

Lost in the Underground

Perceiving Reality and Realizing Perception

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Every film has this nasty tendency of creating its own little world, set apart from our real world, sometimes going miles from it, at others, making just a slight step to the side. Even documentaries, films that are intended to reflect real-world events, create an atmosphere all their own outside present-day reality, rendering what is always a subjective reflection of past real-world events. It is the documentary that throws the cliché "perception is reality" right up on the big screen.

To tempt a Cartesian conundrum, if all reality is merely the perception of the perceiver, is there really any such thing as an aggregate, or shared reality? To a degree, yes, there is a shared reality. There are certain facts that sane people accept- but again, perhaps sanity is a convention subject to perception.

The Weather Underground
Sam Green and Bill Siegel
Shadow/Upstate Films

Lost in Translation
Sophia Coppola
Focus Features

Yet it is the meaning of the facts and emerging fact patterns that get translated some six billion times into some six billion different realities based upon countless factors that could take a lifetime to list. Race, class, geography always come to mind as interpretive factors, not to mention subtle things like education, intellectual ability, physical capacity, and *ad infinitum*.

So, basically, here we are living in a world of facts, tons and tons of them. Remember the buzzwords "information glut" and "data smog" from just a few years ago? Raw data is everywhere, and readily available at the local library and through your internet connection. But when you get down to it, what does it all mean? Again- six billion people, six billion answers. But not everyone is going to data mine the Congo in search of the purest answers to all the questions of the universe. Why do you think people read newspapers and internet sites, or watch television news? It's simply to get an interpretation of "what's going on in the world," a distillation of the facts so we don't have to go all the way to Iraq or the U.N. to find out how badly Mr. Bush is screwing up the standing of the United States among the nations of the world. Oops. Did I impose my reality on your fact-finding mission?

So all this information in our mad, mad world leads us to mediatization¹, one of my favorite words. Time and space limit the ability of every citizen to travel everywhere and

see all events and interpret them first-hand, so we are dependent upon media to report these events. Of course, this returns us to the perception/reality conundrum. Each reporter, each media outlet will see each event differently. So we the ordinary citizen are left not just reading the writing, but reading the writer. While *Fox News Network* may see the killing of American soldiers by Iraqi guerillas as an act of cowardice on the part of an uncivilized group of people who hate the *le monde occidental*, the *Guardian UK* will see it as the logical answer to heavy-handed American empirical ambitions in the middle-east. *Fox News*, a large multinational corporation takes the pro-American stance, because pro-American is pro-corporate, and pro-corporate equals pro *Fox News*. What is good for the goose is great for the gander. The *Guardian*, possibly the most left-wing English-language publication on the planet, wishes to sustain its leftist, anti-corporate leanings. But again, my interpretation of such events is my perception of the reality at hand. Our reality in our image-oriented mediatized world is slippery indeed. In our attempts to fully understand the reality of this world, we are left to interpret interpretations.

Movies, or cinema, as the intelligentsia put it, are creations of a hermetic reality. Take the Script for *Sunset Boulevard*. In the hands of Billy Wilder, it looks one way. If it were given to John Ford or Howard Hawks, it would be completely different. Documentaries, are recreations of reality. Again, no two filmmakers would make the same film of the same material.

The Weather Underground is not just an examination of the leftist radical group of the same name, but a recreation of the atmosphere of the 1960's, 70's, and early 80's that led to the group's creation, flight underground, acts of destruction against the establishment, and eventual resurfacing. The Weather Underground broke away from the already left-leaning Students for a Democratic Society in the late 60's, after a bust-up at an SDS convention in Chicago in 1968. The group, who took their name, originally the Weathermen, from the Bob Dylan song "Subterranean Homesick Blues" ("you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows"), were more than just idealistic privileged college students with a penchant for violence (their touchstone slogan being "Bringing the War (as in Vietnam) Home"), they were media-savvy image managers who knew how to manipulate the sensationalist news media and get their message out to the public, hence, controlling perception.

