The Movies On My Mind:

BRIEFEST ENCOUNTER: *Lost In Translation*, written and directed by Sofia Coppola.

It's as difficult to predict whether film stars playing a couple will sizzle sexually, as it is to foretell whether a mundane pair will click. It's hardly catastrophic when friends you've fixed up are turned off rather than wildly switched on by each other. But megabucks and careers ride on a studio's faith that matching a hunk with a sexpot will generate torrid sexual chemistry and boffo box office.

The chowderheadness of this notion was illustrated when a much paparazzied love affair between Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez failed to charm viewers of *Gigli*. Ben and J-Lo's erotic sparring in this dismal turkey was as exciting as the courtship dance of two snapping turtles.

I'm fond of quirky films where unglamorous actors project a surprising amorous buzz. There aren't many: Tinseltown, after all, thrives on gorgeous flesh. I've particularly enjoyed Ernest Borgnine's lonely butcher courting Betsy Blair's sweet spinster in *Marty*; *House Calls*, which pairs Glenda Jackson's acerbic, not-so-gay divorcee with Walter Matthau's mordant physician widower. *The African Queen* contains Hollywood's most famous unlikely match: Starchy school-marm Kathryn Hepburn is smitten with Humphrey Bogart's grimy, foul-mouthed river pilot.

My particular favorite of this idiosyncratic subgenre is *The Late Show*, in which Lily Tomlin's hippie flake romances Art Carney's aging hardboiled LA private eye. Sofia Coppola's captivating second film, *Lost In Translation*, explores the vicissitudes of another piquant September/May romance. Bill Murray is Bob Harris, a played-out Hollywood star adrift in an ambiguous mid-age crisis. Scarlett Johannson is Charlotte, a recently wed, equally unsettled young woman in her late twenties. Tokyo constitutes a third protagonist: its' nighttime streets ablaze with neon; its daytime bustling with crazy energy; a mise-en-
scene alluring, hilarious, and always elusive (by report, the director herself knows and loves the city well).

Dispirited Bob has come to the city to shoot a lucrative Santory scotch commercial. He's many years married, with kids he loves abstractly, and a wife whose presence in the film consists of her absence save for hectoring faxes and diffident phone calls. Charlotte's husband is a photographer on a fashion shoot, with both feet perennially out the door. He claims that work necessitates his vanishing act, but he's mostly chatting up the vapid babes whose company he blatantly prefers over Charlotte's.

Much of Lost In Translation unfolds in an anonymous Tokyo luxury hotel. Cool minimalist decor nicely captures the characters' prevailing sense of anomie. In the mysterious opening shot, one sees the back of the yet unknown Charlotte's semi-nude body, suspended in a dimly lit nowhere (she's actually asleep in her hotel room.). One's impression is languorous, not particularly arousing, not unpleasing either. Shortly thereafter Bob, stupified by jetlag, enters his room just as the first of his wife's ceaseless reminders about neglected domestic duties chatters out of the fax machine.

In dexterous match shots, Coppola quickly establishes Charlotte and Bob's dreamy isolation; she from her husband and the fresh start she hoped for, Bob from his stale marriage and once glittering career, both from Stateside terra cognita. Their glances cross in a crowded elevator. Then they meet, fellow insomniacs wandering through empty night corridors.

Coppola interpolates their desultory encounters at the bar and swimming pool with scenes of Charlotte's distracted by-the-numbers tourism, and Bob's bemused encounters with his Japanese hosts and assorted media types (including a tyrannical director who absolutely refuses to speak English, and a pixillated talk show host who resembles a demented Soupy Sales). One senses Bob is sleepwalking through Tokyo just as in Hollywood -- where he's probably been on autopilot at home as well as in the lackluster
roles a star is lucky to get when fame slipslides away

At some point -- it's is Coppola's gift, rare in mainstream cinema, to capture that ineffable moment -- Bob and Charlotte's intimations of romantic possibility slip into an extraordinary intimacy, a total appreciation of each other rendered all the more piercing by their (and our) awareness of their immanent separation. Lady Murasaki's exquisite novel, *The Tales of Genji*, contains a Proustian exploration of the vicissitudes of love which antedates Proust's elegant insights by a thousand years. In the elite Japanese society of the Heian period Murasaki knew so well, approach to the beloved progressed through elaborate rituals arguably more important than fulfillment itself. Exchanges of flowers, poetry, small gifts, were imbued with allusions to every nuance of amorous experience.

