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TOWARDS A *POST-TRAVELLER'S* TRAVELOGUE: ASPECTS OF AN ETHICAL TURN IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN TRAVELOGUES ON AMERICA

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This article investigates the forms that contemporary travel writing may assume, especially those shaped by a more critical outlook and an ethical stance towards alterity. The investigation is based on the following selection of contemporary travelogues on America, written by French theorists and Greek intellectuals: *America* by Jean Baudrillard (1988), *American Vertigo: Travelling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* by Henri-Bernard Lévy (2006), *A Villager in New York* by Yannis Kiourtsakis (2009) and *Manhattan-Bangkok* by George Veis (2011). The themes under scrutiny are space, identity and alterity. The article is primarily concerned with the imperialist perspectives that can be detected in the genre as well as with the subsequent management of European stereotypes about "Americanness" and the current "Americanization" of the planet. Particular emphasis is laid on the critical response to globalization through the elaboration of political, philosophical, but also aesthetic concerns in the travelogues under discussion. Finally, the writing modes in these travelogues are examined as a means of building self-reflexive and unstable narrative identities – defined here as "post-travellers." The latter are located in an attempt to go beyond postmodern attitudes, embracing a more ethically concerned critical thinking about Self, space and an interactively defined Other.
Keywords: travel writing, travel writing studies, ethics, America, postmodernism, Modern Greek travelogue, globalization, space, alterity, Jean Baudrillard.

Political and ethical comments in travel texts are sometimes overlooked on account of the enduring tendency of viewing such texts as examples of a "minor" genre (Fowler 57–67). On the other hand, the survival of this genre in the twenty-first century seems to depend on the ways in which contemporary travelogues handle the conditions of postmodernity (for instance, mass and multi-media, mass tourism and transnational capitalism). The effects of enhanced physical mobility and connectivity, heightened by diverse technological means, have engendered new requirements and possibilities for travelling and its representations.[1] It should also be borne in mind that globalization has, to a large extent, eroded the nationalist project upon which the travel genre was initially founded. Historically, travel writing propagated imperial goals by providing descriptions of otherness, which played a decisive role in the establishment of relations of power and inequality.[2] According to Debbie Lisle, Graham Huggan, Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund, such aspects of the genre are particularly significant for the study of global politics as they reveal how common assumptions about power relations at an international level can be produced. At a national level, the role of travelogues in contemporary societies also requires further investigation since recent research in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 28, 35; Geertz 357) has drawn attention to the absence of a firm dividing line between "scientific" ethnographic discourse and "subjective" travel writing, taking into account that all travellers necessarily perceive the world through an interpretative framework comprising specific discourses engendered within their culture.

According to Tim Youngs, at present, "the ethical importance of travel writing is stronger than ever" as the current economic crisis is producing xenophobic reactions in many nations (188). Furthermore, in societies

[1] For perspectives on travel writing in the twenty-first century, see Youngs (177–189).
[2] For a critical commentary on the imperialist legacy of the travel genre, see Thompson (153–55).

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suffering from economic recession, the ability to travel abroad and to engage with other cultures has been significantly reduced. This article investigates the forms that contemporary travel writing assumes, especially those in which the genre's imperialist legacy is subverted by taking a more ethical stance towards alterity. Allegedly, a more self-reflexive critical outlook and an "ethical turn" of engagement with the world, expressing political, philosophical, but also aesthetic concerns, could present a stimulating trend in the development of contemporary travelogues in the context of a globalized world.

