

SUMMARY
SKETCHES ON THE WAY TO INDIA:
“ORIENTAL” JOURNEY AS A TOPOS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

The topos of the way to India holds a special place among the topoi that shaped Western imagination. Its centrality to a multitude of literary creations, movies, the fine and applied arts bears witness to the diversity of its modes of existence. At the same time, it can be noticed in a series of practices of everyday life, as a tool that serves to shape lifestyles and to orientalize various biographical projects. This observation constituted the starting point for the considerations comprised in this book. Its aim is to analyze the dynamics behind the cultural processing of the way to India understood as topos and to render the multifaceted connections between the various areas in which it functions. As such, the book outlines the mechanisms that govern the circulation of culturally significant meanings and practices in their reciprocal relationship.

The concept of topos (*τόπος κοινός* *tópos koinós*, in Ancient Greek, *locus communis* in Latin, which means commonplace), comes from classical rhetoric: it was a practical tool for organizing speeches in a convincing way, in order to persuade an audience regarding certain opinions that would later manifest in their actions. The concept finds fertile grounds into the field of cultural analysis, as it allows to get insight into and interpret the mutual relationship between texts and practices. From this point of view, “way (alternatively road, journey, passage) to India” refers not only to the actual journeys and narratives about them but also to the cultural projects of organizing various aspect of individual lives.

The topos of the way/journey in its Indian manifestation allows for broader considerations across a wide range, from everyday life to academic theories (and their intersections). In the work of scholars of postcolonial studies (such as Arjun Appadurai, Gayatri Spivak, Dipesh Chakrabarty), India constituted an *experimentum crucis* for theoretical reflections. Narratives about India were then relativized, and the Western world was not treated as their sole disposer. This was the ground for the deconstruction of the Western experience of the Orient. Never-

theless, popular culture continues to recycle it, adapting it to changing needs and inscribing it in different contexts.

It is for the above stated reasons that this particular topos provides such rich material in an attempt to answer the following questions: What are the recodification processes of the various elements that make up these imaginaries? How do these processes reflect broader social, cultural, and political processes? What role do these imaginaries play in defining individual and collective identities? How are they related to travel practices and how are they reflected in practices of everyday life?

The thirteen essays comprised in this volume are built around these questions.

The chapter entitled **“Marking the Road”** sets the grounds for the book’s subsequent chapters and outlines some essential contexts. It discusses the romantic version of the idea of the passage to India and its transformation in times of counterculture. It shows how popular culture creates specific routes to be followed on the way to India, and the attempts at going beyond them in times of deterritorialization of cultural symbols and increased ambiguity of the very idea of the traveling to India. It also takes into account the perspective of consumer culture, which transforms the signs of the Orient into a particular kind of brand, leaving its imprint onto lifestyles and everyday practices.

The chapter **“Indian Balm for the Soul”** shows how the topos under discussion conveys multiple meanings within specific horizons of Western culture. Two novels and their film adaptations provide the starting point for the analysis – “A Passage to India” by Edward M. Forster and “Eat, Pray, Love” by Elizabeth Gilbert. The openness of the topos to adaptations of different content is later demonstrated as three other movies are introduced: “The Daarjeling Limited,” “David Wants to Fly,” and “Scream of the Ants.” Their analysis shows how literary and cinematic messages, originating from different cultural contexts, design the use of the topos, and how it comes to be reprocessed in therapeutic and consumer culture.

The chapter **“Travel Fantasies Good for All Ages”** takes as a starting point the concept of backpacking and connects it to the larger identity project of the traveler. It analyzes how certain elements come to be used, due to their attractive connotative content, in identity projects of people who do not fall into the backpacker category, either due to age, social position, or both. The discussion is based on three film productions, treated as examples of three project versions. The first analysis deals with the series “Globe Trekker,” an explicit promotion of the backpacker formula (Indian-themed episodes are analyzed). Subsequent two analyses concern a shorter series entitled “Caroline Quentin. A Passage through India” as a variant for the middle-aged and the feature film “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel” as a variant for the elderly. The Caroline Quentin story puts

forward an attractive project of travel, designed and extended in such a way as to fit the experiences of a slightly older protagonist of different family status; the use of the topos of the road to India is incidental in this case. In "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel", although the motif of the once countercultural "escape to India" is evident, the meanings communicated affirm the value system of Western culture rather than question it and conceals its oppressiveness instead of exposing it.

In the following seven chapters, the author refers to selected texts from contemporary Polish literature. Through these examples, she analyses how the topos of the way to India has been adapted to the changing socio-cultural conditions.

