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Cinematic Auteurism, and the New Wave Sensibilities of Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation"

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Even in a generation of unprecedentedly prolific film output, few films can be said to realistically warrant the label of “instant classic” quite like Sofia Coppola’s sophomore project *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003). Both a critical darling, a financial success, and a breakthrough film for both its two stars and its screenwriter/director, *Lost in Translation* has managed to stay relevant, revered, and widely written about, discussed, and studied even to this day – 15 years after its initial release. However, while an exhaustive quantity of ink, both physical and digital, has been spilled over the years as to explain exactly why the film works, considerably less work has been devoted to explaining *how* the film works. This paper will attempt to remedy this disparity. Its position is that the film utilizes both gender and historical elements as its two primary focuses. By examining *Lost in Translation* through the lens of François Truffaut’s auteur theory, we can see distinct elements of Coppola’s own female-centric auteurism subtly reinforcing the many themes, notions, ideas and values the film brings to the table. Similarly, by utilizing the historical mode of cultural analysis, we can see other nods to the decidedly new wave-inspired mentalities that categorized the birth of the auteur theory as a formidable force in the world of cinema in the first place.

As *Lost in Translation* was simultaneously Sofia Coppola’s sophomore project and her true breakthrough film, it served as the perfect introduction of her as a genuine cinematic auteur. However, before we can explain what exactly makes Coppola worthy of “auteur” status, we must first define the concept of auteurism itself. According to Andrew Sarris, the famed American film critic who introduced the auteur theory to American audiences, the auteur theory can be seen in three “premises,” all of which underscore a specific “criterion of value.” “The first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of the director as a criterion of value. The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director

as a criterion of value... [and] the third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art” (Sarris, 1962).

From the very first shot of *Lost in Translation*, the true nature of Coppola’s “technical competence” is made plainly apparent. She displays a formidable eye for composition throughout the film, and the images she creates therein are not only bold and interesting, but are also deeply meaningful and integral to her story. The film’s iconic opening shot of Scarlett Johansson’s bottom, clothed only in pink underwear, is not only a sly and deeply clever



comment on “the male gaze” from an affirmatively feminine director, but is also a striking introduction for a “will they or won’t

they” romance that boldly chooses “no”. Similarly, her use of space in the composition of her shots is yet another indication of her directorial maturity and “competence.”

Several of the film’s opening shots, such as Bill Murray sitting dully on the foot of his bed or of Ms. Johansson sitting in the windowsill of her otherwise empty hotel room, both seek to emphasize the still, vacant space around the characters in order to make them look confined, weary, isolated, and alone within the context of their shared foreign environment – a feeling that strikes right to the heart of the film’s themes, messages, and story. Thus, it is



fair to argue that Ms. Coppola possesses the “technical competence” necessary in the making of

a Sarris-ian auteur.

Secondly, Coppola's personality is encoded and expressed directly into the very DNA of the film in a number of different ways. Coppola's work consistently centers around a specific precipice she has been focusing and expanding upon with every new film she makes – including *Lost in Translation*. Todd Kennedy of Nicholls State University comments on this in his essay, "Off with Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur." According to Dr. Kennedy, Coppola "projects the image on screen from the perspective (and often from the eyes) of a young female character... who is lost amongst – and juxtaposed against – frightening, foreign surroundings that attempt to undermine her identity" (Kennedy, 2010). Similarly, "the girls are without a voice in their environment," and from this Coppola seeks both to derive conflict and explore the true nature of the female spirit in a world that so often works to undermine it. In *Lost in Translation*, this presents itself in the form of Charlotte's alienation from her own life and her feeling of obfuscation within the foreign surroundings of Tokyo and greater Japan. This can also be seen in Marie's transition to life in Versailles and her cold marriage to King Louis XVI in *Marie Antionette* (Sofia Coppola, 2006) and in Lux's struggle to stay afloat within the corrupting surroundings of her high school life and culture in *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999).

Similarly, in the same way that the unquestioned auteur statuses of directors like Quentin Tarantino and Wes Anderson are accented by the common reliance upon music in their films, and the shared habit of carrying certain genres and aesthetics over from one film to the next – Sofia Coppola's fondness of indie classics and 70s radio singles provides us with yet another example of her auteurism at work. The karaoke sequences and Jesus and Mary Chain outro of *Lost in Translation* show distinct and comparable relation to the use of New Order's "Ceremony" in *Marie Antoinette*, or of Heart's "Crazy on You" in *The Virgin Suicides*. These continuing trends, along with many others, allow us to check the "personality" box in the making

of a Sarris-ian auteur. Finally, due to the “hidden meaning” that can be derived from both her composition theory, and from her single-minded focus on films pertaining to level headed but impressionable female heroines navigating the complex waters of the worlds around them, it is therefore justifiable to conclude that Sofia Coppola has all of the makings of a cinematic auteur

Now, if Coppola is a certifiable auteur, we would therefore be within our rights to delve deeply into her body of work in order to find all of the “interior meanings” that exist within it. One interesting lens through which to see this film is to look at it as a product of the very movement that brought the auteur theory into being: the French New Wave. According to film critic Scott Eyman, “Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* is really a throwback to the French New Wave – two actors of immense charm, a confined setting and no plot as such, just a situation” (Eyman, 2004).

Coppola lends new wave qualities to her work as a screenwriter and director, especially *Lost in Translation*, on several different fronts. According to Michel Marie's book “The French New Wave: An Artistic School,” new wave films often revolve around a stylistic “agenda.” One of the points on this agenda includes the idea that directors should “not follow a strict, pre-established shooting script,” and should instead leave “much of the filming to improvisation in the conception of sequences, dialogue, and acting” (Marie, 2007). Coppola takes this page of the New Wave playbook and directly incorporates it into her film, with Bill Murray serving as the perfect vehicle for her to enact this vision.

Many of Murray's scenes in the film, including his witty, frustrated retorts during photoshoots, his absurd, unwanted, and rather awkward encounter with a mental-Japanese prostitute, and his several karaoke sequences all have a light, fresh, distinctly off-the-cuff feel



to them, an attribute the New Wave was specifically constructed to disseminate into the wider culture of film. Similarly, according to Marie, “[The New Wave] director privileges shooting in natural locations and avoids building artificial sets in the studio” (Marie, 2007). Coppola incorporates this idea into her film by shooting many of its scenes on location in the Park Hyatt in Tokyo, as well as in real Japanese arcades, parks, hospitals, street corners and alleyways. This helps to make Tokyo and greater Japan seem less like an inanimate setting and more like a complex and nuanced character that guides us through the film from start to finish.

Finally, in one of the films DVD extras, entitled “Lost on Location,” Coppola discusses the fact that, due to a low budget, her and her team (actors and all) resorted to simply stealing



shots on the streets of Tokyo without the luxury of permits or police protection. This gritty, guerrilla-style filmmaking strikes to the very heart of the new wave sensibilities that have kept the movement relevant even to this day.

Coppola’s employment of some of its finest tactics drives home the notion of the film as being of the era’s identity. Both these elements, and her personal brand of auteurism, make *Lost in Translation* the refreshing, thoughtful film it is so often held to be, and will continue to perpetuate its legacy going forward.

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