The present study considers a selection of contemporary European travelogues on America, dating from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The "New" World, since its "discovery," has represented "the Other" to the "old" continent (Todorov 4-5). Furthermore, contemporary travelogues about North America/ the US seem to proliferate in the era of globalization. For politically progressive intellectuals, reading travel writing about that part of the world could be a rather tricky task, and this will be illustrated in the present attempt at reading four European travelogues on North America/the US which have been selected for analysis. These texts include Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986) and Bernard-Henri Lévy's *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (2006), as well as two travelogues by Greek writers, well-read in up-to-date cultural theory and literary criticism – Yannis Kiourtsakis's *A Villager in New York* (2009) and George Veis's *Manhattan-Bangkok* (2011). This corpus of contemporary travel texts on North America/ the US will be examined from three different angles. The first seeks to register and explore the imperialist perspective of the genre, still present in European travel writing on America, along with the subsequent management of European stereotypes about "Americanness" and the current "Americanization" of the planet. The hard dialectic between the ethics of mobility and unethical stereotyping will also be taken into consideration. A second specific concern will be with the critical response provoked by the chosen travelogues with respect to problems such as the one of "uniformity" raised by the Americanization of the planet as a form of globalization. Finally, the writing mode employed in these travelogues will be examined as underpinning the construction of self-reflexive and unstable narrative identities, defined here as "post-travellers." The latter are located in an attempt to go beyond postmodern attitudes, engaging in a more ethically concerned critical thinking about the Self and a socially defined Other.

Defining "Americanness": From the Genre's Imperialist Stereotyping to a Cosmopolitan Ethos of Mobility

Even though Western travel writing was once closely bound up with the imperial drive to dominate and exploit other regions of the world, overt racism and a sense of cultural supremacy are rarely found in contemporary travelogues. On the contrary, contemporary travel writers from the West are more likely to espouse a "cosmopolitan vision" which, by celebrating alterity and cultural difference, or by revealing insights into shared values, could contribute to a more general project of mutual understanding and tolerance (Lisle 4). Nevertheless, for Lisle (265) and a number of other recent commentators, there is a lack of political reflexivity and critical thinking in contemporary travelogues (Sugnet 70–85; Kaplan; Holland and Huggan xiii).

The imperialist legacy of the genre continues in several ways, as becomes evident in contemporary travel writing that remains principally a medium through which Western writers address Western audiences, and typically, as underlined by Sugnet, "arrogate to [themselves] … rights of representation, judgment and mobility that [are] effects of empire" (72). This also seems to apply to a large degree to the fictional narrative counterpart of the travel genre: in his recent study of the contemporary Anglophone travel novel, Stephen M. Levin concludes that "much about contemporary travel narratives continues to affirm Edward Said's view that they celebrate, if not the triumph of empire, then the status of the so-called developing world as a cipher and playground for the West" (142). Alternatively, they tend to attenuate their social critique by converting it, in a manner, similar to Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster's approach, into an "aesthetic discourse" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 187–89).

Contemporary European travelogues on North America offer a variation of the mainstream imperialist model in which the "centre" describes the "periphery." Even with Europe's challenged "centrality," which is well emphasized in postcolonial writing, the Eurocentric basis of travel writing remains valid: Europe is implicitly placed at the centre of thought, history and being (Edwards and Graulund 2–9). Europe can thus be described as the "old centre" and America, as the "new," detached one or even as a centre dispersed through globalization.

North America, representing an empire in a new sense, without a core and without borders, is characteristically portrayed in Lévy's book as having "its centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere" (297), while for Baudrillard, "Americans are the decentred centre" (90). This change of perspective underlies a conception of America in spatial terms: its eccentricity is understood as freedom from historical centricity, and freedom in spatial terms is perceived as enhanced movement, which justifies the *topos* of highways, automobiles and speed in travelogues on America. This concept is pushed to its limits and, in spite of the contemporary means of transport and communication, America is, and will always be, as Kiourtsakis predicts, the "faraway land" (26-27),[3] and New York will feature as a metropolis which is "always moving further," in "an unstoppable, forward movement" (Kiourtsakis 31). At the same time, we do not have to travel to the United States: in the process of globalization, American culture is travelling and dwelling everywhere. Attributing a kind of movement to the notion of the US could be viewed as an ethical position which refuses to fix it to the stasis of a "utopia achieved," as asserted in Baudrillard's *America*. Nevertheless, even for Baudrillard, "there is no truth for America," the "real" America is not the social or cultural America but what he calls "astral" or "sidereal" America (27–74).

