

Introduction to 'Journeys of Discovery'

Professor Nigel Leask

'Continent, city, country, society: the choice is never wide and never free'
(Elizabeth Bishop, 'Questions of Travel').

Elizabeth Bishop's line aptly identifies our current post-colonial scepticism about simply celebrating travel as the free movement of an unconditioned (Western) self. Pilgrims, soldiers, diplomats, explorers, colonizers, missionaries, slaves, migrants, all followed itineraries which were historically predetermined by the global flows of money, power and conquest. Some were motivated by spiritual or intellectual curiosity, others by the lust for gold, but many (probably the majority) travelled simply because they were forced to.

Given this caveat, the papers published in this issue suggest how usefully the concept of travel breaks down disciplinary boundaries and stimulates diverse intellectual orientations. The same might be said for the *practice* of travel, for many of the published papers were initially presented at a two-day conference on 'The Culture of Travel', hosted by the University of Glasgow's Graduate School of Arts and Humanities, to which many participants travelled from quite a distance. It's easy to forget, however, that in my own discipline, English literature, the study of travel and travel writing has only recently won academic respectability: as recently as 1982, Philip Dodd announced (in the preface to *The Art of Travel*), that his book was 'the first collection of critical essays to be devoted to British travel writing'. Dodd still needed to do a bit of special pleading, underlining (for the benefit of literary purists) the 'wealth of such writing'. Bill Buford caught the prevailing mood in his preface to the 1984 *Granta* special issue 'On Travel' which spearheaded the 'new wave' of travel writers such as Bruce Chatwin, Redmond O'Hanlon, Jonathan Raban, etc.; 'Travel writing is the beggar of literary forms: it borrows from the memoir, reportage, and,

most important, the novel. It is however, pre-eminently a narrative told in the first person, authenticated by lived experience'. Buford captured both the genre's low self-esteem in relation to other forms of writing (and that's really how it looked back in 1984), as well as locating its core identity as 'personal narrative' which did suggest its literary quality. The magpie nature of travel writing as well as its mimetic role as a 'literature of fact' had seemed problematic to one strain of modernism, which preferred a more autonomous aesthetic and narrative complexity. Buford was one of the first critics to see that generic hybridity and discursive impurity were now firmly on the literary agenda, and that the fortunes of travel writing were consequently 'on the up'.

The recent establishment of several scholarly journals entirely devoted to the subject (*Studies in Travel Writing; Journeys*) and the appearance in 2002 of Peter Hulme and Tim Young's *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* suggest that the magpie genre has rapidly come of age, and not just in the field of literary studies. In their introduction, Hulme and Youngs write 'the amount of scholarly work on travel writing has now reached unprecedented levels. The academic disciplines of literature, history, geography, and anthropology have all overcome a previous reluctance to take travel writing seriously and have begun to produce a body of interdisciplinary criticism which will allow the full historical complexity of the genre to be appreciated'.

The papers published in 'Journeys of Discovery' strongly confirm Hulme and Young's interdisciplinary agenda, although 'multidisciplinary' may be a more appropriate term given the rich configuration of interpretative techniques (close reading, post colonialism, visual culture, gender analysis, psychoanalysis, material cultures) as well as subject areas in evidence here. From Hispanic and Film Studies, Jessie Gibbs' paper on Alfonso Cuarón's Mexican road movie *Y tu mamá también* asks how the itinerary narrative (a staple in Hispanic culture from the era of the

picaresque novel) casts a new optic on the dynamic transformation of modern Mexican identity, as well as portraying, in often hilarious detail, the highs and lows of adolescent masculinity. Staying in the Hispanic world, Julie Candy interrogates another type of journey, the Medieval Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, but from an archaeological perspective. Focusing on the material culture of the route-way, she explores the manner in which the places through which pilgrims travelled shaped and informed their experience of their journey. How did such a worldly passage impinge on their spiritual quest? Emma Dummett, an architectural historian, tells us about Le Corbusier's Journey to the East in 1911, and the influence of vernacular buildings of the Levant in his designs for summer rooms, balconies, enclosed courtyards, verandas, and loggias. Still in the field of the visual arts, Rory Johnstone's paper analyses North American artist Eric Orr's use of his own blood in his paintings, along similar lines to Mark Quinn's terrifying auto-bust 'Self', composed of his own frozen blood. Johnstone draws upon the anthropological theories of Mary Douglas to underline the cultural rather than biological meaning of blood. Sticking with the arts, but in less blood-curdling fashion, Emily Peppers' paper 'Moving Music' discusses travelling musicians and the introduction of the viol into the court of King James V of Scotland. We are reminded that far from developing along 'organic' lines, culture often travels along spatial networks, in this case those established by professional itinerant musicians from Italy, France and Northern Europe. The culture of the early modern court was constituted by lateral, transnational influences of this kind, as the court in turn impacted on its geographical hinterland: Scottish music would never be the same again. Finally, moving to contemporary literature, Ursula Kluwick, from the University of Vienna, focused on migration and flight in the novels of Salman Rushdie. Rushdie displays a recurrent fascination with migrancy as an aerial journey, albeit one quite different from the more privileged flight paths of international jet travel. In depicting the act of

flying as movement through a mysterious and magic realm, Rushdie explores the ontological crisis of his characters, subjected to the irrevocable mutations of migrancy.

This issue offers a rich meeting point for multidisciplinary work from literature, art history, architecture, anthropology, musicology, archaeology and film studies, gathered together under the rubric of journeys of discovery. There is tremendous variety and diversity here, but held together by a common theme which made it feel like a shared project. Let's hope that its success will inspire further discussion of this kind across disciplinary boundaries, and help to inform the kind of work being done by Arts and Social Sciences postgraduates in Glasgow (and beyond) in years to come.