

NOTES AND QUERIES ON *TRAVELLER'S TALES*1

001

North African nomads and the Tuareg in particular are always associated in my mind with salt. And pears too. Not the fruit itself but its voluptuous, sweet, unmistakable aroma drifting across a sitting room on a Sunday afternoon. There was a documentary programme on our black and white television with the cosily familial historical title "All Our Yesterdays." The "we" were the British (with a few others to help) and the "yesterdays" the politically eventful thirties and militarily dominated forties. The images have little to do with the family album and a lot to do with family history. It was warm, the sun slanting through the window creating a rectangle of light, like a reflection of the screen. It was the visual equivalent of sympathetic weather in literature, mirroring the mood of the action. The action was that my father had just entered the room eating a pear and the Desert Fox was advancing through Libya. There was a linking sequence of shots showing Berbers with camels in the middle distance trudging over a stony desert.

"You know," said my father, "I saw people like that when I was in North Africa and the first time I did, one of my friends saw them too and said, 'For those chaps, crossing the Sahara is probably like going to the office every day.'"

He sat down in "his" chair. Normally he never talked about the war, neither did my uncle nor my grandfather. Even when asked directly they avoided answering. But we always gave it a try, my brother and I.

"What else did he say?"

"He said, 'We have something common with those blokes, they don't need passports and neither do we. Our passport is the air force.'"

"What happened to you friend?"

"He got married to a Frenchwoman right after the war and went to live in South Africa."

And that was all. So apart from the fact that he left Libya via Tripoli, went to Sicily and the Naples, climbed Vesuvius (and ran down it because it belched at him), visited Pompeii and Herculaneum and was shipped home after the war from Genoa I know nothing about his experiences.

He was, as he put it, tired of travelling and afterwards he vetoed my mother's suggestion to emigrate (with an assisted passage costing £10 per adult) to Australia. He never left Britain again. Indeed, had he been given the choice he would probably never have left the town he was born in in the first place.

002

Nomad: **ITINERANT**, traveller, migrant, wanderer, wayfarer, roamer, rover, gypsy, Bedouin; transient, drifter, vagabond, vagrant, tramp; refugee, displaced person, DP, homeless

person; **dated**: bird of passage. **ORIGIN** late 16th cent.: from French *nomade*, via Latin from Greek *nomas*, *nomad*- 'roaming in search of pasture', from the base of *nemein* 'to pasture'. 2

Mental exercise: rank according to moral category.

003

I found the material as a flurry of little rolls of 35mm film in a tin at the flea market, part of an accumulation of all kinds of films. I called Kodak and asked if there's any way the emulsion can be dated. The lady on the other end of the line told me to look for a number I couldn't find on the film and after a series of misunderstandings I mention a circle and a triangle. "That's from around 1969 before the present system of identification came into use" she said and then described how the film might look after thirty odd years. It might have been sold later, however.

"Up till about when?" I asked.

"Could be as late as 1973, but not much more than that," she said.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

I cut the connection and think back.

In the summer of 1969 I was in New York and north-east Canada, my first trans-Atlantic flight. 1970 in Italy, 1971 in Provence and in 1972 I was in Morocco.

004

I'm sitting in the hotel café. It's early but hot. I sit forward in the hope that the ceiling fan will evaporate some of the wetness from my soaked-shirt back but it's a psychological gesture really. I'm just postponing picking up my backpack and heading for the station. I've been hypnotised here, alone most of the time and able to pick and choose superficial identities as occasion demands and doing that shifted me into a less determined relationship to time. Leaving Marrakesh is like watching the ball bounce to a stop on a slowing roulette wheel, the possibilities closing down one after another.

Half an hour later I'm in the station. It's eight forty-five. I ask when the train to Casablanca is due and the man behind the counter says "Aujourd'hui." I go and sit on the platform and wait.

