

Adam Ludford Freeman

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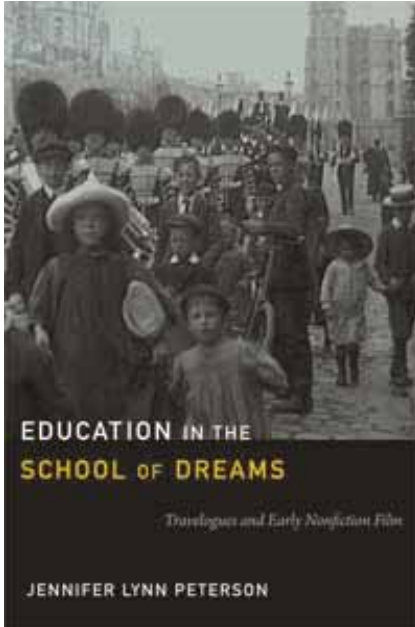
Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and early nonfiction film

Adam Ludford Freeman

The relationship between travel and the moving image is as old as cinema itself, beginning with the famous Lumière film screenings at Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris in 1895. Today the travelogue still has an enduring appeal to audiences, ensuring the survival of the form and its continued evolution. The persistence of the genre is evident through its many recent manifestations, from IMAX spectacles and personal journeys posted on YouTube to avant-garde and experimental films such as *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker (1983), *D'Est* (1993) by Chantal Akerman, and *Elegy of a Voyage* (2001) by Aleksandr Sokurov.

While often operating at the periphery of cinema the travelogue occupied a fundamental position in early film culture and a key role in the development of cinema during its early fertile period. Still, its study has often been neglected in favour of other fields of research. Jennifer Lynn Peterson's *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (London-Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) takes up this largely unexplored area of scholarship, examining travelogue films (also known as scenic films) and other nonfiction film production and exhibition with a specific focus on films exhibited in the United States between the period of 1907 and 1915.

During cinema's early period travelogue films were often categorised as 'educational films' and promoted as such by reformers and entrepreneurs eager to establish a 'higher' and more respectable status for a future cinema as an alternative to the comedies and fictions popular at Nickelodeon theatres during this period. The paradox contained within the title *Education in the School of Dreams* suggests that this educational aspect may also derive from dreaming and from the viewer's aesthetic and affectual experience of these films. Peterson argues that travelogues acted as a form of virtual or surrogate travel, but when viewed by film audiences in the darkened space of the Nickelodeon they functioned on their own terms as a unique experience – one presenting global fictions offering idealised views of otherness and exoticism, thus stoking viewer fantasy. The representational strategies of travelogues served to create a pleasant (therefore marketable) experience for the viewer, in turn establishing the conditions whereby travelogues could 'be



experienced as a dreamlike reverie' (p. 4) as opposed to a purely educational, informational reception.

There has been a significant interest in recent years in the relationships between landscape, place, and cinema, with a number of important texts contributing to this area of scholarship. While a number of these have focused broadly on landscape and the city in fiction and avant-garde films, others more specifically cover early film forms and travel. For example, *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel* offers collected essays as an introduction to travelogues and their place in the history of cinema (it also contains a contribution from Peterson). Like Peterson's book, *Picture Perfect: Landscape, Place and Travel in British Cinema Before 1930* also takes early cinema as a temporal marker but maintains a thematic focus on mostly British landscape representations, with some exploration of travelogue films in foreign countries. Peterson claims Catherine Russell's approach to early ethnography in film in *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* as closest to her own, where the 'textual openness' of early travelogue films provides the conditions in which 'meaning is not closed down' (p. 32).

The experiential, affectual perspective which makes the spectator and the act of looking central and sees the viewing of travelogues as not only an educational experience but also an aesthetic one underpins Peterson's study as outlined in the introduction. Peterson also establishes the travelogue as a form of minor cinema in both a literal sense and the Deleuzean sense, with the aim of elevating the importance of this minor cinema and exploring an area most frequently found at

the periphery of film studies. Travelogues also evade well-trodden notions in cinema studies of the auteur, as most travelogue filmmakers were unknown, in addition to the masterpiece tradition. This allows room for a study that prioritises the audience.

Peterson acknowledges that travelogues enact an imperial gaze through clichéd and generic formulas, perpetuating the ideology of imperialism as well as the power dynamics of empire and those of 'internal empire' through their depiction of foreign places and cultures. Early travelogues traded in images of the globe and were influential in shaping attitudes to race and geography. However, in a crucial departure from much postcolonial theory which focuses exclusively on the many negative characteristics of imperial projects, Peterson sets out to explore the inconsistencies of that imperial gaze and travelogues in general. The contradictory and ambivalent nature of the genre opens it up to resistant viewing, potentially subverting the content – a very central thesis in Peterson's study. This follows Benjamin's model, where despite the 'dreamwork' of mass culture which pacifies consumers and spectators it is possible, through an investigation into the very fabric of mass culture itself, to dissipate its power and myth.

