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Cristian Crusat – Spain

Breve teoría del viaje y el desierto
(2011)

A Brief Theory of Travel and the Desert

Publishing House **Editorial Pre-Textos**

Biography

Cristian Crusat (b.1983) is the author of *Estatuas* (2006), *Tranquilos en tiempo de guerra* (2010) and *Breve teoría del viaje y el desierto* (2011). In 2010, Crusat was awarded the Manuel Llanos International Prize. He has seen his essays, translations and articles on comparative literature published in a wide range of Spanish and Latin American journals, such as *Revista de Occidente*, *Letra Internacional*, *Punto de partida* and *Revista Atlántica*. In 2012, Crusat also edited and translated *El deseo de lo único. Teoría de la ficción*, the critical essays of the French writer Marcel Schwob. He teaches Spanish language and literature abroad.

Synopsis

The six stories of *Breve teoría del viaje y el desierto* contemplate the full range of human experience. They take us on a journey around the world, from the arid landscapes of the Mediterranean coast to the work of the brilliant Serbian writer, Milorad Pavić. All of the characters are waiting for, searching for, or exploring the possibility of a revelation which never appears in their numbed here-and-now. And yet, paradoxically, they seem incapable of taking any kind of effective action, with the possible exception of Lena, who writes from the floating world of dreams. As Sufi mysticism tells us, the soul craves change, and immobility can feel like a slow death that can creep up anywhere: turning up on roads, in deserted parking lots or hotels packed with tourists (the desert of the modern world). However, fate or mere chance (an irrelevant incident, someone fainting on a nudist beach, a plane crash that never actually happened) can reveal in a flash the true face of a character's isolation.

Thanks to an extraordinarily versatile prose, a nomadic style, which adapts to the different spiritual, physical or imaginary locations of each story and to the fragile individuality of their inhabitants, Crusat guides these buffeted characters through the abyss of fears, self-doubt and desires which make up the modern world.

Breve teoría del viaje y el desierto

Cristian Crusat

El mundo acaba de dar una vuelta completa. Ahora gira en torno a un coche del que se acaba de bajar un autostopista ruso.

—No me gusta Almería —gruñe con tosquedad Ben desde el asiento del copiloto, con un regusto a gasolina bajo su lengua—. El coche de mi padre tenía matrícula de Almería. Siempre me pareció una mierda.

Aunque Ben y Magali se hallen confinados voluntariamente en el vasto paisaje desértico almeriense, sus terminaciones nerviosas todavía no han abandonado las paredes roblonadas de los lavabos de la gasolinera, la primera parada de este viaje iniciado en cualquier rincón de la Costa del Sol. Es julio.

(Aunque Ben y Magali hablan el mismo idioma, su comunicación atraviesa un momento particularmente confuso).

Después de conducir varias horas en paralelo al mar Mediterráneo —mientras observaban la sucesión de torsos musulmanes apuntando al suelo durante los rezos matinales (la religión acorralada entre badenes y sucios túneles de lavado) y la maraña de mansiones frente a la costa—, han llegado al desierto y a la gasolinera que ahora abandonan: un oasis de asfalto, vidrios rotos y plástico.

Al tiempo que mira a la bella Magali y sus brazos firmes y escuálidos sobre el volante —brazos de una delicada estudiante de música en el conservatorio—, Ben siente cómo en sus oídos aún resuenan los acordes de “Woman driving,

man sleeping”, de EELS. Al otro lado del cristal, el horizonte tiembla por el calor como si un niño intentara pellizcar un vaso de agua.

Minutos antes, los altavoces de la estación de servicios habían emitido una serie de agudos chispazos eléctricos que lograron inquietar a Ben: parecían anunciar el timbre imposible de un gigantesco teléfono móvil agazapado tras una colina calcárea, la sombra de algún animal monstruoso proveniente de fotogramas *hentai* o *anime* (o así se tradujeron los chispazos en su imaginación, incendiada por el sofocante calor del mediodía almeriense). El hedor a combustible y a goma quemada los persiguió hasta la curva en que el autostopista empezó a caminar elegantemente nimbado por la nada absoluta, como en un video clip de música country. Porque, y Ben lo adivina, *la culpa de todo esto* la tiene el autostopista ruso que recogieron en aquella rotonda y que acaban de abandonar en un kilómetro perdido de cualquier mapa que incluya a Almería. (Cuando descendió del coche, ni siquiera dijo “adiós”). Además, la descripción de la playa que les ha recomendado tiene todas las trazas de ser una perversa mentira soviética.