Furthermore, America escapes fixity due to the versatility of capital. In spite of the efforts of Marxist theorists, capital "can never actually be grasped in its present reality" and it "always stays a length ahead of [the efforts of such theorists]" (Baudrillard 80). According to Gillian Jein, we can resist the urge to produce aphorisms about America by adopting Baudrillard's "multimodal stylized discourse" (43). Such a choice would include the interpretative modes of aphorism, parataxis, parable, paradox, enigma, ellipsis and tropes of all kinds, and in addition, would expose the writer's subjectivity, thus ironically undermining the "objectivity" of any attempt at sociological analysis.[4] Kiourtsakis likewise acknowledges the interaction between the well-known "America of the world" and the unknown, "authentic" America beyond commonplace representations (132). In a similar way, Lévy's *American Vertigo* articulates North America between stasis and mobility. In his concluding chapter, entitled "What does it mean to be an American?" (237), Lévy declares the futility of the project of defining "Americanness" as a way of conceptualizing the sense of belonging and participation of all peoples of the continent in a hemispheric American identity, He asserts that there is no "essence" in the description of the American identity since there is "no large modern nation today as uncertain as this one, less sure of what it is becoming, less confident of the very values, that is to say, the myths, that founded it" (238). Hence the "vertigo" of the title of his book resides in the sense that we and our environment are constantly in the process of moving or spinning.

A sense of ambivalence is in evidence in the travelogues under discussion: America is occasionally approached with admiration but there is also a tendency to stress European superiority. Although technology and the future seem to belong to the "New" World, that world definitely lacks historicity. The European identity is constituted in terms of its long and rich history, and this is a recurrent theme in the extended comparisons between America and Europe, and, specifically, between America and the writers' homelands, France and Greece. It is interesting to note that the stereotypical comparison between the US and France is activated not only by the French writers, but also by the Greek writer Kiourtsakis, who is familiar with French culture. The stereotypes of "Old World" and "New World," analysed in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* (150), but also typical of the colonialist stance of travel writing (Said, *Orientalism* 247 and *Culture and Imperialism* xviii; Pratt 45, 111–197; Macfie 67, 182; Kabbani 206), are reiterated in the books of Baudrillard,[5] Lévy and Kiourtsakis. The key binaries (old/new, history/ahistory, deep/superficial) and the sense of European superiority are encapsulated in the comparison of North Americans to "children" (Baudrillard 49, 55; Lévy 6, 34, 58; Kiourtsakis 100). The most sophisticated reading of the "child" stereotype is to be found in Baudrillard's analysis of the overall absence of depth, the superficiality and *par excellence* postmodernity of the American way of life. Some of the traits of the "child" stereotype, such as the idea that Americans stay "irrevocably [fixed] in childhood" due to the fact that "they think only about enjoying themselves" (Tocqueville 1250), can be detected in the classical travelogue *Democracy in America* by the French political theorist

[3] All translations from Greek in the article are the author's.

[4] The liminality of Baudrillard's text, which registers a shift in late twentieth-century travel writing from legislative to interpretive negotiations of alterity, is discussed in Jein (31–51); see also Shapiro.

[5] See also Kaplan (69–85). In her reading of Baudrillard's *America* in parallel with *Cool Memories,* she emphasizes the author's stereotyped discourse on the United States and Europe and other hegemonic representational practices.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), who journeyed across America in 1830 and 1831. His account was political in its scope, seeking to provide a normative study of democracy in America. This text is a major point of reference for the French writers under discussion but also for Kiourtsakis. It must be pointed out, however, that the three writers in question rely on *Democracy in America* to different degrees. Thus, while Kiourtsakis's reliance on it is limited, Lévy literally follows in the footsteps of Tocqueville, as indicated in the subtitle of *American Vertigo*. On the other hand, Baudrillard refers to Tocqueville while making his social analysis of contemporary American democracy and capitalism, posing many of the same essential questions about democracy, equality, the tyranny of the majority and the future possibilities for freedom.

