

## *Original Paper*

# Living in a Mobile Age: On Endless Academic Conferences and Travels in *Small World* by David Lodge

Ruixue Lin<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, Suzhou, China

\* Ruixue Lin, School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, Suzhou, China

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### **Abstract**

*The novel Small World is brimming with mobilities which can be largely embodied in endless academic travels. These involve the mobility of the body and the mobility of information/knowledge. For one thing, these mobilities help to promote information exchange as well as human relations. For another, mobilities imply the postmodern feature of uncertainty (like the grail-pursuing knights). This paper, basing itself on the perspective of sociology, attempts to sort out the close connection between various mobilities in the novel and how it affects the academic members' feelings so as to highlight the significance of mobilities in this ever mobile postmodern existence.*

### **Keywords**

*mobilities, sociology, mobile, postmodern*

## **1. Introduction**

David Lodge has an international reputation and takes a high position in the history of contemporary English literature. His world-renowned satirical campus novel, *Small World*, shortlisted for the 1984 Booker Prize, is the second installment in his Campus Trilogy, between 1975's *Changing Places* and 1988's *Nice Work*. In this novel, several academics are followed as they travel around the world on the "conference circuit", "to meet and to lecture and to question and to discuss and to gossip and to plot and to philander and to party and to hire or be hired" (Lodge, p. 246). When the main characters in this novel meet and re-meet each other at different places around the world, they utter "It's a small world!" This "world" of academics offers an entry into an often overlooked, but nonetheless vital aspect that allows the world to be small in the first place: short-term travel, or academic travel in particular.

As Lodge claims in the prologue,

“The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austere bent on self-improvement. To be sure, there are certain penitential exercises to be performed—the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others. But with this excuse you journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, and form new and interesting relationships with them; exchange gossip and confidences (for your well-worn stories are fresh to them, and vice versa); eat, drink and make merry in their company every evening; and yet, at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind.

There are conferences on almost everything these days, including the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Geoffrey Chaucer. If, like his hero Troilus at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he looks down from the eighth sphere of heaven on This little spot of erthe, that with the se Embraced is and observes all the frantic traffic around the globe that he and other great writers have set in motion—the jet trails that criss-cross the oceans, marking the passage of scholars from one continent to another, their paths converging and intersecting and passing, as they hasten to hotel, country house or ancient seat of learning, there to confer and carouse, so that English and other academic subjects may be kept up...

...For not all conferences are happy, hedonistic occasions; not all conference venues are luxurious and picturesque; not all Aprils, for that matter, are marked by sweet showers and dulcet breezes” (1).

Short-term travel has undoubtedly become a significant component of work for many academics. This brings about both challenges and opportunities for the individual academic, academic institutions, and society more generally. Regular short-term travel is bound to have an impact on the work-life balance of the traveller and his or her family, while the high environmental costs and possible gender/social inequality associated with this mobility may raise questions about the value and necessity of the practice as well. Despite the novel's considerable breadth and depth on religion, postmodern allegory, education, narrative structures, sex, few researchers have turned their attention to how travel, or in a broader sense, how mobility exerts influence on these academic personnel.

In John Urry's monograph *Mobilities* (2007), *Small World* has been taken as an example to illuminate the significance of meetings in establishing and maintaining network ties. He argues that Lodge describes the complex, multi-layered and richly gossipy nature of conferences and other “occasioned meetings”. *Small World* brings out that what gets exchanged through intense and dynamic conversational interactions are rich social goods, of friendship, power, projects, markets, information, rumours, job deals, sexual favours, gossip and so on. Central to networks then are meetings and hence travelling through time-space in order to “cement” the weak ties at least for another period. However, Urry offers no detailed analysis on how these meetings or other forms of mobilities function in the

novel, and how mobility affects the academia or the postmodern world on the whole. Therefore, taking into account of mobility's general influences, this paper attempts to probe into different impacts of mobilities so as to understand an instable way of living that penetrates the whole novel.

