

Received 23/03/2026

Accepted: 19/04/2026

The Visibility of Translation and The Translator in Film: A Case Study of “*Lost in Translation*”

Yacine Mohamed BELGUENDOZ^{1*}

¹ University of Algiers 2, Institute of Translation, Algeria

yacine.belguendouz@univ-alger2.dz

Abstract

In a globalizing world, translators have become increasingly visible intercultural mediators, a visibility that is strongly reflected in contemporary cinema. This development has prompted renewed interest in integrating film into Translation Studies, particularly within the framework of the Fictional Turn, which positions fictional narratives as sites for theorizing translation. This paper examines cinema as an epistemological space in which translation is not only represented but actively theorized. Focusing on Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003), the study analyses how translation is constructed through linguistic mediation, communicative failure, and intercultural displacement. It further explores the narrative functions, asymmetries, and forms of translator (in)visibility that emerge through cinematic interaction. Drawing on film discourse analysis, cultural translation theory, and the Fictional Turn framework, the paper adopts a qualitative interpretive approach to selected scenes that foreground communicative breakdown and cross-cultural negotiation. The analysis demonstrates that cinematic fiction produces implicit theoretical insights into translation as a situated, asymmetrical, and performative practice shaped by power relations and contextual constraints. The study argues that film should be understood not merely as a representational medium, but as a co-productive epistemological space in which translation theory is enacted and reconfigured. In doing so, it contributes to Translation Studies by extending the Fictional Turn beyond literary discourse and by repositioning cinema as a legitimate site for the production of translational knowledge.

Keywords: Fictional Turn, Translation Visibility, Film Studies, Cinematic Representation, Intercultural Mediation, Lost in Translation

1. Introduction

Translation Studies has progressively shifted from a predominantly linguistic and text-centered discipline toward a broader interdisciplinary field concerned with the cultural, ideological, and sociological dimensions of translation. Within this evolution, the figure of the translator has gained increasing theoretical visibility, being redefined as an active agent embedded within complex networks of power, culture, and communication. In parallel with

* Corresponding author: yacine.belguendouz@univ-alger2.dz

these theoretical developments, contemporary cinema has increasingly foregrounded translation as both a narrative and thematic device.

Rather than functioning merely as a background mechanism of linguistic transfer, translation is now staged on screen as a site of intercultural tension, communicative breakdown, and identity negotiation. In this sense, cinema does not simply depict translation as a functional act but rather situates it within lived, embodied, and socially embedded experiences of misunderstanding and mediation. Building on this perspective, this paper argues that cinema does not merely represent translation but also participates in its implicit theorization.

Through fictional narratives and audiovisual strategies, films construct situated models of translation that illuminate how meaning is negotiated under conditions of linguistic and cultural asymmetry. Accordingly, cinematic fiction becomes a space where translation is not defined in abstract terms, but performed through interaction, silence, and interpretive instability.

Focusing on Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), this study examines how translation operates simultaneously as a narrative structure and as a conceptual problem. The film is particularly significant because it does not foreground professional translators or explicit acts of translation, but instead dramatizes translation as an existential condition of dislocation, affective distance, and communicative instability.

The study is guided by three research questions:

- How is translation constructed as a cinematic and narrative phenomenon?
- What implicit theoretical models of translation emerge from fictional representation?
- How does the Fictional Turn redefine the epistemological status of cinema in Translation Studies?

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach combining film analysis with translation theory. The analytical framework integrates three complementary perspectives: (1) film discourse analysis, focusing on dialogue, silence, interaction, and communicative breakdown; (2) cultural translation theory, particularly Venuti's concepts of visibility and invisibility; and (3) the Fictional Turn framework, which conceptualizes fiction as a site of theoretical production rather than mere representation.

The corpus consists of selected scenes from *Lost in Translation* that foreground linguistic mediation, intercultural misunderstanding, and communicative asymmetry. These scenes are treated as micro-sites of translation where meaning emerges through interaction, omission, and interpretive instability. Rather than functioning as illustrative material, the film is approached as an epistemological object capable of generating implicit theoretical insights into translation practices.

Research Contribution and Novelty

This study extends Translation Studies by repositioning the "Fictional Turn" beyond its predominant literary orientation toward cinematic discourse, with particular reference to Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003). It argues that film does not merely illustrate translation-related themes but functions as a site where translation is implicitly theorized through audiovisual form, narrative structure, and embodied interaction.

Unlike existing scholarship that focuses either on fictional translators in literature or on translation in cinema at a macro-representational level, this study develops a micro-analytical approach that treats specific cinematic sequences as epistemic units of translation theory production. The novelty of this paper lies in shifting the analytical question from how

translation is represented in film to how cinematic form actively produces conceptual insights about translation.

Accordingly, the film is read not as a metaphor of translation, but as a performative space where key theoretical concerns—translator visibility, asymmetry, cultural mediation, and communicative instability—are enacted, problematized, and reconfigured.

2. Translation in Cinema: Introducing Theory Through Fiction

There has been an increase in the number of films and literary works in recent years in which act of translating is prominently featured, as well as the number of fictional translators themselves. Before the introduction of the "Fictional Turn" in translation studies, there had only been a few of academic studies that had focused on fictitious translators in films. This theoretical section investigates the fictionalization of translation and the visibility of translators in films.

