



HAL
open science

THE PRIVILEGED CASE OF TRAVEL WRITING: TRAVEL BOOKS AND TRAVEL BLOGS BETWEEN PERFORMATIVE AND POSSESSIVE KNOWLEDGE

Stefano Calzati

► **To cite this version:**

Stefano Calzati. THE PRIVILEGED CASE OF TRAVEL WRITING: TRAVEL BOOKS AND TRAVEL BLOGS BETWEEN PERFORMATIVE AND POSSESSIVE KNOWLEDGE. Narrative Matters 2014: Narrative Knowing/Récit et Savoir, Jun 2014, Paris, France. hal-01077474

HAL Id: hal-01077474

<https://hal.science/hal-01077474>

Submitted on 24 Oct 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE PRIVILEGED CASE OF TRAVEL WRITING: TRAVEL BOOKS AND TRAVEL BLOGS BETWEEN PERFORMATIVE AND POSSESSIVE KNOWLEDGE

1. Introduction: Form, Medium, and Epistemological Force of the Travel Writing Genre

In two previous articles, I respectively contended that: 1) the medium is responsible for shaping what we conceive nowadays as the novel genre;¹ 2) each medium embeds a proper chronotope which affects the form of the writing.² Here, by comparing a number of contemporary travel books and travel blogs, I would like to extend such claims, by arguing that the choice of the medium also has consequences for 1) how the narrative is effectively unfolded (even beyond a mere question of style); and 2) the kind of epistemology that the narrative unveils (the term “epistemology” is here conceived in its broad Anglo-Saxon meaning).

In this respect, the travel writing genre is a privileged object of analysis in at least two respects. On the one hand, as Carl Thompson argues,³ it claims an intrinsic “pretension to truth”. This means that the contract binding the travel writer to the reader is one of trust: the former pre-tends to provide an accurate account of what s/he has experienced and, in turn, the reader evaluates such an account based on his/her epistemological horizon. In this regard, it is worth remembering what Steven Shapin contends in his work *A Social History of Truth*: in any given epoch, each culture builds its own concepts of accuracy, credibility, and reliability based on “the expectation that knowledge will be evaluated according to its appropriate place in practical, cultural and social action”.⁴ In other words, people and texts that pretend to be trusted have to comply with the “epistemological decorum” of the culture from which they stem and to which they are directed. As a matter of fact, the aim of this paper is to show that such epistemological horizon also depends on and is shaped by the medium chosen to deliver the text. On the other hand, travel writing is, formally speaking, a loose genre, a feature that can be prolific of consequences.⁵ In particular, the subjective stance in charge of the narration, far from being constitutive of the genre, rather represents the formal evolution of the genre starting from late-modernity. Indeed, as Thompson again notes with respect to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English travel writing, “the Royal Society influenced not only how one recorded one’s observations and presented them to the public, but also what one observed and recorded. Abstract or metaphysical speculations were to be kept to a minimum, as were subjective impressions, and personal thoughts and feelings.”⁶ Hence, it is possible to argue that the overt subjectivity with which the genre is nowadays imbued is a formal aspect that has emerged over time, mainly in concomitance with the consolidation of travelling as a widespread practice. Furthermore, travel writing unfolds a rather contested kind of narrative that constantly shifts between fact and fiction. It is no surprise, then, that Bruce Chatwin in *What Am I Doing Here?* claims that “the word ‘story’ is intended to alert the reader to the fact that, however closely the narrative may fit the facts, the fictional process has been at work”.⁷ Again, the goal here is to show that the way in which

¹ Calzati 2013a

² Calzati 2013b

³ Thompson 2011: p. 78

⁴ Shapin 1996: p. xxix

⁵ See Raban 1978; Holland and Huggan 1998; Borm 2004

⁶ Thompson 2011: p. 79–81

⁷ Chatwin 1988: introduction

the subjective narrative is effectively shaped by the writer is (also) determined by the medium. In order to unpack these two points, a good starting point is Paul Fussell's seminal definition of travel books as

a subspecies of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker's encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or romance – claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality.⁸

Within this definition, it is possible to highlight two main problems. Firstly, we attest to the conflation between “actuality” (a term under which are apparently subsumed the notions of “truth” and “reality”) and “factuality” (travel writing is not considered as a novelistic genre, precisely because it must be reliable). Secondly, we can remark on the blurring between travel writing as a genre and the book as a medial format. We have, then, three issues at stake: narrative, epistemological, and textual. The narrative issue addresses the unsolved distinction between fact and fiction; the epistemological one relates to the boundary between truth and falseness; and the textual one discusses the interplay between genre and medium. Certainly, these three issues have already been investigated within travel writing. However, they have rarely been put in mutual relation and inscribed into a broader inter-medial and intra-medial analysis.

Narratively speaking, Graham Holland and Patrick Huggan are right when they note that it is impossible to strictly discern between fact and fiction, insofar as any account is, to a degree, fictional. In this regard, they come to define travel writings as “fictions of factual representation”.⁹ No doubt, the rationale behind such a statement is to overcome a certain formalism affecting the study of travel writing. In this sense, Holland and Huggan's definition is surely a valid departing point, although it still fails to address the other two issues at stake here. This is why it is necessary to provide a study of contemporary travel writing that goes beyond a mere formalist approach – or also a rhetorical one, as proposed, for instance by Jan Borm¹⁰ – and look at this genre from a different perspective.

