

## Travel as performing art – Judith Adler

### WHEN IS TRAVEL ART?

The analytic classification of any activity as an art is best justified in empirical and historical, rather than a priori or idealist, terms. Since the same object or event may function as a work of art at some times but not at others, the question “What is art?” is better rephrased as, “When does an object (or performance) function as a work of art?” (Goodman 1978, pp. 66–67). Travel undertaken and executed with a primary concern for the meanings discovered, created, and communicated as persons move through geographical space in stylistically specified ways can be distinguished from travel in which geographical movement is merely incidental to the accomplishment of other goals. Whether skillfully fulfilling the conventions of a canonized tradition without any deviation, deliberately challenging received norms, or being led through the motions of a “packaged” performance designed and sold by others, the traveler whose activity lends itself to conceptual treatment as art is one whose movement serves as a medium for bestowing meaning on the self and the social, natural, or metaphysical realities through which it moves. Performed as an art, travel becomes one means of “worldmaking” (Goodman 1978) and of self-fashioning.

The relationship between travel performances and the conventions guiding their production and interpretation is variable and ranges from ritualistic adherence to deliberate challenge. This bears mentioning in order to forestall the objection that travel performances lacking obvious elements of imaginative innovation, or those in which the performer exercises little more than the choice of purchase, do not merit the theoretical consideration recommended here. As in other arts, the actual distribution of creative control in any historical series of works is an important object of inquiry; control should not be presumed to rest exclusively or even primarily with the performers. Mass tourism differs from the medieval pilgrimage or the 17th-century *voyage d'Italie* no more than a Hollywood movie differs from an icon or a painting by LeBrun and, like the movie, may profitably be approached as a discrete, industrialized manifestation of an art with an enduring history. Travel performances of a folk culture, those directed by clergy or by tutors aspiring to professional authority, and performances that are minutely scripted by printed guides and airline companies all set different kinds of limits to a performer's choices.

Recent sociological approaches to art have attempted to avoid an exclusive focus on the production of communicative acts and the tendency to equate meanings with producers' intentions (Jauss 1982). All symbolic works are subject to changing interpretations over time, and an artist's first medium is the capacity of his audience to see meaning in his work (Geertz 1983, p. 108). The meanings created through travel performance are neither independent of its audiences and contexts of reception nor necessarily stable.

In effect, travel may owe some of its cultural prestige, as well as its importance to persons' lives, to the fact that, in carrying a performer beyond the world of routine home life, it yields observations, encounters, and episodes that are free to function as relatively abstract signifiers. Like "important" cultural texts, travel experience can provide enduring referents for thought whose interpretation remains open to change (Ricoeur 1971). Once inscribed in memory, photographs, or journals, a single travel performance may always be reinterpreted as saying something new in response to a new emotional need or cognitive query (Eco 1982).

The baseline elements of any travel performance are space, time, and the design and pace of the traveler's movement through both. As psychologists and phenomenologists have stressed, human beings come to know space through "motor projects" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 5). An itinerary translates the spatial order of a map into temporal sequence, defining proximity and distance in terms of time and feasibility. A traveler who has allotted a specified length of time to go "around the world" draws significance to himself and takes possession of a world defined through

that trajectory. Significations, shared with particular publics and nourished by an entire way of life, can be drawn from choices of dress, transport, accommodation, social relations maintained in transit, use of temporal and financial resources, foci of interest, cultivated forms of sensibility, dramatizations of motivation, and concluding testimonials. Although the art of travel centers on the imaginative construction of encounters and passages, it has always included means by which fleeting experiences could be permanently marked or inscribed. Some marks (such as graffiti) may be left in the place of passage, while others (albums, journals, curios, and gifts) testify in the home world to the traveler's passage. All significations created and played on in travel performances draw sustenance from the whole lives of their producers and interpreters. While a sociology of travel history may take inspiration from recent work in semiotics (Butor 1974; Barthes 1979; Culler 1981), it should avoid any temptation to reify social action as a "text" susceptible to formal and insular readings or to grammatical analysis on the model of linguistics.