2.1. The Fictional Turn in Translation Studies

In the latter half of the twentieth century, translation studies focused on the representations of translation in fiction, taking what is described as a **"Fictional Turn"** –a concept first developed by **Else Viera** (1995) who defined it as the move in the discipline that signalled **"the incorporation of fictional-theoretical parameters as a source of theorization on translation and other hermeneutical processes"** (51).

Thus, the distinctions between historically restricted genres, such as fiction, and nonfiction have been redrawn. **"Literary works should be used for theorizing translation"** (Kaindl, 2012; 147). In fact, one of the most important contributions to translation studies in the 1990s was the study of fiction as a source of translation theory. This shift focuses on the growing importance of translation in a multilingual and global society; it also investigates how translation is reflected in fiction (literature and film). It should be noted that this fictional turn is one of many turns in translation studies, such as the technological, ethical, and cognitive turns, all of which refer to a shift in perspective rather than a movement in research topic.

A two-pronged movement characterizes this significant trend in translation studies. On the one hand, some novelists fictionalize translation by employing it as a plot device in their works; world-famous authors have all used their tales to address theoretical concerns. On the other hand, there is a growing group of critics and theorists who use fiction as a source of translation theory (Ma, 2018: 188).

Within this framework, several novelists incorporate translation into their narrative worlds as a thematic and structural concern rather than a purely linguistic element. Writers such as *Umberto Eco*, *Vladimir Nabokov*, *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*, *Mario Vargas Llosa*, and *David Lodge* engage with issues of interpretation, multilingualism, and textual ambiguity, thereby foregrounding translation-related questions within their narrative structures.

Similarly, translation scholars such as *Susan Bassnett*, *Theo Hermans*, and *Gideon Toury* have developed descriptive and cultural approaches that draw on textual and narrative analysis to theorize translation as a socially and culturally situated practice.

In the years since, numerous articles were published in the field, which has now reached its "Golden Age," as experts began to consider the degree of correlations between translation and media in general, realizing that translation and mass communication are co-dependent fields of study for translators, linguists, film specialists, and mass communication scholars to name a few.

This fictional shift is more precisely explained in the collective work edited by *Delabastita and Grutman: Fictionalising Translation and Multilingualism* (2005), which includes contributions from authors from all around the world and asserts that there is a "fictional turn," as seen by the expanding number of literary texts, films, and television shows that involve translators as essential characters.

Recently, several academics have shown a strong interest in examining translational representations in fiction, such as *Rosemary Arrojo*, who published an anthology of eight essays titled *Fictional Translators: Rethinking Translation through Literature* (2018) to examine fictional representations of translation and the prevailing stereotypes surrounding translators. She provides us with new insights into translation studies through observations on fiction. She claims that fictional narratives have ramifications for translation-related theories, based on the premise that we broaden the meaning of theory to include its "etymology of theoria, a style of seeing or looking" (3).

Fiction, according to *Arrojo*, provides a variety of perspectives and angles not seen in other genres. It can portray lively interpretations of theoretical constructs, thanks to its multiple resources and the liberties it is allowed to take in the construction of plots and characters (Ma, 2018:190). She reintroduces new perspectives on the clichés that pervade translation studies by rediscovering and re-examining translation-related concerns as well as what has been discounted or even neglected, such as films. Here, we can see the potential for employing fiction as a tool for theorizing translation.

Arrojo (2018) believes that in contrast to sober scholarly texts, fictional representations of translation can provide a more nuanced frame of reference as they show us translator characters who often reveal their inner struggles while facing the ethical conundrums associated with their work and the relationships they are expected to establish with author and/or reader figures who also have a stake in the translation process. She holds the idea that fictional representations of translators will shine a special, often unexpected, light on the scene of translation as an asymmetric encounter of different languages, interests, and perspectives (1).

Within this framework, *Venuti's work on translator's visibility (The Translator's Invisibility, 1995; The Scandals of Translation, 1998) remains central*. The theorist argues that the scandals of translation are cultural, economic and political, referring basically to the marginal status of translation. For him, "the greatest scandal of translation is that asymmetries, inequalities, relations of domination and dependence exist in every act of translating" (1998: 4). He further explains that translation in dominant Anglo-American contexts is shaped by an ideology of fluency that renders the translator "invisible" by producing texts that appear originally written in the target language. In contrast, invisibility masks the translator's intervention, while visibility highlights their active presence in shaping meaning.

From this perspective, translation is not a neutral linguistic transfer but a site of ideological and cultural negotiation. The translator emerges as an active cultural agent whose decisions

are shaped by institutional, ethical, and political forces. Venuti also emphasizes the tension between domestication, which reduces foreignness, and foreignization, which preserves it and makes the translator's mediation visible.

Within cinematic representation, translation becomes even more complex, as films do not merely depict translation as a linguistic act but also stage the translator as a visible or invisible mediator within intercultural encounters. Consequently, translator visibility in cinema provides a critical framework for analysing how translation is represented and negotiated on screen.

Overall, this field is characterized by a diversity of sometimes contradictory perspectives that explore the multifaceted nature of translation: its emotional, ethical, creative, and ideological dimensions, as well as its increasingly central role in contemporary cultural production (Abend-David, 2019: preface).

2.2. The Thematization of Translation in Cinema

As the twenty-first century dawned, a new media trend is gaining momentum, marked by an increase in the volume, quality, and variety of foreign fictional works disseminated globally. Additionally, such representations are typically self-aware and satirical, as well as acutely aware of the fictional role of translation, which is to infuse fiction with social, political, and historical meaning rather than merely transmit content (Delabastita, 2015: 1).