Concerning the textual issue, it is useful to recall Carolyne Miller's warning: “an understanding of genre”, she notes, “can help us account for the way we encounter, interpret, react to, and create particular texts”.¹¹ Put differently, any generic definition should tell us something on certain common features that a given corpus of texts share and, most importantly, how these texts work; how they create and convey their meaning. Hence, following Miller's argument, travel writing is seen here as a genre which derives from the interplay of travelling and writing as “practices of knowledge”.¹² More generally, the interplay between these two practices of knowledge is inevitably affected by the medium that carries the text. In this respect, the notion of “genium” (genre + medium) can be very useful to account for the textual issue, that is, the blurring between generic and medial features. In other words, the travel book and the travel blog are two geniums which “interpret” and give shape, in their own way, to the travel writing genre.¹³ To sum up, this paper seeks an answer to the following questions: 1) what is the epistemological force of each genium? 2) How do they shape travelling and writing as practices of knowledge? 3) How is the narrative shaped?

In order to address these questions, a close-reading of a number of contemporary travel books and travel blogs about China (in English and French) is provided. The choice of China as the thematic focus of the texts responds largely to the need for a destination that could widen the gap between the traveller and the “other”, so that it would become easier to bring to light the epistemological force of travelling and writing as practices of knowledge. More specifically, the analysis follows the line of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)¹⁴ as an approach that seeks to unveil the power relations embedded in the texts (i.e. between the traveller and the other), while also accounting for the presence of modes other than written language (i.e. images).

2. *La traversée de la Chine à la vitesse du printemps*

La traversée de la Chine à la vitesse du printemps is a 2003 travelogue by French travel writer Olivier Germain-Thomas.¹⁵ The book narrates the author's journey through China before reaching Japan – his final destination – and after having already visited India, Thailand, and Vietnam. Hence, what Germain-Thomas recounts in the *Traversée* is only one leg of a broader journey from Bénarès, in India, to Kyoto, in Japan. In this regard, it is

⁸ Fussell 1980: p. 203

⁹ Holland and Huggan 1998: p. 10

¹⁰ Borm 2004

¹¹ Miller 1984: p. 151

¹² Calzati 2015

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See Aiello 2012

¹⁵ Germain-Thomas 2003

possible to note that the travel book is filled, mainly in the first chapters, with a variety of comparisons between India – which the author knows well – and China, a country completely unknown to him. Here is a crucial passage:

Je me dirige vers la grotte des Mille Bouddhas où je retrouve, sculpté dans la pierre, le visage grec de Gautama venu du Gandhara à travers la Route de la soie. Personne ne s'incline. On s'affaire devant les vendeurs des souvenirs. Ce peuple a-t-il perdu le sens du sacré ou ne l'a-t-il jamais eu qu'en surface? Les souvenirs aussi pullulent à Lourdes. Suis-je déformée par l'Inde?¹⁶

This quote is emblematic of Germain-Thomas' need to represent China through India. As Anthony Pagden notes, travellers tend inevitably to frame the unknown in terms of the known, according to a "principle of attachment"¹⁷ that helps them make sense of reality. As a matter of fact, Germain-Thomas confesses at the very beginning that, "Je ne connais pas la Chine, alors que je connais assez bien l'Asie."¹⁸ More generally, then, the travelogue is configured as a research on China and, in particular, on its arts and spiritualism:

Préparant cette traversée, j'ai cherché, avec livres et rencontres à aborder la pensée chinoise. J'ai été étonnée de constater qu'elle était en résonance avec l'état de mon évolution à la recherche d'une voie spirituelle qui ne fut pas embrigadée par des dogmes.¹⁹

From this passage, the two most important epistemological threads of the book can be derived. On the one hand, the author manifestly acknowledges that, although (or maybe because) he does not know anything about China, he has collected a lot of information before his departure. In other words, the epistemology of his experience is not confined to travelling and writing, but is extended beyond the *Traversée* of China *per se*. And this extension is, in fact, manifested in the book through the quotations from various sources – religious, philosophical, historical – which are interspersed throughout the book, as well as at the beginning of each chapter, in the form of excerpts:

Une allée est bordée de boutiques de souvenirs. D'un geste rageur, je tape mon bâton en m'écriant: "Où est le chemin continuant dans le ciel?" Le vent siffle. Je m'aventure parmi les rochers. "Vois!" voulait dire: "Vois outre!" J'ai besoin d'aide. Elle me vient de Lao-Tseu: *L'œuvre accomplie, se retirer. C'est cela la voie du ciel. Tao Te King 9, 9*²⁰

Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the narrative becomes a dialogic narrative, in which the knowledge of China is built via the contribution of a multiplicity of voices, many of which are, indeed, Chinese voices. On the other hand, the above passage testifies that the author's journey is also an interior quest, that is, a quest for a spiritual path that can help him know himself better. The narrative, then, unfolds two complementary epistemological movements: vertical and horizontal; internal (knowledge of the traveller's own interiority) and spatial (knowledge of China). In fact, the title of the book helps support this same idea: not only is the journey presented as a movement through something, but its time, its duration, is a relative one (the spring blossoming). Put differently, it is a duration that seeks a negotiation between the external world and the internal quest of the author. The important aspect to stress is that these two movements – vertical and horizontal – are not given, nor linear; rather they are problematic and constantly interrogated; they are, using Judith Butler's terminology, "performative", insofar as they shape "the [text's] meaning and the way through which meaning is performed".²¹ More than that, the possibility of knowing itself is eventually contested by Germain-Thomas (an attempt to overcome the epistemological issues declined in terms of exclusive truth/falseness). The author, then, is not urged to provide evidence for his experience, in the same way as modern travellers were required to do in order to be considered as reliable. Rather, Germain-Thomas, in what appears as a typical postmodern move, questions the very epistemological force of travelling and writing. At times, he admits a certain distress as he feels fully disoriented in China:

Contrairement à toutes les situations semblables vécues depuis Bénarès [...] là, sur cette place, je me sens d'une transparence dont mon esprit, hélas, n'a pas su profiter pour saisir cette réalité que l'épaisseur de moi obstrue.²²

At other times, he manifests a more positive attitude:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: p. 37–8

¹⁷ Pagden 1993

¹⁸ Germain-Thomas 2003: p. 13

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: p. 13

²⁰ *Ibid.*: p. 100

²¹ Butler 1988: p. 521

²² Germain-Thomas 2003: p. 15

Je divine qu'un part de moi (où est l'orgueil dans ce gout de l'inconnu?) n'est point trop mécontente de traverser la Chine sans pouvoir communiquer. Je m'amuse à me mettre dans un état de *wuwei*. Epouser le mouvement du train et des minutes égrenées à son rythme.²³

Eventually, the conclusion of the book offers to the reader a sort of pagan agnosticism. Indeed, the knowledge both of the author's interiority and of China reach a suspended state:

Je me sens *chez moi* au sein de l'étrangeté de l'Inde alors qu'ici je ne puis me laisser aller, comme si les idéogrammes et les statues hiératiques des sanctuaires refermées sur eux-mêmes dressaient un barrage.²⁴

J'ai essayé d'attraper le mieux que je pouvais certains aspects de la pensée de la Chine; j'y ai trouvé de quoi avancer. [...] Une évidence: la Chine m'a changé, mais je ne saurais dire en quoi.²⁵

Textually speaking, an interesting point to note is that four years later Germain-Thomas published another travelogue – *Le Bénarès-Kyoto* (2007) – in which he narrates the whole journey accomplished through Asia. The chapter dedicated to the Middle Kingdom contains the same episodes recounted in the *Traversée*, but the way in which they are narrated is very different. As a matter of fact, in the second book the performativity of both the interior quest and the attempt to know more about China are, so to speak, marginalized. Let's take the following passage as an example:

Quittant Suzhou, je me souviens que, malgré la pluie, j'ai été heureux de pédaler le long des canaux, de voir des pivoines éclore, d'être accueilli par des touffes de bambous, de suivre dans l'eau un rayon de lumière jusqu'à la boue nauséabonde. Le train matinal est bondé, les banquettes inconfortables, les paysages plats. Où descendre? A quelle heure? [...] Wuxi, Changzhou, Nankin (à 13h 42), le train se vide.²⁶

Germain-Thomas opts here for a more superficial (i.e. factual) recounting of the journey. Such a change in the way the narrative is built, it is argued, is due, at least to an extent, to the fact that the chapter on China is part of a greater travel experience: an experience which is no longer evoked, but is (para)textually²⁷ included within the book. It is not by chance, then, that the various comparisons between India and China are almost absent in the second book, as if the author is not urged to recall his knowledge of India, insofar as this is effectively presented in the book. But, since the *Traversée* of China is anticipated and followed by the narration of the other legs of the journey, both the internal movement and the relativity of the spatial movement, which were typical of the previous travelogue, lose their strength. Here, the stress is more on the journey as a sequential, linear experience. In other words, actions are privileged over reflections; there is a factualization of the narrative and the time of travel becomes objective. More generally, it can be contended that it is the physicality of the book that marks a decisive boundary between what is to be excluded from the narrative and how are to be shaped those details which are, eventually, included.

3. *First Pass under Heaven*

First Pass under Heaven is a 2006 travelogue by New Zealand writer Nathan Hoturoa Gray. In this travel book the author recounts his walk, together with four other companions "from the west", along the full 4,000-kilometre stretch of the Great Wall. Because this is an endeavour that no one has ever accomplished – or at least recorded – before, the travel writer is confronted with the modern topos of appearing accurate and reliable. In other words, the epistemological horizon that frames the writing is one of credibility. In this sense, it is possible to note that the narrative is shaped in the form of a journal, in which all notes are dutifully dated. The journey is represented as a series of successive stages; as a linear experience in which the Great Wall traces the inescapable teleology and the book defines its narrative boundaries (although, as we will see, other paratextual elements both within the book and outside of it enrich the Great Wall's walk).

More specifically, in the introductory chapter, titled "preparations", Gray lists all the equipment they need: "5 backpacks and packs liners; 3 two-man tents; 1 one-man bivouac; 6 sleeping bags; 5 sleeping mats; etc."²⁸ and he also mentions that they will also be carrying "filming gear", thus confessing the intention to produce a visual testimony of the experience in the form of a documentary. The journey, then, is conceived from the outset

²³ *Ibid.*: p. 78

²⁴ *Ibid.*: p. 86

²⁵ *Ibid.*: p. 122

²⁶ Germain-Thomas 2007: p. 149

²⁷ See Genette 1997

²⁸ Gray 2006: p. 35

as a sort of ethnographic endeavour, and it does not come as a surprise that the book also hosts a variety of pictures as a further testimony of the walk. Some of them are in colour, but the majority are in black and white and are taken directly from the documentary. The main function of these visual insertions, as noted by Gray himself, is to combine the narration with a visual representation of China that can help the reader realize the encounters that the five walkers had during the journey:

My favourite parts of the trip were by far connecting with the locals, spending time at the schools along the way teaching kids English and showing them our photos and footage etc. This is best shown in the documentary of the journey that I put together.²⁹

In this sense, the written travelogue, although representing the textual core of the experience, is also influenced and surrounded by other visual modes, namely pictures and moving images, which are either in the book (as peritextual elements), or outside of it (as epitextual elements).³⁰ Discussing here the role of the documentary would exceed the scope of the paper; however, by remaining concentrated on the travel book, it is possible to note that the decision to insert pictures responds to the will to show all that in the narrative is elided, namely the encounters with Chinese people. Indeed, while in the text these episodes are reduced to a minimum (for example, very few dialogues with locals are reported), the pictures open the book to a representation (and knowledge) of the Chinese which counterbalances the written narrative. In this regard, it is possible to advance two more notations. First of all, as I have noted elsewhere,³¹ pictures in black and white can work as a blurring of the chronotopic coordinates of what is represented, so that scenes are, so to speak, “epicized”. As a consequence, in Gray’s travelogue the others portrayed, rather than being well-defined persons, come to represent all Chinese people; they stand for the whole population. Similarly, landscapes are made less recognizable, giving the impression of an even greater and desolate confrontation between man, nature, and the Great Wall. As a matter of fact, it is only captions that anchor these pictures to the various stages of the journey; otherwise they would embed a fully self-enclosed epistemology within the book. Secondly, it is interesting to note the way in which these black-and-white pictures are displayed in the book. They are inserted together in the middle of the book and three or four frames are presented on each page. Thanks to such a disposition, it is contended that not only do these pages produce an alternative visual narration to the written language, but they impress upon the visual narrative the same steady rhythm as the day-by-day written narrative.

At this point, it is crucial to note that visual and written modes are complementary only on a formal (factual) level. Indeed, on a thematic level, while pictures are a window on the other, the written narrative is mainly focused on the protagonists of the walk. Similarly to Germain-Thomas’, however, such a focus is not static, but shows a certain epistemological development. Gray’s journey is configured, in other words, as a performative, suffered inner quest, whose anchoring points are spiritualism and the author’s Maori background. Emblematically, Gray affirms that: “the journey turned out to be such a challenging affair, (and exhausting after its completion) I wrote the book mainly as a source of cathartic understanding of what I had actually done.”³² More specifically, in the beginning the travelogue is very much imbued with the idea of the walk as an endeavour, so that the account is firmly narrated from the perspective of the group as a bunch of Westerners conquering China:

Kitted out in our matching-red jackets, the Great Wall team stands proudly near the base of the flagpole – a horde of Chinese tourists lining up to get their photos taken. (...) I imagine our faces spreading like the diaspora, adorning dusty mantelpieces throughout the continent. Yet, how will our young faces look at the end of 4.000 kilometers? What in the world will we all be thinking?³³

Then, after the departure, the group splits and Gray first remains with Diego, an Italian companion, and is later left alone. These events contribute to kindle a movement from a Western self-enclosed exteriority towards a subjective Maori interiority:

The race is solely with myself. And like a baby who falls flat on his face when learning to walk, the most important thing is to get back up and try again. The Maori – a warrior race renowned for never giving up – have a similar saying: *Whitu ki raro, waro ki runga. Seven times down, eight times up.*³⁴

²⁹ Gray private communication

³⁰ See Genette 1997

³¹ Calzati 2013b

³² Gray private communication

³³ Gray 2006: p. 39

³⁴ *Ibid.*: p. 212

Hence, while factuality remains the standard form of narration throughout the book, its epistemological horizon is rather unstable. In fact, it shifts from a Western-centred plural focalization to a Maori-centred singular one. Then, again, the physicality of the book represents the centripetal core which gives coherence to the factual/epistemological interplay, although it must be kept in mind that there are other paratextual elements – pictures and the documentary – that also contribute to enrich such interplay.

4. *Curieuse Voyageuse and La Chine à fleur de peau*

CurieuseVoyageuse.com is a travel blog written by French blogger and author Aurélie Croiziers. The blog presents the typical blog-structure³⁵ with a larger central column in which the posts are published in reverse chronological order, and a narrower right column with side information and the blogger biography. Croiziers started to keep the blog in 2009, when she moved to China. In 2011 she went back to France, but she has continued to write about her trips around the world. When Croiziers started blogging in 2009, she decided to narrate first the trips she took to China before her decision to move there. Hence, from the outset a double thematic distinction appears in the blog: on the one hand, there are posts dedicated to her journeys to China and others that are more focused on her “sedentary” experiences in the Middle Kingdom. On the other hand, after her return to Europe, Croiziers has definitively broadened the scope of her travel blog to destinations beyond China and Asia. The “à propos” page witnesses that:

Après un an de vie (pourtant bien active) en France, une centaine d’articles, sur mes voyages en France ou en Europe et sur ma vie quotidienne, je réponds oui, on peut garder un œil voyageur dans son pays, on peut ne pas retomber dans la glu du quotidien, de l’esprit tristement critico-rabâcheur franco-français, et non on n’a pas nécessairement besoin d’exotisme pour voyager.³⁶

The travel blog, then, is a genium with loose textual boundaries, at least thematically speaking. So, it becomes interesting to understand if and how the narrative and its epistemological force are affected by this looseness.

