

Philosophy as Translation in *Lost in Translation*: Is it Possible to Overlap Philosophy as Translation with the Film?

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to see Lost in Translation from the perspective of Philosophy as Translation. According to Standish and Saito, the process of translation is "neither as a metaphor nor as a clearly circumscribed topic but as metonym of our lives." As we translate from one language to another, we experience the process of translation when we undergo the experiences which are never expressed by words. This paper examines whether it is appropriate to adopt the lens of philosophy as translation to examine the ways of life of the characters in the film.

CRITIQUE OF THE SCENES IN *LOST IN TRANSLATION*

Lost In Translation (2003) is a film in which two main characters, Bob and Charlotte, who falling into an identity crisis come to change gradually by the encounter of the other and mutual interaction. Bob is a famous, and successful actor. He comes to Japan to make an advert for Suntory whisky. He does not seem to enjoy visiting. The Japanese way of life does not fit him, so he feels uncomfortable or strange all the time. For example, Japanese style room wear is a little short for him, the position of the shower head is a little low for him. He eats breakfast alone and the use of chopsticks is very awkward for him. He is also puzzled with the Japanese business custom of passing business card to him. He, who wants to go back home, tries to reject the offer which demands a longer stay in Tokyo. He is confined in his hotel where he is able to communicate in English and never gets out of the hotel like a tourist. Charlotte, a Yale philosophy graduate, now in her twenties, also came to Tokyo with no specific active motivation. She just follows her husband, who works as a photographer of movie stars. Unlike Bob, she tries to touch Japanese culture. She goes out on the street, visits a video arcade, and a temple, and joins a flower arranging class. However, none of them inspires her. She cries on the phone and says to her mother, "I feel nothing." She sits by and stares out of the window across the high-rise buildings of Tokyo.

In the first scene of the encounter at the bar, the two introduce themselves and talk about the situation they find themselves in. Charlotte points out that he is in a "midlife crisis." Bob also knows that Charlotte has just graduated from university and has not found who she is yet. They know that both of them have similar problems about an identity crisis, as well as suffering from insomnia. When they are in Charlotte's room before hanging out, Bob finds the CD titled "Soul Search." He tells her that he has one, too. We do not know if it is a lie or not, but he shows empathy with her. However, he feels still uncomfortable, which is shown by the way he wears his T-shirt inside out. After hanging out at the club and the underground bar, they enjoy

karaoke. When he sings the song “More than this,” he makes eye contact with her. The lyrics of the song is “More than this there is nothing Oh, more than this you tell me one thing More than this you know there’s nothing.” Then, they share the same feeling and project their difficult situations to the lyrics. The fact that they get close by means of karaoke is suggestive, because it originated in Japan, but at the same time, it is now internationalized. Charlotte and Bob did not feel comfortable within strange culture, but they finally feel good and sympathize with each other through Japanese culture. In addition, although the form (karaoke) is Japanese, the content (song) is Western. They can succeed in healing themselves and understanding where they are via different cultures. Charlotte puts her head on his shoulder and they share a cigarette. She relies on and leans on him.

After the karaoke day, Bob’s condition becomes better. He enjoys playing golf in nature, and takes shiatsu massages. He tells her that thanks to it, the tightness of the body has completely disappeared. It suggests that he may be at the exit of the midlife crisis. However, he continues “then replaced by unbelievable pain.” It infers that he will feel pain in the process of getting out of this difficult period. Then, as for the pain, she make a remark that she feels it on her toe. He makes fun of her saying “it’s dead,

” but he takes her to the hospital in the end. His tightness is gone, so next it is Charlotte’s turn. He lets her sit on the wheel chair and pushes it from behind. Bob, who has not been willing to have communication with foreigners, speaks to a man at the information desk of the hospital in a positive manner. While he waits for her medical examination, he talks with a middle-aged lady. She is not able to speak English at all, so they do not have a fluent communication with each other, but when she opens the door, he holds a cushion with the illustration of an owl. An owl that has nocturnal habits reminds us of night or sleep. Bob and Charlotte have been suffering from insomnia. The cushion may be the key for improving sleeplessness. It suggests that she may be heading to the exit she has been looking for a long time.