005

wait: To stay where one is or delay action until a particular time or until something else happens: remain in readiness for some purpose. **ORIGIN** Middle English: from Old Northern French *waitier*, of Germanic origin; related to **WAKE**. Early senses included lie in wait (for), observe carefully and be watchful.³

wake: To emerge or cause to emerge from a state of sleep; stop sleeping; become alert to or aware of. **ORIGIN** Old English (recorded only in the past tense *wȝc*), also partly from the weak verb *wacian* remain awake, hold a vigil, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *waken* and German *wachen*; compare with **WATCH**.

watch: To look at or observe attentively, typically over a period of time: keep under careful or protective observation: secretly follow or spy on: follow closely or maintain an interest in. **ORIGIN** Old English *wæcce* watchfulness, *wæccende* remaining awake; related to **WAKE**. 4

006

THE MATERIAL:

It had survived when the material in other cans had almost deteriorated to invisibility leaving just intriguing hints as to what kind of film it was part of. More like reliquaries than reels. This material, however, was simply superfluous to needs, unneeded beginnings to be disposed of, out-takes, the dismantled scaffolding of a documentary in the making. Perhaps the makers claimed it reflected Tuareg reality, but their methods of making it turned the Tuareg into actors waiting for their cue to do 'typically' Tuareg things in an acceptably aesthetic way. What is interesting is that this remnant material becomes, like it or not, a documentary of the documentary, a role partly predicated on its absence from the finished product. Even while it is exposing the construction of documentary reality (and thus partially hindering you being seduced by cinematographic and narrative illusion), it simultaneously exhibits many of the characteristics of the parent material. It is impossible to completely disassociate an image from its origins; it can only be given another context. The modified images create new stories, new traveller's tales. They also lock into current events and conjure up perceptual clichés and thus, like all visual traveller's tales, are as much about those who tell them as it is about those depicted in them.

007

“Tuareg IV, Tag/Aussen,” [Day/Exterior] the clapperboard labels the sky and the desert but there is no sign of the person. Clap. The board disappears in a puff of chalk dust, an echo of the climatic conditions of this semi-arid desert. There he is, sitting on his camel as if he had always been waiting there. And he has. Waiting on his camel in a tin box for years. Waiting for the board to exit the frame. Waiting for the off-screen signal to move. But it is also as if he had just this minute been conjured into being, a piece of filmic magic, the board acting as a theatre curtain, a magician’s cloak. The sleight of hand makes him seem to hesitate as if awaiting a signal. Then he sets off, heading for the right-hand side of the frame. He never gets there having been called up for service in the ‘real’ documentary, where he has another role to play. Instead he disappears behind the clapperboard again. Time after time. A Sisyphus of the African desert balanced atop the awkwardly elegant gait of a camel. Unlike the original Sisyphus, he has not been found guilty and will never age and die (though he may suffer some data loss). Slowly the disappearance takes on the same weight as the appearance and is equally inexplicable, part of a single illusion/disillusion, looping in time.

008

transit: the carrying of people, goods, or materials from one place to another: (a painting was damaged in transit). an act of passing through or across a place. **ORIGIN** late Middle English (denoting passage from one place to another): from Latin *transitus*, from *transire* ‘go across’.⁵

009

Clack. Synchronicity of sound and image established. Even without sound you can hear it in your mind’s ear from having seen it so often in the cinema. The clapperboard retreats out of the frame. The (perpetual) loading of the rifle, rapidly becomes a rhythm, a fixed sequence of events, a pattern, and like almost every repetitious situation a kind of boredom creeps in from anticipating the continuance of the pattern. I knew what I wanted to do with this piece when I saw it, but I’m still shocked when he levels his rifle at me. The camera pointed at him becomes the rifle pointed at me.

*I’m reminded of a passage in *The Atlantic Sound* by Caryl Phillips⁶: “One of the men looks into Stephen’s car, and then he flicks a cigarette butt, which briefly flies before plummeting to the ground. It is the kind of sudden dramatic action that is designed to inculcate fear.”*

*I seem to also hear echoes of a representative of the Travel Agents Association discussing on Austrian radio a hostage crisis in the Philippines a couple of years ago when he said, “Well, you know, the more exotic a country is the more dangerous too. But the choice is up to the consumer.” But I’m almost certain he’s not referring to the USA, listed in my copy of *The World’s Most Dangerous Places*⁷ as being right up there with the winners.*