The word "mobile" or mobility has certain senses. In Peter Adey's latest writing (2017), he readdresses the difference between movement and mobility claiming that mobility is about a displacement of something across, over and through space, a context of social, cultural meaning and significance which shapes the feeling, experience and meaning of mobilities. For cultural geographers like Tim Cresswell, mobility is an entanglement of "movement, meaning and practice" (2006). Mobility is thus a lived relation; it is an orientation to oneself, to others and to the world. It is the "structure of feeling", a way of addressing people, objects, things and places. It is a way of communicating meaning and significance, while it is also a way to resist authoritarian regimes.

Moving between places can be both physically or virtually. Here, we may focus on conferences and academic travels as chief forms of corporeal mobility. Since there are some overlaps between conferences and academic travels, it is thus of necessity to make it clear that the former is understood more as the terminal of an academic travel while the latter concept is more general in the following paper. Urry defines academic travel as the non-routine, work-related practices of academics that involve short-term and corporeal mobility. For instance, it may capture corporeal or bodily movement, implying that people are effectively travelling in person across space. Generally, the primary mode of transportation is the airplane, but also cars, trains or boats are used, especially for shorter distances. "These geographical movements allow experiencing normally distant places, times, objects and other people with all bodily senses" (Urry, p. 124). Corporeal travel is nonetheless highly interdependent with other types of travel, not in the least with virtual travel or the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Sheller & Urry, p. 112). Yet virtual mobility is gaining much momentum as virtual communications and mobile telephony is calling into being new ways of interacting and communicating within and across societies.

## **2. Academic Conferences and the Mobility of Knowledge**

In a sense, not only do scholars and intellectuals are able to move, academic ideas have also gained mobility across oceans and continents. Central to *Small World* are very "costly" conferences, these being necessary to "form" and to "cement" ties within the academia. Especially significant are analyses of occasioned, intermittent face to-face conversations and meetings that "have" to occur within certain places at certain moments. Such intermittently occurring meetings seem obligatory for the sustaining of family, friendship, workgroups, businesses and leisure organizations (Urry, p. 203). Just like Arthurian knight, every academic member is also looking for his own Grail on the conference. Feminist novelists like Desiree take overseas literary meetings as a source of inspiration whenever she hits a bottleneck in writing. Likewise, the already retired Miss Sybil Maiden goes to conferences so as to keep her mind

young and fresh. As advocates of different theories, scholars from all over the world shuttle through various literary seminars or conferences, yearning to make themselves the mainstream. In this case, a free exchange of literary ideas presupposes a successful commencement of such conferences as part of the academic travel. As a newcomer of conferences, Persse benefits a lot by exchanging ideas with academic celebrities, thus further building his career as an intellectual. Others, through lectures or small talks during the break, may enhance their comprehension over structuralism, deconstruction and other literary theories as well:

“Again? You’ve really got to tell me what structuralism is all about. It’s a matter of urgency”.

“Structuralism?” said Dempsey, coming up with a sherry for Angelica just in time to hear Persse’s plea, and all too eager to show off his expertise. “It all goes back to Saussure’s linguistics. The arbitrariness of the signifier. Language as a system of differences with no positive terms”. “Well, take the words dog and cat. There’s no absolute reason why the combined phonemes d-o-g should signify a quadruped that goes ‘woof woof’ rather one that goes ‘miaou’. It’s a purely arbitrary relationship, and there’s no reason why English speakers shouldn’t decide that from tomorrow, d-o-g would signify ‘cat’ and c-a-t, ‘dog’” (16).

Another positive case in point is Philip’s opportunity to voice his unique stripper theory: The dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the delay in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another (19). Although approved by few, Philip’s key idea “To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. But every decoding is another encoding” (21) inspires Angelica’s study on romance.