The travelogue evolved on a trajectory from other travel representations which formed the visual culture of travel in the 19th century – from stereographs, magic lantern slides, and photographs to panoramas, world fairs, and most specifically (as explored in Chapter 1) the travel lecture tradition, discussed in detail through an analysis of the work of world traveler Burton Holmes. Holmes perpetuated the rhetoric of imperial ideology, performing a tourist's view of the world for middle class audiences, trading in the commodification of landscapes and the exotic. Peterson makes evident that by focusing on imperial ideology in travel representation previous scholarship may have overlooked the way in which such ideology could contradict and undermine itself and invite potentially subversive readings. Holmes' narrative-heavy travel lectures based on personal anecdote and his larger than life worldly persona is in stark contrast to the authorless nature of travelogue films, where the viewer is placed in the role of traveler and author, offering the audience the freedom to open readings not predetermined by an authorial voice.

Peterson charts the development of the travelogue genre from 1895 through 1917, exploring the transformation from 'a dominant genre in a marginal media to a marginal genre in a dominant media' (p. 64), and from actuality to scenic films, arguing that in the early era of cinema nonfiction or 'educational' film held a fundamental position in the industry. The popularity of educational films offered the opportunity for reformist and entrepreneurial attempts in the so called Progressive era to rescue film from the moral darkness of the Nickelodeon, to 'uplift' cinema from its reputation as a cheap form of entertainment and put the medium into the service of education, partly through promotion and distribution of non-

fiction films, thus legitimising cinema. It was believed that uplift could be achieved through education with an aim of empowering the lower classes. Therefore travelogues might democratise global travel and cultures, acting as a 'substitute for actual travel' (p. 105) and educating through experience. Nonfiction films contained an inherently 'high class' appeal and could be advertised as such and packaged as 'educational', validating the format socially. Through standardisation and a mostly rhetorical transformation educational film could become mass culture through the wide appeal of cinema, an idea taken on by many figures in the industry, including prominent film producers George Kleine and Thomas Edison, both of whom saw the potential for profit from the promotion, production, and distribution of educational films globally.

The two major characteristics defining filmic representations of landscape and place from other previous travel representations are fragmentation through editing and movement. Travelogues set out to depict both the exotic faraway places of empire and the internal empire, mimicking colonial strategies for control, presenting 'generalised and popularised versions of imperial ideology' (p. 139). In Chapter 4 Peterson argues that through various aesthetic principles and via the specificities of the medium of film and its ability for capturing everything, even that which is unintended by the filmmaker, this Western visualisation of the world could be read against the grain. The global distribution of travelogues and mass exhibition contexts meant that the films were received by very diverse audiences, so rather than meaning being distributed equally interpretation would have been potentially diverse and free for oppositional readings, especially from non-dominant populations. Peterson identifies one such possibility for reading against the grain: the discomfort of the people, or 'native types', being filmed as an unintentional aspect of the travelogue. By analysing a number of films where subjects look directly at the camera she investigates this potential for rupture in the look of the returned gaze. Through the tendency of many travelogue films to underscore the act of viewing or looking (with the use of oval matting, for example), what Tom Gunning calls the 'view aesthetic'⁸, and through the discontinuity of disjunctive, fragmentary spatial views assembled by the principle of 'collection' rather than continuity editing, Peterson stakes further claim for the notion that potential gaps in viewer experience could open up the film to resistant readings.

Certain aesthetic characteristics of travelogue films embody notions of the picturesque. The concept of the picturesque originated as a key aesthetic principle in the 18th century but by the early 20th century had become a commodified term used for its association with cultural capital and its soothing and tranquil connotations which were well adapted to mass culture, mechanical reproduction, and modern consumer habits. The picturesque could mask conflict and de-politicise the world through its aestheticisation according to its reductive conventions, thus

it can be seen as a further form of knowledge in service of Western imperial culture. While this repressive ideological discourse is well analysed in previous scholarship, Peterson attempts to move beyond this and focus instead on its often contradictory elements, for example the picturesque as idealised fiction of its represented subject.