010

It was the usual kind of thing. You get up at four in morning after sleeping badly because of the heat and the fact that you will have to get up at four o'clock in the morning to catch a bus. But the bus doesn't appear. It might have been England, in fact it was Guatemala. Then you have to stand around wishing you'd taken a shower and eaten something and you buy some buns and a warmish pepsi from a passing street pedlar and by the time the bus comes it's almost full. Luggage on the roof, seat on the bench at the back. This is the bouncy part of the bus because the weight of the engine is at the front and the driver's care with potholes ends as soon as the front wheels have cleared them. The morning builds up to a sweaty, dusty lunchtime but at least the road is surfaced. Every few kilometres the bus picks up passengers and sinks further on its springs. I've nodded off a number of times now but wake to sharp voices at the front of the bus as it idles at the side of the road. The door slams, the bus lurches forward bumping up onto the tarmac and accelerates. There is a strangely quiet crack sound behind us and everyone turns round to see the man who was refused entry to the bus because he was carrying a rifle pointing it at the back of the bus. We all duck down. The bus slowly gains speed and then rounds a bend. I recover from the fear. Someone nearby says he had been waiting for the bus all morning. I don't think he couldn't have been really serious about hitting it, it was too close to miss. When we got out late in the afternoon I forgot to look at the back of the bus for any holes.

011

He stand traditionally veiled. The rifle is present, right hand on the bolt, but it is an not immanent threat, partly due to the immobility of the figure. It is only a symbolic counterpoint to the camera shot which captures his image. The wind blows. A hot Saharan wind. It tugs at his voluminous desert-adapted dress. The sequence is constructed of a second or two and its mirror image. Thus the byting wind, a construct of computer manipulation, sucks at the clothes too. It is almost the only movement barring the camel rein swaying in the background.

It is an ambiguous situation, a motionlessness figure with no visible face, no eyes looking back at the camera. There is no reciprocity of gaze. It is disconcerting. I remember a tale told me by Ernst Strouhal about Anna, a blind female acquaintance, who told him that blind women seem to attract a higher proportion of a certain kind of man. She had the feeling that many were attracted to the shamelessness of the situation caused by the fact that they could not be seen. They felt liberated from a shame predicated on being seen by others (and thus imposed from without) and not from moral imperatives from within. But eyes or no eyes, I still feel under scrutiny.

This connects up with Malek Alloula's analysis of colonial postcards depicting women of Algeria in various stages of undress, pointing out that the normal dress of Algerian women, being long and flowing, together with the veil, denies the voyeurism of the photographer (and viewer). He says, 'Thrust into the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels photographed, having become the object-to-be-seen himself, he loses the initiative: *he is dispossessed of his own gaze.*' 8

I think: in the west, masking yourself like this is regarded as aggressively anti-social and in some situations also an infringement of the criminal law – because you cannot be individually identified by those who represent the state and its organs of control.

012

Gazing across a heat-wavering aridity at the blue travellers. My personal history is insidiously present, peering through the filmic veils of Lawrence and the Sheik of Araby out into a desert storm of my own making.

Early last century, the nomad was located in Western consciousness as a romantic figure who had no fixed abode and thus was free of the civil duties, social responsibilities and economic pressures of sedentary cultures. Glorified in the same way as Hollywood later glorified the figure of the 'tramp' or 'vagabond', itinerant workers many of whom were victims of stock market crash of 1929 and recession of the Thirties. By the Fifties they had ceased to be empathetic figures, 'kings of the road,' and had become instead 'vagrants' or vernacularly, 'good-for-nothings' or 'parasites' and thus threats to the images of total prosperity.

013

It occurs to me that although the Tuareg have been involved in salt and slave trading as well as attacking trans-Saharan caravans and have been nomads for centuries, their nomadic existence has, perhaps, come more under threat in the post-colonial era than at any time before. So-called 'national' boundaries (Mali, Niger, Morocco, Algeria, Libya etc.) established by the retreating colonial powers, combined with a number of severe droughts have meant that the Tuareg's border-invalidating way of life and their resulting impingement on the agricultural land of the sedentary agriculturalists of those countries has led to extended guerrilla conflicts in at least two, Niger and Mali. It turned nomads into refugees for extensive periods.

Nomadism has always been regarded as a threat by non-nomads. Two and a half millenniums ago Herodotus described the Scythian nomadic culture and the fear is provoked in his "Persian Wars." The Scythians were able to resist conquest because they were continually on the move and had no fixed

territory or cities to defend: “they maintained their autonomy through movement, making it seem to outsiders that they were always present and poised for attack even when absent.”⁹

It seems ironic to think that just when traditional nomadic cultures such as this are being eradicated from the face of the earth, it is capital that has become the new nomad or, at least has assumed certain fundamental characteristics of nomadism including, and especially, de-territorialisation. As the Critical Art Ensemble put it: “The archaic model of nomadic power, once a means to an unstable empire, has evolved into a sustainable means of domination. In a state of double signification, the contemporary society of nomads becomes both a diffuse power field without location, and a fixed sight machine appearing as spectacle.” ¹⁰and further, “elite power, having rid itself of its national and urban bases to wander in absence on the electronic pathways, can no longer be disrupted by strategies predicated upon the contestation of sedentary forces.” ¹¹