The first of these chapters, "**The Indian Mirror**," introduces the reader to the atmosphere of contemporary travel writing. The availability of various cultural environments (not only in travel situations in the physical world but also through the media or consumer goods) results in the banalization of many symbols and images. This chapter discusses the problem by showing changes in the symbolic meanings of various kinds of journeys to India in Polish travel writing since the 1950s.

In the following two chapters, "**From the Mystique of the Expanse to Pure Translocation**" and "**By Train, Car and, Rickshaw. Reclaimed Places of Travel**," the starting point for the analysis is the specific topic of mobility to and within India, by specific means of transportation. Central to the analysis is the transformation of the symbolic potential of travel by different modes of transport to India and within the subcontinent and the means of transportation themselves – planes, trains, cars, rickshaws. What is shown in this essay is how these motifs are linked to various concepts of travel.

The chapter "**The Street as a River, The City as a Jungle**" outlines the mechanism behind the literary processing of the experience of a traveler encountering an Indian city. It reveals the specificity of imagery based on the metaphor of "wild nature" and examines its functions. The formula of the travel writing images of "being thrown into the Indian street" is juxtaposed with urban landscape described in the anthropological perspective. The chapter also characterizes the modes of transforming "uncivilized," chaotic cities into areas useful to the travel imagination and translated into concrete practices.

The chapter "**Through Dirt and Poverty to the Real India**" focuses on motifs that, while being part of the travel experience, can make it morally ambiguous. Poverty, dirt, hunger, noise or chaos in a specific manner contaminate the image of a beautiful and spiritual India; however, treated as markers of India, they are considered indispensable in forming a credible image.

The chapter "**The Map and the Watch. The Desire for Freedom and Its Limits**" addresses the categories of space and time that, along with the idea of

being free, play an important role in travel narratives. It asks how involvement in everyday life is reflected in travel narratives, how the imagination overcomes the elements of reality considered oppressive, and how it conceals or falsifies their effects. The essay shows the literary transformations and elaborations of the motif of constraint, considered here either in spatial or temporal terms, and rendered visible within the “paradigm of the map” or within the “paradigm of the watch”.

The chapter “**Reactivations**” addresses issues of reviving the holistically comprehended idea of traveling to India. It presents different strategies employed in order to give weight to travel stories about India. It identifies two pathways, built in relation to certain systems of values, and referred to as “picaresque” and “chivalrous”. It also considers how new ideas for reactivating the topos reflect broader socio-cultural arrangements. It points out how certain features are favored, such as entrepreneurship, the ability to function in a group, but also individualism that encourages people to go beyond systemic arrangements. Crossing financial barriers (for example, in the “smuggle” stories set in the 1980s) takes place in settings that evoke a sense of adventure; nevertheless, the adventures eventually end with financial success shown in connection with the ideology of personal success, understood in the categories of liberal capitalism.

The following essays deal with contemporary travel practices. The material analyzed includes interviews, ethnographic observations, blogs and travel forums. The field was understood in this research not only as a physical space, but also as an arena for the creating meanings for various signs of the Orient. Its boundaries were fluid, stretching across real and virtual space.

The chapter “**I go where I want. The Idea of Being Free and the Problem of the Travel Framework**” examines how the framework of travel, determined by travel time and cost, is created in relation to travel ideology and how the space of the travel experience is captured in relation to these determinants. It shows how different groups of travellers struggle for agency and develop strategies for cultivating situations of control over all that is travel related.

The chapter “**On How the Bubbler Turns into a Network. The Specific Character of Knowledge about Exotic Journeys**” presents how practical knowledge about travel to and within India is constituted and operationalized. Critical here are the technological transformations that have turned many tourism areas into interconnected networks. It asks how these transformations affect the constitution of liberatory fantasies about travel to India. Central to this chapter are the practices of producing and applying travel knowledge so as to follow one’s dream of unlimited world exploration. It presents the activated systems of socio-cultural relations and those attempted to be blocked, while showing how this knowledge works on different levels and how it affects its users.

The last chapter, entitled “**Orientalizing Objects in Everyday Practices**,” discusses objects associated with the Orient. (The term *orientalizing* has been selected to indicate the semantic potential of the object and the related projects of its use while also suggesting its agency.) The objects are analyzed within the context of their owners’ biographies. In doing so, the chapter addresses the emergence of identity orders through the symbolic potential of objects which indicate specific relationships between people and things, rendering individual biographies in a place distant from the geographical area called the Orient (the material was collected in Warsaw). The author’s choice to end the book with an essay about objects speaks of the ways in which everyday life is saturated with stories about exotic worlds and journeys, while these stories, sometimes fragmentary and only for a moment, may appear in various places and situations.

The essays presented here contribute to a comprehensive picture of the multi-layered reworking of symbolically charged themes and motifs concerning specific cultural practices.