Hipótesis primera: Quien llega a un desierto —Magali, Ben, o aquel autostopista— escapa de algún otro lugar.

El desvío por el que se ha introducido el Renault Mégane, señalado con profusión de detalles por aquel autostopista ruso, una delgada arteria que comunica con la costa, su sucesión de terrenos áridos, polvorientos y mezquinos, parece ser la prolongación alucinada de los resuellos de las máquinas, barriles y barricas, jarcias y bidones con olor a carburante de la estación de servicios. Hacía años que Ben no veía aquellos

antiguos mojones señalizadores, esos trozos de cemento rematados con un semicírculo de color rojo. (No son las únicas formas que en este viaje evocarán su infancia: su padre recogiendo a las puertas del colegio, con una bolsa de plástico verde y un cigarrillo quemando el reborde amarillento de sus uñas, cada día). Todo son grietas en el cemento y en el asfalto de la carretera. Ben observa la sucesión de montañas de arena, de gravilla, de balasto, hormigoneras, escoriales, depósitos, la fábrica de gas, bombas y varias torres de alta tensión: el horizonte se modula a la manera que lo hacen las pesadillas determinadas por los genios del destino de algunas películas de ciencia-ficción, personajes capaces de alentar comportamientos desquiciados en el resto del reparto, uno de los cuales indudablemente Ben identifica con el ruso que acaba de bajarse del coche: el fiel, intachable y ejemplar guardia de corps de cualquier héroe infame de Hollywood. Por un momento, Ben lamenta su presencia en el interior del vehículo, que identifica con un mal sueño. Quiere bajarse y volver a su casa, encontrarse en el desportillado Peugeot matrícula de Almería de su padre. Despertar de una puta vez.

Pero Magali...

Ella tuvo la idea. *Ella* es quien lo ha invitado a acompañarla en este viaje. *Ella*, después de cruzar algunas estúpidas palabras que sacaron a cada uno de sus respectivas soledades, lo invitó a cruzar la costa española. Cualquiera que los viera actuar —el autostopista ruso, sin ir más lejos— pensaría: Han reñido y están peleados. O: son un par de subnormales que se dedican a desconcertar a la gente, aunque ella es muy guapa, *extrañamente guapa* para ir acompañada de un tipo tan desastrado y autoabsorto. Además, esa cicatriz en la cabeza de él... Confiere virilidad a su rostro aniñado. Sin embargo, es mucho más sencillo, incluso prosaico: Ben y

Magali no se conocen (aunque Ben tiene la certeza, desde el día que hablaron por primera vez en aquel parque y Magali lo invitó a ir con ella, de haberla conocido *siempre*: suficiente motivo para mentir a su padre diciéndole que va de excursión con unos amigos. Le ha dicho que lleva todas sus medicinas, que no se preocupe).

El malestar de Ben se acentúa cuando Magali, cuya frente se ha perlado de sudor y cansancio a lo largo de los kilómetros, acelera en un tramo perfectamente recto que no parece tener fin o que, en caso de tenerlo, nunca llegaría por la natural voluntad del conductor. Ese ruso era un demonio, piensa Ben, todo ha ido bien hasta ahora, pero su sombra nos ha poseído a ella y a mí en el lugar de donde no se vuelve: el desierto.

El desierto de Almería.