Of course, such mobility in academia is not without flaws. Sometimes there hangs a question mark over those conferences’ academic efficacy since problems like plagiarism, vulgarization, formalism and materialism abound. Urry claims that, “there are prescribed social, economic or family obligations often involving strong normative expectations of being present and attentive which gives rise to “mobility burdens” (Urry, p. 120). It is not difficult to recognize the listless academic atmosphere even in the ordinary attendees. “Some were leaning back as far as their seats allowed, staring vacantly at the ceiling, others were slumped forwards onto the desks that separated each row, resting their chins on folded arms, and others again were sprawled sideways over two or three seats, with their legs crossed and arms dangling limply to the floor. In the third row a man was surreptitiously doing *The Times* crossword, and at least three people appeared to be asleep” (9). Be they exhausted from a long travel or compelled to participate, a staggering number of scholars seems to have difficulty enjoying themselves, let alone achieving any academic resonance with others. Pressure emerges due to frequent conferences

as well, which turns intellectuals into opportunists. One can be accused of “plagiarizing part of his paper from an unpublished manuscript of others” (67). Analogously, a paper can be used repeatedly by other scholars at different conferences held at different universities to fish for fame and credit. Things are no better for those prominent ones who are expected to give wonderful speeches or, to be exact, performances. Professor von Turpitz may be a controversial character in his excessive efforts to create a mysterious image instead of honing his academic skills. He has never been known to remove this glove in the presence of another person. No one knows what hideous injury or deformity it conceals, though there have been many speculations: a repulsive birthmark, a suppurating wound, some unheimlich mutation such as talons instead of fingers, or an artificial hand made of stainless steel and plastic—the original, it is alleged by those who favour this theory, having been crushed and mangled in the machinery of the Panzer tank which Siegfried von Turpitz commanded in the later stages of World War II (65).

### **3. Academic Travels and the Mobility of Body**

Apart from endless conferences, international scholars’ academic travels are mainly played out against the backdrop of a variety of transportations. Ezra Pound once pronounced eloquently, “Transportation is civilisation” (Pound, p. 169). And the accessibility to transportation is a measure of mobility (Kaufmann, p. 37). Throughout history, academics have always been recognised for having high levels of personal mobility (Storme, p. 24). In fact, the ability to move from places to places on tools guarantees the itinerant or wandering scholar pursuing new knowledge (Storme, p. 23). And thanks to the technical progress, being physically mobile has become for both rich and even for some poor a “way of life” across the globe. Fast and affordable transportation technologies and infrastructures had facilitated temporary and circulatory movements (Freyberg, p. 214).

For a start, mobility always involves some ambivalence but it is heightened with international air travel, the prime example of how modern world involves systemic forms of ordering and connection. The significance of airplanes in academic travels have been stressed by Morris Zapp when he claims that “There are three things which have revolutionized academic life in the last twenty years, though very few people have woken up to the fact: jet travel, direct-dialling telephones and the Xerox machine. Scholars don’t have to work in the same institution to interact, nowadays: they call each other up, or they meet at international conferences” (31). First then, airspaces are places of material organization and considerable social complexity. They are not simply “non-places”. They are characterized by: “the boring, everyday, routine, but essential operations, processes, systems, and technologies, that enable global mobility to occur” (Parker, p. 16). These system features include that each passenger is transformed through a series of planned and timed steps although these vary depending upon “class” (Cresswell, p. 102). In one of the scenes, Lodge describes two lines of people: “They got through customs with surprising speed. Something about Fulvia’s elegant, authoritative mien, or maybe her

