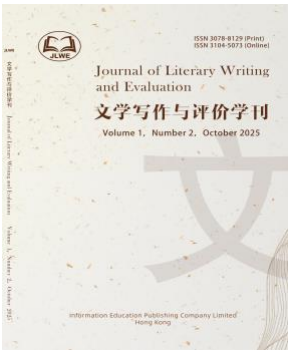

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From *I* to *We*: Opening and Enclosing the Traveller via Intertextuality in *The Art of Travel*

Fang Yaqi, Li Yun

Abstract: This article rereads Alain de Botton's The Art of Travel through Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality and recent calls for a critical intertextuality attentive to power and cultural capital. While intertextual studies have long emphasized the decentering of the author and the openness of textual meaning, this essay shows how De Botton reclaims a soft cultural authority through a pronounced pronoun shift from I to we. The narrative begins with a confessional, vulnerable traveller's I and draws readers into a polyphonic field filled with canonical voices—Huysmans, Ruskin, Wordsworth—creating an enticing sense of dialogic participation. Yet this openness soon narrows: citations are meticulously glossed, interpretive gaps close, and the inclusive we stabilize into a model reader, implicitly middle-class and aesthetically trained. The book's climactic call to break routine habit in fact leads to the cultivation of a socially legible habitus, embedding perception within Eurocentric, upper-middle-class taste regimes. By combining Kristeva's notion of the subject-in-process with critical intertextuality and Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the article reframes intertextual travel writing as a site where author and reader are invited but subtly disciplined. This reading also illuminates how pre-social-media "slow travel" narratives anticipate today's influencer-led travel media: intimate and democratic in tone, yet quietly regulatory in taste and class.

Keywords: Intertextuality; Critical Intertextuality; Travel Writing; Cultural Capital; Authorship and Subjectivity

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题目：从“我”到“我们”：《旅行的艺术》互文性与旅行者的开放和封闭

摘要：本文重读阿兰·德波顿（Alain de Botton）的《旅行的艺术》，以朱莉娅·克里斯蒂娃（Julia Kristeva）的互文性理论为核心，并结合近年来对“批判性互文性”的呼吁，关注文本中的权力关系与文化资本再生产。传统的互文性研究长期强调作者的去中心化与意义的开放性，但本文指出，德波顿通过显著的代词转换——从“我”到“我们”——重新确立了一种柔性的文化权威。文本开端以旅行者“我”的自白与脆弱姿态吸引读者，并通过汇聚于惠斯曼、罗斯金、华兹华斯等经典之声构建出诱人的对话性场域。然而，这种开放性很快被收缩：引用被精心注释，解释空隙逐渐关闭，包容性的“我们”最终稳固为一种隐含的“理想读者”形象——既中产阶级，又受过美学训练。书中对“打破日常习惯”的呼吁，最终导向的是一种可被社会识别的惯习的养成，将感知重新嵌入以欧洲中心、上中产阶级品味为核心的审美体系。通过结合克里斯蒂娃“过程中的主体”概念、批判性互文性及布迪厄（Pierre Bourdieu）的文化资本理论，本文重新界定互文性旅行写作为一个既邀请读者进入，又在不知不觉中加以规训的场域。同时，本研究揭示了在社交媒体兴起之前的“慢旅行”叙事如何为当代网红主导的旅行内容奠定基础：它们表面上亲密、民主，实则在品味与阶层上暗自进行规范化与筛选。

关键词：互文性；批判性互文性；旅行写作；文化资本；作者性与主体性

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Travel writing has long promised more than practical guidance; it has invited readers to imagine journeys that shape how they see and feel the world. Over the past few decades the genre has moved away from the imperial adventure tale or the encyclopedic guidebook toward a more intimate, reflective mode in which the author narrates personal travel while weaving in art, literature, and philosophy. Alain de Botton’s The Art of Travel (2002) exemplifies this change. Rejecting the hurried consumption of places, it advocates a cultivated attentiveness: the traveller should slow down, look closely, sketch, and think alongside canonical voices from Huysmans to Ruskin. The book combines a confessional tone with cultural guidance, offering its audience not only stories of movement but also ways of perceiving and valuing experience. Many readers praise The Art of Travel for its perceptual uplift: one reviewer remarks that it “opens the reader’s eyes to the many perceptual enhancements that travel can provide” (Goodreads, 2013), while other calls it “wise and utterly original” (Goodreads, 2015). Such reactions capture the book’s appeal as both intimate and illuminating.