Se ha agarrado a la enganchadera sobre la ventanilla de su derecha, y los posibles significados de la escena estallan sin orden en la mente de Ben. Entre espirales de polvo arcilloso y partículas de grava levantadas por la presión de las cuatro ruedas a gran velocidad, a través de las escasas acumulaciones arbóreas que tal vez sean tomillo, o anís, o simplemente mala hierba, los dos ojos abrasados de Ben divisan un amplio y en un perfecto estado sillón de dentista, delicadamente reclinado y con la base sobre la que se sustenta, entre tallos de arbusto, un poco corroída. Es de un blanco esmaltado y luminoso, percepción realzada grotescamente merced a los dos roquedales rojizos que enmarcan el espacio distante. La soberana acción del sol a esas horas posteriores al mediodía crea la ilusión de que se ha encendido el foco iluminador de la boca del paciente. Los rebordes de aluminio perfilan el sillón y, bajo el respaldo de cuero, un brazo articulado conecta con un diminuto caño de agua que hará desaparecer la sangre tras las extracciones

dentales (Ben recuerda una fotografía: Marilyn Manson, su dentadura amplia y groseramente a la vista gracias a un aparato ortopédico compuesto de varillas y clavos metálicos, algunos oxidados, además de un gorro de aviador nazi sado-masoquista). Se trata de un elemento cargado de una polise-mia tan brutal que Ben no es capaz de desviar la mirada, aún cuando el sillón ha quedado atrás (entre lo que ahora parece un campo de girasoles) y sólo puede seguir su desaparición definitiva por el cristal del espejo retrovisor. Lo hace hasta que en su campo visual se impone el azul marino de la playa (concluyendo que siempre habrá algo que genere una distancia, un desequilibrio entre ella y él).

Hipótesis segunda: El desierto es, por definición, un espacio árido y deshabitado, estrictamente impersonal, en congruencia perfecta con los estratos más profundos de la psique humana (...).

A Brief Theory of Travel and the Desert

Cristian Crusat

Translated from the Spanish by Jacqueline Minett

The world has turned full circle. Now it revolves around a car that has just dropped off a Russian hitchhiker.

“I don’t like Almeria”, Ben grumbles from the front passenger seat, aware of the lingering taste of petrol in his mouth. “My father’s car had an Almeria number-plate. I always thought it was crap.”

Ben and Magali are willing captives of the vast desert landscape of Almeria, but their nerve endings are still bouncing off the riveted partitions in the WCs at the petrol station, the first stop on this journey that began at a place that could have been anywhere on the Costa del Sol. It is July.

(Ben and Magali speak the same language, but right now communication between them is floundering).

After several hours driving parallel to the Mediterranean, with a succession of torsos bent in morning prayer (religion wedged between speed bumps and grimy car wash tunnels) and the sprawling sea-front mansions flashing past them, they reached the desert and the petrol station they have just left behind: an oasis of asphalt, broken glass and plastic.

Ben looks at Magali, taking in her good looks and her firm, skinny arms resting on the wheel, the arms of a willowy conservatoire student. He still has the tune of “Woman Driving, Man Sleeping” by EELS ringing in his ears. Through the windscreen, the horizon shimmers in the heat, like a child plucking at water in a glass.

Minutes earlier, at the service station, Ben had been unnerved by a volley of high-pitched crackling over the loudspeakers: it was as if they heralded the impossible ringtone of a gigantic mobile phone crouching behind a limestone hill, the shadow of some monstrous creature from a *hentai* or *anime* cartoon (the product of his imagination ignited by the stifling midday heat of Almeria). The stench of fuel and burning rubber hung in the air as far as the bend in the road where the hitchhiker coolly walked away, haloed in absolute nothingness, as if in a country music video clip. Because, as Ben instinctively knows, *the one to blame for all this* is the Russian hitchhiker they picked up back at the roundabout and have just dropped off at some godforsaken place on the map – any map – including Almeria. (He hadn't even said “goodbye” when he got out of the car). And another thing... The description of the beach he'd recommended to them was probably a perverse Soviet lie.

First hypothesis: anyone heading for a desert — Magali, Ben, or that hitchhiker — is running away from somewhere else.

