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## Under the spell of tokyo

Jean-Paul Thibaud

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Ghosts [phantasmagorias]

# 64 Lo sQuaderno

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*Under the spell of Tokyo*

# Under the Spell of Tokyo

**Jean-Paul Thibaud**

## **Half awake<sup>1</sup>**

Many authors have noticed and commented on the hypnotic power of cinema<sup>2</sup>. Halfway between wakefulness and sleep, the spectator is placed in a paradoxical state, in a second state of hallucination, trance, abandonment, fascination. The darkness of the projection room and the immobility of the spectator, the perceptive isolation from the rest of the world, the implementation of a unique and continuous focus of attention contribute to producing this effect of quasi-sleep. Bob Harris, one of the two main characters in *Lost In Translation*, the movie by Sofia Coppola, seems to be in a similar state when he arrives in Tokyo. With jetlag and fatigue, he discovers the city in a state of drowsiness at the very beginning of the film. Dazed look, drowsy body, floating attention. The tone is set. The experience of Tokyo will not be under the sign of full vigilance and perfect intelligibility, but rather under that of sleepwalking and disorientation. The awakening to the city will take place gradually, in a surreptitious way and in company. Similar to the cinema exerting its hold on the spectators by plunging them into another state, the Japanese capital city will discreetly intrude into the emotional life and the very ways of being of the American visitor.

## **Ambient acclimatization**

If the city and the cinema work so well together, it is because both have a capacity to inhabit and transform our experience. In both cases, we are immersed in a singular sensitive environment that affects us and takes possession of us. Rightly, Jean Ladrière<sup>3</sup> considered the city as an “existential inducer”, enabling to feel “a certain affective tone that qualifies our existential movement”. *Lost In Translation* could well be a test of this proposal. Indeed, Sofia Coppola seems to ask a question in her film: what happens when we arrive in a foreign city for the first time? By following Bob Harris and Charlotte, the two protagonists of the story, the filmmaker invites us to plunge into the atmosphere of Tokyo. It is less a question of proposing a touristic visit or discovering the emblematic places of the Japanese capital than of imperceptibly infusing in its *ambiance*. The characters will gradually acclimatize to the tones of the city and enter into resonance with it, becoming one with its lights, sounds, rhythms, and energy. It is as if the film functions as an atmospheric infusion from which the initial feeling of strangeness fades away.

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1 *Credit*: This article has been previously published in French: Jean-Paul Thibaud (2015) *Imprégnations de Tokyo*, in: Nicolas Tixier (Ed.) *Traversées urbaines. Villes et films en regard*. Genève: Métis Presses, pp. 73-80.

2 Raymond Bellour (2009) *Le corps du cinéma. hypnoses, émotions, animalités*. Paris: P.O.L.

3 Jean Ladrière (1973) *La ville comme inducteur existentiel, in Vie sociale et destinée*. Gembloux: Duculot, pp. 139-160.

## Forms of strangeness

The strangeness in *Lost In Translation* is not of the same type as that of Roland Barthes's book *The Empire of Signs*. If the latter describes Tokyo and Japan in the mode of a radical strangeness, of the order of the untranslatable, Sofia Coppola's film puts us rather in the presence of a "familiar strangeness"<sup>4</sup>. We recognize without too much effort the signs of hypermodernity and those of tradition, the Tokyo of *pachinko* and that of *ikebana*. A whole series of situations explore this type of strangeness. For example, when everyday objects do not work quite as one might expect: a too-small shower forcing one to bend over, an uncontrollable sports machine, an automatic curtain that opens in the morning without warning, etc. The world of objects is no longer taken for granted, it is rather experienced as surprising and unexpected. The same goes for the meeting of unlikely characters with whom one does not really know how to behave. From the ridiculous call girl to the tyrannical advertising executive, from the laconic photographer to the hysterical TV host, everything happens as if Bob Harris were surrounded by excessive and caricatured characters with whom he doesn't know what to do. Cultural codes escape him and social interactions remain enigmatic. But if these discrepancies provide material for slapstick scenes and comic effects, they take on a whole new face with Charlotte. Her escapades in Tokyo lead her instead to a feeling of disorientation, loneliness and alienation. We then pass from the universe of Jacques Tati and Buster Keaton to that of Wim Wenders and Michelangelo Antonioni. From the Buddhist ritual to which she attends indifferently, to the electronic game rooms that she visits as a disengaged spectator, it is a completely different atmosphere that we are exposed to. The body-incongruous of Bob Harris is replaced by the eye-distant of Charlotte. Perhaps we have here two polarities from which our strangeness in the world is configured. *Lost in Translation* takes up and explores the figure of the stranger in a new way. From Georg Simmel to Alfred Schütz, from the Chicago School to Isaac Joseph, from Bruce Bégout to Bernhard Waldenfels, abundant literature describes this subtle dynamic of distance and proximity that we maintain with the surrounding world. Sofia Coppola's film takes up this theme by giving a sense of the various tones that run through this condition, ranging from the comical to the tragic of existence.