However, as the group were rudely made aware of at their "Days of Rage" gathering in Chicago in 1969, the whole world may have been watching² in 1968, but it was no longer listening in October of 1969, as only 100 or so persons showed-up to participate in the "Days of Rage" when the group was expecting thousands just like the summer of 1968. The "Days of Rage" went on in Quixotic fashion, as participants (i.e., rioters) looted and vandalized Chicago's Gold Coast district. The cops were ready, outnumbering them. Chicago Black Panther Party Leader, Freddy Hampton, who would die violently at the hands of the FBI only two months later, called the "Days of Rage" *Custeristic*, as in General Custer leading his troops into a massacre. The "Days of Rage" fizzled quickly, and the Weathermen went underground, becoming the Weather Underground, living in what one member called "a parallel universe."

The group then embarked upon a campaign of terrorism, losing all sense of proportion. In the film, Weatherman Mark Rudd excuses the loss of sanity to the chaos created by the Vietnam War. The group's first planned bombing would hit a Non-Commissioned Officer's Dance at Fort Dix. Members of the group built a bomb for the deed at an upscale townhouse in New York's Greenwich Village. But the bomb meant for the dance attendees wound-up taking out three members of the Underground and their Greenwich Village townhome instead.

This accident brought the group to their senses, somewhat. The group vowed from then on to commit only damage to property of "the establishment" and not do harm to any human beings. The group had an impressive string of hits throughout the 70's, the most famous bombings hitting a men's room at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., a military recruiting station at the Ferry Building in San Francisco, and a Courtroom in New York. The group made sure that all of these buildings were evacuated before their homemade time bombs exploded.

Though the main story of the Underground is compelling, the film's backdrop lends credence to the group's violent radicalism. This was a time when American Soldiers were slaughtering innocents, and dying senselessly themselves in a Sisyphian war thousands of miles away from U.S. soil. The filmmakers do not go lightly on the most violent stock footage from that war, as well as footage and photographs of other tumultuous events - the U.S. Government-led violence against the Black Panther Party, especially the bloody deaths of Freddy Hampton and Soledad Brother George Jackson; the death of Martin Luther King and the riots in its aftermath; rioting worldwide in Tokyo, Paris, and Mexico City; as well as various student and youth uprisings throughout the U.S.



But for all the bluster and frustration with America's corrupt corporate-driven capitalist system and the violence being committed in the name of American citizens in southeast Asia, it is difficult to see the positive side, or even the merest evidence of substance among the Weather Underground. While the Black Panther Party was teaching adult literacy to African-Americans deprived of a decent education earlier in life, feeding breakfast to poor schoolchildren in Oakland, organizing a political voice for the prison population of California, taking "Black Power" to the streets of ghettos nationwide, and uniting communities against police brutality, among many other things, the Weather Underground was all *sturm und drang*. TWU put a greater emphasis upon getting attention than creating any sort of lasting movement or positive change. The idealism was just window-dressing for rock star imagery- middle class kids pandering for street cred by groveling before the imminently stronger and smarter BPP, which cringed and kept its distance lest its efforts be corrupted by these vampiric white kids. Those with any doubt

of the rock star pretense of the group need only view the ramblings of drug guru Timothy Leary, who the group broke out of prison for \$20,000, to get the feeling that TWU were glamorous nihilists with no clue about how to build a practical resistance to the system it so despised.

Ultimately, TWU managed to play no small part in screwing up the future of the left. Their antics helped push the mainstream further and further to the right, giving us the gifts of Nixon, Reagan, and the Bushes. I hope the group's book and film royalties help ease their guilt. It's funny how much delusion can affect reality. Goodnight Elisabeth Dohrn, wherever you are. Sleep tight.