The turning just taken by the Renault Mégane, which the Russian hitchhiker had described in such profuse detail, is a narrow road leading to the coast. In Ben's mind, it's as if the arid, dusty scrubland it runs through were an extension of the service station's wheezing machines, barrels and petrol drums, its cables and cans reeking of fuel. It is years since he has seen any of these old kilometre stones, cement bollards with a red semicircle painted at the top. (These are not the only visual cues on the journey that will remind him of his childhood: his father meeting him every day at the school

gates carrying a green plastic bag, the tips of his fingernails scorched and stained yellow by his cigarette). The cement and asphalt of the road are riddled with cracks. Ben gazes at the mountains of sand, gravel and ballast, the cement mixers, slag heaps, storage tanks, gasworks, pumps and electricity pylons as they fly past. The horizon shifts and changes like a nightmare scripted by the mysterious mastermind in a science fiction film, who is capable of unleashing all sorts of insane behaviour in the other characters and whom Ben doubtless identifies with the Russian who has just got out of the car: the faithful, infallible, consummate *garde du corps* of some despicable Hollywood hero. For a moment, Ben wishes he weren't in the vehicle, which is now associated in his mind with a bad dream. He wishes he could get out and go back home, he wishes he were sitting in his father's beaten-up Peugeot with its Almeria number-plate. If only he could wake up, damn it!

But Magali...

It had been *her* idea. *She* was the one who had invited him along on this trip. After exchanging a few idle words that had lifted each of them out of their respective loneliness, *she* invited him to travel the length of the Spanish coast with her. Anyone watching them now — the Russian hitchhiker, for one — would think, “They’ve quarrelled and are not talking to one another.” Or, “They’re a couple of weirdos who get their kicks by making other people feel uncomfortable. But she’s very attractive, *too attractive* to be travelling with an awkward, self-absorbed guy like him. And another thing, that scar on his head... It makes his boyish face look more manly.” But there is a simpler, more prosaic explanation. Ben and Magali are strangers (although, from the very first day they talked in the park and Magali invited him to join her, Ben has felt as if he has *always* known her – a good enough

reason to lie to his father and tell him that he's going on a trip with a few of his friends. He reassured him, saying he had all his medicines with him, and told him not to worry).

Ben's anxiety increases as Magali, who is tired after driving so many kilometres and whose forehead is beaded with perspiration, accelerates on a perfectly straight, seemingly endless stretch of road; or rather, it would be endless if it were up to the driver. "That Russian was a demon" thinks Ben. "Everything was fine until he turned up, but now we are both possessed by him in the place from which there is no return: the desert."

The Almeria desert.

Ben grips the handle above the side window on his right, the possible implications of the scene bursting chaotically on his imagination. Amid the swirling clouds of clay dust and particles of gravel thrown up by the pressure of the four wheels travelling at high speed, and through the sparse clumps of vegetation that could be thyme, anise, or just plain weeds, Ben's burning eyes spot a large, intact dentist's chair in a gently reclining position resting on a rusty metal base, in amongst the bushes. It is white enamel, made all the more dazzling by its contrast with the two russet-coloured rocky outcrops framing the far distance. The dental lamp appears to be switched on — an optical illusion caused by the relentless noonday sun. The chair has an aluminium frame and, under the leather chair-back, an articulated arm is connected to a small pipe delivering water to wash away the patient's blood after an extraction (Ben remembers a photograph of Marilyn Manson, his outsize teeth exposed in a hideous grin by a dental device consisting of metal rods and bolts, some of them rusty, wearing a sadomasochist Nazi aviator's leather

helmet). The object is so powerfully charged with multiple layers of meaning that Ben cannot tear his eyes away from it, even when the dentist's chair recedes into the distance (into what now looks like a field of sunflowers) and he can only watch in the rear mirror until it finally vanishes. He continues to gaze at it until the beach and the marine blue of the sea finally loom into view (and he comes to the conclusion that for some reason or other there will always be a gulf, an imbalance, between her and himself).

Second hypothesis: the desert is, by definition, an arid, uninhabited, strictly impersonal space, perfectly in tune with the deepest levels of the human psyche (...).



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