Yet not all readers experience this openness as universal. One Goodreads reviewer, while declaring affection for De Botton, observes: "The focus is very Euro- and Christian-centric… why is it so exotic for French-speaking De Botton to go to the south of France? … he seems to be a bit of a dandy traveller … resorts, pastries, countryside houses" (Goodreads, 2007). This reaction points to an undercurrent that more enthusiastic reviews leave unspoken: the world the book invites readers to inhabit is culturally and socially specific—rooted in European intellectual heritage and the comforts of a cultivated middle-class traveler.

Such comments highlight a tension at the heart of the book. The Art of Travel greets readers with vulnerability and erudition, appearing to democratize aesthetic experience, but it also defines what counts as meaningful travel and who can inhabit the role of the "traveller." The narrative voice promises shared reflection yet quietly shapes the horizon of that shared experience. This tension—between invitation and subtle guidance—frames the present study's central inquiry.

To examine this tension, the present study turns first to Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, which views every text as a mosaic of prior discourses and every subject as a subject-in-process/on trial—continuously formed and re-formed in the interplay between the semiotic (affective, bodily drives capable of disrupting order) and the symbolic (socially regulated language and cultural codes) (Kristeva, 1980). In principle, semiotic eruptions such as boredom, disorientation, or desire could fracture the symbolic field and allow new subjectivities to emerge; yet, as later analysis will show, The Art of Travel quickly reinscribes such cracks within a cultured symbolic frame. Within Kristeva's model, the authorial I never stand as an autonomous originator but emerges through engagement with other voices; the reader, too, is positioned inside a preexisting network of quotations, genres, and cultural references. This dynamic is particularly visible in De Botton's self-narration, which braids art history, philosophy, and literature into a polyphonic but carefully arranged field of voices.

However, intertextuality has often been celebrated as if such dialogism were inherently democratizing, with less attention to how openness can be curated and policed. Since the 1990s, theorists such as Graham Allen (Intertextuality, 2000) and Mary Orr (Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts, 2003) have argued that poststructuralist optimism neglected the social forces that shape which voices count. Critical intertextuality responds by re-politicizing the concept: it asks whose discourses enter the mosaic, what subject positions are legitimized or excluded, and how quotation networks can consolidate soft authority rather than disperse it. Recent studies in travel writing further demonstrate that intertextuality itself can operate as a structure of experience, shaping how travel is perceived and narrated rather than simply expanding interpretive freedom (Din-Kariuki, 2023). When paired with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture, this approach clarifies the mechanisms: cultural capital works through classification (marking some practices as refined and others as vulgar), conversion (turning education and leisure into symbolic

distinction), and misrecognition (méconnaissance: making trained taste appear natural) (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). These insights enable us to see how intertextual strategies can train perception and taste while claiming openness.

In this article, the term traveller does not refer to any empirical tourist but to a discursive position produced within The Art of Travel. Sometimes this position is inhabited by the authorial "I," as De Botton narrates his own journeys; at other times it expands into an implied "we," inviting readers to step into a shared cultural itinerary. The traveller here is therefore understood as a textually constructed role—a way of seeing, feeling, and interpreting travel that the book offers to its audience, following Kristeva's view of the subject as always in process/on trial.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this article investigates how The Art of Travel negotiates the promise of openness with subtle forms of narrative control. It asks three guiding questions: (1) How does De Botton's intertextual practice—especially the shift from a confessional I to an inclusive we—shape his authorial subjectivity? (2) In what ways are readers simultaneously invited into and disciplined within this intertextual field? (3) How does the book's celebrated return to bodily experience—its plea to break routine and revive perception—ultimately train readers into a culturally prestigious habitus rather than open an unbounded rupture? The discussion unfolds in three main stages. The first section, Intertextual Subjectivity: From the Confessional I to the Collective We, examines how De Botton builds an apparently dialogic space by weaving canonical voices into a vulnerable self-narration. The second, Fixing We and Vanishing I: Enclosing the Text and Readers, analyzes how this openness is progressively curated, producing an implicit model reader and reassembling the authorial subject as a gentle cultural tutor. The third, On Habit? Break Habit or Reproduce Habitus?, explores how sensory practices—slow looking, sketching, attentive presence—seem to resist textual saturation yet become tools of aesthetic discipline and cultural distinction. The article concludes by reframing intertextuality not merely as textual play but as a site where contemporary travel writing invites readers while subtly shaping taste and reinforcing soft cultural authority.

