

TRAVEL WRITING ABOUT CHINA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE

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Just like travel writing itself, the theorizing of the genre is also in a period of noticeable revival. Very often, it is directly related to the Postcolonial critique. One of the best known contemporary theoretical works concerning the travelogue is Debbie Lisle's book *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. In it the author expresses her opinion that it is relatively easy to discern the model of imperialist way of thinking in modern travel writing, since the authors, deliberately or not, reproduce the logic of the colonial perception of the world. Lisle asserts that the issues of world politics cannot be avoided in this kind of literature and that the Western authors inevitably reproduce the colonial and the imperialist models in the process of reproducing – or even *producing* – their experiences. According to the author, this model can be observed even in the cases when the travel writer approaches the foreign culture in a favorable and seemingly unprejudiced way – in the 'cosmopolitan' type of narrative, as she calls it. As an example of such a benevolent narrative she mentions Bill Bryson's book *Neither Here nor There: Travels in Europe* (Lisle 2006, 7). As for writers with a critical attitude towards the foreign peoples and their cultures, Lisle's most useful and most frequently used target is the extremely popular travel writer Paul Theroux who is not at all in the habit of sparing his criticism towards each and every place he visits, from Mexico to China.

In the very beginning of *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Debbie Lisle relates an episode from her adolescent days when she was given a copy of Theroux's book for the first time. She was shocked by the American's style of writing, which she found "boring, nasty and offensive, in equal measure" (Lisle 2006, xi). As for the emotional description "boring", it has no critical value and no bearing upon the ethical evaluation of the travelogue. The author of this paper, for one thing, finds Theroux's style colorful and absorbing. The influence of the concept of the offensive is felt on almost every page of Lisle's book, and is very frequently related to the 'imperialist' world view of the travel writers.

It might seem that Bryson's harmless and unthreatening depictions of cultural difference are better than Theroux's explicit neocolonial judgments. But as this book argues, the shift from a colonial to a cosmopolitan vision is profoundly depoliticizing because it smuggles in the logic of Empire under the banner of universalism. In other words, messages of global harmony and international unity are being trumpeted by a genre that claims to have jettisoned its colonial past, but all the while is casually producing new forms of colonial power (Lisle 2006, 15).

In effect, cosmopolitan travel writers are modern-day missionaries: they open up 'uncivilised' spaces and make them available (and receptive) to the evangelizing forces of liberal democracy - whether those forces are welcome or not (Lisle 2006, 152).

The author leaves no doubt that according to her the genre of travel writing and the colonial worldview are inseparably linked. Starting from the once chief reason for the popularity of the travelogues - the distribution of stories of faraway strange lands, with the purpose of imposing control over them, she asks the following question: "Why, then, are travelogues still being written in our *supposedly* 'enlightened' age?" (Lisle 2006, 2, my italics). Apparently she takes it for granted that there cannot be another reason for the interest towards the genre and that the betrayal of such an interest is indicative of the existence of a latent imperialist inclination in the writer and his readers, as is made clear by the expression '*supposedly* 'enlightened' age'. This impression is retained throughout her text and the reader is left to wonder whether the genre of the travelogue has any real value at all in the eyes of the author, in spite of her frequent claims that a travel narrative must engage with the complex problems of power relations and political discourse, which throws some light on the issue. It is not until the end of the book that Lisle states categorically that there is, after all, a firm criterion establishing the value of a certain travel narrative: "I want to argue that a travelogue can be judged as 'good' to the extent that it acknowledges, addresses and engages with its ethical and political responsibility to the other" (Lisle 2006, 265).

Regardless of her interpretation, Lisle draws a very adequate line between the two kinds of travelogues - the critical and the cosmopolitan. In the books and the blogs, written by foreigners who have lived in China, there are representatives of both kinds of writing. Before taking a closer look at some examples of the literary output of foreigners in China and examining how they relate to Lisle's claims, it is necessary to point out another prominent

feature of her theoretical model, characteristic of the period of postmodernism and postcolonial critique: the suspicious and even negative attitude towards the concept of 'objective reality'. In her book Lisle repeatedly makes it clear that she, too, rejects the existence of an objective reality. In the very first chapter states that the problem of the model according to which texts shape reality and reality shapes texts is that "it assumes there is a single, incontrovertible reality awaiting documentation by travel writers, and each travelogue can be judged for how accurately it represents this reality" (Lisle 2006, 12). In her further mentions of the words 'reality' and 'real' she insists on putting them in quotes to make it completely clear she's using them as lexical units and not because she thinks they really exist.

