

OLD GOLD! – *LOST IN TRANSLATION* (2003)

Preliminary: Intercultural Communication

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Syllabus Content

The nature of communication

Students will develop knowledge and understanding of the nature of communication through a study of:

- how culture determines the ways individuals encode messages, what mediums they choose for transmitting them, and the ways messages are interpreted
- verbal and non-verbal communication
- the role of communication in maintaining social relationships and social control

Focus study

Looking in/Looking out: Exploring Intercultural Communication

- Choose a cultural group and examine:
 - aspects of society and culture that are similar to or different from the student's own cultural group through the research method of secondary research
 - the existence of group identity and commitment to cultural continuity
 - examples of potential intercultural misunderstanding
 - strategies for dealing with intercultural misunderstanding
 - the role of intercultural exchange in gaining cultural perception and values
 - the role of intercultural dialogue in effective intercultural communication.

Syllabus Outcomes

- P3 identifies and describes relationships and interactions within and between social and cultural groups

Related concepts

Culture, customs, cultural transmission, continuity and change, cultural heritage, society, stereotypes, values, westernisation

Rationale

Lost in Translation,

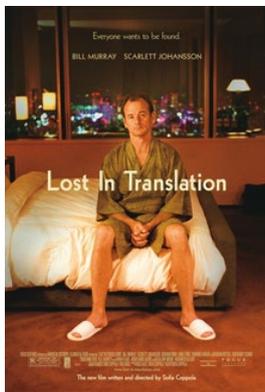
Directed by Sofia Coppola, USA, 2003

Rating: PG 13

Genre: Drama / Comedy

This resource by Lucy Macken was originally part of Vol 110 (2017) *Focus on Film*. The resource can be used by students to explore the nature of communication, especially the role of culture in shaping all aspects of the communication process through the viewing of the film *Lost in Translation* (2013). Whilst the resource focuses on exploring features of Japanese and North American (USA) culture and communication, related concepts of westernisation, individualism/collectivism are key. For teachers, the resource can be used in its entirety or alternatively, it may serve as a template to explore other cultures or pieces of stimulus.

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Synopsis

Bob Harris is an American actor who is doing some commercial shoots and TV shows in Japan. Charlotte accompanies her husband, a photographer, who is constantly away working during their stay in Tokyo, which leaves Charlotte to herself quite often. Both are looking for the meaning of their lives, both of them have difficulties adjusting to the surroundings and, additionally, they both have trouble getting to sleep. As they are staying in the same hotel, the Park Hyatt Tokyo, they meet during one of their midnight walks around the hotel. Soon Bob and Charlotte become friends as they share a feeling of being “out of context” (Sofia Coppola, the director, has described the role of the Bill Murray character as “this big American out of context”).

From: http://www.uni-hildesheim.de/interculturalfilm/show_entry.php?fid=115&sid=337&cl=1

Poster image: Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_in_Translation_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_in_Translation_(film))

Teaching and Learning Activities

FORMALITY

Welcome to the hotel

Japan is part of the modern world these days, with big, expensive hotels in the Western styles. This welcome, though, mirrors Japanese traditions. People greet you by bowing, whereby the angle of inclination shows the hierarchical relationship, the comparative status of the two people involved. So in spite of globalisation the Japanese maintain at least parts of their traditional culture and include guests in it to a certain extent.

Shooting the whiskey commercial

In comparison to the welcoming scene at the hotel, where Japanese traditionalism is shown to a certain extent, we now see the results of Westernisation. The director is quite Western in his ways, his hair is dyed, he wears stylish glasses and he acts like a Westerner saying “cut-o, cut-o, cut-o” (deriving from “cut”). Also, the commercial itself, being for a luxury product originally from Britain, is filmed in a “British” atmosphere, introducing a foreign world into Japan. Nevertheless, the old traditions still appear as the Japanese use a lot more “honorifics” or formalities when addressing people, which is why they take longer than English speakers to say approximately the same thing.