Filmmakers appear to make the most of the social, cultural, ethical, commercial, political, and historical dimensions of translating practice in their works, contributing to the growing visibility of translation and translators in a globalized world and demonstrating the increasing influence of translation in the contemporary media. Demonstrating the critical role of translation in interlingual and intercultural communication, as well as increasing translation's and translators' visibility, requires a closer examination of a medium in which translation has long been a visible thematic and representational concern.

Hence, the research of fictional representations of translation has expanded to films. The potential and impossibilities of translating texts, emotions, cultural codes, social conventions, and linguistic subtleties interest contemporary film, and even when no translators or interpreters are present, cinema is increasingly portraying a multilingual, multicultural, and multinational reality. If translation appears in cinematic storylines, it is not out of generosity. It is rather an acceptance of the consequences of language and cultural disparities.

Translation is therefore unsurprisingly a recurrent concern in cinema. What is surprising is that the issue of linguistic difference and translation is usually disregarded in film studies. The issues raised by representations of translation are too important or persistent to be ignored in any attempt to understand the impact of cinema as one of the preeminent idioms of the modern age (Cronin, 2009: introduction). This means that there has been no systematic investigation of the thematization of translation in films. Despite the fact that translation has been handled in a number of film genres such as (drama, science fiction, comedy, biography, historical, thriller, documentary, etc.), the topic of translation in film has mostly been overlooked by academics until now.

How is translation portrayed on screen? To neglect one of the most crucial intertextual resources of modern people is a form of blindness verging on folly. Given the enduring appeal of cinema on both large and small screens, and its long-term global diffusion, motion pictures

are a formidable source of imagery and representation of what translation may or may not entail. *Cronin* thinks that translation studies need to take these films regarding translation more seriously and study them more thoroughly, given that they have been watched by millions of people throughout the world (2009: introduction).

These statements regarding translation are no less valid records that deserve to be examined than the translations themselves in our research into historical conceptions and practices of translation,' (Delabastita and Grutman, 2005: 29).

Several international conferences have been organized: the “*First International Conference on Fictional Translators and Interpreters in Literature and Film*” was held at the University of Vienna’s Centre for Translation Studies in 2011, whose result was the collection of articles: *Transfiction-Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction* (2014).

Later, in 2015, Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, hosted a conference entitled *The Fictions of Translation*, which brought together both emerging and established scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds to explore various aspects of translation (Ma, 2018: 189).

When such studies are paired with those of comparative literature, world literature, postcolonial studies, globalization and postmodernity studies, and postcolonial studies, the translator emerges as a prototypical character of our day.

This figure bears testament to the modern world's characteristics, as translational fictions shed new light on displacement, hybridity, migration and cultural identity. Translation is not only a way of paying witness to diversity, but it suggests the boundaries of globalization, in which the media has been complicit.

If there is no time for translation, there may be no time for much else. It could be argued that translation on screen is too important an issue to be left to translators exclusively. The globalization of industry, warfare, religion, neo-liberalism, trade and telecommunications in a multilingual world means that no one is immune from the effects of translation, though some may seem to be more susceptible to its effects than others. Students of modernity and globalization would be well advised to consider how film makers have handled translation issues within their narratives as a further angle to understanding how multilingual and multicultural concerns play out in a globally distributed medium (Cronin, 2009: introduction).

2.3. The Visibility of Translator in Motion Picture

The translator, a pivotal figure in contemporary film, has gained importance in recent decades, and the subject of translation has been increasingly prevalent in a number of recent films. The characters in contemporary fictional portrayals of translators in film have features that distinguish them as complex individuals with social, emotional, and psychological lives.

In stories set in cosmopolitan contexts, conflicts are likely to surface on a linguistic level (borderlands, modern cities, international business, politics, diplomacy, espionage, etc.). Translation - interlinguistic mediation – may then play a critical role in resolving them, or its absence or poor management may become the primary impediment (Delabastita and Grutman, 2005: 24).

Regardless of the sociocultural context in which translators work or the historical conditions that formed translators' actions, translators are being reintroduced as agents, as active

participants in the texts and cultures they have shaped as well as those that have shaped them (Gentzler, 2001; Gentzler, 2007).

Fictional translators have been elevated to a higher level of prominence. This visibility allows translators to be seen as social individuals who work in specific sociocultural contexts rather than simply interlingual photocopiers.

Films frequently feature dissatisfied translators with their second-class status and frequently usurp territory that is traditionally reserved for text authors. As a result, the evident hierarchical ties between writer/author and translation are frequently questioned and/or reversed in order to reveal the power struggle that exists between the figures of author and translator (Miletich, 2018:175). Furthermore, cinema has typically portrayed translation as an audio-visual medium dominated by interpreters. The translator's task is rarely acknowledged in movies.

By contrast, the life of an interpreter looks to be significantly more appealing. While this is a natural bias, it has made little difference to the value of the various films' explorations of translation challenges. In summary, paying due attention to the multiple traces of translation in one of the most significant and visible media of the last century is, if nothing else, a way of countering an excessive pessimism about the task of the translator.

Lastly, but certainly not least, the presence of translators/interpreters in films can serve as an excellent instructional tool for anyone interested in digging deeper into the complex field of translation research (Cronin, 2009: introduction).