From here it is very easy to get to the idea that the cultural differences which the travel writers describe, do not exist objectively either, but are 'produced' by the writers themselves. The expression 'production of difference' is one of the key and most frequently encountered phrases and Lisle's book. At no point does she permit the notion that these differences might not be 'produced' but actually existent. A similar belief is expressed by the famous orientalist critic Edward Said, according to whom the idea that there are "geographical spaces with indigenous, radically "different" inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space" is "highly debatable" (Said 1995, 322).

However strange it might seem for the sphere of the humanities, the rebuttal of the idea of the nonexistence of objective reality cannot be achieved through any means except reaching for evidence in the sphere of the exact sciences. In a nutshell, since the exact sciences completely rely on the existence of objective, predictable reality, they would not be able to achieve any results whatsoever, if such a reality did not exist. The evidence for the fact that results are being achieved is everywhere around us – the electric switch on the wall, the automobile on the road, the television set etc. All these things function in a predictable way, which would not have been so if there did not exist an objective reality which is the same for all people and independent of the subjects who are perceiving it.

Occasionally, even Lisle finds it appropriate to admit that there is an objective reality:

While a travelogue can translate empirical facts by fictional devices, the travel writer cannot ignore the empirical world altogether - that would lift the travelogue out of its precarious in-between position and shove it head first into fiction (Lisle 2006, 49).

Although she follows this observation with the somewhat disheartening question “[W]hy write a travelogue when you could write a novel?” (Lisle 2006, 49).

For these reasons the phrases ‘production of difference’ and ‘production of the Orient’ cannot be accepted unconditionally, no matter how convenient they might be for the discourse analysis and postcolonial critique. Above all, it must not be forgotten that we can talk of at least two kinds of difference between cultures – factual and interpretational. It is quite understandable that critics should refer to the interpretational differences as something ‘produced’. In fact, this kind of difference cannot be anything else but produced by the travel writer because it by definition originates in him. The factual differences, however, are not dependent on the perceiving subject; any attempt at production automatically turns them into interpretational differences. They are a part of the objective reality which the author is at perfect liberty to interpret as he pleases. Such a distinction, however, is not made in *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. The two types of differences are placed in a single category and regarded as producible.

In his famous travel account *River Town: two years on the Yangtze* the American travel writer Peter Hessler repeatedly talks about the differences between the Western and Chinese culture. Each time those differences are interpretational, this is clearly indicated by the context of the situation, and the factual differences are not subject to doubt. At certain moments the two kinds are intertwined:

I didn’t agree that our countries’ political differences were so neatly (and morally) explained by these contrasting attitudes toward the individual and the group. But I felt that the stereotype was more accurate with regard to close social networks of families and friends. The families I knew in Fuling were arguably closer than the average in America, because individual members were less self-centered (Hessler 2001, 111).

In his books about China Peter Hessler repeatedly differentiates between factual and interpretational differences, although he does not employ these terms. Sometimes his descriptions of Chinese society seem like a very appropriate target for ferocious criticism coming from theorists such as Said and Lisle, especially when his texts generalized the image of the “Chinese”:

It was a quintessentially Sichuanese scene — for every scroll painting of a lovely river they could have had ten depicting *baijiu* arguments, two men scrabbling over a cup while a young woman waited with a bottle (Hessler 2001, 83).

and also:

It was China. Chaos, noise, adrenaline; fear and surprise and excitement; a mass of bodies, everybody yelling, horns sounding, the Earth pounding (Hessler 2001, 90).

The generalization of features 'typical' for a particular culture is one of the most unforgivable sins in the eyes of the postcolonial critique. Hessler, just like Theroux, Gifford, Thubron and the majority of the authors of Chinese travelogues, including the blog writers, repeatedly allows himself to make such 'sinful' generalizations. It is exactly generalizations of this type that causes Lisle to characterize Theroux's books as offensive and nasty, and those of Bryson – as latently racist. The generalizations have always been regarded by the postcolonial critics as an instrument for establishing and fostering of power relations, beneficial for the Occident and humiliating for the Orient. My disagreement with this appraisal results, on the one hand, from the sheer impossibility to conduct objective studies verifying its truthfulness, and, on the other, from the fact that generalizations are an inevitable and a very necessary part of communication and the spreading of ideas. When a person lives for a certain period in China, or another randomly chosen foreign country, different from his own, and writes about it, he, of course, is going to describe the unfamiliar culture the way he sees it, in which process he will inevitably generalize. Generalizations are the price we pay for the opportunity to receive information.

