*Idiots Abroad?* Constructing travel as intercultural mediation in two European travel documentary television series
Fred Dervin

**Abstract**
This chapter is based on the analysis of two “traveltainment” programmes in Europe. The first one, entitled *An Idiot Abroad* (UK), was produced by two famous British comedians. The show’s main character, Pilkington, “a typical little Englander (who) doesn’t like going out of his comfort zone” is sent around the world to discover the 7 wonders of the world. The second show, French *J’irai dormir chez vous*, follows Antoine de Maximy who travels alone around the world, with the sole aim of meeting “locals” and staying at people’s places. In their own ways, both programmes examine how and if the saying “Travel broadens the mind” works or in other words, if and how the very much researched and problematized notion of intercultural competences makes sense (Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007; Dervin, 2010). My aim in this chapter is to look at how the intercultural is constructed in both shows, the types of intercultural challenges that the characters are made to face, and potentially their learning. Basing my work on transcriptions of some of the episodes, I am also interested in the potential learning of intercultural mediation that is taking place.

**Introduction**

This chapter looks at two examples of a new television genre that I call “Traveltainment”: *An Idiot Abroad* (Sky1, UK, 2010-) and *J’irai dormir chez vous* (Voyage, Canal +, France 5, France, 2004-, translated literally as *I will sleep over at your place*, shortened as *j’irai* in this chapter). Both series follow individuals traveling the world and visiting many and varied countries. They present, in a ludic but also, in a sense, ironically, what some researchers in applied linguistics and language education have referred to as “intercultural competences” (Byram, 1997; Risager, 2007; Dervin, 2010). Based on transcriptions of both shows, this study examines how the intercultural is constructed, expressed and put into scene and also the potential link between the shows and intercultural mediation. The following list of questions is tackled: what intercultural “challenges” do the travellers face in the programmes? How do they react? How do other people respond to their presence? What intercultural learning seems to be taking place and how is it “performed” in the shows? What does it tell us about how the series producers conceptualise intercultural encounters (a highly polysemic notion, cf. Dervin, Gajardo et Lavanchy, 2011) and archetypes of intercultural mediation?

Though based on the same philosophy (“Travel broadens the mind”), the two shows differ in their format. *Idiots abroad* follows radio producer Karl Pilkington in 14 episodes while *J’irai dormir*’s main character is Antoine de Maximy (35 episodes). Pilkington is described as follows in the introduction by one of the show producers, comedian Ricky Gervais:

> He is a typical little Englander and he doesn’t like going out of his comfort zone. I just think it’d be amazing to send him around the world. What we want to see is him experience other cultures, other peoples, and see if in any way we can change his outlook on the world, I’ve been to many exotic places, I genuinely believe that travel broadens the mind.
Pilkington is followed by a camera crew during his “unplanned” adventures. His destinations, the “Seven Wonders of the World”, are presented as being imposed on him by the producers – which makes him appear as a “puppet” in the series. During his trips, he remains quite “protected” and encounters “planned dangers”. Finally, English is the only language he uses abroad.

On the other hand, Antoine de Maximy, who is the producer of the show J’irai, is a “world traveller”. In the series, he travels alone with three cameras (two filming his interlocutors and one himself), which often leads to discussions with strangers. His stays at various destinations are unplanned as he decides where he wants to go. De Maximy speaks English, French, Spanish and a bit of Arabic. He also experiences “dangers” and has to defend himself (e.g. in Canada he gets attacked by a drugged Inuit).

1. **What is intercultural mediation?**

The notion of the intercultural has a long history in global research worlds (cf. Dervin et al., 2011) and is represented by a complicated array of fields and subfields in the human and social sciences. Yet the conceptualisation of the notion is witnessing changes today, especially against what Sarangi (1994) calls “analytic stereotyping” which has relied immensely on excessive differentialism (people from different “cultures” are always presented as being distinctive, rarely alike). An overemphasis on problems (mis-understanding/non-understanding…) can also be strongly identified in research and practice and there is a strong belief in the “absurd idea” that people adhere fully to their ‘cultural’ world without questioning it (Bensa, 2010: 36-37) in intercultural communication. All these lead to a denial of anomaly (Chauvier, 2010), i.e. there must be clear structures and logics in cultures and Otherness, which is being increasingly put into question. In fact the concept of culture is omnipresent in such limited approaches to the intercultural, in the form of a “deceptively cozy blanket” (Eriksen, 2001: 204). This is too challenging as it tends to give culture too much explanatory power (Cf. Abu-Lughod, 1991; Wikan, 2002; etc.). It is not just daily discourses on otherness and intercultural encounters that recycle the concept but also research worlds (cf. Dervin, 2011 on the treatment of Chinese students in this context).