014

*“Timbuktu, for example, was built on the profit from salt coming from Taoudenni. The salt deposits there were in the middle of the Sahara Desert, 400 miles north of Timbuktu. The merchants of Timbuktu were able to organise and give armed protection to the huge caravans that brought the salt south. It was a costly and risky enterprise. The caravans were often attacked. Dust storms caused disastrous delays. On several occasions supplies did not get to Taoudenni in time, so everyone died. The mines then had to be re-staffed. In 1805 an entire caravan, with 1,800 camels and 2,000 men, died of thirst. If a caravan reached Timbuktu, however, there were vast profits to be made, setting the salt at the exorbitant price allowed by the monopoly. The merchants were thus able to extort money from a huge area that had no other salt source. Like the salt malangis in India, the people who actually extracted the salt received little of this wealth. Until recently the mines were largely staffed by slaves. This continued even under French rule.”*¹²

015

Overheard in the underground between Landstrasse and Karlsplatz:

“Why can’t you just let it be? Why do you have keep on raking up it up? Why can’t you just forget the past?” The woman addressed is silent. I think: I wonder whose irritating past is to be forgotten and how long ago that past is supposed to begin. It seems to me that the mechanisms involved in continuously re-editing personal memories to fit in with the present, the permanent re-configuring of identity, have something fundamental in common with how we construct other cultures out of our own present needs. And that comes from the fact that our past is also a foreign country.

Turning over in my mind the mercurial definitions of illusion and reality and the shifting boundaries of what constitutes a 'travel experience,' I come across a video describing the reconstruction of Las Vegas, an example of the most artificial of urban constructs in itself. The video shows how Venice is being inserted into Nevada. A replica complete with canals, gondoliers, sanitised water and, naturally (the meaning of the word blurs at the edges in this context), shopping opportunities. It is a completely enveloping illusion, a compellingly false world in three dimensions, a film set in durable materials which reduces film to a pale simulacra.

On the same day I read a report about a piece of art work dealing with the 'Sound of Music.' Clearly the Hollywood production projects a certain image of Austria which is more than acceptable to the City of Salzburg since there are well-received, organised tours to the sites where the film was made. This image has much to do with the with the same motivation which led to the extremely selective quoting of Theodor Herzl on a commemorative plaque affixed to the wall of the court building where he had spent time in training. The plaque in question read "I spent some of the happiest hours of my life in Salzburg," omitting the subsequent sentence I his diaries which is equally pertinent and read: "I would have love to remain in this beautiful city, but as a Jew I would never have been promoted to the position of a judge." A desire to project an idyll—the two mentioned requiring special determination to maintain in the face of competing historical constructions—and a third: an empty blue video signal >nothing >before something happens >change of intense, transparent blue to grey blue > the object/meditative quality of the pure colour interrupted > by something, indiscernible > slowly recognisable as desert > takes over as the thing to be looked at >desert where nothing is happening >waiting >but the grey-blue sky appears to break out into a whirl of colour >a flash of camels > then nothing again > nothing >blue nothing >blue >empty blue video signal.

ENDNOTES

¹ This text was originally written during the process of developing *Veiled Threats*, an installation for three monitors, one beamer and salt. The visual material was subsequently developed further for the linearly-structured eleven minute video using the text as the basis for a voice-over narration. *Traveller's Tales* sales and distribution are through Sixpack film: www.sixpackfilm.com

² Oxford English Dictionary

³ O.E.D. op. cit.

⁴ O.E.D.

⁵ O.E.D.

⁶ Phillips, Caryl: *The Atlantic Sound*, Vintage, 2001

⁷ Pelton, Robert Young: *The World's Most Dangerous Places*, Harper, 2000 (4th edition)

⁸ Alloula, Malek: *The Colonial Harem*, University of Minnesota Press, 1995. p.14

⁹ Critical Art Ensemble: *The Electronic Disturbance*, p14.

¹⁰ Critical Art Ensemble, op. cit. p15.

¹¹ Critical Art Ensemble, op. cit. p23.

¹² Moxham. Roy: *The Great Hedge*, Constable, p.171 The great hedge was a customs barrier running south from the Himalayas over 1500 miles where salt tax was levied.