To start with, although the reason behind Croiziers’ journeys to China is professional, in the first post the blogger mentions that she will only write about her travelling experiences, thus avoiding any reference to her job. In so doing, she tends to build for herself a self-representation as a typical unconditioned traveller,³⁷ rather than as a worker or a temporary émigré. More specifically, concerning the first trip the blogger demonstrates an awareness of doing typical tourist things, but she also tends to move away from the tourist gaze, by striving to offer unusual insights into the country. For example, in the post dedicated to the Sky Temple, she does not spend words describing it, but rather recounts an encounter with an old woman who is practising Tai Chi:

Lors d’une visite touristique au Temple du ciel de Pékin, j’ai eu le plaisir de rencontrer une belle vieille dame. Je l’ai d’abord aperçue en train d’effectuer de drôles de massages faciaux avec son amie, je me suis approchée et ai essayé de l’imiter. Elle n’a pas été gênée, au contraire, nous avons partagé un bon moment : elle a voulu m’en apprendre plus et elle m’a appris quelques pas de Tai Chi. J’ai fait rire un bon nombre de passants...³⁸

The attempt to offer an alternative representation of China and the Chinese is also enhanced by the pictures uploaded. These usually portray details of everyday life which avoid typical tourist sites. Emblematic, in this respect, are the pictures found on the post titled “ombres pékinoises”³⁹ in which, not only pictures are alone, so that they constitute the only mode of representation, but what is represented is highly symbolic and ambiguous – indeed shadows – entailing the clear attempt to offer a subjective portrayal of China. At the same time, the visual representation of the blogger herself is elided from the posts and if we want to “see” her we have to go beyond the mere narration of the journeys and read her “à propos” page.

More generally, concerning the narrative of the travel blog, I have noted elsewhere⁴⁰ that the blog, as a medial format, tends to epicize the narrative – that is, to frame it in a space and time dimension that is beyond contingency; beyond a performative unfolding. This is because each post, although being connected to others, is autonomous in itself; it focuses on a specific topic and self-encloses it. The narrative of each post, then, tends to be not only factual, adherent to facts, but objectified, or, in Theodor Adorno’s words, “possessive”, in the sense that it acquires the force of a given to the detriment of its inner diegetic development:

³⁵ See Walker-Rettberg 2008

³⁶ Croiziers 2009: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/a-propos/>

³⁷ See Lisle 2006

³⁸ Croiziers 2009: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/rencontre-au-temple-du-ciel/>

³⁹ *Ibid.*: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/ombres-pechinoises/>

⁴⁰ Calzati 2013b

The curiosity which transforms the world into objects is not objective: it is not concerned with what is known but with the fact of knowing it, with having, with knowledge as a possession. This is precisely how the objects of information are organized today (...) As facts they are arranged in such a way that they can be grasped as quickly and easily as possible.⁴¹

As a matter of fact, Croiziers' representation of China is monological; the knowledge that derives from the posts dedicated to her journeys to the Middle Kingdom is univocal, uncontested – that is, it is not in dialogue with the other she encounters. Emblematic, in this sense, is the fact that there are no direct speeches reported. Dialogues, if any, only occur extra-diegetically with the people who comment on the blog. However, these comments very rarely challenge Croiziers' view because they remain secured within a Western perspective.

So far, these notations pertain to each post considered individually, but when we compare the first trip as a whole to the following ones then the interplay between the possessive narrative and its inner epistemology is altered. Indeed, while it is true that the narrative remains adherent to a factual form, Croiziers manifests an increasingly refined knowledge of China with the passing of time. In this sense, it is possible to note an epistemological development, insofar as she becomes aware of the cultural and ethnic diversities of China and of the contradictions in which the country is trapped. Here are two examples:

Cette journée a très heureusement commencé par la visite du musée des minorités ethniques du Yunnan. Le Yunnan est un véritable réservoir des diversités ethniques du Sud de la Chine. Dans ce musée ont pris place nombreuses traces de la vie de ces peuples si différents des Han. Les costumes présentés sont notamment de toute beauté. Ils illustrent toute la diversité, la créativité et pourquoi pas la vitalité de ces peuples.⁴²

Ici encore, les contrastes de la Chine contemporaine sont partout visibles. D'un côté, des campagnards cherchant du travail dormant à même le sol, de l'autre toute une jeunesse branchée qui se cherche une identité entre Chine et Occident.⁴³

The development of the knowledge of China goes hand in hand with the blogger's mastery of Mandarin language. So, for instance, while on the second trip she mentions her linguistic problems when she meets and stays with Chinese people, in the third and fourth journeys these issues gradually fade away. Eventually, this gradual settling-in triggers a change in the blogger's self-perception. At the beginning of her effective stay in China, she does not know how to think of herself: her opening post is titled "Française en voyage ou chinoise d'adoption?" This confession entails, in fact, a distinction between travelling and staying in China and between being a resident and a temporary traveller. So, the question becomes: are there any changes in the way the experience is narrated, once Croiziers moves to China? Narratively speaking, there are not. Posts are still very much objectified and usually brief. It is epistemologically, however, that we witness the most evident shift, insofar as the refinement mentioned before loses its inner, horizontal force and is spread, so to speak, *in loco*; it becomes a vertical movement. It is no longer a matter of going and seeing different places, but of seeing differences in one place. Not only does Croiziers tend to concentrate even more on details, but she decides to open an effective conversation with Chinese people, launching a new section called "Portrait de Chine"⁴⁴ in which she interviews Chinese friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. In this way, the posts become effectively dialogic; Chinese people start to emerge from the mass and to have faces, attitudes, dreams, and problems.

