

# Narratives of Travel and the Travelling Concept of Narrative: Genre Blending and the Art of Transformation

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## Introduction: The Prevalence of Narrative

One of the many reasons why narrative has emerged since the 1980s as a seemingly ubiquitous mode across the human and social sciences can be seen to relate to the “tectonic shifts in our cultural architecture of knowledge following the crisis of the modernist episteme” (Brockmeier and Harré 2001, 39). Critical attention has increasingly focussed not just on the content of discourse (i.e. what is represented) but also on the manner in which it is patterned and shaped by particular users for particular purposes in specific contexts. In addition, the scope of narrative analysis has broadened such that all kinds of narrative ‘texts’ are included (e.g. dance; museum displays; social rituals); it has become an activity of cultural, rather than simply linguistic, analysis (cf. Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001, 5). From this perspective, narrative, in its insistence on the constructed or ‘storied’ nature of existence, becomes a form of resistance to the Cartesian principle of rationality (cf. Brockmeier and Carbaugh 2001, 9). How these stories are framed and the contexts in which they are presented become as meaningful as the stories themselves.

In the context of a discussion of autobiographical narratives or “how people give account of themselves” (25), Bruner (2001) points to the relationship between “individual psychic geography” and “cultural geography” (33) in narrative, a relationship mirrored in the title of his essay: “Self-making and world-making”. In this essay, he looks at the rhetorical nature of autobiography, the construction of self and of culture, and the processes of self-accounting made visible in narratives. He concludes with the following: “Like all other aspects of worldmaking (sic), self-making (or “life-making”) depends heavily upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted – its opportunities and constraints” (36).

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In pointing to the opportunities and constraints of particular symbolic systems, Bruner is acknowledging narrative (self-)construction through the medium of language, in either verbal or written mode, as a culturally-mediated activity reflecting sets of (expressive and interpretive) norms and conventions as well as opportunities for shaping and presenting aspects of agency. In effect, he is emphasizing the dialogic nature of self and other and indicating the ways in which narrative construction is both individual and cultural and relates to both process and product.

Taking as my starting point the widening reach of narrative and the dynamic relationship between text and world, self and other, interpretive frame and culturally-mediated product, I wish to view de Botton's *The Art of Travel* (2003) as a text which reflects some of the characteristics of the concept of narrative as it has travelled from its disciplinary base in the humanities to a wider constituency in the human and social sciences. Given the post-structuralist emphasis on context as a determinant of meaning, it will therefore be important not simply to analyze the text itself and its narrative structures but also to acknowledge the cultural and rhetorical context in which it has been produced. While *The Art of Travel* does not set out to be an autobiographical text, insofar as it constructs a relationship between "individual psychic geography" and "cultural geography", (Bruner 2001, 33), it may be considered to incorporate a self-making as well as a world-making dimension. For in constructing a text about the motivation for and means of travel at times past and in the contemporary world, de Botton is also narrating a story about his own experience of travel. He is in effect linking individualized (representations of) experience to a cultural tradition of journeying and its narrative construction.

### **Narratives of Travel and the Travelling Concept of Narrative**

One of the questions which raises itself at this point is the extent to which de Botton's text sits within the conventions of travel literature and the extent to which it reflects the kind of post-structuralist struggles over meaning which I have already alluded to. Certainly, *The Art of Travel* might usefully be viewed alongside such works as Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1992) with respect to its generic mix of travelogue, social/cultural anthropology, philosophy, and autobiographical insights. More recent travel literature of the kind produced by Geoff Dyer (see, for example, *Yoga For People Who Can't Be Bothered To Do It*) which mixes psychological and geographical rambles, comical insights and philosophical commentary, landscape and listlessness, would also provide fruitful terrain for comparison.

If, however, I wish to treat *The Art of Travel* as a genre-defying space set against the backdrop of the travelling concept of narrative rather than as a consciously deviant form of travel narrative, it is partly because de Botton's other works (e.g. *The Consolations of Philosophy*) also demonstrate such traits and partly because the author himself is conscious of wanting to mix modes and play with conventions in his search for an alternative essayistic paradigm.