Labor migrations, the forced marches of armies, and travel for commercial purposes normally fall outside the scope of the perspective I advocate here. But pilgrims consciously shaping their journeys to evoke valued visions of reality or spiritual qualities of the self, 17th-century virtuosi disciplining their sight-seeing to empiricist canons, and present-day tourists all fall centrally within it. The boundaries separating travel practiced as an art from travel undertaken for economic or other purposes are not necessarily distinctions of traveling populations or even of entire trips. Labor migrations presumably involve orientations of a different sort, but in some cases the distinction between tourism and migration has proved to be a function of age and income rather than of motivation and purpose (Schmitt 1968). Young males of the poorer classes have at times used the search for work as a pretext for a poor man's Grand Tour (Adler 1985), while one of the unpublicized motivations for the classic Grand Tour of the past was economic—rentiers found that fixed incomes went further abroad than at home (Barrows 1948, p. 172; Black 1985, p. 112). Professional and middle-class groups notoriously seek opportunities to combine work with travel valued for its own sake (Pape 1964; Greenblat and Gagnon 1983). Even war has been glossed with tourist significance; postcards carrying greetings from well-known battlefields were sold just behind the French front during World War I (Fussell 1980, p. 6). Any attempt to distinguish rigorously a consciously practiced "art" of travel, or even simply "leisure travel" and tourism, from more instrumental geographical movements must therefore guard itself against purifying a taxonomy of travel types at the expense of its adequacy. The production and reception of travel performances as art are best considered as one dimension, rather than a pure "type," of activity, and the search for the

art needs to be carried out where it is in fact to be found, not, like the search for the proverbial lost purse, simply where the light is better.

#### TRAVEL STYLES

Since any cultural system is shaped by its own history as well as by extraneous influences, particular travels, travel sites, and institutions must be seen in relation to the historical development of travel traditions and of the travel art as a whole. The possibilities and limitations of even the least self-conscious travels are to a great extent determined by the state of the travel art itself: its norms, technologies, institutional arrangements, and mythologies. Adopting this premise entails a departure from most current sociological work on tourism, which rarely accords the weight of the past (expressed in consolidated institutions and referentially interlocked "bodies" of travel performances) the theoretical consideration it requires. (Admirable exceptions are Nash [1979], Britton [1982], Butler [1985], and Haug [1982].)

In contrast to the study of other forms of expressive culture, the study of travel is still in its infancy—comparable, perhaps, to the first systematic development of the history of the visual arts in the 19th century. A preliminary identification and adequate description of historical and current styles of travel practice have yet to be accomplished; they would have the ultimate aim of explaining the emergence and eclipse of particular travel styles in terms of the social relations and wider fields of cultural meaning that determine their development. Some travel historians and social scientists (Graburn 1983*a*; Feifer 1985) have appealed loosely to the notion of travel style, but there has been no explicit reflection on the implications of a concept long central to studies in literature and the arts. Recourse to the concept of style is still mainly limited to histories of travel writing (see Penrose 1942; Carrington 1947; De Beer 1952; Bideux 1981; Harder 1981; Lacoste-Veysseyre 1981; Chevallier and Chevallier 1984), but even a brief perusal of travel literature, or a short period of fieldwork among present-day tourists, is sufficient to suggest that styles of practice are numerous and, upon close analysis, as divisible into subcategories and phases of development as the panoply of styles in any other art's history.

The process of delimiting stylistic categories of travel is complex and involves a comparative grasp of some shared coherence that marks one body of travels off from previous, subsequent, and present practices. In some cases, such coherence may be shaped by travelers' conscious devotion to an explicitly formulated code of performance, as was the case for an international style of 17th-century philosophical travel, disciplined by travel treatises and "directions" that were widely translated and published by Europe's scientific academies. In other cases, such coherence

may point to common emulation of the same exemplary models of travel performance. The travel writings of Laurence Sterne and of Rousseau, for example, inspired emulative "sentimental" journeys in the late 18th century. A body of travel performances may be comparable to a school of painting or to an artistic movement. After the late 18th century, many travelers overtly gave themselves and their journeys such labels as "romantic," "picturesque," "philosophical," "curious," and "sentimental." But in all cases some of the elements constituting a recognizable travel style are reproduced unconsciously, out of common dependence on similar technologies and institutions as well as shared preoccupations rooted in the whole pattern of a group's life.

From the outset, skepticism is warranted toward any ahistorical and abstract delineations of travel "types"—such ambitiously universalizing typologies, for example, as have purported to distinguish tourism neatly from "serious" travel or pilgrimage from tourism (Pfaffenberger 1983). Similarly, we should guard against scholarly narratives, long fashionable in other art histories, that suggest a unilinear temporal sequence of travel styles, implicitly appeal to ideas of evolutionary progress, or naturalize stylistic innovation, consolidation, and decline as immanent to the "life" of cultural forms. Ignoring minor traditions at the expense of canonized ones and naively foreclosing on the possible futures and changing interpretations of past performances, such narratives typically attempt to explain single styles by a preconceived "spirit" of an "age."