The interesting thing is that Croiziers has also published a book based the blog, titled: *La Chine à fleur de peau*.⁴⁵ In this remediation process⁴⁶ both the narrative and the epistemology of the account are affected. First of all, the book loses the *in media res* opening which characterizes the blog. The book, on the contrary, is introduced by a brief paragraph that explains and motivates it. Secondly, the book features a predominance of words over pictures, to which is delegated a mere appendix role. Hence, China (and its way of knowing it) has to be largely imagined by traversing the density of the words, rather than derived from the scrolling of pictures which, from time to time, appear in the blog. Thirdly, thematically speaking the book only refers to Croiziers' reflections on China and does not take into account her successive move to Paris. In this sense, the book represents again a decisive physical boundary that legitimates the travel narrative's coherence and distinguishes it from other details which are considered as epitextual because they are not directly pertinent to the generic form of the book. Most importantly, however, while it is true that the book mirrors the blog by keeping the structure of the entries and the dates – the remediation process, according to Bolter and Grusin's terminology, is one of

⁴¹ Adorno 1991: p. 84

⁴² Croiziers 2009: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/week-end-aux-environs-de-kunming/>

⁴³ *Ibid.*: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/canton/>

⁴⁴ Croiziers 2009: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/portrait-de-chine-rencontre-avec-juanjuan/>

⁴⁵ Croiziers 2011

⁴⁶ Bolter and Grusin 1999

“immediacy” – we nonetheless witness that the narrative of the text has undergone a deep rewriting process. The following is a comparison of the “same” passage as it is found on the blog and in print:

Nous avons passé quelques nuits dans les villages Miao que nous avons visités.

Les Miao sont la cinquième minorité en nombre de personnes, 9 millions de Miao ont été recensés en 2000. Ce nombre important et l’étendue de leur répartition géographique expliquent la diversité des coutumes voire des langues d’une région à l’autre. Ce site donne de nombreuses informations sur cette minorité.

Dans les villages visités, certaines journées sont très animées, pour plaire aux touristes de passage, ce qui permet aussi aux villageois de s’enrichir un peu. Ces danses faites sans enthousiasme m’ont guère plu, je n’en ai vu aucune dans son ensemble. Seule la beauté des costumes – ici costume traditionnel Miao, vaut vraiment le coût...⁴⁷

Depuis trois jours je me balade entre rizières et villages des minorités ethniques du Guizhou. Ces sont des groupes de populations ayant de modes de vie, des traditions, des langues qui diffèrent totalement de ceux des *Han*, chinois majoritaires. Il existe cinquante-six minorités ethniques reconnues en Chine. J’ai visité à ce jour quatre villages : Matang, Ching’an, Langde, et Xijiang, des ethnies *Miao* et *Gejia*. Il s’agit de deux groupes ethniques de plusieurs millions de personnes, les minorités étant ici à l’échelle chinoise ! Ces cultures sont reconnues par l’Etat chinois, ce qui leur permet d’avoir un peu plus de place et de pouvoir dans les représentations politiques. Cependant ces minorités sont souvent folklorisées et il n’est pas rare de voir fêtes et traditions autrefois réservées aux grands moments de la vie, commercialisées pour les touristes de passage. N’empêche, si la curiosité pousse à prendre le temps, on peut découvrir un peu mieux ces manières de vivre si différentes. Ne serait-ce que par la façon de porter les bébés : ils sont ici « attaches » dans le dos, à la manière africaine. Les langues diffèrent aussi, mais si on consacre un peu de temps aux gens, de nombreux sourires et quelques mots sont toujours échangés. Nous passons plusieurs nuits dans les villages Miao que nous visitons. Les Miao sont la cinquième minorité de Chine en nombre, neuf millions d’entre eux ayant été recensés en 2000. Ce nombre important et l’étendue de leur répartition géographique expliquent la diversité des coutumes voir des langues d’une région à l’autre. Dans les villages visites, certaines journées sont principalement occupées par des animations, pour plaire aux touristes de passage, ce qui permet aux villageois d’avoir un petite source de revenu. Les danses faites sans enthousiasme ne me plaisent guère, je n’en vois aucune dans son ensemble. Seule la beauté des costumes – comme par exemple le costume traditionnel ; Miao avec la coiffe, la protection de poitrine et leurs jambières en argent – vaut vraiment le coup...⁴⁸

The book, then, tends to narrativize the travel experiences by wrapping the posts within a richer whole. As a consequence, the epistemology of the text is also affected. More specifically, the book’s structure and its own physicality project onto Croiziers’ experience a teleology which is completely absent from the blog. In fact, in the book the knowledge of China is presented as a gradual, incessant discovery; it is a progressive scratching of layers from absolute ignorance to full appreciation; a scratching that in the blog appears more inhomogeneous and only when we compare one journey to the others. Moreover, in the book Croiziers is compelled to insert information about herself and her job which are absent from the blog. In this sense, she eventually turns the gaze onto herself, deconstructing that self-representation as an unconditioned traveller which emerges from the blog. The following passage, for example, is presented only in the book:

Cette journée fut pour moi l’occasion d’une grande expérience: j’ai brûlé mes premiers panneaux. A la demande de notre metteuse en scène, j’ai eu le privilège de porter les quelques panneaux écrits en caractères chinois pour donner des indications sur l’histoire à destination du public non francophone. J’ai surtout eu la chance d’être aux premières loges pour voir les yeux ronds et les aires parfois amuses, souvent étonnées des Chinois.⁴⁹

5. Bitbythetravelbug’s *China 2014*

Bitbythetravelbug, alias Shannon Feesago, is a blogger found on the travel blog platform travelblog.org.⁵⁰ She has written seven posts about her two-week journey to China, during which she also took Mandarin classes. In this travel blog some of the tendencies highlighted in Croiziers’ blog are exacerbated.