In this sense *The Art of Travel* is not a single work but part of an oeuvre. It is also, I would argue, emblematic of a cultural shift in modes and media of textual production which illustrates a concern with pushing generic and textual boundaries. For de Botton, like writers such as W.G. Sebald, is working in textual spaces which challenge rigid notions of genre and subvert attempts to separate into discrete and/or privileged categories narrative and argument; time and space; the visual and the verbal; history and story; philosophy and personal anecdote; academic discourse and the conventions of story-telling.

It is also worth mentioning that de Botton has himself crossed linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary borders. Born in Switzerland in 1969, he spent the first 12 years of his life speaking French before switching to English. He studied history at Cambridge and has taught philosophy at Birkbeck. He has published three works of fiction and four of non-fiction as well as having presented two television series to accompany two of his books. In an interview on *The Art of Travel* published on the web ([www.writerspace.com/interviews/botton1002.html](http://www.writerspace.com/interviews/botton1002.html)), de Botton indicates his desire to “write about the influence of places on our psychology”; to write about beauty, “why we want it, what it does to us”. He also expresses the wish to “not just assert things about beauty, but try to show them as well”. He is aware of attempting a “new descriptive kind of writing”; in the same interview in connection with his novels, he mentions his “taste for reflection on experience” influenced by his European perspective on life and by readings of Montaigne, Stendhal, Flaubert and Proust. On his own web site ([www.alaindebotton.com/cv.htm](http://www.alaindebotton.com/cv.htm)), de Botton proposes the view that “a book should in some way help us to live” and indicates his commitment to “combining novelistic descriptions with more abstract discussion”.

In other words, de Botton is conscious of working with and against generic conventions to produce a type of writing that will mix “intimate experiences and more abstract reflections”; blend images, both literal and metaphoric, of the aesthetic endeavours and travel experiences of major writers and artists with his own meditations on and experiences of travel; and produce a work that is part travel guide, part guide to living.

Indeed, what Toolan (2001, 119) refers to as “intertextual and cross-genre clashings and mergings” is the very condition of creative and transformative discursive work (cf. Kress 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001 with respect to the notion of design). Thus a view of genre which would oppose narrative and argumentative texts has been problematized by narrative’s new-found reach and influence. For just as notions of what constitutes a particular genre at a given historical and cultural moment is the product of socio-cultural preferences in dialogue with creative, individual intentions and motivated actions, so concepts of narrative reflect the necessary interplay between the theoretical or speculative and the analytical or descriptive. Likewise, just as texts aiming to call into play generic conventions simultaneously depend on an understanding of how such genres function and on the reader’s ability to decode the new text in relation to previous sets of conventions, so concepts of narrative, or more properly, notions of what counts as narrative, expand or are modified in relation to changing cultural and social concerns and practices.

## ***The Art of Travel: Genre Blending and Transformation***

*The Art of Travel* can be seen, then, as a site of interrogation of narrative and genre. De Botton relates a series of journeys taken by himself – to Barbados, to Amsterdam, to Madrid, to the Lake District, to the London Docklands, around Hammersmith – placing them in the context of journeys (both real and imagined) taken by others (writers, visual artists, and philosophers) before him. In this way, he creates a layering of experience, linking individual episodic tales of travel with previous narratives of travel and reflections on the art of travel. In addition, he presents a multimodal text consisting of both visual and verbal representations and mixes photographs, some of which have been taken by himself, with reproductions of paintings and drawings (notably by Edward Hopper, Van Gogh and Ruskin).

A glance at the Contents page is indicative of de Botton's mixed method. For the book is structured around a number of themes relating to the processes and practicalities of travel (cf. DEPARTURE and RETURN); the motivations for travel (cf. MOTIVES); and the intentional and representational objects of travel, including landscapes, both real and imagined (cf. LANDSCAPE and ART). In effect, the journey provides a narrative and temporal framework for a text which blends "a kind of essayistic writing" (de Botton) with an unfolding narrative of travel, including preparations for departure, departure, arrival and return. The author, de Botton, is also a character in the story, at once individualized (e.g. arguing with his companion on Barbados), and yet 'standing in' for all those who journey in search of happiness, pleasure, beauty, or a break from routine. Other 'characters' include the writers, artists and philosophers who guide de Botton's travels and mediate his perceptions of the places he visits.