Intertextual Subjectivity: From the Confessional *I* to the Collective *We*

The Art of Travel is organized as a sequence of nine essayistic chapters— "On Anticipation," "On Travelling Places," "On the Exotic," "On the Country and the City," "On the Landscape," "On the Sublime," "On Art," "On Possessing Beauty," and "On Habit." Each chapter follows a distinctive rhythm: it begins with a personal travel episode, turns toward one or more cultural interlocutors, and ends with reflective lessons about how to travel and perceive. A striking paratext frames this rhythm: at the start of every chapter De Botton presents a small table with two headings, Place and Guide. A chapter on curiosity, for instance, pairs "Madrid" with "Alexander von Humboldt." Before the narrative even begins, the reader is positioned as an apprentice entering a curated itinerary: each journey will take place somewhere, and each will

unfold under the tutelage of a named cultural authority. This visual device literalizes Julia Kristeva's notion of text as a mosaic of quotations—not just implicit but announced. It also quietly shapes roles: the author appears as a designer of learning paths, and the reader, invited yet guided, steps into a preframed cultural conversation.

Within these frames, the book opens in an unexpectedly self-effacing register. Rather than offering heroic exploits or expert itineraries, the first chapter "On Anticipation" recounts a trip to Barbados that collapses under its own promise: the glamorous brochure gives way to a cheap hotel and an inescapable disappointment. "I had thought Barbados would be different," the narrator admits, only to find the same restlessness and dissatisfaction he had hoped to escape. Similarly, an early Amsterdam stay dissolves into anticlimax: dreary weather, anonymous hotels, the loneliness of travel's first night. These scenes stage a disoriented first-person voice, an "I" that confesses vulnerability and disappointment rather than mastery.

Julia Kristeva's concept of the subject-in-process/on trial is useful for understanding this move. For Kristeva, the subject is not a fully autonomous origin; it is produced and continually reworked through language, caught between the semiotic—bodily drives, affect, desire—and the symbolic—the cultural and linguistic codes into which one must enter (Kristeva, 1980). De Botton's opening self-mockery enacts this process: diffuse longings and travel desire (semiotic) push against, and are tamed by, narrative reflection (symbolic). The authorial "I" appears unstable and trial-bound, preparing the ground for its later reassembly through citation.

Into this vulnerable stance, De Botton weaves an expansive intertextual network. When the Barbados trip falters, he invokes Joris-Karl Huysmans's decadent journeys and sense of disappointment; when teaching himself to look in Amsterdam or Provence, he brings in John Ruskin's injunctions to "draw to learn to see." Hopper's paintings become a visual grammar for solitude in motels and train stations; Wordsworth and Flaubert articulate a poetics of departure and disappointment. These voices enter narratively: the text recounts a train ride or a walk, then turns to a thinker who illuminates that experience. The book thus performs what Kristeva calls a mosaic of texts: the authorial self is rewritten as it cites, threaded into an older lineage of cultured travelers, artists, and critics.

The pronoun shift renders this transformation with unusual clarity and frequency. In the early pages, first-person singular dominates: "I arrived in Barbados full of expectation"; "I found the hotel oppressive." Soon, singular experience begins to generalize: "We are inclined to believe that anticipation will exceed reality"; "We may fail to notice what is before us if we rush"; "We should sketch in order to see." These plural turns are rarely abrupt. They appear at precise rhetorical moments: typically after a confession and a cultural citation. For instance, after recounting his inability to see anything in Provence, De Botton quotes Ruskin on drawing as a way to see, then writes, "We might pick up a pencil not to produce art but to learn to look." Elsewhere, after describing personal disappointment with exotic travel, he writes, "We are prone

to disappointment when we expect the exotic to rescue us from ourselves." The shift thus occurs where the I has been "educated" by intertext; it moves from singular failure to a lesson voiced collectively.