## Atmospheric situations

This shifted relationship to the surrounding world manifests itself less in action scenes or in a tight plot than in atmospheric situations. If this condition of stranger limits the capacity of the characters to understand what is said, to interpret what happens, and to act in accordance, it contributes on the other hand to sharpen a sensitivity to atmospheres. If one cannot clearly grasp the message of an interlocutor, one begins to listen to the music of his or her language. For those interested in urban ambiances, this is far from trivial. It is as if a certain amount of strangeness, a certain degree of disorientation, a relative loss of the obviousness of the everyday world were necessary to become sensitive to the atmospheres in which we are immersed. And indeed, everything contributes to making *Lost in Translation* an atmospheric film<sup>5</sup>. If not much is going on – little action and laconic dialogues – this is due to the attention focused more on the places and landscapes, gestures and faces, silences and lights. These expressive materials seem to become the primary substance of the film, allowing to feel the emergence of Tokyo's atmospheres and the transformation of the characters' emotional state. It is a question here of what is felt, of the meeting of aesthetics and ethology attentive to the infinite nuances of expression. But how does this sensory acclimatization and impregnation of urban atmospheres take place?

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4 Bernard Stiegler (2013) « Lost in translation » : réflexions sur la traduction et le dialogue interculturel », *Trivium*, 15, 2013, <http://trivium.revues.org/4704>

5 Brian L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling (2011), Cinema and choric connection: Lost in translation as sensual experience, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 97(4), pp. 363–386.

## Motor conformation

In order to answer this question, certain scenes in the film function as manifestations of this progressive tuning to the environment. The most elementary process undoubtedly concerns motor conformation, the adjustment of the body to new environments, the adoption of new ways of moving and standing. We have witnessed Bob's embarrassment in front of surprising everyday objects, but we should just as well note the banal gestures repeated in common situations in Japan: bending over to greet, eating with chopsticks, etc. Beyond these clichés, it is a question of learning how to adjust with one's immediate surroundings. The paradigmatic scene of this type of acclimatization is the one in which Charlotte walks through a Japanese garden, carefully following the stone path provided for this purpose. Her walking rhythm, the length of her steps and the meandering of her path resonate with the material layout of the garden. The attention paid in Japan to the lower part of the body<sup>6</sup> and to the contact with the ground is very concretely actualized in this scene. In a way, the body reconfigures itself by adapting to new conditions, initiating new motor habits and familiarizing itself with new sensory-motor schemes. A kinesthetic and proprioceptive habituation develops little by little, in an involuntary and unconscious way, allowing Bob and Charlotte to feel more at ease in this new environment. The infusion of this new ambiance operates here at a pre-reflexive level and unfolds in the terms of a soma-aesthetic<sup>7</sup>.