There is, then, a sense in which *The Art of Travel* fulfils the basic criteria for narrative. There is a teller, a tale, and an addressee (Toolan 2001, 2) and "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events" (6), if by 'non-random' we understand a motivated connection between the various 'episodes' described in the book. In outlining the sequential nature of the structuring of the Contents page, I have indicated the superimposition of a temporal, though not necessarily causal, framework. I would also suggest that by the book's end, we, as readers, are left with a sense in which we have arrived at some kind of resolution or synthesis; having journeyed vicariously to a number of locations with a series of guides and focussed recurrently on the psychology and mechanics of travel, we have, by journey's end, reached an understanding of the place of travel not only in the lives of the various protagonists presented in the course of the narrative but by extension of the place of travel in the Western psyche and Western culture more generally.

At the same time, however, this is clearly not a traditional linear narrative in which a main character is seen to develop over time, having encountered a series of obstacles or overcome situations of conflict from which s/he has gained insight and been transformed (cf. Dickens's *Great Expectations*, for example). Indeed *The Art of Travel* functions more like a modernist work where spatial juxtaposition, rather than linear sequence, is the guiding principle and coherence is to be found at the level of the presentation of themes and of discourse rather than at the level of the story (cf.

Bradbury and McFarlane 1991, 50). In addition, *The Art of Travel* draws on other generic resources (e.g. the travelogue; the self-help book), mixing and transforming them to produce a work capable of incorporating a wide range of modalities.

In other words, the form of the book, by which I mean to refer to its textual shape and structure, as opposed to what the book is about (its content and themes), is motivated by an explicit desire on the part of de Botton to do several jobs at once: by blending the personal and the philosophic, to interrogate received ideas and to provide a kind of practical toolkit for the problems of everyday life. To accommodate such wide-ranging aims, de Botton draws on a European textual tradition (e.g. the essays of Montaigne, and the aesthetic prose of a Flaubert or a Proust) and reinvents it to suit present-day needs. In the context of travel, this means understanding the mechanics of travel, the psychology of travel, and reflecting on cultures of travel as they have changed over time.

### ***The Art of Travel: Sample Narrative Analyses***

To illustrate de Botton's method and account for his style, I shall look in more detail at both the beginning and end of the narrative with a view to showing the extent to which *The Art of Travel* is framed by an initiating event (the arrival on the doorstep of a Winter Sun brochure) which triggers an action on the part of the main protagonist (taking a trip to Barbados), resulting in both material and intellectual/affective consequences (experience of and lessons learned as a result of travel; return to the realities of everyday life; financial implications of the trip).

Chapter 1, which falls under the DEPARTURE theme, addressed in chapters 1 and 2, consists of 18 pages of text and 3 visuals and deals specifically with the nature of anticipation. It is divided into 8 sections.

Section 1 provides the context for de Botton's decision to travel to Barbados, while section 2 speculates that travel as quest relates to the human search for happiness. Within the context of an investigation into the relationship between the anticipation of travel and its actuality, section 3 begins to recount the story of Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Huysman's novel *A Rebours* (1884), who leaves his villa on the outskirts of Paris, having spontaneously decided to visit London, a city which has so impressed him from his reading; however, he gets no further than English bookshops and taverns in Paris and finally returns home, convinced that the reality of travel will only spoil the much richer images of his imagination.

Section 4 picks up De Botton's narrative with his and his companion M.'s arrival in Barbados and reflects on the differences between images of a place formed in imagination and the lived reality. Section 5 returns to the story of Des Esseintes and his previous, disappointing trip to Holland. Section 6 continues the de Botton story-line, relating his first morning in Barbados and his realization that while he has changed location, he has not changed disposition. In section 7, the events of a particular day later in their holiday are related: sightseeing, lunch, arguing and

making up. General reflections on the necessity of psychological and emotional well-being as a precondition for enjoying material and aesthetic comforts follow. Section 8 concludes the story of Des Esseintes relating his decision, in the wake of his disappointing trip to Holland and his aborted trip to London, to travel no more, save in imagination. Though indicating that he travelled in spite of Des Esseintes's advice to the contrary, de Botton concedes that there were times when he was tempted to draw a similar conclusion to and from his travels.