This pattern is not random style but a narrative technology. It allows De Botton to convert private affect into shared insight, to move from confession to guidance without adopting a bluntly didactic tone. Kristeva's subject-in-process helps explain the authorial side: the "I" appears permeable, open to other discourses, and then re-emerges strengthened by them. But the same movement shapes the reader: the text signals, "Your disappointment is like mine; together we can learn from Ruskin or Huysmans." The plural pronoun makes the reader a co-traveller in the mosaic, promising inclusion in an ongoing cultural conversation.

For readers, this shift feels like an invitation with potential freedom. The book seems to say: your ordinary feelings of boredom and restlessness belong to a larger, meaningful tradition; you can step into it and learn to see differently. Yet this communal "we" is already culturally bounded: the voices it gathers are European, intellectual, and aesthetically cultivated. The openness carries within it a quiet normativity about how one should travel and feel.

These dynamics set the stage for the next part of the argument: while the I → we movement initially invites readers into dialogic co-authorship, it will gradually harden into a more curated and prescriptive stance. The following section examines how this welcoming "we" becomes a form of textual enclosure, shaping both the authorial position and the reader's role within a particular cultural horizon.

Fixing *We* and Vanishing *I*: Enclosing the Text and Readers

The apparent hospitality of The Art of Travel—its vulnerable "I," its mosaic of cultural voices, its early invitation to join a reflective "we"—gradually hardens into something more controlled. What begins as a shared process of meaning-making becomes, by the later chapters, a carefully arranged cultural itinerary in which the author regains interpretive authority and the reader's role narrows from co-traveller to pupil. This consolidation happens through the book's intertextual practice, which first destabilizes, then reconstructs the writing subject while simultaneously shaping the reader's position.

Early parts in the chapters foreground an uncertain authorial self. In "On Anticipation," De Botton narrates his letdown on arriving in Barbados: "I had thought Barbados would be different. I arrived, and within hours I was listless, disappointed, unsure what to do with my freedom." In "On Travelling Places," the Amsterdam vignette presents a lonely first night in an anonymous hotel: "I remember the first evening vividly, alone in my room, wondering why I had come." These scenes enact Kristeva's subject-in-process/on trial: the "I" appears porous, lacking mastery, open to being reshaped by discourse. Desire for a transformative journey is felt but not yet articulated; affect (the semiotic) flows before it finds cultural language.

Intertexts then enter as provisional aids. Huysmans appears to name disappointment; Flaubert gives language to the disappointment of exoticism; Ruskin promises a method for seeing. These citations initially seem to rescue the narrator from confusion. But as the book accumulates such moments, the I that once faltered begins to solidify. After confessing his inability to appreciate the English countryside, De Botton cites Ruskin's dictum that drawing forces attention, then writes: "We should take up a pencil, not to produce art but to learn to look." In "On Possessing Beauty," the author recounts frustration at wanting to own what he sees, only to conclude: "We must resist ownership and cultivate attentive seeing." Each time, the pattern is: I faltered → I consulted a guide → I return speaking for a collective. Through this cycle, the writing self that appeared trial-bound is reassembled; it gains legitimacy not by rejecting external voices but by weaving them into a new, stable identity—an author who can now guide others because he has himself been "educated" by the canon.

This consolidation is anticipated paratextually. The small tables at the head of every chapter, listing Place and Guide, seem at first to be neutral orientation devices, but they quietly signal a deeper logic: travel here is always to be guided. Before the narrative begins, the reader is told which location will be visited and which cultural figure will serve as mentor. What looks like itinerary design also functions as curricular framing: you will travel, but under the tutelage of an already sanctioned voice.

Pronoun shifts mark the next stage of this process. In the Barbados and Amsterdam sections, singular verbs dominate: "I arrived," "I felt deflated," "I wondered why." After each encounter with a cultural voice, plural forms emerge: "We are inclined to believe anticipation will exceed reality," "We may fail to notice what is before us if we rush." The transition is especially clear after Ruskin is introduced: confession about not seeing gives way to "We should draw, not to make art but to learn to look." This linguistic slide is not stylistic ornament; it is the textual trace of the author's transformation from learner to guide. The early I create solidarity, but once knowledge is secured through citation, that solidarity is reconfigured into a more didactic we.