In this chapter I argue that in order to conceptualise intercultural mediation, we need to move beyond these problems, to put aside culturalist or essentialist approach to encounters. For Philips (2010: 5), it means that we need to bear in mind the fact that any activity, habit, opinion, etc. is a potential contested and constructed activity and that they should also be considered as such. Also when working on intercultural mediation we should pay attention to discourses on cultural difference (one’s own or the Other’s) to reflect more on variation than hierarchy (ibid.: 20). Several critical approaches to the intercultural can help us to reconsider intercultural mediation in a new light: “Humanism of the diverse” (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003), “Critical intercultural communication” (Piller, 2011), “Critical intercultural research” (Dervin, Lavanchy & Gajardo, 2011), and “Interculturality without culture” (Dervin, 2011). All these researchers agree that, in order to mediate interculturally in a renewed manner, one should ask oneself the following questions: How do people negotiate and ‘do’ identity in relation to the ‘intercultural’? What cultural/identity markers do they use to define themselves, communicate, argue, convince and even manipulate (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003)? For Ingrid Piller it means moving away from the question “how does group X communicate?” to “Who makes culture (identity!)
relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?” (Piller, 2011: 172). In other words, mediation consists in looking at intercultural encounters from a socio-constructivist viewpoint rather than taking discourses on culture and the intercultural as givens. For the anthropologist Alban Bensa (2010: 21) it corresponds to examining the “political” in intercultural encounters rather than the structural. Mediating between people from different countries means to be critical towards discourses and actions that rely heavily on static visions of the self and the other to help them to communicate. Ethics is thus a central part of this process.

2. What ‘intercultural challenges’ in traveltainment?

In this section, I adopt the approach presented in the previous section in order to analyse the data derived from the two travel programmes under scrutiny.

The two characters of the series travel to many and varied places (Pilkington: Brazil, China, Egypt, Israel, etc.; de Maximy: Canada, Finland, Japan, Madagascar, Rumania, etc.). Let us start by looking at the types of activities that have been planned for Pilkington (he is a “puppet”) and decided upon by de Maximy.

Pilkington travels first to Beijing China (Wonder of the World: the Great Wall), where he goes to a market to witness the selling and consumption of e.g. toads, foeti and scorpions; he is also subjected to fortune telling, Kung Fu, Chinese fire massage (during which flames are applied to the body to help the patient to relax), etc. All of these are meant to represent intercultural challenges, which can test Pilkington’s resistance to Otherness. His conclusions about these experiences are summed up at the end with “the weirdness of China tires you out”. Let us note again that this “weirdness” is actually constructed by the producers who dictate where Pilkington goes. When he is sent to Rio de Janeiro (Wonder of the World: Christ the Redeemer), the types of activities differ amply: he gets to stay at a noisy hostel for youngsters; he gets massaged by a gay man (Pilkington is married); he experiences body waxing; he is taken to a nudist/gay beach and he takes part in Rio Carnival, dressed up as a traditional dancer. It is easy to see from these two examples that while China is constructed as a culturally strange place, Brazil offers ‘intercultural’ experiences, which could be had anywhere else in the world. So a different light is shed on Otherness here: on the one hand over-differentalist, see bizarre (China) and on the other, “universal” but disguised as culturally different (Brazil).

In J’irai, the main challenge faced by the traveller is to find a place to stay overnight and to see how “they live”. Therefore the challenges he faces are quite different from Pilkington’s and less “entertaining”. De Maximy keeps repeating in the series that “Ce qui m’intéresse plus c’est les gens plutôt que les monuments” – which has some truth as he visits cities but also towns and villages and does not concentrate on monuments in his series, while monuments are the main objective of Pilkington’s mobility. Interestingly, de Maximy seems to be obsessed with meeting the “local” only in the show. In Bali, he says “I didn’t come here to see tourists but locals”; in Australia, on leaving a migrant he had discussed with, “I leave him because I am looking for “real” Australians”; in Japan, he comes across two Asian ladies who turn out to be from Hong Kong: “what a shame you are not Japanese!”. This obsession, see fetish for the local, turns to ridicule in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for example where de Maximy has difficulties in finding locals: the population of Dubai is composed of 82% foreigners (expatriates but also Asians, cf. Dubai Statistics Centre, 2007, http://www.dsc.gov.ae/en/pages/home.aspx)... De Maximy explains a few times why he insists on meeting locals. The recurrent argument is that he wants to
learn their “way of life”. In a hybrid and complex world as ours (Pieterse, 2004), it is easy to understand how such a generic comment can lead to differentialist and essentialist imaginaries (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2003; Holliday, 2010), to some sort of impossible grail: does ‘local’ mean exclusively ‘of the place’? Are locals homogeneous? Do people who have obtained the same nationality as the ‘locals’ count as ‘locals’? (cf. Bhatia and Ram, 2009).