## Sensory infiltration

A second figure relates to the porosity of living beings to the surrounding world. Speaking of sensory infiltration, it is a question of recognizing our capacity to be affected and inhabited by what surrounds us. The air we breathe is often given as an example, alternating inhalation and exhalation, and revealing this fundamental condition of permeability between the subject and the world. In *Lost in Translation*, we see a double treatment of this question. On the one hand, the city is put at a distance, seen from above the hotel room and perfectly silent. We are dealing here with the panoramic, overhanging and disengaged gaze as described by Michel de Certeau<sup>8</sup> and so much commented since. Tokyo seems inaccessible here, and its *ambiances* almost absent. But a second treatment is also proposed, which shows how the city manages to infiltrate despite all expectations within the characters themselves. The lights of Tokyo radiate from all sides, projected and reflected on the windows of the hotel room or the cab. In some scenes, Bob and/or Charlotte are literally bathed in the ambient light of the city, tinted with the colors of Tokyo and superimposed on the luminous landscape. In this case, we are no longer in front of an image or a view, but rather immersed in a sensitive environment and blended into the landscape. Tokyo invites itself into the hotel room and imprints itself on the characters' skin. The acclimatization to the urban ambiances finds then a second formula: not only the adoption of new motor habits but also the infiltration of sensory phenomena.

## Gestural Imitation

As the title suggests, the inability to understand the language is one of the leitmotifs that run through the film. This situation might seem prohibitive, yet a scene of primary importance occurs towards the end of the film that offers an alternative to this apparent inability to communicate and be understood. If verbal interaction between a Japanese and an American seems impossible, it can nevertheless explore another terrain: that of gestures, of a "conversation by gesture"<sup>9</sup>. In this scene of waiting at the hospital, Bob imitates the sounds and inflections of the person who is talking

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6 François Laplantine (2010) *Tokyo, ville flottante*. Paris: Stock.

7 Richard Shusterman (2008) *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

8 Michel de Certeau (1980) *L'invention du quotidien. Tome 1 Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard.

9 George Herbert Mead (1934) *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

to him, and in turn re-enacts the body gestures that accompany the speech of his interlocutor. A real exchange takes place between the two characters, which reflects an attention brought to the aesthetic qualities of the voice and to the forms which draw the movement of the hand. Imitation replaces translation, the quality of the gesture replaces the meaning of the word, and analog communication replaces digital communication. For the first time in the film, we are truly plunged into Japanese culture. A process of familiarization seems to be underway, opening up to the sensitivity to others, to the possibility of a shared game, and then allowing the development of the beginning of an exchange. Acclimatization in Tokyo involves processes of imitation, which, for Gabriel Tarde<sup>10</sup>, are the very foundation of the social bond.

## Urban Tuning

A last form of acclimatization is apparent throughout the film, giving a sense of the evolution of the tonicity and vitality of the characters. While the first part of the movie presents long scenes of sitting or lying down, in which rest, inaction and immobility are predominant, the following part puts the characters in motion, making them more alert, mobile and active. Everything happens as if Tokyo manages to infuse its energy into the visitors, drawing them into its frenzy and agitation. The gestures become more lively, the walk more determined, the body more eager. The characters come alive. The way of filming enhances and expresses this movement of intensification of the experience: the scenes become shorter, the sound of the city more present, the colored lights of the neon lights and other screens more vivid and bright. New affects of vitality<sup>11</sup> appear, which increase the power of action of the characters. The same tone seems to imbue the bodies and the spaces of the city. If the beginning of the film showed the newcomers to be out of tune, insensitive to their surroundings, the following part shows how they end up tuning into the urban ambiance. In the same way that musicians and listeners share the same duration in the musical experience, that they tune in<sup>12</sup>, a shared rhythm is established here between the movements of the characters and the atmospheres of Tokyo. It is all about the intensity and energy that emanates from the film, without us really knowing “who has the fever in the evening, if it is the lights of the city or the busy passers-by”<sup>13</sup>.

## On Impregnation

Isn't it ultimately about exploring an art of impregnation? With *Lost in Translation*, it is our (in)capacity to inhabit a world that seems to be presented at first glance. But if we look closely, it is also about our capacity to be inhabited by a world, to enter in connivance with it and to be transformed by its atmospheric powers.

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10 Gabriel Tarde (1890) *Les lois de l'imitation*. Paris: Félix Alcan.

11 Daniel Stern (2010) *Les formes de vitalité*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

12 Alfred Schütz (1951) Making music together: A Study in Social Relationship, *Social Research*, 18(1), pp. 76-97.

13 Pierre Sansot (1984) *Poétique de la ville*. Paris: Klincksieck.