Peterson delves further into arguably the most pervasive thesis of the book in Chapter 6, exploring the notion that while travelogues were praised for their realism and educational value the attraction for viewers may have actually resided in the aesthetic, perceptual, and emotional effect the filmic travelogue could produce, drawing the viewer into a state of poetic reverie. Presenting views of the world, of 'elsewhere', encouraged a flight out of the real and into fantasy, desire, and dreaming. Peterson uses a number of accounts in the trade press of the time to provide evidence of this potential spectator response, such as details that the audience, who were normally very vocal during Nickelodeon screenings, occasionally fell into silence during the screening of travelogue films. This form of armchair travel was achieved through mechanically-reproduced global space reassembled within the cinema screen. This fictionalised simulation of space constructed from fragments of geographic locations through editing and framing techniques facilitated the act of dreaming and leaving the real world rather than teaching any real lessons about geography, echoing the title of the book by reinforcing the idea that rather than education in the traditional sense travelogues offered lessons in desire.

Travelogues can be placed within the discourse of modernity as categorically modern phenomena. Through a close reading of travelogues depicting the American West, Peterson establishes a major contradiction in that what were attempts to present a vision of the West as 'timeless and pristine, connecting the nation to an ancient and "prehistoric" past' (p. 21) actually presented a modern view of the West with landscapes full of tourists and passing trains – both very contemporary phenomena – thus modernising the old myth of the West for the 20th century. In portraying the American West in this way Peterson beautifully describes how travelogues ushered in a shift from the territorial ideology of Manifest Destiny to the consumerist ideology of recreational tourism and the commodification of landscapes.

Peterson is first and foremost a historian, providing insight and knowledge through precise empirical archival research. Through analysis of this primary research and interpretation of the textual material, and often through close examination of specific films, Peterson arrives at clear and sophisticated conclusions to her main lines of enquiry. The book is written with precision, clarity, and fluidity, free from complex terminology. Alongside the largely historical approach Peterson occasionally diverges along various theoretical and philosophical lines of thought. For example, Bachelard is referenced in regard to poetic reverie and dreaming,

Bergson on movement, and Barthes' 'author function' is employed to emphasise the centrality of the spectator in acquiring meaning. These references never feel strained or irrelevant and are employed as tools to offer appropriate and necessary perspectives on the written material and serve to enhance and elaborate on meaning and context.

The large number of illustrations of film stills, adverts for screening programmes, and trade press documentation all act as visual aids for deeper comprehension of the text and provide specific visual references to aesthetic and formal characteristics of the film examples Peterson discusses. Peterson has included an invaluable film list, a large number of which are unfortunately still only available for viewing in various film archives (although these are listed should the reader wish to track them down). However, where possible, she notes the availability of titles on DVD and also includes a list of feature films (in the context of travelogue film or archival film in general) which are more readily available and may further inspire the reader.

Such a convincing and expertly-written book of unfailing thoroughness and coherence invites very little criticism. While the book is researched to the finest details and justifies almost all points with empirical evidence, there is very little written evidence to suggest how an audience may have reacted to the films (with some exceptions, such as documentation of silent reactions to travelogues) or whether or not they would have critically engaged with them at all, so that any potential the films have for resistant readings or reading against the grain is here largely speculation based on a contemporary analysis. However, the conditions that would make oppositional readings possible are well established here and Peterson acknowledges the need to speculate early on. This absence of empirical evidence thus provides an invaluable framework for exploring the exciting prospect of unintended subversion within the media tools of dominant ideology available through mass culture to global audiences.

Peterson concludes the book with an epilogue which briefly looks at the life and influence of the travelogue after the early period of cinema, such as its continued presence as an educational tool in the classroom or the expansion of the format into ethnographic or feature length films, also in the adoption of techniques and aesthetics such as location shooting and the moving camera by the fiction film industry. A brief analysis of Oskar Fischinger's experimental film *Walking from Munich to Berlin* (1927) stresses the legacy of the travelogue film through its influence on the avant-garde. The clichés and formulaic views of landscapes and people inherent to the travelogue are here subverted through a modernist approach to representation, interrogating the image through rigorous formal experimentation. These lines of thought offer up obvious departure points for potential further scholarship.

In relating this filmic journey on foot made by Fischinger to the romantic tradition of the solitary walker, Peterson finds in this relationship between landscape, place, and walker an analogy for the experience of early travelogue spectatorship and indeed cinematic spectatorship as a whole, emphasising the necessity for early film scholars to focus not only on the historical and cultural discourses of film but on cinematic experience itself. *Education in the School of Dreams* provides an invaluable contribution to the scholarship of early cinema, specifically the transitional era and in the early development of the relationship between travel and film. With clear and concise prose laden with historical anecdotes and an extensive scope of study, this lively book will appeal not just to the academic community but to a wider audience with an interest in early cinema, ethnography, the visual culture of imperialism, and the representation of landscape and place in the moving image.

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Note

8. To expand on this term Peterson quotes from Gunning 1997, p. 14.

About the author

Adam Ludford Freeman (University of Kent)