2. What discourses on the ‘intercultural’ are constructed?

In this section, I am interested in the construction of discourses on the intercultural. In both shows, it is clear that aspects of the classical understanding of the intercultural are identifiable: differentialist biases, essentialism and the uncritical and automatic use of the concept of culture (cf. Culturespeak in Hannerz, 1999). As such, the word culture is omnipresent – not intercultural, which is not uttered a single time. But this is typical of discourses on the intercultural (cf. section 1). In J’irai, de Maximy adopts a distinct culturalist approach. In one of his videoed diaries available in the DVD version of the show, he asserts that: “Quand on va à la rencontre des gens il fait nuit ils sont tellement étonnés de voir un étranger à cette saison que ça donne des rencontres des confrontations d’esprits, de personnalités, de confrontations de cultures” – the latter phrase being very much reminiscent of Huntington’s famous ‘clash of civilisations’ (1996). It is also interesting to note that depending on his location in the world, the use of culturespeak varies. That is the case when he visits Japan. From the beginning of the episode filmed there, he comments on how different “their” culture is:

- J’y suis allé, je parle pas japonais, la culture est différente
- Y a une mentalité spéciale une culture qui n’a rien à voir
- Dommage qu’il a ce problème de langue et puis effectivement de culture
- Le problème c’est pas la gentillesse, la culture c’est vraiment un problème

In An idiot abroad, differentialism and “strangeification” are also identifiable throughout. For instance in the Chinese episode, prior to his trip, he says:

- See out of all the places this is the place that I am worried about the most.
- (producer) Why?
- Just the way they live they’re different.
- (producer) What? Chinese people?
- They just wreck everything, they make everything weird. That’s what I am worried about.
- (producer) I don’t understand what you mean.
- Everything. Chicken why is it orange in Chinatown? Just the slightest thing, the chicken is orange they eat anything… you know what I mean?

Later on, when he returns, he adopts the same kind of discourse on China. The following is about the logograms used in the writing of Chinese:

The way they write, their letters, is weird, their alphabet’s not like ours, it’s like someone testing out a biro, everything’s there’s no logic to anything they do there is there of course there’s a logic to it… they way they read the book it’s all the
other way round, from back to front and up and down everything that we’ve done they’ve gone right we’re gonna do it weirder

In a way, De Maximy adopts the same strategy as he creates some kind of hierarchy between the places he visits by comparing them: in terms of countries/cultures and people (je retourne dans un pays avec une culture plus proche que la mienne; le Maroc pays est le pays le plus accueillant; C’est plus cher en Angleterre qu’au Japon; Les Belges sont plus ouverts que les Français), continents (La culture du sud de l'Afrique c’est pas le même que celle du nord) and within a country (Dans les grandes villes on n'a pas l’âme d’un pays car c’est trop international). In J’irai, there are also many instances of essentialism: in terms of authenticity (Je vais aller rencontrer de la vraie Écosse), mentality (Pourquoi j'ai l'impression que les gens sont barges ici; Je voulais voir l’état d’esprit général des gens du Sud (about France); languages (native vs. non-native speakers: Je parle mal l’anglais avec des gens qui parlent mal anglais en général alors qu’en Angleterre j’ai pu bien parler anglais et écouter du vrai anglais). Essentialism here means “authenticity”.

Hidden behind essentialism, culturalism and the hierarchy between places and people, one can easily identify ethnocentrism. In Pilkington’s case, this is very clear. In India, he calls the place abnormal: “This has been the only building in India (the Taj Mahal) that has a bit of normality to it so maybe that’s why it is a wonder”. In the last episode of the first series, during a discussion between the producers and the traveller, the former also make comments which are clearly ethnocentric – even if they had been laughing at Pilkington’s seemingly ignorance and “little Englanderness”: when watching again an episode where Pilkington witnesses a scene where a Chinese man “engulfs” food and spits bits of chicken feet that he is eating, Gervais says: “see I am with you on that there is no reason to eat like that”; about hawking and spitting, he comments: “it’s disgusting”. These comments, which are in fact judgments, are ethnocentric in the sense that they hide an implicit comparison with what Gervais is used to in his context.

Yet it is fair to say that there are few moments during both programmes where the travellers seem to be moving beyond these types of discourses and attitudes. This is when awareness of similarities and complexity seems to emerge. Could we go as far as saying that there are signs of intercultural competences here? Are the travellers learning how to cope with diversity within difference (Dervin, 2011)?