The history of travel (like that of other arts) is best seen as a history of coexisting and competitive, as well as blossoming, declining, and recurring, styles whose temporal boundaries inevitably blur. When Goethe made his Italian journey of 1786, traveling in a manner that broke with many of the conventions of the *Kavaliers Tour*, he still found pilgrims on the road to Venice bearing the centuries-old insignia of scallop shell and pilgrim's hat. Some hallmarks of an essentially medieval travel style were still intact at the end of the 18th century. And, although Goethe's tour played a role in eclipsing the intellectual prestige of an earlier style of erudite travel, performances in that earlier mode continued to be enacted without modification throughout the 19th century (Klenze 1907, p. 86). In fact, the incidence of performances in a given style may actually increase as its cultural prestige declines. While some (though not all) historical periods may be characterized by the clear predominance, in either incidence or cultural prestige, of one travel style over others, and while new conjunctions of circumstance permit new practices, travel styles rarely appear or disappear with the neatness suggested by conventional travel histories. Like an underground stream, they gather force before they are noticed, disappear only to resurface again in modified guise, or, taking

hidden turns, give an appearance of novelty while drawing on enduring sources.

#### STYLISTIC CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Just as we should not expect to find any neat identification between a particular travel style and a well-defined historical age, so, in charting the advent of stylistic innovation in this art (as in others), we find that even the most extreme departures from tradition involve change in only a few conventions, while other long-standing ones remain unchallenged. Any travel style, no matter how seemingly new, is built on earlier travel traditions. The preservation of these fragments of tradition owes as much to their being built into travel technologies and into the infrastructure on which travelers depend as it does to continuities of intellectual and aesthetic orientation. Change in any of the conventions that together define an established style tends to require corresponding changes in travel technology or social arrangements, and there are limits to how much trouble even deliberately innovative travelers will take.

There is considerable continuity in the marvels listed in guides to Rome written between the 12th and 18th centuries, as well as in the pattern of the tours they recommend. Although the balance of interest in Christian and classical objects and the mode of sensibility cultivated in relation to them had changed, Grand Tourists visiting Rome during the 18th century carried on much of the program established by pre-Renaissance pilgrimage; continuity of destination carried with it considerable continuity in travel design (Burke 1968).

Similarly, while 17th-century English virtuosi traveling to Italy wrote with considerable skepticism about the wonder-working religious relics they were shown by their guides, they *did* take the road to Loretto and other pilgrim shrines with striking frequency. Many of the objects once sacred to pilgrimages lost religious significance only to be integrated into later travel styles as interesting "curiosities" or as examples of superstition that Protestant travelers were duty bound to document and expose. While this undoubtedly reflected interest in the church as a major political and ideological force, it is also true that centuries of pilgrim travel, with well-established routes, coaching services, inns, and professional guides, made it easier to make routine visits to hallowed sites than to nontraditional destinations. In short, travel performances spanning several centuries reveal striking continuities despite major changes in cultural orientation.

As in other spheres of cultural activity, not only do stylistic "breaks" in some travel conventions leave others intact, but a single traveler may practice disparate travel styles or a single trip display a mix of conven-

tions from diverse traditions. Scientific travelers of the late 18th and 19th centuries often singled out for attention objects that satisfied picturesque and romantic canons of interest or interspersed naturalistic "observations" with religious and patriotic meditations (Cobbe 1979; Stafford 1984). One cannot take at face value even the seemingly straightforward matter of continuity or rupture in the conventions governing choice of travel destination when considering an art that creates meaning through play with richly symbolic spaces. An underlying conceit that time can be changed with place—that the past of the traveler's home culture can be directly experienced elsewhere in the world, or its future foreseen among more "advanced" peoples—has given allegorical resonance to even the most realist trips. At first glance, there seems to be a striking difference between early Western pilgrimage to the Holy Land and 18th-century explorations of the New World, or between Greece and the Swiss Alps as 19th-century destinations. Such disjunctures are less complete than they seem, however. Some 18th-century travelers believed themselves among the ancient Hebrews when they encountered North American and Pacific natives (Clifford 1986). And after their defeat by the French in 1798, the Swiss were widely idealized by other Europeans as ancient Greeks (Bernard 1978, p. 24). When early ethnographic or scientific travel performances were dramatized as quests for contact with living exemplars of biblical mores, rigid distinctions between them and earlier forms of pilgrimage blur. Similarly, once symbolic substitutions and displacements have been taken into account, ancient Greece (whether visited on the shores of the Mediterranean or in a landlocked Alpine valley) displays remarkable salience, across disparate styles of performance, as a 19th-century travel destination.

Discrete stylistic elements are no more likely to characterize a single traveler, trip, or travel culture than an age. Travels sharing a style may be analyzed as composites, revivals, modifications, and quotations of earlier performances. Often a style achieves significance through practitioners' deliberately distancing themselves from earlier or adjacent practices. Medieval pilgrims contrasted themselves with those who traveled to satisfy "curiosity," considered a vice at the time (Zacher 1976; Howard 1980, p. 23); 17th-century scientific travelers, on the other hand, sought to distinguish themselves from purveyors of hearsay by strenuously emphasizing their curiosity, a passion that had been rehabilitated to connote scrupulous care for truth.

