

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Lost in Translation*]

### *Enter Sofia*

By Steve Sailer

SOFIA COPPOLA'S "Lost in Translation," starring the melancholy and mordant Bill Murray, delivers, among other pleasures, a wonderfully nasty tribute to the satirical travel writing of Evelyn Waugh in time for the 100th anniversary of his birth on Oct. 28.

Murray plays an aged, downhearted, and jet-lagged action-movie star, a cross between Bruce Willis and himself. He is killing time in a Tokyo Hyatt between making a whiskey commercial under a long-winded but incomprehensible Japanese director and being interviewed by the "Johnny Carson of Japan," who turns out to be more like the Pee-Wee Herman of Mars.

It's hard to imagine what the poor Japanese have done since, oh, 1946 to justify Coppola's malicious obtuseness. She mocks them for speaking an inscrutable foreign language, for saying "lip" when they mean "rip," and for being just plain short.

The film's ethnic derision would be sophomoric if Coppola's script wasn't so sharp and, in Murray's expert hands, so funny. Murray has reached the point in his career where in an absurd situation he doesn't have to say anything sardonic—he merely hints at one of his famous facial expressions, and we mentally fill in the blank for him.

So he's got that going for him, which is nice because over the years he's lost much of his energy as his sadness has

deepened. The tragedy of comedy is that as many of its greatest practitioners (such as Murray and Waugh) age, their depression and misanthropy come to the fore.

Coppola's script deftly exploits an insight of Waugh and the even grumpier Paul Theroux: the secret to entertaining travel writing is elegantly to fail to figure out why those perplexing natives do the inexplicable things they do.

In impoverished Ethiopia, for example, a man boasted to Waugh in "very obscure English" that his businessman uncle had some sort of "monopoly," but Waugh couldn't understand what kind. In this situation, James Michener, an admirable man but a mediocre artist, would have diligently found a translator, and probably organized a debate over whether Ethiopia needed its own Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Waugh, however, complacently declared himself baffled because "monopoly" seemed to be "a perfectly adequate description of almost all commercial ventures in Abyssinia."

Coppola expertly captures the oddly decentering effect of modern business travel. The hotel seems dispiritingly like every other downtown luxury hotel in the world, yet its Japanese idiosyncrasies just make it even more disconcerting to Murray.

Because Japan doesn't import many Third-World immigrant workers, the Japanese have robotized many service jobs, which takes some getting used to. Murray's drapes fling themselves open in the morning, and in the empty hotel gym, he finds himself in the clutches of an unstoppable and hyperactive exercise machine shouting indecipherable and no doubt deranged commands at him.

He can't talk to the locals, can't navigate the streets, and can't fathom the peculiar television fare (except for his

old movies, which have been dubbed into Japanese). He can't calculate an appropriate hour to call his resentful wife in America and can't find the words to make her understand what he's undergoing.

Another gloomy guest is a privileged but purposeless young woman, who is fresh out of Yale with a philosophy degree, played by Scarlett Johansson. "Lot of money in that racket," Murray supportively comments after meeting her in the Hyatt's lavish bar. She's tagging along after her husband, a workaholic fashion photographer who has been instructed to make nerdy Japanese bands "rook more lock and loll."

Her husband seems more interested in a ditzy Cameron-Diaz-lookalike in town to promote her new kung-fu movie with Keanu Reeves. Viciously, Coppola has the Diaz character (who has checked into the Hyatt under the name "Evelyn Waugh" without realizing Waugh was a man) burble, "Everybody thinks I'm anorexic, but I'm not. My dad, though, is anorexic. See, he was captured at the Bay of Pigs, and Castro tortured him with food."

Murray and Johansson find themselves increasingly drawn together, apparently by their mutual refusal to be culturally enriched by their all-expenses-paid sojourns in one of the world's great cities.

As they share inarticulate confidences about their dreary marriages and visit a karaoke bar where they sing Pretenders and Elvis Costello classics, their funk lifts. Johansson eventually even allows herself to be charmed by the sight of a traditional wedding in Kyoto.

But are the feelings of the 52-year-old Murray for Johansson (who in real life is only 18) erotic or avuncular? Some have proclaimed "Lost in Translation" to be a classic romance in the tradition of David

Lean's "Brief Encounter." Others may find their relationship creepy.

Fortunately, American movies have become much more conservative about sex over the last few years, and both groups will find the unconsummated ending poignant. ■

Rated R merely for yet another pointless strip-club scene.