The widespread stereotypes about the "childish" and "superficial" American character and cultural model, still reproduced in many contemporary travelogues, could be seen as organically linked to the attributed primacy of the US in the process of globalization and cultural homogenization of the planet (Hardt and Negri xiii-xiv). In consistence with Tocqueville's famous remarks concerning both North America's "immense and tutelary power" (1250) and the assumption that it represents "tyranny of the majority" (410), forced conformity as one of the risks of nascent American democracy has been proved pertinent in the course of globalization. Analysing American cultural conformity – despite the continent's endemic cultural specificities – appears to be an everlasting project that goes on from Tocqueville (1835) to Baudrillard (1986) and Lévy (2006). Preserved in the form of a stereotype, conformity has additionally been advanced in European travelogues not only as the perpetual risk of American democracy, but also as the gist of "Americanness" and, subsequently, the "Americanization" of the planet. The latter could be comprehended as the impact that the United States exerts on the culture of other countries, the dispersal of its value system, culture and way of life as a dominant cultural model.

The four European travelogues on North America are intriguing because of the interplay between the reproduction, consolidation and spread of the "conformity" stereotype, on the one hand, and their final ethical, aporetic stance concerning the description of an "authentic" and "real" America, on the other. The need for a firm critical position with regard to anti-Americanism, often expressed by leftist intellectuals, as well as the requirement for a critical overview of the stereotypes about the US, are registered, more or less intensively, in the work of the four writers under discussion – even in Baudrillard's analysis of America as the perfect locus of postmodern experience. Given that the drastic reduction of cultural diversity questions travel as a meaningful practice, it can be argued that the ethical turn in these travelogues is manifested more clearly through a type of critical thinking that takes into account the eventual reactions to a possible Americanization of the planet.

Exploring Alternatives to "Americanization": The "Post-Traveller" and the Interplay of Ethics, Politics and Aesthetics

If stereotypical thinking threatens the concept of alterity, then the encouragement of cultural conformity in the context of American globalization questions notions of personal and national identity. The problems of "Americanness" and "Americanization" in the travelogues under discussion are often intertwined with the parallel ones of "Europeanness" and each traveller's own national identity, as well as issues of global politics, such as the recent financial crisis.

In the context of globalization, travel writing might effectively represent a reflection on, or even a reaction to, the decline of diversity and the radical transformation of locality. Globalization alters the context of meaningful construction: it impacts the shared understandings and values that have developed with regard to local self-assertion, and ultimately affects people's sense of identity. As John Tomlinson argues, the dynamics of spatial transformation is captured by the idea of "deterritorialization,"[6] i.e. breaking the connections between cultural meanings and place. The local subjects must thus adjust to the perception of increased uniformity, that is, to "a sense that the world is becoming, for the first time in history, a single social and cultural setting" (9).

The most recent perception of this notion of space challenges the colonial traveller's position of security and authority. The travelogues shaping and shaped by that shift of attitudes no longer tend to stage a quasi-absent, neutral, "objective" subject who has the authority to grasp and transmit the truth about the places s/he traverses (Lisle 268–71). The narrative subject emerging in these travelogues can therefore be defined as a "post-traveller" and described as a self-reflexive and ethically involved individual against unethical stereotyping.

[6] See also Appadurai (37–39, 53–54).

His/her ambiguous self-location suggests the postmodern, ironic, playful persona of the "post-tourist" (see Feifer; see Urry), who tests the limits of the narrative conventions of the genre by means of individual and social self-positioning. Both Feifer and Urry emphasize the status of the contemporary traveller as somebody who comes after, or *posterior to*, other, more confident attempts to traverse a given geographical place and reflect on it. The "post-tourist" is defined as someone who knows that notions of getting off the beaten track and of being a "traveller" rather than a "tourist" are illusions frequently produced by the tourist industry itself. S/he is, above all, role-distanced, aware that the moral dilemmas of tourism have been emptied of meaning, and that tourism is, after all, a whole series of games with no single, authentic tourist experience (Urry 90–91).