For the reader, the effect is double-edged. On one hand, the vulnerability of the early "I" is disarming. A traveller who feels boredom and disappointment seems accessible, and the intertexts arrive gently, as companions who might help us as well. On the other hand, the book's paratextual framing—especially the repeated Place / Guide tables—signals from the outset that the itinerary is curated and that meaningful travel presupposes a learned guide. Each canonical figure is preselected, each lesson pre-scripted. As the narrative voice stabilizes, the inclusive "we" increasingly functions as a managed collective: readers may join, but only by accepting the cultural lineage already charted.

Stylistic devices support this quiet consolidation of power. De Botton often opens with questions or admissions of failure—"Why do I so quickly feel bored?"—that align with the reader's own potential confusion. Once a cultural citation appears, the prose shifts to calm

aphorisms: "We travel not to escape ourselves but to encounter them anew." Modal verbs ("should," "must") remain polite but accumulate normative weight. Sentence rhythm becomes balanced and declarative, signalling that inquiry has reached resolution. The anxious I has found a discursive home; now it speaks as if for all.

Intertextuality here reveals its ambivalence. Kristeva helps us see the genuine opening: the authorial subject begins unstable and invites readers to share that instability. But she also reminds us that the symbolic order one enters sets limits. The "dialogue" in The Art of Travel is curated within a Eurocentric, aesthetically cultivated field. As the I gains footing by mastering that field, it can readdress readers from a position of soft authority. The plural voice is thus not a space of free co-authorship but a rhetorical device of inclusion under guidance. Readers are welcomed, but as apprentices rather than equal interlocutors.

By the book's later chapters, the authorial subject that once appeared in trial has become coherent and instructive; the reader who began as a companionable co-traveller is now positioned as a learner in a guided seminar. The pronoun "we" masks this hierarchy even as it performs solidarity. What looked like open dialogism has become a subtle enclosure, preparing the ground for the book's final turn—its apparent return to bodily experience—which will promise escape from textual authority but remain embedded in the same regime of cultivated taste.

"On Habit"? Break Habit or Reproduce Habitus?

The final chapter of The Art of Travel, "On Habit," appears to offer release from the discursive itinerary built earlier. After narrating failed holidays— "I had thought Barbados would be different. I arrived, and within hours I was listless, disappointed, unsure what to do with my freedom"; the anticlimactic first night in Amsterdam, "alone… wondering why I had come"—De Botton turns toward the problem of habit: everyday repetition dulls the senses, and travel should jolt us into renewed attention. He counsels slowing down, sketching, attending to light and form, letting perception rather than fantasy guide experience. If we followed Julia Kristeva's notion of the subject-in-process, such affective collapse could function as a semiotic breach: boredom and restlessness might destabilize the symbolic order and open space for new subjectivities. Yet the chapter's very title already hints at a double movement: what begins as an exhortation to break routine habit quickly becomes a training in habitus — the deeply socialized, class-marked set of dispositions that Bourdieu describes. In this book the potential rupture is swiftly sutured. The semiotic—those pre-symbolic impulses of desire and alienation—briefly surfaces but is quickly rechanneled into a pedagogical aesthetic regime.

The textual mechanism is clear. After admitting he "looked but failed to see" the English countryside, De Botton invokes John Ruskin's dictum that drawing disciplines the eye and concludes: "We should take up a pencil, not to produce art but to learn to look." In "On

Possessing Beauty," the urge to hold on to vistas becomes a moral failing: "We must resist ownership and cultivate attentive seeing." These imperatives sound liberating but also codify the senses: to recover travel's value is to look through a Ruskinian, nineteenth-century European discipline. Even the apparent rebellion against guidebooks and cliché turns into another "curriculum". The book thus stages an apparent escape from numbing habit, only to install a different kind of habit — a cultivated habitus that signals membership in an educated, Eurocentric class.

The book's paratext makes this curricular logic explicit. Each chapter opens with a Place / Guide table—"Madrid / Humboldt," "Lake District / Wordsworth," "Provence / Van Gogh." These tables appear benign but quietly establish that travel is meaningful only when apprenticed to approved cultural mentors. Peripheral sites (Barbados, Amsterdam) are narrated through Huysmans or Flaubert; nature is domesticated by Ruskin and Wordsworth; vision is shaped by Van Gogh. The symbolic field is thus scripted before the body arrives; what seems an invitation to break routine is in fact a predesigned syllabus.