For de Maximy, I have identified the following discourses:

- (While watching a child misbehave in Senegal): Les gamins c’est tous les mêmes dans les pays
- (In Australia) Je pensais que ça allait bien se passer c’est un pays occidental, on est assez proches… en Australie ça marchait pas vraiment ça les faisait pas rire

In Indonesia, he insists on visiting various contexts (modern cities, tribes…) and says that he likes contrasts in a place.

For Pilkington there are also such few moments. For instance in Brazil, he explains why he does not want to go down to a party at the hostel he is staying at by saying that “I’d be happier in an old people’s home”. So unambiguously he shows that it is not because of cultural differences that he cannot get along with the people but because of a generation gap – we can hear the loud electronic music being played...
at the party from his room. Finally, at the end of one trip he tells the programme viewers that “I think it was the crowd that did me head in I didn’t enjoy it because of all the people” and not because of culture.

3. Travel broadens the mind? Travel as intercultural mediation?

This section presents some clues to the assumption, based on the old saying, that travel can broaden the mind or more precisely that travel can promote intercultural mediation.

I will start with An Idiot Abroad, in which there is an interesting phenomenon, which I shall call “the fear of transformation”. On many occasions in the series, Pilkington is presented as being afraid of becoming somebody else, of being transformed by his international mobility. In India, he imagines his wife’s (Suzanne) reaction if he returned a different person:

A lot of people say I am going to India to find myself. But what happens if I change and I go home and I’m all different? Suzanne’s gonna go what’s happened to you? and then she doesn’t like the new me. That I found and then I’ll start to hate myself because I am not the person who I thought I was. I know who I am bloody hell I’m getting bills for Karl Pilkington left, right and centre, so I hope I am him cos if I’m not I am paying for someone else.

This somewhat tongue-in-cheek discussion resonates with typical “Western” discourses of spirituality and especially of Hinduism in India, where millions of tourists go to find their “real selves” (Korpela, 2009). We could also see here a criticism of postmodern discourses on multiple identities (Maffesoli, 1995, cf. “I know who I am bloody hell I’m getting bills for Karl Pilkington”). Multiple identities play a central role in the renewed approach to the intercultural discussed in section 1.

During his trip to China, Pilkington is made to eat toad. In this excerpt, he discusses the potential discovery of a nice taste:

If I go over there I have a bit of toad I go, d’u know what? Quite nice that it’s nicer than chicken. It’s gonna get pretty tough to get a bit of grilled toad in this country you could make me sort of wish for stuff that I could no longer get hold of.

Again, Pilkington shows open-mindedness but he seems to be ridiculing the idea of being offered the opportunity to discover something that he will not be able to enjoy “at home”.

Many excerpts from both shows also demonstrate that the travellers review their expectations prior to their trip, during and after.

This is the case for de Maximy in Switzerland and Italy, amongst others. In these cases, he systematically compares preconceived ideas that he had or that were shared with him to the “reality”:

- On dit souvent que les Suisses ne sont pas trop accueillants donc je voulais voir je suis resté puis au bout de 1 ou 2 jours je trouve les mots pour parler aux gens enthousiastes
- Je m’étais imaginé que la partie italienne serait la plus facile mais en fait c’était la plus difficile
In the first excerpt above, he refers to the voice of the doxa (“common sense”) expressed by the French pronoun “*on*”, while in the other, to his own voice (“*je m’étais imaginé*”). These disclose that his preconceptions are a blending of Other/Self’s pre-discourses on the Swiss and Italians (Paveau, 2006).

In Pilkington’s case, the codas of the show, i.e. the final clauses “which return the narrative to the time of speaking, precluding a potential question, “And what happened then?” (Labov, 1997), often include discourses of transformation, “proving” open-mindedness. Unlike the examples of ethnocentrism quoted in the previous section, the followings seem to counterbalance, often in an ironic stance, a limited vision of the self and the other. However we need to beware of such discourses. As such the irony contained in these excerpts could also be “inventions”. One of the producers of the show, Ricky Gervais, is famous for his spoofs on British television. For instance in 2007, as part of the British charity Comic Relief Red Nose Day, which is a biennial telethon, Gervais “faked” a trip to Africa to appeal for money from viewers and ironized the charity work of celebrities. It is then easy to assume that the same sort of strategy is taking place in *An Idiot Abroad* – as many of the comments in *An Idiot Abroad* follow a similar pattern. Let us take a few examples to illustrate. In Rio de Janeiro, after waxing and having “befriended” a gay Brazilian, Pilkington claims that “I suppose it is good for me to meet different kinds of people I suppose there is no point of having mates who are all the same”. At the end of his trip to China, again ironically, he reviews his experiences: “They fart, burp, etc. but that’s the way they are, are they right? Is that the way we should live? I don’t know”. In the final episode of the first series, Pilkington is debriefing his trips with the two producers. Gervais goes back to the objectives of the show and starts a discussion with Pilkington:

- One of my ambitions for the show was travel broadens the mind you know that’s the phrase that we hear do you feel now the dust has settled like a different Karl?
- You’re saying about the broadening of the mind I’ve put more stuff in the mind and whenever you do that something has to go it’s the mind everything’s only got a certain amount of space even with computers they go ooh disc space full or whatever it’s the same with the brain but when I learn a few facts I don’t have to make room I don’t have to go right I’ve got to chuck some out course you do unless you’re Stephen Hawkins who’s got it all on a hard drive you can’t just for oh here’s that thing? Where’s that thing that I want to remember?

It appears that the phrase “travel broadens the mind” is ridiculed here through the classical comparison of the mind with a computer and the idea that it can get overloaded with new experiences and thus necessitates deleting data.

There seems to be a pattern in how such discourses are constructed: the speakers start with quite an “interculturally-correct” claim and then ramble about it. This is the case in what follows. At the end of the Chinese “adventure”, Pilkington says:

*There’s an old Chinese proverb by this Mao fella, that says a toad in a well only gets to see some of the sky and if the toad came up he’d see more of the world which you know is a bit like me in a way I’ve seen more of the world just from doing this I don’t know if it’s made me a better person or not but he’s saying it is he’s saying if you get out of the well and see the bigger picture it’s good for you*
but I’d say it isn’t and it’s not even worth getting out and seeing more sky here cos of all the pollution and definitely if you are a toad I wouldn’t get out of any holes here cos they’ll cut your head off and eat you.

But some of Pilkington’s “learning” and claims also appear to be politically incorrect, insensitive and even racist. For instance, cultural difference is clearly biologised in what follows:

- There’s certain things I have learnt I learnt that babies in China a lot of ’em have square heads
- Why?
- I asked some questions and the main answer seemed to be so they don’t roll out of the cot they somehow stick a book to the back of its head when it’s born but I didn’t get all the ins and outs and this is what I’m saying

This obviously created political incorrectness is aimed at shocking the audience but also the idea that when one moves one becomes more open-minded.

**Conclusion**

I would like to start the conclusion of this chapter by saying that I have mixed feelings concerning the two examples of traveltainment that I have examined here, especially for *An Idiot Abroad*. The programme has appeared clearly and interestingly as an ironical treatment of travelling and of the related discourses of open-mindedness, intercultural competences and mediation. On the other hand, *J’irai* is a classical “politically/interculturally-correct” programme about meeting the Other, especially the “locals”.

It is therefore interesting to reflect on these two questions: (How) do the discourses in *An idiot abroad* and *J’irai* resemble/differ to research discourses on the ‘intercultural’? What are the pedagogical limits of such traveltainment?

In both programmes, there appears to be a “classical” modern understanding of the intercultural, which is evidenced by the use of typical solid discourses (Dervin, 2011; Piller, 2011) – bearing in mind of course that *An Idiot Abroad* seems to be “staging” them. The programmes thus contribute to the “artificial production of strangeness” (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 1994: 21) and to culturalism and bizarre over-differentialism, which in *J’irai’s* case lies in an overemphasis on the local. We have also noted that many a times both travellers’ discourses are contradictory – bearing in mind again that in Pilkington’s case it might be intended.

Other noteworthy phenomena include: the “staged” fear of transformation in *An Idiot Abroad* (which is often viewed as “bad” intercultural competences) but also intersectionality in explanations of feelings of outsider (generation, gender vs. cultural differences, “good” intercultural competences that go beyond culture as an alibi (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986).

To conclude, it is clear that these examples of traveltainment pose many ethical problems when reflecting on the notion of intercultural mediation. Does travel broaden the mind? In order to answer this question, we need to question the meaning of this saying. As we see in the programmes, there are discourses of open-mindedness, of acceptance of differences and Otherness, yet it is impossible to say if they are genuine or constructed for the programmes (and by whom). While De Maximy takes this job seriously (though he contradicts himself between/within
episodes), we have many indications that Pilkington plays upon the idea and ridicules accepted common sense on the systematic equations travel = finding one’s real self, travel = transformation, travel = accepting others. I believe that educators could use both series to work critically on the idea of intercultural mediation in order to show how unstable, but also up to a point, how much “staged” it is/can be, in reality-TV but also in “real” life...

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