From this brief overview of chapter 1, it is clear that de Botton's method involves intercalating different but complementary story-lines: his own story (my trip to Barbados) is set against and informed by the story of Des Esseintes: his travels, both real and imaginary, and his resolve finally to travel only in imagination. At the same time, these narratives are framed by philosophical questions: why and how do we travel? What are the conditions for successful travel? What do we learn from travel and are these things that we could not learn if we stayed at home? Travel, in its psychological and philosophical dimensions, is discussed in the light of particular tales of travel and in relation to specific travellers, both real (de Botton) and fictional (Des Esseintes). In the final resort, these tales, whether fictive or based on real travels, are all linguistically and culturally mediated. For as de Botton reminds us in relation to the workings of art and the imagination, they are selective; they omit and compress, thereby both simplifying and intensifying our experience of reality.

The themes of anticipation and departure, of setting out on a journey, are complemented and completed by the final strand of thematic enquiry, a focus on return. Composed of a single chapter entitled, "On Habit", the theme of RETURN is explored firstly in relation to the notions of change and changelessness. After returning to London from Barbados, de Botton is disappointed to find that the city "had stubbornly refused to change" (243). While he had been having new experiences under a different sky in Barbados, London has been indifferent "to the events unfolding in the lives of its inhabitants" (243). The contrast between what he has just left – the azure skies, raffia bungalows, and coconut trees of Barbados – and what he finds on his return – it is still raining and the skies are "funereal" (243) awakens in the author a kind of despair induced, at least in part, by the fact that despite his travels, nothing has changed. He is condemned to return to the very place which had motivated his escape in the first place.

This leads him to contemplate in section two Pascal's adage that "[t]he sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" (cited in de Botton, 2003, 243). No explicit explanation is offered for the juxtaposition of the realities of return and reflections on the causes of unhappiness but the implication is that travel is a form of displacement activity, during which one can only temporarily forget problems and escape from routine. The underlying issues do not go away.

There follows in section 3 a comparison between two travellers and two types of journey: Humboldt's South American expedition and De Maistre's journey round his bedroom. The large-scale, monumental journey and the extremely localized

journey are two very different modes of travel and make different demands on traveller, writer and reader. Yet, despite the limited trajectory suggested by De Maistre's localized journey, we learn something valuable about travel, de Botton suggests: that it is the mindset rather than the destination that is important. The travelling mindset, he proposes, is characterized by receptivity, by which he means an openness to new experiences and new places. He contrasts this openness in respect of the new with the more blinkered mindset that we develop over time in relation to home: our world seems to shrink and we see less and less. We settle into a routine and our vision becomes selective.

The author tries but fails to repeat De Maistre's experiment in a narrow sense, his bedroom being too small. However, in section 5, he follows De Maistrean principles and decides to take a walk around his immediate neighbourhood. At first it feels strange to be consciously lingering in a place through which he has become habituated to pass on his way elsewhere and to pay attention to aspects of the architecture, the passersby, and details of street life. However, he forces himself to try to reverse the process of habituation and to look at things anew. This leads to reflections on the conditions of possibility for looking closely and appreciatively at something: not only does one require the time and leisure to do so; being by oneself is also conducive to such concentrated observation and reflection.

Section 6 sees de Botton pick up on and articulate more explicitly an underlying dichotomy between 'boring daily life' (routine; home) and 'marvellous world' (escape from routine; travel) but in the light of De Maistre's injunction to look carefully at one's immediate environment and, as de Botton puts it, "to notice what we have already seen" (254).

De Botton's meditations on the art of travel are thus introduced and brought to a conclusion with reference to two overlapping models or ideals of travel. Des Esseintes can be seen to represent a character conscious of the gap between the imagined and 'the real' and finally preferring the world of imagination, an imagination fed by works of art and symbolic accounts of places and their inhabitants. Dickens's representations of London, for example, are presented as the quintessential London with a substance and flavour of their own. From this perspective, the actuality of London can prove to be disappointing.