This is where critical intertextuality becomes indispensable. Kristeva's 1960s formulation decentered authorship and imagined the subject as always "in process / on trial," but it largely bracketed social power: semiotic drives could disrupt the symbolic, yet she did not ask who controls the symbolic field. From the 1980s onward, critics such as Graham Allen (Intertextuality, 2000) and Mary Orr (Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts, 2003) argued that intertextuality had been depoliticized: celebrated as openness while ignoring curation and hierarchy. Critical intertextuality re-politicizes the concept, asking: whose voices enter the mosaic, what subject positions are sanctioned or excluded, and how textual networks reproduce cultural and class privilege. It fuses poststructuralist dialogism with Bourdieu's sociology of culture, showing that curated polyphony can reinforce rather than dismantle power. When read this way, De Botton's pedagogy about "breaking habit" is itself a cultural technique for producing habitus: it converts disorientation into disciplined aesthetic comportment.

Viewed through this lens, De Botton's semiotic breach is allowed only to justify re-education within a Eurocentric, male, upper-middle-class aesthetic. The canon he curates—Humboldt, Flaubert, Huysmans, Ruskin, Wordsworth, Van Gogh—is entirely Western, white, and historically bourgeois-humanist. No Caribbean writers contextualize Barbados; no Dutch voices shape Amsterdam; no non-European epistemologies challenge European optics of nature. The supposedly polyphonic dialogue is strategically narrow: discomfort is staged, then cured with European taste.

Here Bourdieu's cultural capital explains the deeper mechanism. Cultural capital is not just book knowledge but habitus: deeply embodied ways of sensing and acting that signal membership in an educated class. Bourdieu shows that cultural capital reproduces privilege through processes of classification (marking certain practices as refined and others as vulgar),

conversion (transforming education and leisure into distinction), and misrecognition (méconnaissance: the naturalizing of learned taste as common sense) (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). De Botton's narrative repeatedly builds this binary: The "bad" traveller is hasty, image-hungry, assuming distance redeems life. Barbados and Amsterdam embody this naiveness: the narrator arrives, consumes the postcard promise, and is left empty. He mocks "the disappointment of arrival" and "the belief that change of place will change the self." The "good" traveller is patient, slow, self-reflective, guided by high culture. Drawing fields, resisting souvenirs, reading Ruskin or Wordsworth—these are framed as perceptual and moral elevation.

Such criteria quietly exclude wide swaths of travellers: those without leisure to linger, without educational background to decode nineteenth-century art theory, without economic freedom to treat travel as contemplative self-fashioning. The "we" of the late chapters quietly hails those ready to inhabit a bourgeois, Eurocentric habitus—a subject comfortable with museums, literary reference, and reflective leisure. What begins as a critique of routine habit becomes a rite of passage into class-coded habitus: the traveller learns to look, but to look as one of "us."

De Botton also naturalizes this boundary. Following Bourdieu's insight that the highest distinction is to make acquired taste seem innate, he narrates his own rite of passage: once naive and disappointed, now perceptually awakened. This conversion story makes the habitus appear as common sense—anyone can "learn to look" if they try—while hiding the structural privilege (education, time, resources) required. The body's awakening thus becomes a soft, middle-class initiation.

The authorial subject follows the same arc the reader is asked to emulate: porous and trial-bound at first, then reconstituted as calm cultural tutor. Kristeva helps us see this dissolution and re-formation; critical intertextuality adds what Kristeva left implicit: the symbolic field where he regains authority is curated, Eurocentric, and classed. By selecting an exclusively Western male canon, De Botton participates in cultural capital's reproduction while presenting it as gentle self-improvement. His apparent call to break habit ends as a call to relearn habit—to embody a new, socially legible habitus.

Thus, the book's turn to habit—its plea to escape numbness by renewed perception—is not a rupture but a culmination. Sensation is admitted only to be tamed and converted into distinction. Travel's raw failures become lessons in aesthetic self-fashioning; the "I" completes its journey from vulnerable learner to cultural guide; the "we" stabilizes as a classed collective. Intertextuality proves double-edged: it promises process and destabilization, but once its curation and social anchoring are visible, we see a training ground that converts bodily renewal into the reproduction of Eurocentric, middle-class cultural power.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine Alain de Botton's The Art of Travel through the lens of intertextuality, asking how the book invites both author and reader into textual dialogue while at the same time curating and containing that openness. By following the book's movement from a vulnerable, confessional "I" toward a seemingly inclusive "we," then into a late appeal to break routine in On Habit, we have traced a complex process: the promise of destabilization gradually giving way to a re-inscription of cultural authority.