Coppola's delicate portrait of Bob and Charlotte's undeclared courtship evokes Murasaki's magisterial depiction of courtly love. Rather than flowers or haiku, Bob and Charlotte exchange words -- few, but phenomenally charged with meaning; minute changes of countenance which exquisitely register the couples' dawning awareness of an utterly unexpected, consuming tenderness.

Bob, prodded by Charlotte's perceptive kindness and youthful *elan vital*, begins to emerge from his armored desparation. His ironic maturity and respect for Charlotte's concealed, astringent intelligence spur her unvoiced recognition that she's also been slumbering away her life in a post-adolescent holding manoeuvre -- which probably existed well before, and informed her tenuous marriage to a fatuous narcissist. The film's opening shot encapsulates her Sleeping Beauty persona, as well as her yet to come enchantment for Bob, who is similarly trapped by his bleak domestic routine -- for which he may very well share the burden -- and the humiliating demands of a fading career.

Coppola's screenplay acquires tragicomic depth by refusing to have Bob and Charlotte make ecstatic love. Both are obviously experienced. He's clearly had affairs, indeed endures a drunken one night stand with a busty lounge singer which he will regret
terribly. For it degrades him and wounds Charlotte to the core. Until the final scene Bob and Charlotte barely touch, save for once when, in bed and fully clothed, their fingers tentatively brush. The devotion which has fallen upon them like a flash of grace extends light years beyond sexuality. Coppola infers that they know lovemaking won't initiate a brief affair, but a wrenching commitment which will force them to cross boundaries neither is prepared to traverse.

Doubts about their radical differences in age and background arguably restrain them. Bob's hesitancy could also spring from guilty awareness about the distress he's caused previous abandoned lovers. But at base, neither Bob nor Charlotte want to destroy their marriages. Bob may truly love his wife, or his kids, or simply want to take the easy way out as he has done before, backsliding into his drab support system. One guesses Charlotte will eventually leave her shallow, philandering husband. But she isn't quite prepared to explode the myth of standing by a man who isn't worth the spit to blow him away, in order to search solo for a more defined selfhood.

Coppola's hand is too sure to spell out these dynamics in bold print. There may be little spoken in _Lost In Translation_, but there's much silent, acute observation. The couple's discourse is fragmented and elliptical, but their faces speak volumes to the complex shades of their feelings.

I've always thought Bill Murray a fine actor beyond his acknowledged gifts as a _farceur_ (see _Groundhog Day_ for confirmation). He's magnificent here, conveying Bob's spiritual and physical exhaustion, the amazed opening of his heart through minimal shifts of tone and countenance. Scarlett Johansson's Charlotte is uncannily _there_: Zen-like "suchness" pervades her perplexity over her husband's desertion; her delight in Tokyo's chaos; above all an unadorned youthful candor which plays beautifully against Bob/Murray's defensive self-effacement.

Their penultimate parting at the hotel is strained. Charlotte is furious over Bob's one
night "infidelity". Then, as he's being driven to the airport, Bob glimpses her through the window of his cab just as she's about to disappear into a swirling crowd. He rushes out to stop her. In standard Hollywood fare, the couple would embrace to the crescendo of delirious music and live happily ever after, their troubles somehow tidily disposed of.

Coppola cleverly subverts such Lalaland bromides. Bob and Charlotte fall into each other's arms with a huge sense of relief both wryly amusing, and singularly moving. Near tears, they affirm wordlessly the preciousness of the love they've stumbled into, and will soon give away.

There's been considerable debate over what Bob's whispers into Charlotte's ear before they go their separate ways. Cynics assert he is telling her when and where they'll meet again. I think he's murmuring, like a prayer, how dear she has become to him, how dear she and always will be, with no future meeting in mind. Coppola's solution is infinitely more heartrending, truer to the film's rueful tone than a facile plunge into despair, or a trite upbeat finale.

In the end, *Lost In Translation* doesn't reference *Casablanca* (unless you believe Rick never bedded Ilsa after she showed up at the Cafe Americaine); or *The Honeymoon Kid* (in which a feckless Charles Grodin, fresh off the altar, abandons his hapless bride to elope with Sybil Shepard). The film definitively evoked by Coppola is Noel Cowards' *Brief Encounter*, a deeply moving depiction of illicit romance honorably declined. Two thoroughly decent, ordinary people meet fortuitously; are hurled into stunned adoration; then absent themselves from felicity, returning to the decorous rituals of a diminished life with a thoroughly decent spouse. It's the right wrong thing to do, and quietly, utterly desolating.