Numerous popular films from throughout the world, produced at the turn of the twenty-first century, give a complex and nuanced representation of translation that differs from what is normally found in scientific literature. They have dealt with translation issues and culture/language disparities, either directly or indirectly.

The figure of the translator appears in mega hit films starring huge Hollywood actors; a collection of films released within a relatively short period of time: "Lost in Translation" (2003), "The Interpreter" (2005), and "Babel" (2006) proving that translation issues are not the constrained concerns of indie filmmakers but they are at the centre of the world's most seen films in history. These pieces of art explicitly addressed the act of translation in their titles and included explicit references to the challenges faced by translators and translation related problems, as in Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation".

3. Presenting the Corpus

This empirical section of the paper introduces the corpus, 'Lost in Translation,' by providing a quick review of the film's director, background, filmography, and her themes, prior to proceeding to the film's plot and summary.

3.1. The Filmmaker

Born in New York City on May 14, 1971, Sofia Coppola is an American filmmaker. She was christened in front of her father Francis Coppola's camera for *The Godfather* when she was just a baby. However, Sofia had no intention of becoming an actress, she worked as a screenplay for her father's 1989 short film *New York Stories*, as director of photography on

Torrance Rises, as an actor's costume designer for Lucas Reiner's 1990 picture *The Spirit of '76*, and as producer on *Ciao, Los Angeles* in 1994.

Coppola's interests include photography, design, fashion, and music, but it was her family's filmmaking tradition that finally won out, since the medium best fit her talent and aesthetic. She found her true calling in 1996 when she directed and produced **Lick the Star**, a short film about the wanderings of young lost girls (Sofia Coppola: Do Audiences Still Want to Look Through Her Gaze?, s. d.).

3.1.1. Filmography

Sofia Coppola wrote and directed her debut feature film, '*Virgin Suicides*'. The picture premiered at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival and received critical acclaim. In 2003, she returned with '*Lost in Translation*'; the film gained widespread critical praise, earning three Academy Award nominations in 2004 for Best Actor for Bill Murray, Best Picture, and Best Director. Aside from being a box office hit, '*Lost in Translation*' is universally regarded as one of the greatest films of the decade. With this success, Sofia filmed her Queen '*Marie-Antoinette*' biography in 2006, which screened in competition at Cannes Film Festival. Her fourth film, '*Somewhere*' (2010) won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. Three years later, the 66th Cannes Film Festival welcomes her '*The Bling Ring*'. Recently, Coppola wrote, produced, and filmed '*The Beguiled*', which premiered at Cannes in May 2017 and won her the Best Director award (Healy, 2017).

3.1.2. Filmic Themes

In just a few films, Coppola establishes herself as one of the most talented filmmakers of her generation. Her favorite themes and visual style have been defined since her first picture, most notably the loneliness of being threatened by a suffocating atmosphere and identity crisis. She has shown an interest in liminal spaces, rituals of passage. She is fascinated by the person in 'transition', who is caught between two worlds and unsure of what to do.

"*Lost in Translation*" is a great example of her work focusing on a person who is "lost", "alienated", and "suffering from an existential crisis" (Spencer, 2017). She had the inspiration for this film after numerous trips to Tokyo in her twenties. She was intrigued to Tokyo's neon lights, its calmness, design, and fusion of cultures/languages, which included a French restaurant and a New York bar in the Park Hyatt Tokyo, which served as the film's interior location. She considered the hotel as a 'Melting Pot' where people from diverse cultures/languages come together (Focus Features, 2019).

3.2. "Lost in Translation"



Figure N°01: The official film poster
(Lost In Translation 2003 R1 Custom DarkGiygas, s. d.).

3.2.1. Synopsis

Lost in Translation is the 2003 romantic comedy-drama starring two of the most popular actors in Hollywood, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson. The film follows an aging American movie actor, Bob Harris, as he travels to the city of Tokyo to shoot an advertisement. He continues to run across Charlotte, a recent college graduate who was also staying at the same hotel.

After a night out in Tokyo, the two protagonists form a relationship and embark on the tough task of translating the Japanese language/culture. They discover the pleasures of cultural misunderstandings and the hardships inherent in being distant from home and feeling disoriented in their own lives. In a literal sense, we witness individuals with varying language backgrounds become “lost in translation”. On the other hand, we learn that human ties do not require translation (Lost in Translation, 2003, s. d.-a).

3.2.2. Summary

Lost in Translation tells the narrative of two characters: Bob Harris, a mid-fifties American movie star who is in Tokyo for a television commercial and is having a life-changing experience both personally and professionally. The second is a fellow displaced American Charlotte, a recent Yale philosophy graduate. She has accompanied her husband on a business trip to Tokyo on assignment to photograph a rock band; leaving her to while away her time while he works. Charlotte is adrift in her life, trying to figure out how to navigate adulthood and carve out a space for her outside of the role she has been assigned in her marriage. Like Charlotte, Bob appears to be having marital problems; the spark has gone out of his marriage.

In addition to his marital crisis, Bob is dealing with a dilemma of identity. He has lost faith in his career. He is constantly confronted with an array of images of himself, none of which seem to fit him entirely. Evidently, he is no longer the outstanding performer of his youth.