Kristeva's original conception of the subject-in-process proved essential for illuminating the book's early dynamism. De Botton's first-person travel failures—his listless arrival in Barbados, his anticlimax in Amsterdam—expose a self momentarily in trial, open to re-signification. Intertextuality, in this sense, stages a productive vulnerability: the author cites others not as settled authority but as a field through which the travelling self might be reconstituted. The pronoun shifts from "I" to "we" reflects this aspiration to shared exploration, a textual strategy that seems to decentralize the author and grant the reader co-agency.

Yet the same shift also revealed its limits once critical intertextuality was applied. Later theorists such as Graham Allen and Mary Orr have shown that intertextuality, if unexamined, can mask its own politics: a mosaic of quotations may be less democratic than it appears, for the field of voices is curated and ranked. In The Art of Travel this curation is narrow and unmistakably Eurocentric: Huysmans, Flaubert, Ruskin, Wordsworth, Van Gogh, Humboldt form an all-male, Western lineage that defines what counts as meaningful travel. The early semiotic tremor—boredom, alienation, the shock of disappointed fantasy—could have opened to other epistemologies but is quickly sutured into this canon.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital helps to explain why. The book's late pedagogy turns from breaking habit to installing a cultivated habitus: slow looking, sketching, moral restraint, and deference to European masters become embodied signs of cultural legitimacy. Through classification (marking some travelers as refined and others as vulgar), conversion (transforming education and leisure into distinction), and misrecognition (making trained taste appear natural) (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986), the narrative transforms an affective failure of tourism into a soft initiation into an upper-middle-class, Eurocentric aesthetic. The author himself enacts this passage—from naïve tourist to calm cultural tutor—and invites readers to follow. The result is an apparently open, dialogic intertext that actually trains a specific social subject.

Seen in this light, The Art of Travel is neither simply elitist nor simply liberating. Its power lies in combining intimacy with pedagogy: it confesses vulnerability, promises perceptual renewal, and offers practical ways to escape the deadening force of routine, but it does so by channeling those impulses into a highly curated cultural syllabus. Intertextuality here is double-edged: it enables process and the re-making of self, yet—once its curation and social anchoring become visible—it also reveals itself as a technique of distinction.

These findings also speak to contemporary travel culture in the digital and post-digital age. De Botton wrote before Instagram, TikTok itineraries, and algorithm-driven "must-see" lists, but his project of slow, reflective looking remains an implicit critique of the speed and surface of platformed tourism. At the same time, the book shows how easily a rhetoric of depth can be captured by inherited cultural hierarchies: the aesthetic cure to shallow consumption can itself become a new form of distinction. For today's readers and writers of travel, this ambivalence is instructive. It reminds us that resisting the spectacle of social media is not enough; one must also question which traditions of seeing and feeling are smuggled in as universal, and who is empowered or excluded when "cultivated perception" is framed as common sense.

This insight also helps situate The Art of Travel alongside today's KOL-driven travel media. Influencers on Instagram, Xiaohongshu, or YouTube often speak in a similarly intimate, confessional voice, promising authentic discovery while curating routes, aesthetics, and consumption patterns. Like De Botton, they seem to democratize taste but frequently reinforce hierarchies—defining "real travel" as boutique, art-informed, slow, and financially unburdened. What looks like friendly guidance doubles as an invitation into a class-coded habitus. Reading De Botton thus equips us to see how contemporary "traveller mentors" reproduce cultural power: they convert personal narrative and apparent openness into subtle training in privilege, even when opposing mainstream tourism.

For travel writing studies, this means that the genre's recent turn to intimacy and perception should be read not only as a break from colonial grand narratives but also as a quieter mode of aesthetic stratification. For cultural theory, it demonstrates how the semiotic can be recuperated, and how authorship—far from dissolving—can be refounded within selective networks of quotation. The invitation to join a dialogic "we" remains enticing, but it is a "we" built to reproduce a particular cultural habitus under the guise of perceptual liberation. Recognizing this dynamic is vital for understanding how pre-social-media travel texts and today's influencer travel content share a double face: intimate and democratic in tone, yet quietly regulatory in taste and class.

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