velvet knickerbockers, attracted an official as though by magnetism, and soon they were free of the sweating, milling, impatient throng. On the other side of passport control, however, was another sweating, milling impatient throng, of meeters and greeters” (86). Although he gives only a portrayal of the queuers, yet it seems to suggest the class difference behind the simple story. A more appropriate example may be Lodge’s description of passengers at different compartments of the train where “The second and third class compartments were already full, the passengers within, wedged tightly together, hip to hip, knee to knee, prepared themselves stoically for the night’s long journey while in the first-class compartments, where Philip had a berth, the atmosphere was more relaxed. Bottles clinked against glasses (145). This implies the economic motivation behind passengers’ choice of mobility, and scholars are no exception. In order to win Arthur Kingfisher’s favor, Morris promises to cover the whole cost for him, including round-trip air tickets; while at the same time, Persse could only hope for a cheap refund for he is short of conference subsidies. It seems true that “For individuals, physical mobility is not only a manifestation of power, but also a means to obtain social status” (Liu, p. 23). Thus, the more powerful one is, the higher levels of mobility he possesses. And this ordering works not just in airplanes or other means of transportations, but the society as a whole. An epitome of reality is the rich like Hermann Pabst enjoying the state of art private jet that takes him anywhere at any time. Second, in and around such complex material and semiotic organization, various sets of social relations are afforded possibilities for development. ‘People spend considerable amounts of “dwell-time” in these places and thus it is argued that: “instead of experiencing waiting time as wasted time ... the urban traveller is invited to use transit time to accumulate useful experiences of leisure and work” (Lloyd, p. 94). When summarizing global flights’ features, Urry’s concludes that “airports are complex places since peoples and cultures from around the world overlap within them through the intersection of enormously elaborate relays. These relays come together especially within the departure lounge of airports, places of intense sameness produced by the systems of the aviation industry and of intense hybridity as mobile peoples and cultures unpredictably intersect through various modes of ‘dwelling-in-transit’” (Urry, p. 80). To be more specific, passengers is likely to establish contact with others during the shared process of waiting, boarding, and transferring, thus triggering new reactions. For example, Cheryl Summerbee (the airport ticket inspector) who is entrusted by Morris to hand over his hat to Persse happens to help Persse solve the message left by Angelica, which eventually makes her the next target of Persse. It is also in the same airplane with Fulvia Morgana that Morris learns about the vacant position of UNESCO chair. Air travels break interpersonal balance too. Tired of routines, Philip excuses himself from his wife Hilary with constant overseas meetings, hence weakening their marriage ties.

Car travels has its due in offering the private space for emotional release. The body of the car extends the human body, surrounding the: fragile, soft and vulnerable human skin with a new steel skin, but that can scratch, crumple and rupture once it encounters other in a crash (Brottman, p. 25). Within private

cocoon of glass and metal intense emotions are released in otherwise unacceptable forms. As a money-pursuer, Morris have always sacrificed family and spiritual world to make way for material possessions. When Morris takes the taxi away from a conference, he first immerses himself in his thoughts:

Behind them people dream and doze, fart and snore, as dawn creeps over the roofs and chimneys and television aerials. For most of these people, today will be much like yesterday or tomorrow: the same office, the same factory, the same shopping precinct. Their lives are closed and circular, they tread a wheel of habit, their horizons are near and unchanging. To Morris Zapp such lives are unimaginable, he does not even try to imagine them; but their stasis gives zest to his mobility--it creates, as his cab speeds through the maze of streets and crescents and dual carriageways and roundabouts, a kind of psychic friction that warms him in some deep core of himself, makes him feel envied and enviable, a man for whom the curvature of the earth beckons invitingly to ever new experiences just over the horizon (63).

Is the life of ordinary people really as dull as Morris thinks? The answer varies for everybody. Yet Morris prides himself over his highly mobile way of living that deserves recognition and admiration from others. In a sense, he is making positive efforts to find comfort in this ever mobile postmodern life: "Times have changed, and both jobs and their associated 'career ladders' appear more temporary, and more elusive, than before. Yet people still seek certain fundamentals—security, community, and selffulfilment—from their working lives. How can we still help to provide these fundamentals in a time of greater uncertainty? One answer lies in finding continuity in what we used to see as discontinuous events. People may change jobs, but retain the relationships and support systems that they had before" (Storme preface).

#### 4. Conclusion

Unlike the static old-fashioned way of living, mobility or, to a certain degree, uncertainty marks the postmodern world where the academic members now live in. This has a lot to do with making connections between places and people. Since "A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be" (Lyotard, p. 42).

Modern scholars or intellectuals are intrigued by the conjunction of high-level academic discussion with a certain amount of partying and tourism; by the mixture of cultures; and by the idea of people, all of whom know each other, converging from all over the world on various exotic places to talk about fairly esoteric subjects, and then flying off, only to meet each other again in another exotic venue. This is where Lodge started: a kind of academic comedy of manners, with a global dimension. The

characters would travel widely, having adventures as they went. They may experience either the mobility of the body or the mobility of information/knowledge with their own unique feelings. Mobility not only connects them in this small world, but also leads to a wandering life for fame or whatever. Be it successful or not, the endless process of pursuit is precisely the truth of postmodern living.

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