First of all, the blog is part of a greater platform: “travelblog.org”. Hence, if we want to read Bitbythetravelbug’s blog we have to look for it, either by browsing the platform, or by using the search box. In this sense, from a medial point of view, the platform requires a competence that anticipates any effective reading. Clearly, Croiziers’ blog also requires such competence (as does her book, for that matter), but insofar as her blog is independent, its medial boundaries are much more defined than Bitbythetravelbug’s. To be more specific, the blog platform on which Bitbythetravelbug’s blog is hosted dictates and shapes not only what the blogger can write, but also how she can do it. In this respect, it is notable that the platform offers a whole accountability about the blogger’s activity; an accountability that is, indeed, very much factual and does not

⁴⁷ Croiziers 2009: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/guizhou-folklore/>

⁴⁸ Croiziers 2011: p. 41

⁴⁹ Croiziers 2011: p. 13

⁵⁰ Bitbythetravelbug 2014: <https://www.travelblog.org/Bloggers/BitByTheTravelBug/>

really reveal anything about the blogger. Croiziers' "à propos" page, which provided a brief autobiographical portrait of the blogger, is here reduced to mere usage data and a blogger's picture.

Secondly, as noted elsewhere,⁵¹ the blog is surrounded by a variety of content whose insertion is up to the platform (or the advertising server on which the platform relies). Put differently, by publishing her own blog on a platform, the blogger agrees to abdicate, to an extent, her own authorial singularity. Hence, while books and also individual blogs tend to be in service of the text, in portals or blog platforms, there is a greater cooperation between various actors. Evidently, this has an impact on the generic features of the blog too, which passes from a travel account *strictu sensu* to a more broadly defined text that could be defined as a hybrid of the diary, the travelogue, and the travel guide. It is, however, not only a matter of hybridization of genres, but, more radically, of a completely different understanding of travelling and writing as practices of knowledge. Indeed, with regard to Bitbythetravelbug's written posts, it is possible to remark that they are very much objectified – even more than Croiziers'. More specifically, as the following quotes attest, the narrative is minimalized in style and syntax, it is imbued with information copied from other sources, and, as such, it does not provide any subjective insight:

We ended up going to the Temple of Heaven, a complex of religious buildings situated in the southeastern [sic] part of central Beijing. The complex was visited by the Emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties for annual ceremonies of prayer to Heaven for [sic] good harvest. (Wikipedia) It was built in the early 1400's [sic].

We visited a rebuilt section of the wall, and it is a popular (crowded) section because it is easy to get to. It is very steep in places and reminded me of Dead Woman's pass on the Inca Trail when we hiked to Machu Picchu.⁵²

We were stopped several times for photos by Chinese locals. The tour guide said people travel from rural villages to these sites, and this is probably the first time they have seen a foreigner.⁵³

Unlike Croiziers' blog, then, here the blogger does not do anything to build a subjective representation of the experience. In other words, it could also be suggested that Bitbythetravelbug fully embraces a banal (see touristic) attitude which annihilates any possibility of knowledge of the other. Pictures, too, adhere to such an attitude. Indeed, there are a huge variety of them that portray either the blogger, or the whole group with which she has studied, and all the people are staring at the camera as if testifying of "having been there", thus reasserting a purely self-referential purpose.⁵⁴ Similarly, concerning the representation of China and the Chinese, a number of pictures portray the typical tourist landmarks, such as the Great Wall and Tiananmen Square.

More generally, it is possible to contend that, by being hosted on a communitarian platform, the epistemological singularity of Bitbythetravelbug's blog is levelled to that of all the others. Put differently, on travelblog.org the pretension to truth of each travel account bears the mark of banality: factuality is subservient to superficiality, or at least it suggests the commodification of writing and travelling as something that anyone can accomplish. By offering a free and ready-to-use space that does not require any knowledge or re-elaboration, the platform implicitly asks the blogger to renounce her subjectivity, thus encouraging both an anonymous way of travelling, and a form of writing that is a pure stereotypical reification. Travelling and writing, then, are no longer practices, but mere documentary acts; acts whose very purpose is a self-enclosed enjoyment and whose result is the narcissistic reassertion of the presence of the blogger on the web.

6. Conclusion

The inter-medial and intra-medial comparison of a number of contemporary travel books and travel blogs about China (in French and English) showed the deep interconnection between the choice of the medium and both how the narrative is shaped and its epistemological force – that is, its capacity to offer a knowledge of the other encountered and the writer's interiority.

In *First Pass under Heaven* the underpinning epistemology is one of objective accuracy due to the nature of the endeavour. However, the written narrative also presents a development, as it shifts from a Western-centred focalization to a single-centred one.