It is significant that neither Said nor Lisle propose to explain how exactly one should write about a foreign culture, without generalizing and stereotyping. Lisle claims that a travelogue should at all costs discuss and bring the reader's attention to the power relations between the two cultures in the context of the postcolonial discourse. This is not a recipe for doing away with the generalizations but it does sound patronizing and looks like an alarming sign that some critics deem it acceptable to tell an author how he should or should not write.

The existence of factual differences, independent from the writing person, is confirmed by the representatives of the Chinese culture, when they are quoted verbatim in the travel texts. One of the main accusations of Said and Lisle is that in the travelogues by the authors from the Occident and the Orient is not allowed to talk about itself with its own voice. This claim cannot be accepted in the cases when people are quoted word for word. It is true that it is the writer who chooses in what context he is going to put the quotations

but this is one of the undeniable rights of every writer and cannot be avoided. Peter Hessler repeatedly quotes verbatim the people he talks with. Very often these quotations demonstrate that the representatives of the Chinese society are also quite fascinated with the differences between the two cultures. Drawing an analogy between China and the USA for instance, they too resort to the inevitable generalizations:

„Our China is different from America, I think,” he said. “The education level in America is higher. Most of the Chinese are peasants, and if they chose our leaders directly it would be dangerous, because anybody could lie to them, or trick them. China isn’t ready for that yet...” (Hessler 2001, 142).

Unlike the factual one, the interpretational difference between the cultures is entirely subjective and can be, to use one of Lisle’s favorite expressions, ‘produced’. Indeed, it can hardly be of any other nature. Every subject (a travel writer) produces, intentionally or not, his interpretations. They could be described in the critical theory as ethical or unethical but it is counterproductive that they should be stigmatized in any way. In a 2006 interview Hessler lays a special stress on the interpretational cultural differences when he talks about the importance of the context in which the information about the unfamiliar culture is presented.

During the last two decades the travel literature on Asia, and more specifically on China, is experiencing something of a boom. This is accounted for not only by the accelerating opening of China to the rest of the world, but also by the establishment of the Internet as a fundamental means of exchanging thoughts and impressions, available to practically everyone presented with an opportunity to travel and experience life in a foreign country, even for a short period. When I say ‘travel literature’ I have in mind both the printed editions in the form of books, magazines, journals, articles etc., and the content of the Internet blogs produced by people who have spent some time in China. In contemporary society, depending more and more on electronic communication, it would hardly be reasonable to exclude this kind of writing from the travel writing category.

If one glances, even cursorily, at a random excerpt of the travelogues about China, they will hardly fail to notice that in spite of the accelerating globalization of the world and the unprecedented opportunities for receiving out all sorts of information, our perception of - and reaction to the unfamiliar cultures have not changed very much. In the majority of the texts it is easy to notice that the authors, regardless of whether they are benevo-

lently disposed towards the foreign culture, almost always fall victim to the so-called 'culture shock' - a phenomenon which has always existed and which received its current name from the Finnish anthropologist Kalervo Olberg. In its more general sense, the expression means anxiety, disorientation, confusion and insecurity in people who have found themselves in a cultural environment very different from their own. It appears that Westerners who visit China are especially vulnerable to culture shock and this shows very clearly in their travelogues.

The 'culture shock' phenomenon would seem to be a very easy target for the postcolonial critical theory in that it can easily be interpreted, when described in a travelogue, as yet another way of reinforcing the colonial perspective - the foreigner is shocked by the practices and way of life of the oriental society, which is consequently viewed as inferior and in need of change and westernization. Culture shock could also be read by the postcolonial critique as a powerful tool for reinforcing one's own identity by means of unusually intensified othering. This interpretation could be quite valid the cases where the travel writers dwell on their shock, describing in great detail various practices and characteristic features of the foreign community, and putting a special emphasis on how stunned they felt witnessing those practices, as do some writers of travel books and many blog authors. In many of those cases one can side with the postcolonial critics. The reinforcement of the self identity does seem to play quite an important role in many of these writings. The phenomenon itself, however, not its description on the pages of the travelogues, cannot be interpreted in this manner since culture shock is not something one experiences deliberately. Each is, as Kalervo Olberg notes, a rather uncomfortable psychological phenomenon, which most travelers would choose not to experience.

Interestingly, Lisle never mentions culture shock in her book. Said mentions it only once, putting it in a purely historical perspective, when he speaks of Comte de Volney, the French traveler whose works Napoleon relied upon during his Egyptian expedition.

Volney's work constituted a handbook for attenuating the human shock a European might feel as he directly experienced the Orient: Read the books, seems to have been Volney's thesis, and far from being disoriented by the Orient, you will compel it to you (Said 1995, 81).