De Maistre's contribution to reflections on modes and media of travel is to suggest that travel is a mindset requiring receptivity and the ability to see anew. Consequently, it does not demand that vast distances be traversed or that journeys be arduous or heroic. Travel is a state of mind, a kind of dehabituation which brings the traveller into contact once again with the wondrous materiality of his/her surroundings and their imaginative possibilities.

In both instances, travel is a metaphor. The *space* of the imagination is given material extension through travel; but journeys can be inward as well as outward. Looking closely at the world around you requires leisure and time, the time to reflect, the time to dream, the time to imagine, the time to create. Time is thus a precondition for travel.

De Botton's journey in *The Art of Travel* is both literal and metaphoric. The story of his trip to Barbados frames a narrative about travel, its whys and wherefores. Travel as cultural and historical phenomenon as well as psychic reality is related and commented on. Our flights of fancy (in both senses of the word) are shown to be culturally and textually mediated and perception is seen to be as much a cultural and psychological as a visual and intellectual phenomenon.

## Narrativizing Experience: Temporal Compression and Spatial Extension

According to de Botton, layers of experience settle “into a compact and well-defined narrative” (de Botton 2003, 15) in the sense that language organizes and structures experience transforming random feelings, impressions and sensations into linked, sequential events. In this sense, narrative is fundamental in that as humans we seem to feel the need to ‘story’ our existence or give it retrospective shape and meaning through the act of narration; in so doing, we have recourse to socially and culturally available storylines and discourses which we endeavour to transform in accordance with our interest (cf. Kress 2000, 155 and Kress 2003, 36 with respect to the notions of *interest* and *the motivated sign*). In *The Art of Travel* de Botton is using narrative as a resource to structure what might otherwise be a series of discrete observations on travel. Simultaneously, he consciously disrupts the narrative flow by inserting into it other storylines which need to be pieced together and which provide a kind of counterpoint to the story framing the chapter in question. This juxtaposition of short, thematically-interconnected, narrative blocks serves to disrupt temporal sequence, thereby creating a kind of spatial extension. This (conceptual or metaphoric) spatial extension is reinforced by the presence of (real) images which invite the reader to suspend or ‘step out of’ the on-going narrative and ‘take in’ the visual representations chosen to give another, complementary, mediated cultural perspective on travel.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the visuals featured in chapter 1 include a reproduction of William Hodges's *Tahiti Revisited, 1776*, and Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Alkmaar*, c. 1670–75, both oil on canvas, and a photograph of a Barbados beach attributed in the Acknowledgements to Bob Krist/CORBIS. The first is introduced in the context of a description of the photographs included in the ‘Winter Sun’ brochure, which triggered in de Botton the desire to visit Barbados in the first place. These photographs remind de Botton of the Hodges painting which he sees as providing “a model for subsequent depictions of tropical idylls, including the pages of ‘Winter Sun’” (de Botton 2003, 8). The second appears to relate to the story of Des Esseintes whose view of Holland was formed through paintings by the Dutch masters such

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<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the precise relationship between visual and verbal narratives in this text. For a general discussion of the relationship between the visual and the verbal with particular reference to Sebald's *Austerlitz*, see Doloughan (2004/5).

that when he actually visited Holland he was disappointed by what he saw. The third is a (more or less) generic photograph of a Barbados beach such as we might be expected to imagine it.

However, it is not just the conscious disruption of the narrative and the embedding of stories within stories, as well as the inclusion of visual images which serve to give the story a spatial dimension; in addition, the book's architecture is such that the reader is invited to view pairs of chapters subsumed under particular themes as complementary and to set them against one another. For example, under the LANDSCAPE theme, the two chapters are entitled "On the Country and the City" and "On the Sublime". The former relates a trip to the Lake District, characterized both as personal and belonging to "a broader historical movement dating back to the second half of the eighteenth century, in which city dwellers began for the first time to travel in great numbers through the countryside in an attempt to restore health to their bodies, and more importantly, to their souls" (132). Not surprisingly, perhaps, de Botton's guide to the Lake District and focus of this narrative is the life and poetry of William Wordsworth. Discussion revolves around the beauty and restorative properties of the natural world and of the power of particular images of and in nature to remain with us, removing us from present difficulties and returning us to moments of happiness (cf. Wordsworth's 'spots of time').