The intra-medial comparison of Germain-Thomas' books *La traversée à la vitesse du printemps* and *Le Bénarès-Kyoto* showed that the physicality of the book represents a liminal boundary which dictates what to include in the narrative and how to shape it. While the first book unfolds a double problematic quest of the self and the other, the second one is more focused on the objective development of the journey, because the journey around China is inscribed in a broader narration.

⁵¹ Calzati 2012

⁵² Bitbythetravelbug 2014: <https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/China/Beijing/blog-842858.html>

⁵³ *Ibid.*: <https://www.travelblog.org/Asia/China/Beijing/blog-842909.html>

⁵⁴ See Calzati 2013b

Croiziers' travel blog is, on the one hand, connoted by a relevant thematic looseness, at least when compared to the remediated book *La Chine à fleur de peau*. On the other hand, the posts of the blog unfold a narrative which is not only factual, but possessive, in the sense of Adorno's "possessive knowledge". At the same time, by comparing the various journeys to China that Croiziers accomplished it is still possible to witness an epistemological shift in her knowledge of China. Instead, the knowledge of the blogger herself, which only appears in the book, is elided.

Bitbythetravelbug is a blogger who published a travel blog about China on the platform travelblog.org. Such a choice has consequences for the narrative and the epistemology that derives from it. Indeed, on the one hand, the blog platform reduces the self to a set of data, while the knowledge that we can get of China is fully possessive and adherent to a tourist gaze that commodifies the practices of travelling and writing as mere acts. Hence, while the independence of Croiziers' blog was at once the reason for and the consequence of the blogger's attempt to provide a subjective representation of China, here, on the contrary, the inscription of Bitbythetravelbug's blog within a larger platform is symptomatic of a more superficial approach to travelling and writing and to the medium too. More broadly, by putting Bitbythetravelbug's blog in relation to those on other platforms that I have analysed elsewhere,⁵⁵ it emerges a constant pattern among bloggers as for the places they visit in China and the way in which they are presented, thus suggesting a reiteration of the travel experience that eventually does not add anything different to the representation of the country.

To conclude, what the constant evolution of the web seems to entail for online writers is the need, if they really want to be read, to acquire a medial knowledge that precedes any effective production. When it comes to an inter-medial comparison with books, what is at stake is not a matter of quality – that is, of "better" or "worse" content – but of different kinds of reading experiences. While the book tends to be subservient to the text, the blog depends more on the cooperation between various actors whose visibility is evident both within and around the text.

⁵⁵ Calzati 2013b; 2014

References

- ADORNO, Theodor (1991). *The Culture Industry Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.
- AIELLO, Giorgia (2012). "All Tögethé® Now: The Recontextualization of Branding and the Stylization of Diversity in EU Public Communication". *Social Semiotics* 22 (4): 459–486.
- BITBYTHETRAVELBUG (2014). *China 2014*. URL: <https://www.travelblog.org/Bloggers/BitByTheTravelBug/>.
- BOLTER, David, GRUSIN, Richard (1999). *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- BORM, Jan (2004). "Defining Travel: On the Travel Book, Travel Writing and Terminology". In Glenn Hopper and Tim Youngs, eds., *Perspectives on Travel Writing*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 13–26.
- BUTLER, Judith (1988). "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory". *Theatre Journal* 40 (1): 519–31.
- CALZATI, Stefano (2012). "Power and Representation in Anglo-American Travel Blogs and Travel Books about China". *Comparative Literature and Culture Web* 14 (5). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2154/>.
- (2013a). "Alcune riflessioni critiche sul processo di rimediazione dei blog". *Bollettino '900* 1–2. URL: <http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2013-i/Calzati.html/>.
- (2013b). "Intermediality, Multimodality and Medial Chronotopes: A Comparison between the Travel Book and the Travel Blog". *Caracteres* 3 (1): 99–113.
- (2014). "Travel Writing on the Edge: An Intermedial Approach to Travel Books and Travel Blogs". *Film and Media Studies* forthcoming.
- CHATWIN, Bruce (1988). *What Am I Doing Here?* London: Jonathan Cape.
- CROIZIERS, Aurélie (2009). *Curieuse Voyageuse*. URL: <http://www.curieusevoyageuse.com/>.
- (2011). *La Chine à fleur de peau*. *Journal d'une curieuse voyageuse*. Clermont-Ferrand: Jacques Flament Editions.
- FUSSELL, Paul (1980). *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- GENETTE, Gérard (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GERMAIN-THOMAS, Olivier (2003). *La traversée de la Chine à la vitesse du printemps*. Monaco: Editions du Rocher.
- (2007). *Le Bénarès-Kyoto*. Monaco: Editions du Rocher.
- GRAY, Nathan Huturoa (2006). *First Pass under Heaven: One Man's 4000-Kilometre Trek along the Great Wall of China*. Auckland: Penguin.
- HOLLAND, Patrick, HUGGAN, Graham (1998). *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- LISLE, Debbie (2006). *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MILLER, Carolyne (1984). "Genre as Social Action". *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70: 151–177.
- PAGDEN, Anthony (1993). *European Encounters with the New World, from Renaissance to Romanticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- RABAN, Jonathan (1988). *For Love & Money: Writing-Reading-Travelling 1968–1987*. London: Picador.
- SHAPIN, Steven (1994). *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- THOMPSON, Carl (2011). *Travel Writing: The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge.
- WALKER-RETTBERG, Jill (2008). *Blogging*. Cambridge: Polity Press.