The idea of this phenomenon, however, is present in both *Orientalism* and *The Global Politics*. Debbie Lisle does not use the expression 'culture shock' but she methodically attacks various aspects attributable to it.

If we take a closer look at the writings of those authors whose travelogues exhibit the symptoms of culture shock, we will notice that this psychological phenomenon is always accompanied by a strong sense of insecurity. Indeed, insecurity, according to Oberg, is inevitable in such cases. On the other, it seems to me that the nature of every travel narrative which displays the culture shock of its author, is unavoidably *contrastive*: By dwelling on how different, traumatizing and subduing the foreign environment is, he inevitably compares it (or, rather, contrasts it) with the environment in his own western country. By indirectly invoking his home, the writer brings a certain sense of insecurity into his narrative. In this sense, Debbie Lisle is right when she points out:

The discourse of modern cartography is reproduced most effectively in contemporary travel writing through the mapping of safe homes and dangerous destinations. In this way, travelogues can be understood as texts of security in an insecure world: they reassure readers that their civilised homes are contrasted to (and must be protected from) various foreign places that cannot peacefully govern their own territory (Lisle 2006, 151).

At the same time, she does not fail to point out that such representation points to a neocolonial vision:

By territorialising spaces of danger as wholly other to civilised homes, contemporary travel writers reproduce colonial space in their belated encounters with Empire (Lisle 2006, 151).

Once again, this opinion of the critic can be adopted in the cases where the travel writer dwells on and exaggerates the differences he encounters, but could hardly be sustained in every perceived case of culture shock in the travelogues, insofar as psychological conditions are involuntary and cannot simply be used as evidence in support of a postcolonial interpretation.

According to Lisle, the projection of 'excessive difference' can serve yet another purpose, also related, though indirectly, to the imperial gaze of the Western authors: romanticizing.

The subject position of the travel writer is secured to an even greater extent when it can project excessive difference onto the foreign subjects who live elsewhere. In effect, the more difference displayed by locals, the more authentic the encounter is (Lisle 2006, 83).

Travel writing about China abounds in illustrations of both kinds of projecting difference: the self-securing and the romanticizing. The former kind is particularly noticeable in the weblogs, the internet discussion posts

and the articles written by Westerners living and working in China for an extended period. A good example is the following quotation from an Internet post, published at the Vegsource website:

Other than the surprising, futuristic skyscrapers that stand out, China is still a dirty, backwards, poor third world country where most everything Western countries have like cleanliness, ethics, freedom, comfort, wealth, safety, justice, [or] good healthcare, is not easily available.¹

It is quite clear that the issue of danger/safety is central to this paragraph and the reader is expected to view China as a dangerous place, and the West as a safe one. In addition, as the postcolonial critics often point out, the foreign place is depicted as set back in time: "Visitors are quickly jerked back to reality that they are not in Kansas anymore when they realize that they have instead fallen into a time warp back to 1900."² Once again, it becomes obvious that, for the author, China represents danger and the USA stands for safety. Equally telling in this respect are the diaries of Uriel Wittenberg, titled "Western Teacher, Chinese College", and written with unusual aggressiveness towards the Chinese people the author encounters.

This sort of attitude has been dwelt upon and discussed by Larry Samovar and Richard Porter. In their book *Communication between Cultures* they observe:

The feelings that we are right and they are wrong pervade every aspect of a cultures existence. Examples range from the insignificant ("Earrings should be placed on the ears, not on the nose") to the significant ("We need to build up our defenses to protect ourselves from those religious fanatics") (Samovar 2007, 56).

This kind of representation, described by Xiaohong Wei as 'Negative Cultural Transfer', constitutes a relatively easy target for the postcolonial critique. While Said's examples are largely from the sphere of Orientalist scholarship, Lisle's illustrations of this cultural transfer engage modern travelogues and attack contemporary writers such as Paul Theroux and David Campbell.

It is interesting that even well into the 21st century the books, articles, and weblogs produced by authors living or traveling in China keep representing the Other in ways which have been, for quite some time, elaborated upon and protested against by the postcolonial critics. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the travel writers will be significantly influenced by the scholarly discussions sparked by their writings. After all, the overwhelming majority of these

writers are not scholars and are largely oblivious of what the critics have to say about the genre. As more and more writing travelers are making their way to China, the theoretical discussions are not likely to run out of fuel in the foreseeable future.

NOTES

¹ Vegsource - <http://www.vegsource.com/talk/humor/messages/8086.html>

² Ibid.

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