In the latter half of the film, Bob and Charlotte drink Japanese sake on the bed while watching a movie. They are very close, but never touch. Then, they keep talking while lying on the bed. Charlotte turns her face toward him, and Bob looks up at the ceiling. This is the time that she reveals her problem to him. She confesses that she is stuck. When she asks a straightforward question, he answers honestly. Then, he recommends her to keep writing. There is no certain reason why he says so (because he has never seen her writing), but he would know that a young person who is at a loss needs encouraging words from the other, even if it is inappropriate advice. He tells her honestly how complicated life can be, touching her toe. At the beginning of the film, she said “I feel nothing” weeping on the phone. However, she has been feeling pain on her toe. Nobody knows how she hurt her toe, but it can be said metaphorically that she has not worn good shoes which fit her. Owing to his kindness, her pain is softened and, now, he touches her toe gently. He acts like a healer for her. He seems to be a mentor for her, but it can be said that he plays a therapeutic role as a healer for her, and vice versa. He is also healed by her. They heal each other with their words and attitudes. Largely, in the bed scene, he appears to give advice to her, but, in reality, he comes simultaneously understand who and where he is by his own words. It means that she heals him by listening.

SEE THE FILM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PHILOSOPHY AS TRANSLATION

Here, I move on to the argument about connecting the critique of the film with the philosophy as translation. According to Standish and Saito, translation is not linguistic, technical procedures, but “the metonym of our lives” (Standish and Saito 2017, p. 2). Generally speaking, translation is considered to be carried out when we transfer one language to another one. However, translation is beyond any simple sense of linguistic exchange. Standish explains the fallacy about language and translation referring to Derrida. According to Powerpoint lecture note by Naoko Saito and Paul Standish in the International collaborative course (February 5, 2022, Online), Standish points out that it is a fallacy that translation involves the matching of a word from language A with a word from language B. It is wrong because it imagines languages A and B as more or less pure or uncontaminated, but no language is pure and stable. Thoreau also mentions that the sense of transitivity and volatility inheres in language. The meaning of words is unstable, and it refuses to be fixed and shifts. Therefore it always extends beyond what we intend. As for this point, Standish explains that Cavell indicates that there is projective nature in language. The meaning of words is dynamically changeable, and far from stable, hence, words are beyond our grasp (ibid.) By connecting the nature of language with the nature of human beings, as linguistic beings, he suggests that the identity of the self is also always open to new possibilities. Besides, he considers that “it is an essential moment in the work of philosophy to make human existence, or show it to be, strange to itself” (Cavell, Forthcoming). The process of translation is the trigger to re-examine ourselves, which means that translation is equal to the endeavour of making the familiar strange. That is why translation never fails to go with transformation. It can be said that life and culture are the processes of transformation. In other words, he puts emphasis on the feeling of wrongness, or discomfort. Cavell may suggest that we should criticize the common sense that we unconsciously accept in daily lives, not taking it for granted automatically. The chances of learning foreign languages are opportunities to re-examine our languages and our identities. For that reason, translation really works in education while going beyond the subject of English.

Now, I will re-examine the film from the perspective of philosophy of translation. Both of the main characters, Bob and Charlotte, who have fallen in an identity crisis change not drastically but definitely by the encounter in Tokyo. Their attitudes, appearances, and remarks tell us that they have transformed in the latter half of the work. They succeeded in re-examining themselves by seeing from the eyes of the other. However, I am not willing to see the drama as the story of philosophy as translation, because the differences between transformation and translation are still ambiguous. It is absolutely true that both of them have transformed themselves by the encounter, but it can be said that it is just transformation, not translation. As I mentioned above, the process of translation is equal to the endeavour of making the familiar strange. By encountering the other, we doubt and criticize our inner sense or intrinsic language. As a result of the process, we will get new interest or trust in the world with renewed words. However, Bob and Charlotte had already lost their meaning of life before coming to Tokyo. They had already doubted their identities or who they were. Or I might say that the film represents the last stage of the process of translation. Bob and Charlotte came to Tokyo at a pupal state, and could get out of it by the encounter. Translation is the process of recreating the things that are impossible to express in words in one’s dictionary. By re-examining

the gap between their languages and other languages (or nonverbal sense), they re-examine and redefine their own language or interpretation. They give new words and expressions to nonverbal experiences or feelings of wrongness that they experienced, which leads them to open to new understanding.

In addition, I will raise a question about the importance of translation. Standish and Saito pick up the scene where Charlotte steps on the stones in Nanzenji temple, in order to point out that she underwent translation. However, she seems to go to Kyoto and enjoy sightseeing spots just like a tourist. It may be true that she recovered the sense that can be inspired by different cultures, and it is the fruit of translation. However, if the result of the translation changes those who struggle with identities to anonymous tourists, is translation really meaningful? Although common tourists just visit famous sites and lose a chance to transform themselves, Charlotte seems to have got it after transformation. I wonder if the advocates of philosophy as translation only value the process of translation which gives us new perspectives, not the result of that. I do not understand the philosophy fully, so I would like to dig it up while raising questions.

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