A similar quest for "pure travelling" is discussed in Baudrillard`s *America* in somewhat radical reflections about the nature of contemporary travel, regarded as a postmodern yearning for an endless journey without any objective which aims finally at the extermination of meaning:

> In fact the conception of a trip without any objective and which is, as a result, endless, only develops gradually for me. I reject the picturesque tourist round, the sights, even the landscapes (only their abstraction remains, in the prism of scorching heat). Nothing is further from pure travelling than tourism and holiday travel … The only question in this journey is: how far can we go in the extermination of meaning, how far can we go in the non-referential desert form without cracking up and, of course, still keep alive the esoteric charm of disappearance? A theoretical question here materialized in the objective conditions of a journey which is no longer a journey and therefore carries with it a fundamental rule: aim for the point of no return. (9–10)

Baudrillard's travelogue with its postmodern theoretical presuppositions occupies a liminal position in the present selection of works. The rest of the examined travelogues on America in the twenty-first century bypass the traveller's self-location as a postmodern subject, which merely means that all genre conventions become subject to revision. They can be aligned more easily with several contemporary travel novels which, according to Levin, keep at a distance from political concerns, and even dramatize a critique of global culture (142). This happens by means of the portrayal of an uncertain travelling subject striving to locate himself/herself against the challenges posed by globalization. Sometimes a sustainable form of subjectivity is achieved, but just as frequently such efforts expose the futility of this endeavour beyond the limits of the local social structure and culture. The travelogues, written by Veis, Kiourtsakis and Lévy, come closer to these contemporary travel novels by presenting the so-called "post-traveller" as an individual whose subjectivity is mobile and "in a process of becoming," often self-questioning, interacting with the world and looking for whereabouts and means of self-location.

One way to handle this critical interaction with the world is through politics: questions of global and American political relations frequently serve as points of reference in the selected travelogues as part of the reflection about otherness, identity, home and belonging. These principles constitute the premises upon which individual and collective identities, cultures, and even nations are built. In *Questions of Travel* (1996), for instance, Caren Kaplan demonstrates that we are not presently dealing with territorially bounded spaces, but with diasporic public spheres and trans-localities, whose global effects depend on systematically questioning the principles of home and territoriality.

Travel as a form of mobility is just one of a number of transnational practices. Even if we choose not to travel, nobody could remain any longer an "autonomous villager," a pure local. The example of the recent economic crisis, first striking America, then the entire world, confirms that "what happens in America happens to us, too, and concerns us sometimes more vividly than what happens under our nose" (Kiourtsakis 120). The narrator of *A Villager in New York* describes himself as a "villager" and views Manhattan as the place *par excellence* which facilitates the understanding of the interplay between the local and the global, "centre" and "periphery," cosmopolitanism and patriotism. Acknowledging the political implications and ethical dilemmas posed by New York as a "global village," he attempts to come up with the idea of a "centre" in a decentred world by affirming both his cosmopolitanism and his strong national identity. Kiourtsakis suggests rethinking the world by "relearning the lesson of borders" (140) – not only in geographical terms, but also in terms of civil and ethical relations.

The present discussion of the relationship between local and global identities could be understood better by means of Tomlison's concept of "glocalized cosmopolitanism" (194–207). By "glocalization" he means the way(s) in which local social actors interpret global processes or phenomena in order to suit their particular

needs or cultural contexts (Roudometof 113–135; Robertson 45–68). This rooted cosmopolitanism,[7] combining both global and local forms of identity, avoids the negation of national or even civil identities. Kiourtsakis, for instance, strongly claims not only his Greek, but also his Athenian identity. The travel writer, as a "cosmopolitan villager" (140), is a subject who "roots" his travelling experience by writing down his impressions for his compatriots. Kiourtsakis, then, occupies an intermediary position between the deterritorialized, borderless (Post)modern Globalized Other, and his Greek "Ancient Villager Self." The "villager" is a "man of borders"(139), but also one defined by a centre-homeland.