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## BOOKS

[*The Book Against God*, James Wood, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 272 pages]

### Prodigal Son

By J. P. Zmirak

THIS NOVEL IS an unexpected delight. *The Book Against God* reads almost as if Evelyn Waugh were alive again, and had decided to write in his graceful, fluid prose about one of Walker Percy's heroes: the distracted, contemporary sons of comfort whose search for religious meaning is indirect, halting, and thoroughly believable. Wood speaks in the voice of Thomas Bunting, a youngish, intellectual skeptic religiously obsessed with *disproving* the existence of God. Bunting is not a conventional unbeliever. As the son of a jovial, learned, and blissfully confident Anglican vicar, Bunting wrestles continually with God—leaving his dissertation to molder, ignoring his beautiful wife, forgetting to bathe, smoking incessantly, and spending his days ensconced with stacks of theological works, scribbling refutations in a notebook. The latter he calls his "Book Against God," or "BAG," which he intends to craft into a comprehensive critique of Christian faith—a counterpart to the grand apologetic Pascal once hoped to write.

Pascal couldn't finish his work; he left behind instead the luminous notes we

call *Pensées*. Nor does Bunting complete his *magnum opus*—at least not in the form he'd intended. The novel, which he narrates, is what he produced instead, and it's far more compelling than the short fragments of counter-theology from the original project that appear occasionally in the story.

Full of wry observations about contemporary life and mores, and unwitting self-revelations, the tale Bunting tells of himself rings with psychological truth and carries the reader along in sympathy with a protagonist one might expect to dislike: a spoiled, self-destructive intellectual idler in a dirty silk dressing gown. Our fondness for Bunting at first is only what we'd feel for a loveable rogue, someone who for a while "gets away" with breaking the rules that bind most of us, whose jabbing wit keeps us entertained.

But Woods is stalking bigger quarry, and he wields his considerable talents to make Bunting particular and plausible—while still serving an allegorical purpose. Step back, and one can see in Bunting a figure of modern Western man—an unwounded, pouting Prometheus whose only fire is a cigarette, too caught up in the ruins of his childhood to father any offspring of his own. In the book's most telling scene, Bunting risks dooming his marriage by deceiving his wife in order to avoid conceiving a child.

The story itself is fairly straightforward, although its chronology twists and turns according to the narrator's reticence: Bunting, the gifted son of benevolent (if sometimes inattentive) parents, drifts through an undistinguished academic career and into a marriage—which he proceeds to starve with neglect and poison with compulsive lies. He fails to complete his Ph.D., flubs freelance assignments, spends himself into penury, and ends up leading a solitary, almost ascetic existence—with only his old expensive tastes, the memory of fine meals, and a few pairs of fancy shoes to attest his devout worldliness. Throughout most of the story, Bunting hides his religious doubts from his priest father—a man he loves with childish devotion

tainted by adolescent rebellion. In fact, from a blankly psychological perspective, here is the nub of Bunting's problem: he never completed that rebellion, never summoned the nerve to state his doubts and differences openly and forge for himself an independent, adult identity. Instead, he sneaks around like a smart but dirty-minded 13-year-old, a perpetually impure altar boy. When his marriage collapses, Bunting even returns to his childhood home, where for months he sleeps in, lets his mother cook for him, and hides from his father his liquor bottles and irreligious books. The suspense that drives the book—and it's a surprising page-turner—is whether (and how) Bunting will ever amount to anything more.

In his explicit reflections on whether God exists—and if so, whether He is good or simply powerful—Bunting follows the well-worn path trod by Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and other precursors of existentialism. His favorite objection to God's existence is the widespread evil and suffering in the world. When arguing with his mildly theistic friends, Bunting invokes these phenomena—from the casual cruelty of a tavern keeper towards his bartender, to grand-scale evils such as genocide—arguing passionately that a God who loved us as sons would never permit all this. When he finally, towards the end of the book, raises this argument to his father—in a wrenching, touching scene—he receives an intriguing answer. It comes in two parts.

First, the Rev. Peter Bunting points out, "[I]f you take God away from the world, the world is no less horrid, no less painful or sinful or unsaved. It is simply painful and sinful *without God*, without the hope of salvation or succour." In other words, the rebellion against God, fueled (it seems) by compassion, ends by undermining the grounds for empathy and hope. Depose God, and you begin to make of man a beast. (As another character observes, the behavior of anti-religious governments from 1789 through 1989 seems to bear this out.) This argument