Yet sleeping tight escapes Bill Murray in Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. Scarlett Johansson, too, is suffering such fate. Such things happen to Americans in the international dateline circadian nightmare that is Tokyo. But the nightmare does not stop there. All of Tokyo, with its electrified and hyper-surreal atmosphere, is but a freakshow of bizarre imagery and barrage of cultural contretemps for these two lost and bewildered Americans. Coppola's neon and dancing billboard Tokyo makes Vegas look like Peoria. Her use of musicians Kevin Shields (My Bloody Valentine), Squarepusher, Jesus and Mary Chain, Phoenix, and Death in Vegas, among others add, a haunting aural element to the visual surreality.

Listlessly floating among manga³ reading subway riders, kinky call-girls, absurdist talk-show hosts, dizzying video arcades, way too many karaoke bars, American women doing bad 70's torch ballads for horny Japanese businessmen in hotel lounges, and spontaneous parades by pop act Morning Musume⁴, are two people not only lost in an unfathomable foreign culture, but lost in life. Bill Murray plays a has-been action movie star whose only gig in the present is promoting a brand of Japanese whiskey. He misses his family, but is obviously glad to finally have a little breathing room. Scarlett Johansson is a recent Yale grad who hangs out being bored in the same Tokyo hotel as Murray while her big shot photographer husband works all day, and pretty much ignores her when he is around. Despite the big name college degree (in Philosophy, no less), she has no clue what to do with her life. She spends the bulk of her Tokyo days staring out the window and listening to self-help CD's.

By chance, these two lost American souls find each other in the hotel bar, and a sweet friendship sparks up. The sexual tension is palpable throughout, but there's a lot more to this relationship than a physical connection. Yes, Ms. Johansson's character (Charlotte) gets jealous when Murray's Bob Harris sleeps with the hotel lounge singer, yet these two sleeping together stops at a fully clothed late night chat curled up on the covers. Like all lost people, they are searchers. These two are searching for a way out, to find meaning in a foreign land and in their lives. They find it together- wondering video arcades, singing karaoke, getting chased by pissed-off bartenders with electro-stun guns, and in those late night chats brought on by insomnia and weariness from their day to day existence.

Strangely enough, it is the unfamiliarity of their surroundings that makes them dispense with masks and affectations. Honesty prevails in such circumstances. In adversity, a very

strong bond is formed. Near the end, just when it looks like these two will just be two ships passing in the night, one final gesture seals the bond for good.

It's amazing how beneath all the glitz of Tokyo, the human heart remains frail and lovely, beating as strongly as ever. Equally amazing is how beneath the famous name, the heart of an honest and sensitive filmmaker is beating stronger than ever. Well, maybe there is one absolute thing that transcends the perception conundrum after all.

Basil Joe's Top Ten of 2003 So Far (9/28/03)

1. *Morvern Callar*
2. *Lost in Translation*
3. *Bend It Like Beckham*
4. *Spellbound*
5. *Dirty Pretty Things*
6. *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not*
7. *Laurel Canyon*
8. *American Splendor*
9. *Secretary*
10. *All or Nothing*

Honorable Mention

Blue Car
Vendredi Soir
The Pianist
Lost in La Mancha
Northfork
28 Days Later
Swimming Pool

¹ The Webster Dictionary Definition of Media is as follows: [Late Latin, from Latin, feminine of *medius*; from the voiced stops' being regarded as intermediate between the tenues and the aspirates] : a voiced stop. See, <http://www.webster.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=media>

² This was the slogan chanted by thousands of demonstrators outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago in the Summer of 1968, and the slug line of the fictionalized version of those events in the form of the film, *Medium Cool*. See, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0064652/>, *Medium Cool*, Haskell Wexler; Paramount/ H&J

³ Manga is a genre of sexually-explicit adult comics popular in Japan, and spreading worldwide. See, <http://www.jlist.com/R/MANGA/>, for more information and illustrations. Also see, <http://www.mit.edu/people/rei/Expl.html>

⁴ for more info see www.morningmusumeonline.com