The inquiry into the new connections between citizenship and space in contemporary travel writing can, however, provide more sustainable forms of subjectivity in a globalized world. A cosmopolitan sense of homelessness presents the risk of the subject's total disorientation because, as Edwards and Graulund maintain, "the cessation of one identity (through national independence) without a sufficient connection between citizen and space being 'in place' leads to an experience of being out-of-place" (*Postcolonial Travel Writing* 7). Consequently, travel writing can be conceived as a form of mediation, an act of "civil reterritorialisation" of the traveller within – but also beyond – nationally-bounded communities. Furthermore, if an overall ethical stance towards alterity is to be pursued by travellers identifying themselves as "cosmopolitan citizens," travel writing could contribute to mapmaking that produces alternative global topographies, that is, politically-conscious topographies tracing civil spaces that guarantee democracy and the protection of human rights. For instance, in all of the examined travelogues on America, there are references to and evaluations of the political choices of the respective US governments, and more specifically, those of Bush and Obama, affecting global politics and the protection of human rights. In particular, Lévy's text invokes the US in relation to critical issues such as "realized democracy" and the integration of various minorities in the multinational composition of the American polity.

The second concern, raised by the travellers' personal interactions with the space traversed, refers to culture and aesthetics. "Identity in formation" and the ethos of mobility are a focal point in Veis's travelogue on the role of aesthetics, both in terms of the way places are configured and as regards the travelling subject's self-location. Here travel is explicitly seen as an aesthetic experience, a critical reflection on art, culture and nature, rather than as an act of political engagement. Veis handles his journey to America as a chance to think more philosophically about travel and space. In line with postmodern works such as Alain de Botton's *The Art of Travel* (2002), which proposes an exploration of artistic insight, culture and philosophy in order to do justice to the travelling experience, Veis turns to his own senses and memories, poetic works, photos and impressions of landscapes and cultural events in order to illustrate his interactions with the places that he visits. He even resorts to art criticism to capture and transmit his personal encounter with America. Furthermore, his aesthetic approach to travel includes encounters with eminent American and European artists in New York. In the end, he explicitly discusses another postmodern literary "travel journal," "a book of random impressions" (442), Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet,* arguing about the dubious value of travelling. Veis quotes a passage from Pessoa's book, which denigrates travelling as a poor substitute for the creative power of the imagination:

> Travel? One need only exist to travel. … If I imagine, I see. What more do I do when I travel? Only extreme poverty of the imagination justifies having to travel to feel. – The end of the world, like the beginning, is in fact our concept of the world. It is in us that the scenery is scenic. If I imagine it, I create it; if I create it, it exists; if it exists, then I see it like any other scenery. So why travel? In Madrid, Berlin, Persia, China, and at the North or South Pole, where would I be but in myself, and in my particular type of sensations? Life is what we make of it. Travel is the traveller. What we see isn't what we see but what we are. (219–220)

Nevertheless, Veis does not subscribe to the postmodern notion of the production of space and reality as a mere result of the human mind. On the contrary, he overtly reclaims the necessity of travelling for self-formation beyond the paradigm of the European traveller's traditional solipsism, and adopts a more ethical position about the interaction of the human subject with what he calls a "civilized space" (220). The latter is defined as a landscape populated with humans, which contains stimuli for their development. His concept of "travel as aesthetics" promotes an interactive model, according to which space, along with the people it contains, is clearly recognized as an "educator" and the traveller feels "as part of it" and as a "subject in

[7] See also the use of the term "postnational" in Kostova (175).

formation" (220). The traveller, in his/her turn, representing a collective subject, orders the perceived space and thus contributes to its formation.

To conclude this subsection of the present discussion, the analysed travelogues are critically concerned with the current possibilities for interaction with the world in the course of travelling. Their perspectives seem to blur the traditional distinctions between travel writing, ethnography, studies in the field of global politics, art criticism, philosophical essays and literary travel novels.[8]

Narrative Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization of Space as Aspects of the Encounter with Otherness

In the travelogues under discussion, the travelling subject's ethical concern goes beyond the playful postmodernist questioning of positions of authority and comprehensive "grand narratives" about space and specific places. Whereas modernists tended to be certain about the positions of "centre" and "margin," postmodernists are aware that the perspective and the discursive regimes that produce "centres" and "peripheries" are themselves the product of Western metanarratives. The post-traveller, although acknowledging the postmodern disillusionment with notions of originality, authenticity, reality and "centre," may engage in the quest for knowledge of the self and alterity. By embracing uncertainty as a prerequisite for an ethical stance, the post-traveller avoids the mere reproduction of stereotypes and aims for a kind of "reterritorialization" of both human identity and that of the places traversed through contact with alterity.

