenes to explain this. There are no eye-opening maxims from Japanese culture or critical events which destabilize their relationships with their partners. We sense that there is transformation but we cannot prove it. This irritates us and drives us to watch the film more closely for more subtle evidence. You might eventually find small fragments of evidence that convince everyone. However, facing the limitation of explaining a film analytically, aren't we required to question the way we watch a film here?

It is not that the possibility of transformation is denied at all due to the lack of its precise explanation. As Naoko Saito suggests, by “expos[ing] herself patiently to what happens in the film” or “paying close attention to the bodily movements of Bob and Charlotte, their subtle changes in facial expressions, and the words they utter, a certain thread of the film is elucidated” (Saito, 2019, p. 94). What is at stake is how to treat what is elucidated. Saito says, “what makes this film a perfectionist story is not a matter of Bob and Charlotte achieving something solid at the end” (Saito, 2019, p. 95). The image of something solid probably comes from the word transformation itself. One of the most familiar visualizations of transformation would be a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly through a cocoon. While this kind of image metaphorically tells a lot about the nature of human transformation, it can deceive us in some sense. Nobody can fail to distinguish a butterfly from a caterpillar. The result of transformation is obvious. Also, we know – not scientifically exactly but roughly – that there are fixed environmental conditions to be met to successfully transform and once they are met, transformation goes in a solid way. However, this is not how human transformation happens, or at least it is not how we experience our transformation.

THE NATURE OF OUR LANGUAGE AND OUR FRUSTRATION

How we experience transformation is well understood in relation to the understanding of how our language works. We have observed that we have a desire to analytically break a film down into objective pieces to understand what happened and what kind of meaning there is in each

scene. It can be pointed out that the same tendency goes with our language. To put it simply, words are small pieces of information comprising a scene and sentences are scenes. A whole text would be a film. If you want to identify the meaning of a text, you just have to elucidate the logical connection between words and words or sentences and sentences. In such a case, language is seen to be a tool to reflect the structure of the world. If you successfully analyze the events in the world, that means you can precisely express it in language and vice versa. If you want to make sure your analysis is correct, you need to show how logically precise your language is in describing the world. There is no interpretive diversity, and eventually a fixed and perfect structure of the world is identified through language analysis. How can we believe such a world view – or why not? This argument would lead to diverse and complicated controversy over analytic philosophy, but here let us focus on what the film and pay attention to what it tries to say.

One of the main themes of *Lost in Translation* is obviously “translation.” Bob and Charlotte are in a foreign country and they do not understand the local language at all. If we think translation is a matter of precision based on an analytic worldview, we might attribute all the awkwardness and depression Bob and Charlotte experience in Japan to a matter of lack of ability to understand a different language and culture. One of the best examples of it would be a scene where Bob takes part in a Suntory whisky commercial shooting. Bob cannot feel confident to act right because of language barrier. Probably, Bob himself thinks all the uncomfortableness comes from a failure of direct translation. He keeps asking his translator “that’s all what he says? (0:9:28)” in the first CM shooting scene as if a better translator can bring comfort in the world back to him. Is this really so? Bob and Charlotte’s miscommunication with their partners, highlights in a sense that their communication goes wrong even in their native language, thus showing us the possibility of miscommunication being not only a matter of different languages. It can be said that a stage setting that emphasizes difficulty in translating different languages directs spotlight on how language itself needs translation in communication. It also shows how we are lost when the translation fails. Bob’s confusion by not understanding Japanese works as a good metaphor of his sense of feeling lost: in a midlife crisis. From that perspective, Bob’s translator’s somewhat strange behavior not to translate most of what the director says in the first commercial shooting scene and not to even try to make any kind of excuse does not describe her own lack of ability or theatrical effect for the sake of comedy but rather it can be seen as a well-made description of the nature of our language. A viewer with fully analytic mind would feel frustrated with the translator’s deficiency or laziness because they believe her job is to translate every single piece of Japanese sentences into English one with maximum precision. However, the scene implies that this is not how our language works. The frustration is embedded in the nature of language and there is not such a final solution: that of direct translation.

HIDDENNESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Let us go back to the issue of human transformation. The same kind of frustration is aroused around the scenes in which we sense Bob and Charlotte’s inner transformation. The frustration culminates in the last scenes where Bob whispers something to Charlotte and she is obviously impressed by that. The viewer could not hear what he says. It is hidden from us. If it is revealed,

it would be a huge hint to analytically understand what has happened in and caused her inner transformation because we see certain words directly and explicitly move her emotion unlike subtleness and implicitness of other scenes. This is the last chance for viewers to fix why and how their inner transformation has happened. Their attempts are directed to fail. Our failure to atomically analyse a film makes us sensuously experience what Bob and Charlotte experience in Japan and also how we live our life. Bob in a CM shooting scene is us who feel unfit in the world and trying to make things right with frustration. Bob in the film does not have any extraordinary viewpoints from which to observe himself and to know what to do next to make things better. Even if he is in a foreign country without knowing its language and culture, he still lives an ordinary life – Japanese culture does not give him an eye-opening, life-turning or extraordinary teaching. By such frustrating experience as Bob's, we are denied an extraordinary viewpoint to see the world from and are dragged down to our own ordinary life. We realize that we cannot anticipate beforehand cannot what may transform us, and we cannot premeditatedly plan to meet Bob's last word to Charlotte in our ordinary life. Stanley Cavell (1981), who Saito relies on in her perfectionist interpretation of the film, says, "those who realize that they have lost the world, i.e., are lost to it...do not know beforehand what you [they] will find" (p. 53). He also says "a priori conditions [under which our knowledge works] are not themselves knowable a priori, but are to be discovered experimentally" (p. 95).

CONCLUSION

The film is certainly about human transformation. It is directed for us to see that Bob and Charlotte are under transformation through diverse experiences and interactions. However, the film resists giving viewers a moralizing message by revealing the exact moment and structure of the transformation because the very person right in the middle of the transformation is not given such information. Through its hiddenness and frustrations caused by it, the film questions us the way to watch a film, and the way we live our ordinary lives. We do not live our ordinary lives as a film viewer able to know extra information that the characters in the film cannot know. It directs us to rethink how we live our lives – especially in the middle of crisis and struggle for help – which possibly gives us hope in our ordinary lives without driving us to be an extraordinary film viewer.

REFERENCES

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