Any reconstruction of the meanings that particular travel performances hold for their publics must take into account the expectations they alter, as well as those they fulfill, and the expressive choices implicitly rejected in the course of their accomplishment. For this, it is necessary to avoid

hindsight and examine travels in light of the reigning models of their time. Early automobile touring cannot be understood without taking into account that the first motorists, far from regarding the car as an alternative to the horse and carriage, saw it as a means to recapture some features of coaching experience by avoiding mass railway transport (Belasco 1979). To appreciate the manner in which any style of travel constructs a world for its participants, one must hold in focus the excised features of other worlds, constructed through earlier or adjacent practices.

#### ENACTED TROPES

Of particular importance are historical breaks and continuities in the underlying narrative structures, or story lines, on which the meanings of travel performances are founded. The representation of the trip as an allegorical miniature of earthly life, or as search for a vantage point from which to grasp and understand life "as it really is," has long been a master narrative, even for secular travel styles. The search for direct experience of another time through change of place is another—sustained by Western mythologies of history. Germans in the 18th century went to England to contemplate their own future (Bayne-Powell [1951] 1972), much as 20th-century radicals went to postrevolutionary Russia (Enzensberger [1973] 1974, pp. 129–77) and came home to testify, "We've seen the future, and it works." The promise of time travel has become standard fare in commercial tourist appeals, with many tourist destinations featured as surviving remnants of an earlier, or even "timeless," way of life. Other long-enduring story lines or tropes that, through multiple transformations, transcend any single travel style include the discovery of new territory, the search for a "homeland of the soul," the desire to fortify the mind with an anodyne of beautiful memories, the study of the "book" of the world, and the exploration of terrestrial paradise or hell.

The so-called voyages of discovery created a cultural epic that set the mold for many later travel postures. A long line of travel criticism, exclusively equating the art of travel with this tradition and observing that conditions favorable to its reproduction are on the wane, has proclaimed the "end of travel" and mocked its epigone performances. "This is a game which is losing its interest," declared Joseph Conrad ([1923] 1926, p. 129): "Presently there will be no back-yard in the heart of Central Africa that has not been peeped into." The lament remains standard fare in recent travel literature (Fussell 1987, pp. 651–53).

The search for a homeland of the soul, accompanied by play with the ambiguity between literal, geographical space and psychic or metaphor-



ical space, can be traced from narratives of early pilgrimage through 18th-century neoclassical Italian tours to its abbreviated statement in current tourist brochures. Typically, the aim of the play is the internalization and retention, through symbolic representation, of relationship to a real place that, having once been glimpsed and identified with cherished values, must be relinquished. In a double movement of projection and reinternalization, values are emblematically fixed in landscape and reappropriated through encounter with literal geography. Criticism of travel performances based on this kind of iconic play has typically sought to accent one pole of the metaphor at the expense of the other, insisting, like St. Jerome, that Jerusalem is better sought in one's heart than through a real pilgrimage East.

The treatment of the world as a book, and of travel through it as a commentary on other texts or even as a democratic alternative to textual learning, can be traced to Plotinus and Augustine, who read the Book of Nature as a commentary on scripture. Richard Lassels, in his enormously influential *Italian Voyage* (1697, p. 2), praised travel as an "excellent commentary upon histories" and continued, "They that never stir from home read only one page of this book . . . and dwell always upon one lesson." Like other root metaphors, the idea of the world as a book and of travel through it as a "moving Academy or true Peripatetic Schoole" (Howell 1642, p. 8) has involved supplementary metaphors and correlates in action. Courtesy books of the 17th century, which treated travel on the Continent as "graduation to a higher form," advised parents to request regular written evaluations of their children's progress from accompanying tutors (Gailhard 1678, p. 23).

The search for paradise isles has long lent itself to commercial exploitation (Wagner 1977; Cohen 1982*b*) and is suggestively illuminated by studies of the literary pastorate (Williams 1973; Turner 1979). The temporary suspension of inequality in a courteous courtship between social classes, a definitive feature of literary pastorate, is an enduring motif in tourist appeals as well. The tradition of descents into hell, including journeys to present and past battlefields, slums, leper colonies, concentration camps, famine fronts, and other places of intense suffering, has been more resistant, though not impervious, to commercialization. A Swiss travel agency, offering excursions to Verdun in 1920, promised "an unbelievably impressive picture of horror and frightfulness" (Kraus [1920] 1977, p. 71). As the modern tourism industry is driven, like other industries, to expand and diversify its products for accurately targeted and well-differentiated markets, hitherto minor traditions—among them the exploration of infernal terrain—will no doubt increasingly be tapped for commercial purposes.