This position of uncertainty, adopted by the travelling subject, is maintained via narrative choices. For instance, in the travelogues under discussion, the traversed space is decentred. The sense of deterritorialization is enhanced by choosing rather the non-hierarchical "chronotope of the net or the web" (Pitman 97) over the typical "road narrative," that is, the traditional, linear, goal-oriented travel narration, often organized in a chronological order. This narrative choice mirrors somehow the network effects of globalization. The narrative of "Americanness" in Lévy and Baudrillard, for instance, is extended to form a spatial axis in order to cover a series of short trips branching out from a focal point or points. In the narratives of Veis and Kiourtsakis, New York, the planetary metropolis, illustrates this "decentred centre" of the narration, a chronotope which insinuates the exploration of the American identity as a network of non-hierarchical global and local relationships. According to Veis, " [New York] is the place where the dream of Babel is fulfilled" (128).

The unstable identity of the travelling subject is also reflected in the decentring of the narratorial self along with the accrued literality of the travelogues. Sometimes the travelogues, especially those of Baudrillard and Lévy in which entire sections deal with the concepts of space, "Americanness" or "Americanization," resemble analytical reasoning. Even in those cases there is no solid narratorial frame. Diverse narrative "snapshots," as well as seemingly inessential details and digressions, offer equally important insights about the place that is represented. As a matter of fact, the many *obiter dicta* in the travelogues under discussion open up their net-like structure.

This effect is further highlighted by the adoption of multiple narrative points of view, the use of tropes, blurring of genres, extensive references and lengthy quotations of texts by other authors, who are for the most part former erudite travellers. Thus, Lévy adopts a mode of travelling in the footsteps of Tocqueville. This fact *per se* implies a dialogic relationship between the two writers. The polyphonic structure of his travelogue is foregrounded by the multiple citations of literary and artistic references to America and the very notion of travelling. The extended use of quoted passages incites Veis to attach a "Bibliography of Quotations" to his travelogue. To describe the travelling experience better, he likewise blurs the limits of different genres. Veis's travelogue is a combination not only of prose, documentary-like images and snapshots of cultural events accompanied by philosophical comments, but also of his own poetry, written during his long sojourn in New York (1983-89), and his works on art criticism discussing American literature, theatre, music, painting and cinema. Intertextuality and metatextuality are the main writing practices employed in this type of travelogue. The former has always been one of the defining characteristics of literary travelogues, while the latter is intended as a systematic reflection on the text that has been produced and its presuppositions. The use of both

[8] Cf. the form of "fictocriticism" as a creative and critical form of travel writing which combines supposedly distinct forms of writing, such as literary criticism, poetry, theory and prose fiction (Fowler 60).

practices has resulted in the emergence of travelogues designed as collages of different texts, genres, styles, registers and languages.

This travel-writing style could be trademarked as postructuralist and postmodernist. Nevertheless, the travelogues under consideration in this article have not reached the impasse in which, as Kasia Boddy notes, "the writer's characteristic response is either to repeat or to parody experiences of previous generations" (246). In that manner, the postmodern writer acknowledges the impossibility of a completely original contemporary travel text and reaches the awareness that the "real" journey can only be accomplished through literature.[9] In the chosen travelogues, intertextual references do not merely operate as playful reminiscences of the writers' erudition and cosmopolitanism. In accordance with the overall rhetoric of the narration, intertextual references can also be read as a sign of ethical concern with the large number of stereotypical representations of the US and banal assertions about the American people. An essentially uncertain travelling subject tries out a multiplicity and diversity of narrative forms, and seeks to trace his/her self-location through an equally uncertain sense of alterity and space. This particular narrative form also signifies the option to restrain the authorial perspective from providing readers with ultimate guidance and, instead, charges them with part of the textual responsibility, enabling them to configure the intricacy of the account of cultural difference (Fowler, Forsdick and Kostova 7).