Due to the culture shock they are experiencing, Bob and Charlotte spend the majority of their time at the hotel. They spend their nights awake watching television, attempting futilely to converse with their spouses, and staring out the Park Hyatt's windows in prolonged meditative silences. One night, the two happen to meet in the hotel bar, they become fast friends as they explore Tokyo. They both find themselves adrift in a chaotic world they don't comprehend, but also alienated by their marriages and American culture. In some ways, the film exemplifies how lost we are during our formative and later years. They begin to wonder if their brief encounter may evolve into anything more (*Lost in Translation*, 2003, s. d.-b).

4. Analysis of the Translational Theme in the Film

This section shifts from theoretical considerations to the practical analysis of translation as represented in the film. It explores a range of interconnected issues, including language and cultural difference, alienation, dislocation, identity crisis, and globalization, all of which are closely related to translation in its broad sense.

Rather than treating translation as a purely linguistic operation, the film presents it as a complex cultural and experiential phenomenon manifested through different narrative situations and cinematic patterns.

The following analysis will examine key sequences that foreground the act and concept of translation, before addressing the film's representation of cultural shock and concluding with an interpretation of its title and open-ended ending.

4.1. Language/Culture Shock

The premise of *Lost in Translation* is as follows: two strangers in an unfamiliar culture create an unforeseen connection. Sofia Coppola has defined her film as a story about «things **being disconnected and looking for moments of connection**» (Thompson, 2012), a perspective that critics have echoed. Translation, in a linguistic sense, can be a significant connecting mechanism used by people with varying language backgrounds to intercommunicate, or not. Bob and Charlotte are culturally bewildered as a result of culture shock experienced during their foreign vacation to Japan.

Coppola's investigation of vast cultural and emotional distance is set in Tokyo. The city of Tokyo is the third major actor. The story would not have the same impact in any other city. There are no true Japanese characters; instead, Tokyo speaks for itself. Bob and Charlotte's estrangement (and subsequent bonding) is the result of a unique combination of city-related factors: the ancient, highly ritualistic traditional culture is still visible, as is the palimpsest of Tokyo's frenetic neon background, and, most significantly, the language barrier they both face, where even the written characters are foreign. *Coppola* also wishes to demonstrate the two sides of Japan: the noisy, technologically advanced modern Japan, and the ancient, tranquil, traditional Japan, as nostalgic or contradictory manifestations of the same

cosmopolitan globalized city of the world. As *Cronin* (2009) notes, the Japanese language is disorienting due to its use of non-Latin characters, and Tokyo is a superb visual experience.

The protagonists' displacement is exacerbated by immersion in a foreign language. They are subjected to a sophisticated modernity rooted in a distinct culture. The fact that Tokyo's skyline resembles that of any large American metropolis complicates comprehension. The neon advertising's flashing Japanese characters remind us that the unfamiliar is never completely familiar (82/89).

“These characters are also both *in* the Japanese culture but not *of* it, and though the trappings of the city are familiar—roads, cars, hospitals, appliances, arcades—the details exclude them from participating and communicating” (Graves, 2014: 38).

They neither relate to the culture nor can communicate in or with it” (Bongiorni, 2011:26). They are dislocated from their typical lifestyles, native time zones, family and familiar environment. They feel alienated not simply by this harsh uprooting, but also by Japan's pervasive peculiarity. The concept of being "lost in translation" works well here.

4.2. The Film's Key Scenes

The second part of the empirical analysis examines the translational issues raised in two key sequences from the film: the advertisement shoot and the still photography session, along with several additional brief scenes that further illustrate the dynamics of linguistic and cultural mediation.

4.2.1. The Advertisement Shooting



Figure N°02: The Japanese interpreter translating to Bob Harris (1:12mn)
(Suntory Time! - Lost in Translation (1/10) Movie CLIP (2003) HD, s. d.

Several things are "lost in translation" throughout the film. Bob is on set with a Japanese director (Yutaka Tadokoro) and an interpreter (Takeshita) filming a commercial for Suntory whisky. The director issues lengthy, heated commands in Japanese during multiple exchanges. These are typically followed by quick, imprecise interpretations from the interpreter.

One would assume that the interpreter does not accurately convey the entirety of the director's statements and is therefore incompetent, which is possible, but what if she does not do so for cultural reasons? The director issues explicit and even rude commands to the actor, which the interpreter translates just to the bare minimum. The director instructs Bob in a clearly

passionate and verbose manner, which the interpreter interprets as **“Turn and look into the camera.”**

For she is afraid of offending Bob, and because it violates her moral notion of Japanese courtesy, the translator helps Bob by abbreviating what appear to be unpleasant directives by the director. Harris' on-camera conduct does not satisfy the director who attempts to communicate with the actor using abstract language and ignoring the interpreter totally.

The very visible interpreter is rendered invisible in terms of agency/mediation. He then provides extensive instructions that are translated as **"Right side, with intensity"** and **"Please be more intense."**, **"He wants you to turn, look into the camera. O.K.?"** Harris, on the other hand, is bewildered: **"Is that all he said?"**

Bob is perplexed by his encounters with the Japanese commercial director, whom he is unable to understand, realizing that the interpreter's translation of his conversation is "lost in translation." As a result, the performer and director are unable to communicate. Even those who do not understand the un-subtitled Japanese can discern the director's arrogant and self-important tone of voice and body language. Coppola did not include the subtitles for the Japanese on purpose, so that the audience feel the same as the character of Bill Murray.