Reflect on the differing conceptions of *formality* across these cultures, and explain how this might lead to Intercultural Communication.

Be sure to integrate key concepts in your response.

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INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM

Charlotte calls home

This scene shows clearly that Charlotte belongs to an individualistic world in which everyone has to look after him- or herself. The social networks that might catch you when you fall are very loose, and one person hardly cares about the problems of the other. Charlotte finds herself in a world where she is lost, as she is not a member of that society, which is a very important matter in Japanese culture: you have to have a group to belong to, otherwise, you are nothing. She does not belong to a group in Japan, and she is additionally let down by her friends and family back home.

Japanese Karaoke

The karaoke scene shows the importance of collectivism, especially of narrower group collectivism, in Japanese culture. This sort of entertainment is only enjoyed with a particular group of friends or people who belong together, and never in public as in Western culture. Doing something together which might be embarrassing for you individually strengthens the feeling of belonging together, of belonging to one group.

Kelly's karaoke

As Kelly is doing something in public which Japanese would only do behind closed doors with friends, she loses face. She isn't part of a group, which means that she is not included in the collectivist system, and thus stays alone.

Bob calls home

The individualism of Bob's world becomes obvious as he seems completely cut off from the life his family is leading at home. His wife does not show the least interest in the experiences he is having in Japan and just asks if she has to worry about him. So he, too, is cut off and lost in this new world that has opened to him, but which he too cannot completely penetrate.

What is the difference between individualism and collectivism?

Do you think the film presents a realistic interpretation of the difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures?

Be sure to integrate key concepts in your response

AFFECTIVITY (SHOWING EMOTION)

Visit of the prostitute (premium fantasy)

This scene shows the kind of Westernisation that is going on in Japan. It is doubtful whether a Japanese woman would act like this normally, and probably the prostitute is behaving in the way that she expects a Western man would want her to. She tries to meet Western expectations.

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RELATIONSHIP TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Ikebana

Ikebana can be translated as “living flowers brought to their real shape”. The art of Ikebana (most Japanese put flower arrangement on a level with painting and other art forms) reveals the Japanese love of nature. The structure of an Ikebana-style flower arrangement is based on three main points that symbolise heaven, earth, and humankind. In Ikebana, human beings and nature are brought together. Arranging flowers in this way means arranging them according to models offered by nature itself. Ikebana shows the desire of the Japanese people to have a piece of nature near them. Furthermore, while doing Ikebana, one becomes quiet, more patient, and tolerant of differences. This scene shows the way that Japanese people feel about nature: they feel a strong bond and deep love of nature. They try to imitate nature, but all the time they are aware that their work will never be as perfect as nature is. Thus, the Japanese have a very strong and positive relationship with nature and they try to preserve it.

Compare and contrast the Japanese relationship to the environment (as represented in the film through Ikebana) with your own culture.

Be sure to integrate key concepts in your response

COMMUNICATION STYLE: HIGH/LOW CONTEXT

A drink with Kelly

Kelly talks loudly, in a brash and direct way, showing that she comes from a low context culture. In contrast, the Japanese would treat topics like these very confidentially and discuss them in smaller groups, with close family or friends, as they come from a high context culture where things don't have to be spelled out completely in order to be understood. Again, Western culture clashes with the Japanese.

The talk show

The talk show host is completely Westernised, in a vulgar way, as revealed by his style and in the way he talks, acts and dances. But as he has the most famous show in Japan, this is presumably what Japanese people want, what is “cool”. It's very un-Japanese brashness makes it entertaining for reserved, high-context Japanese.

Identify one concept that is relevant to high/low context and the way it is represented in the film.

Explain its relevance in understanding how context affects Intercultural Communication.

Be sure to integrate relevant concepts in your response.

Source

Quast, B. (2003) Intercultural film database. Available at: http://www.uni-hildesheim.de/interculturalfilm/show_entry.php?fid=115&sid=0&cl=1 (Accessed: 16 August 2016).