Space is, then, conceived in the sense promoted by Foucault, that is, as an entity that is discursively constituted and manifested in the course of the travelling experience, rather than as ontologically prior to the traveller. Travel writers like Veis seem more aware of that uncertainty when accessing the "actuality" of the foreign places they visit and portray. They equally maintain that there is no access to any transcendental "reality." The latter is shaped by references to antecedent cultural representations and prevailing discursive hegemonies. Nevertheless, all of them include a self-conscious attempt at grasping a concrete "traveling experience" filtered through personal, either political, or aesthetic experiences. Their work engages critically in meta-discourses about the conception of space and travel. Veis, Kioutsakis and Lévy's travelogues investigate the consciously chosen American places not only via historical and cultural references, but also through their personal vibrant experience of contemporaneity and cross-cultural interaction. These writers endeavour to understand the US not as a fixed landscape, but as the outcome of a dynamically constructed encounter with the inhabitants of the traversed space. They place themselves in the mobility of the "contact zone,"[10] defined by Louise Pratt as "an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (7).

Lévy aims at producing an account of the variety of everyday life in America and therefore presents diverse American citizens of all social classes, ranging from politicians, actors, writers, artists and tycoons to detainees, hookers, homeless people and preachers. In Veis's travelogue, his aesthetic concern with the educational role of cultural space turns the narrative focus to several famous and emblematic American artists or intellectuals, who have also achieved fame in Europe: Francis Ford Coppola, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Jorge Luis Borges, Bob Dylan, Jude Law and a few others. During his sojourn in New York, he interacts with them either through personal meetings or through their work which he knows well.

The writers under discussion usually sketch more or less detailed narrative portraits of their most memorable encounters and then go on to comment on the "interviewed" persons' statements or reactions to various events. In some cases, as with Veis, they try to enhance the dialogic effect by directly quoting from the transcript of the interview. According to Pratt, such a "contact perspective" affects also the traveller, whose subjectivity is shaped by his/her interaction with alterity:

> By using the term *contact* I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters, so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A *contact perspective* emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. (7)

Such an interaction between the traveller and the space that has been traversed is overtly acknowledged by Veis: in the closing lines of his travelogue, he admits that he allowed the place and its people to "shape" him

[9] See also Pitman on writing modes in postmodern travelogues (77–97).

[10] For a critical commentary on the term, see Forsdick (7).

(220). This statement resounds in the verses of his own poem "Excursion" which he quotes in his travel text: "I believe that landscapes govern our destiny / they are there – imaginary maps that include us" (126).

To sum up, all of the travelogues under analysis, even the more static, liminal text of Baudrillard's *America* which employs the journey metaphor to explore a theoretical model of postmodernity, are written from the perspective of "ethical criticism." The travellers' narrative identities differ from those of postmodern "leisure" travellers ("post-tourists") by being actively implicated in ethical issues, whether touching upon politics, aesthetics or philosophy. Despite similarities, the four travellers' subjectivities branch out in different directions, thus promoting varying degrees of uncertainty. In the process of tracking the positions of uncertainty adopted by the travelling subject in the travelogues, we observe a deliberate contrast between the "post-tourist's" stance and that of the "post-traveller." For the "post-tourist", tourism is a game with multiple texts and no single, authentic tourist experience, an activity seeking mainly to escape the world of everyday life at home. The "post-traveller," on the other hand, emerges through narration as a "subject-in-formation," who promotes the ethics of mobility and interacts with the world in order to explore his/her own place in/through the contact with alterity. By exploring this ethical perspective, contemporary travel writing provides renewed responses to the interplay between local and global identities and operates through transcultural communication. Contemporary travelogues likewise offer meaningful insights into the persistence of cultural diversity at this late capitalist stage of globalization.

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