This is a common issue for interpreters, owing to the inflated egos that directors might have (asymmetrical power relationship between author and translator). The interpreter appears to be attempting to keep things moving, which results in a great deal of confusion and even more humorous errors.

It is worth noting that the commercial scenario is based on a Suntory commercial Francis Coppola directed in the 1970s. This scene is a mini-film. It shows what happens when the business of filmmaking collides with the irreducible facts of language/culture. We see not only members of the production crew but also translators navigating a linguistic and cultural difference.

"It appeared as though you could never make your presence felt," said Bill Murray of the filming procedure. Studio scenes demonstrate what the brand's visual trickery, the stamp of translation, hides. The narrative is framed by the episode's misunderstandings. Translation is not a minor matter for local operations; it is a major issue that throws into doubt the picture language's universality (Cronin, 2009: 85/ 86).

The translation performance in the scene has a dimension that has ramifications for how translation is portrayed. *Coppola* exploits a cultural cliché on translation here: the translators' proclivity for condensing lengthy discourses into a few pithy sentences, which can be true in some conditions.

While the moment is amusing due to its awkwardness, it also reinforces the film's central message: effective communication of thoughts and emotions is critical. Without translation, there is no communication in a bilingual and or multilingual context.

The Advertisement Shooting clearly illustrates Venuti's notion of translator's invisibility. Although the interpreter is physically present, her role is reduced to a mediating function characterized by the systematic shortening and neutralization of meaning. The director's long and emotionally charged instructions are compressed into minimal, functional statements. This process of domestication and the gradual erasure of linguistic and cultural mediation

render the translator socially, communicatively, and ideologically invisible, despite her central role in enabling communication.

This scene directly answers the research question by revealing several implicit concepts of translating as enacted through the fictional practice of the interpreter. Translation here is not presented as a neutral transfer of meaning, but rather as a mediated, culturally filtered, and power-sensitive activity. The interpreter's performance embodies key concepts of translating such as selective equivalence, cultural adaptation, and domestication.

These are not theoretical constructs explicitly stated in the film, but practical and situated decisions pressure, and cultural expectations. In this sense, cinematic representation becomes a space where translation is implicitly theorized through practice, as it emerges as a socially situated and culturally negotiated act shaped by power relations and ethical constraints.

4.2.2. The Stills Session



Figure N°03: Harris trying to understand the Japanese photographer (2:29 mn)
(*Lost in Translation* (2003) - « The Rat Pack Photo Shoot » Movie Clip, s. d.)

The film's second significant sequence involving language/culture concerns occurs during the shooting session. While Bob is on set to be photographed by the Japanese stills photographer (Tetsuro Naka), he runs into another language barrier. The scene reopens with Harris being prepared for the photo shoot by the crew of the studio in order to complete the shoot. However, the interpreter is missing from this scene. Harris and the photographer are conversing in English only. Translation is still an issue, despite the fact that the translator's services have been abolished. The photographer initially asks Harris, **'Can you put your hand close your face?'** Harris appears to be perplexed by the request before responding: **'I don't get that close to the glass until I'm on the floor.'** Later, the photographer instructs Bob to impersonate **"Flank Sinatra"** of the **"Lat Pack"** and **James Bond's "Loger Moore."**

This problem for the Japanese people in pronouncing R's and L's in English is introduced in this scene, as Harris' initial bemusement gives way to him correcting the mispronunciation. Despite Harris's best efforts, he is unable to discern the meaning of the photographer's requests. A metalinguistic reformulation follows, in which Harris explores the expressive possibilities of satirical speech. Harris is frequently unsure of what he should do or who he should impersonate. He asks for clarification frequently, as if repetition, rephrasing, and

reformulation were translation.

While the photographer plainly struggles to convey the emotional or cultural elements vital to the photo shoot's success in English. Only Harris's stances confirm that the requests were effectively grasped. Bob Harris is on hand to ensure that the Anglophone audience gets the meaning with his satirical reframing and rephrasing. If the photographer is in control of the images in the situation, it is evident that his subject is striving to exert control over the words. There is no interpreter visible, but the translation effort is audible.

What Harris discovers during the advertisement's filming and the stills shoot is that communication is impossible without translation and that the true cost of translation is the loss of communicative (Cronin, 2009: 86/87).

In this sequence, the absence of an interpreter intensifies communicative instability, revealing that translation is not merely a supportive mechanism but a constitutive element in the production of meaning. In Venuti's terms, the scene suggests that when translation is absent or erased, communication itself becomes fragmented, unstable, and dependent on improvisational forms of interpretation.

4.2.3. Other Scenes (The global Lingua Franca)

Bob's lack of mastery of the Japanese language/culture is frequently exploited for hilarious effect, as significant meanings appear to be literally lost in translation. Nonetheless, there are a few situations in which we get the distinct impression that the incomprehension is mutual. For instance, in the hospital waiting room, a stranger asks Bob about his time in Japan. Bob can only mimic a few syllables; his interlocutor bursts into laughter. The film focuses on what is mimicked without understanding, what escapes translation (King, 2005).

The hospital displays a modern vision in a language other than the global English. The set may be familiar, but the language is foreign. The potential for misunderstanding is used for comedic effect again when Bob is working out on an exercise machine that begins to speed rapidly and gives Harris instructions in strongly accented Japanese English, which he clearly doesn't understand.