The chapter "On the Sublime" picks up the theme of emotions experienced as a result of viewing aspects of the natural world and documents the intense interest among writers, painters and philosophers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g. Joseph Addison, Edmund Burke, Thomas Gray, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Caspar David Friedrich) in landscapes, such as mountain peaks, precipices, glaciers, boulder-strewn deserts, likely to arouse in onlookers a feeling of the sublime. Travelling through the Sinai desert, de Botton himself comes to an understanding of the sublime: "that the universe is mightier than we are, that we are frail and temporary and have no alternative but to accept limitations on our will; that we must bow to necessities greater than ourselves" (169). He then goes on to make the link between God and sublime landscapes and to discuss the book of Job, "described by Edmund Burke as the most sublime book of the Old Testament" (174).

## Concluding Remarks

If I have treated *The Art of Travel* as a critical and self-reflexive narrative rather than as a collection of essays on modes and media of travel, it is partly because its architecture encourages such a reading and partly because contemporary concepts of narrative recognize the extent to which relations between story (chronological sequence of events) and discourse (how those events are presented) can differ across narrative types. I have suggested that de Botton's intercalation of different storylines, which nevertheless pick up and comment on one another (cf. analysis of ch.1), as well as his construction of motivated connections between otherwise

disparate textual elements (cf. analysis of ch. 9) create continuity and propel the narrative forward. This is a book *about* travel; it is also the story *behind* our desire to travel. Representations of travel constitute the material which gives rise to reflections on travel. The level of commentary and analysis outweigh the level of story. Culturally available discourses of travel serve in their turn to tell a story about the place of travel in contemporary society. De Botton as both protagonist and narrator/commentator is able to layer the text and give it depth and spatial extension (embedded narratives) as well as sequential elaboration.

*The Art of Travel* (de Botton 2003), then, is a book whose structuring principle is a conscious interweaving of different modes and different genres such that the very differences underpinning them are shown to be cultural and aesthetic choices rather than naturalized and determinative principles. De Botton's interest lies in taking available cultural and linguistic resources and re-working them to suit his particular purposes: to write a book focussing on the whys and wherefores of travel as articulated in a selection of verbal and visual texts of cultural and personal import. The very title, *The Art of Travel*, reflects de Botton's dual purpose: to examine how and why we travel as well as the place of (representations of) travel in our culture. The 'Winter Sun' brochure which arrives unsolicited on his doorstep is the trigger for a journey – "I resolved to travel to the island of Barbados" (de Botton 2003, 9) – both literal and metaphoric. Indeed, what becomes clear is the co-dependency of the physical and metaphysical, the real and the fictional, the image and the imagined. Any supposed hierarchy or dualism, as, for example, between nature and culture or representation and reality, is shown to be problematic, since nature is viewed through the lens of culture and shown to be a universe of signs in its own right. Likewise, the dialectic between word and image is seen to be embedded in "the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself" (Mitchell 1987, 43). In weaving together narrative and other discourses (e.g. the philosophic; the didactic; the autobiographical) as well as word and image, de Botton is not simply calling into question the legitimacy of fixed notions of what constitutes particular modes and genres but is actively using his knowledge of culturally available forms to produce a text which travels across discursual and generic boundaries and is grounded in and constituted by difference.

Making sense of the world and of wider cultures of representation in relation to travel does not preclude but rather calls upon the construction of a self from whose perspective the story is told and the events and/or episodes are evaluated. This self is not necessarily a unitary and singular entity but may represent a multiplicity of selves or diversity of perspectives (cf. Harré 2001). Thus self-making and world-making go hand in hand; the particularized and individualized experience is seen to be culturally embedded and circumscribed.

The concept of narrative itself is shown to be historically variable and the product of changing cultures and contexts. Its various forms are "fleeting constellations of forms of life which are best understood within a conception of structure as fluid patterns of action and of positioning" (Brockmeier and Harré 2001, 53). It is

perhaps not surprising, then, that the early purveyors of a structuralist narratology such as Mieke Bal have moved away from a narrowly construed notion of narrative towards a broader and more inclusive post-structuralist narratology appropriate to an age of “migratory aesthetics” (Bal 2004) and variable cultural contexts.

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