The hotel gym is strikingly similar to those found in luxury hotels everywhere with the same language (English), yet, the message is not conveyed. Apart from the Japanese language, this English language is not the only one discussed in the film; different languages and culture are mentioned in passing. For example, when in a sauna with two German businessmen, Bob Harris is unable to understand their conversation because he is not fluent in this language. In the nightclub episode, he is conversing with a Japanese girl in broken French.

And when Charlotte and Bob are in the bedroom watching the 1960 film 'La Dolce Vita' on television; the film's protagonists communicate in a blend of Italian and English with Japanese subtitles. Assuming that speakers of a global lingua franca such as English will be instantly understood by everyone is a formula for disaster. A global lingua franca can only be global if other languages agree to translate or are compelled to. Thus, communication in that language is contingent upon the success of the translation (Cronin, 2009: 88).

In this sense, linguistic universality is shown to be contingent rather than absolute, since communication in a so-called global lingua franca remains dependent on translation and linguistic negotiation rather than being self-sufficient. The selective subtitling strategy in the film can be further interpreted through Venuti's concept of foreignization.

By leaving certain Japanese dialogues untranslated, the film preserves linguistic opacity and resists full domestication for the viewer. This aesthetic choice displaces the audience into a position of partial incomprehension, mirroring the protagonists' own cultural dislocation. As a result, translation is not rendered invisible but instead becomes perceptible through absence, making linguistic difference itself a visible cinematic device.

4.3. Interpretation of the Film's Title

The title *Lost in Translation* can be interpreted on multiple interconnected levels. At its most immediate, it refers to Bob and Charlotte's experience as two Americans temporarily situated in Tokyo, where they encounter persistent difficulties in cross-cultural communication. Within this context, the title evokes their partial incomprehension of an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environment.

A second interpretive layer extends the meaning of "loss" beyond linguistic misunderstanding to include relational and affective dimensions. The evolving friendship between the two protagonists—often suggestive of a potential romantic connection—remains unresolved and ultimately "lost," in the sense that it never fully materializes into a stable narrative closure. In this reading, the title reflects not only failed translation between languages, but also deferred or unfulfilled emotional communication.

Beyond these narrative dimensions, both characters are themselves portrayed as being "lost" in a broader existential sense. Their dislocation in Tokyo intensifies pre-existing feelings of alienation within their own lives, relationships, and identities. This condition of liminality fosters their temporary bond, through which each seeks a form of recognition or belonging. However, the film deliberately resists resolving this search for identity, leaving their sense of loss structurally open-ended.

From a theoretical perspective, the title can also be reinterpreted through *Lawrence Venuti's* critique of translation as a non-transparent and ideologically mediated practice. The notion of "loss" in the film operates on multiple levels—linguistic, cultural, and interpersonal—suggesting that miscommunication extends beyond language to encompass identity formation and human relations. Within this framework, translation is not conceived as a neutral transfer of meaning but as a process marked by asymmetry, mediation, and transformation.

Accordingly, "loss" should not be understood as a contingent failure of communication, but rather as a constitutive condition of translation itself. Meaning is never fully transferable; it is always refracted through cultural, linguistic, and ideological filters. The title thus encapsulates a broader theoretical insight: that translation necessarily involves visibility of mediation, structural imbalance, and the irreducible gap between languages and experiences.

4.4. The Open Closure

In the final segment of the film, Charlotte is shown moving through the bustling streets of Tokyo in a more immersive and embodied manner, shifting from detached observation to direct engagement with the urban environment. Bob, in parallel, develops a more intuitive and less mediated relationship with the surrounding cultural space.

These transformations may be understood in terms of defamiliarization, whereby altered spatial and temporal perceptions generate a renewed awareness of self and environment, as suggested by Haslem (2004), who interprets Bob's encounter with Tokyo and Charlotte as a shift in perceptual and existential positioning.

Although the relationship between Charlotte and Bob is implicitly marked by emotional intimacy, this affective dimension is predominantly expressed through non-verbal, gestural, and bodily communication, while verbal articulation remains deliberately limited or absent. Meaning is therefore suspended between articulation and silence, reinforcing the film's broader logic of communicative incompleteness.

In the penultimate scene, Bob whispers something into Charlotte's ear; however, Coppola intentionally withholds this utterance from the audience, thereby resisting narrative closure and refusing to resolve the interpretive trajectory of their relationship. This strategic omission places emphasis on absence as a meaningful cinematic device, where what remains unsaid becomes as significant as what is shown.

Consequently, the film's conclusion exemplifies a form of "open closure," in which interpretive resolution is systematically deferred rather than achieved. This aesthetic choice reinforces the film's central preoccupation with mediation, uncertainty, and the instability of meaning. More than two decades after its release, *Lost in Translation* continues to be regarded as a key work in contemporary cinema precisely because it disrupts conventional narrative resolution and foregrounds interpretive indeterminacy as a structuring principle.

5. Conclusion

There has been a growing body of cinematic works in which translation emerges as a privileged site for articulating cultural, linguistic, and ideological tensions associated with globalization. This study has challenged the marginalization of translation within film studies by demonstrating that cinema is capable of theorizing translation beyond its purely linguistic function.

Through the analysis of Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), the paper has shown that translation is not merely constructed as a communicative act, but as a complex cultural and experiential phenomenon shaped by linguistic breakdown, intercultural dislocation, and communicative asymmetry. In this sense, translation is repositioned as a lived and situated process rather than a neutral transfer of meaning.

The findings further indicate that cinematic fiction implicitly produces theoretical insights into translation, particularly in relation to mediation, asymmetry, and the negotiated nature of meaning. Importantly, these insights do not arise from explicit conceptual exposition, but from embodied interaction, performance, and communicative failure as represented on screen. Accordingly, *Lost in Translation* does not simply represent translation as a theme; it actively participates in its conceptual reconfiguration by staging translation as a process embedded in social, cultural, and affective contexts. Cinema thus emerges as an epistemological space in which translation is both performed and rethought through audiovisual form.

Ultimately, the study argues that translation should be understood as a constitutive cultural mechanism through which meaning, identity, and power are continuously produced and

renegotiated. Within this framework, cinema is not merely a representational medium of translation, but a site where translational knowledge is actively generated.

Bibliography

- ABEND-DAVID, D. (Ed.), (2019), *Representing Translation: The Representation of Translation and Translators in Contemporary Media*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.
- ARROJO, R. (2018), *Fictional Translators—Rethinking Translation through Literature*, Routledge, London & New York.
- BONGIORNI, K. (2009), “*La Dolce Vita and Lost in Translation: Federico Fellini and Sofia Coppola Take On Meaningful Human Relationships. Can They Exist In This Day and Age?*” *Cincinnati Romance Review*, Louisiana State University, vol. 28: 19-37.
- CRONIN, M. (2009), *Translation goes to the Movies* (2nd ed.), Routledge, London.
- DELABASTITA, D. and GRUTMAN, R., (2005) ‘*Introduction: fictional representations of multilingualism and translation*’, 11–34, in DELABASTITA, D. and GRUTMAN, R. (eds.) ‘*Fictionalising Translation and Multilingualism*’, special issue of *Linguistica Antverpiensia*, No: 4:11–34.
- FOCUS FEATURES. (2019), *Finding Japan in Lost In Translation, Iconic spots put on the map by Sofia Coppola’s film*. <https://www.focusfeatures.com/article/film-locations-japan-lost-in-translation?ref=magazine.frontier.is> (Consulted on 12/23/ 2021).
- GENTZLER, E. (2007) *Translation and Identity in the Americas: New Directions in Translation Theory*, Routledge, London and New York.
- GENTZLER, E. (2001), *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Clevedon: *Multilingual Matters*, Routledge, London and New York.
- GLEIBERMAN, O. (2017), *Sofia Coppola: Do Audiences Still Want to Look Through Her Gaze?* <https://variety.com/2017/film/columns/sofia-coppola-gaze-the-beguiled-1202486961/> (consulted on 08/12/2021).
- GRAVES, S., *The Estranged World: The Grotesque in Sofia Coppola’s Young Girls Trilogy*, A thesis of Degree of Master of Arts in English Middle Tennessee State University, 2014.
- HASLEM, W. (2004), “*Neon Gothic: Lost in Translation.*” *Senses of Cinema*, Australia, Issue: 31.
- HEALY, C. M. (2017), *Sofia Coppola: keep your dreams:* <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/36488/1/sofia-coppola-beguiled> (consulted on 08/11/2021).
- KAINDL, K. (2012), “Representation of translators and interpreters”. In *Handbook of Translation Studies*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam–Philadelphia, Vol. 3, pp. 145–150.
- KAINDL, K. and SPITZL, K. (eds.) (2014), *Transfiction: Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam–Philadelphia.
- KING, H. (2005), “*Lost in Translation.*” *Film Quarterly*, London, Vol. 59, No.1.
- *Lost in Translation* (2003) - « *The Rat Pack Photo Shoot* » *Movie Clip*. (s. d.), YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gjiQwh1p6M> (consulted on 08/10/2021).
- *Lost in Translation* (2003), (S. d.). IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335266/plotsummary> (consulted on 08/10/2021).

- *Lost in Translation* (2003), (S. d.-b). Movie House Memories. <https://www.moviehousememories.com/lost-in-translation-2003-movie-summary/> (consulted on 08/10/2021).
- MA, D. M., (2018). *Fictional Turn in Translation Studies*. Proceedings of the 2018 2nd International Conference on Education, Economics and Management Research, Published by Atlantis Press, June 2018, Paris.
- MILETICH, M. (2018), *Dragomans Gaining Footing: Translators as Usurpers in Two Stories by Rodolfo Walsh and Moacyr Scliar*, Hikma, Spain, Vol. 17 p . 175.
- SPENCER, S. (2017), *Three Visual Patterns in Sofia Coppola's Film*, Indiana University Cinema: <https://blogs.iu.edu/establishingshot/2017/06/01/three-visual-patterns-in-sofia-coppolas-films/> (consulted on 08/01/2022).
- *Suntory Time!-Lost in Translation (1/10) Movie CLIP (2003) HD.* (s. d.), YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiQnH450hPM> (consulted on 08/10/2021).
- THOMPSON, A. (2012). *Sofia Coppola's Lost In Translation* - Filmmaker Magazine, https://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/fall2003/features/tokyo_story.php (consulted on 08/12/2021).
- VENUTI, L. (1998), *The Scandals of Translation—Towards an Ethics of Difference*, Routledge, London.
- VIEIRA, E.R.P. (1995), “(In) visibilities in Translation: Exchanging Theoretical and Fictional Perspectives,” ComTextos, Poland, volume 6, p. 51.