

'From Brixton to Ghirriland'. An Interview with Geoff Dyer

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I met Geoff Dyer for the first time in 1999, when he came to Bologna to launch the first Italian edition of *The Colour of Memory*. Almost twenty years later, at the end of November 2017, he came back to my city, to launch the new edition of the very same novel, together with the translation of his latest book, the collection of essays, *White Sands*.

Almost thirty years separate the two volumes, which at first sight seem to offer two utterly different images of their author. Whilst his debut novel is a lyrical representation of youthful life in Brixton during the Thatcher era, in the essays of *White Sands*, Dyer appears as a restless and somewhat snobbish traveller around sixty, who recommends Adorno, listens to free jazz and, notwithstanding his being a health fanatic, suffered a light stroke at the age of fifty-five.

There are continuities that link all of Dyer's works, from the first novels to the idiosyncratic essays that brought him fame. What he writes in a metafictional intermission of *The Colour of Memory* might apply to any of his books, starting from his masterpieces, the collection of jazz stories, *But Beautiful*, and the volume on photography, *The Ongoing Moment*: «This book is like an album of snaps. In any snaps strangers intrude [...] Hidden among the familiar, laughing faces of friends are the glimpsed shapes of strangers; and in the distant homes of tourists there *you* are, at the edge of the frame, slightly out of focus, in the midst of other peoples' memories. We stray into each other's lives. [...] That is what is happening here. Look closely and maybe there, close to the margin of the page, you will find the hurried glance of your own image». Indeed, a sort of photographic structure characterizes Dyer's writing together with an incessant will to open a dialogue with his reader. Meeting him and talking to him again after almost two decades was like resuming a dialogue interrupted on a hot May afternoon at the end of the second millennium.

When you came to Bologna the first time, eighteen years ago, to launch The Colour of Memory, the first thing you said was: «It is so strange for me

to be here to talk about a book I wrote ten years ago». Well, how do you feel now, presenting a book you wrote thirty years ago?

It's a marvelous feeling, as if the book had found a new life. I do not want to sound arrogant, but maybe there is something about the book – although it is set in a particular place and in a particular time – that is timeless. Usually I don't reread my books, but I had to reread this when the digital edition was published, and I was struck by something that I lost as a writer: that lyricism which characterized my writing many years ago. Well, it would be rather bizarre if, now that I am almost sixty, I had the same lyricism of my twenties. Yet, as time goes by, you realize how peculiar a writer's life is: there is a mysterious side of writing, which is out of control and sort of resists any kind of rational imposition. Where has that lyricism gone now? I don't know.

So, how do you feel about The Colour of Memory today?

That's a nice question. Well, I look back on it fondly, because it was my first novel: one's first novel has a really special place in your affections. You know, up until that moment you dream of becoming a writer, then you publish your first book and you sort of become a writer, you think, 'Oh, my God, the world's gonna change!', and if you are lucky, if things go well, they can change, but for me, on the contrary, it was just a sort of traumatic event. In terms of the contents of the book, I look back on it fondly as well because of that lyricism, which is now, not surprisingly, gone.

I've taught The Colour of Memory many times at the university, to different generations of students, and it has always been their favourite. Young people identify with your characters, they like them: it was on my syllabus in the 90's and the students loved it; it was still on my syllabus last year, and they enjoyed it just as much.

Oh, great! I'm delighted by that. You know, it talks about such a wonderful phase in people's lives, between 23 and 30, there is a universal magic in it. However much the world changes, there will always be such things as a bunch of friends, romanticism between boys and girls, these things will always be there. The clothes will change, the women's dresses will be higher or lower, the hair changes, but these timeless unchanging things will remain.

But as far as the social situation is concerned, don't you think that the social problems of the late Eighties are mirrored in nowadays situation? I am

thinking, for instance, of unemployment and the young graduate's difficulty finding a job. I think that the reality depicted in The Colour of Memory is more similar to today's reality than to the social situation of, say, ten years ago.

That's a good point. But the difference now, at least in England, is that that wonderful safety net of social security that my friends and I and my whole generation relied on is no longer there. So, in a way, I think that life is harder now, crucially, also because London back then was such an easy and cheap place to live in: there was a whole economy available for cheap living, which I think is no longer there.

In 2017, you had three books out in Italy – White Sands, Another Great Day at Sea, and The Colour of Memory – in six months.

Is that a record?

Well, yes, I think so. I would like to know how you feel about it.

I guess the thing to say is that in a way the whole of my career, everything that has happened to me in publishing, has been just a compensation for the horrible start I had. You know, I always like coming to Italy because the first book of mine to be translated was translated into Italian, by Gianni Burgo's publishing house, Instar Libri. You remember that gorgeous edition of my jazz book, *But beautiful?* You know, that was the start of things getting better. So it doesn't surprise me, because I've written a lot of books, and, yes, we're catching up... there are a lot of books in the past. Well, of course I am happy.

Critics say that the main characteristic of your work is to disrupt genres and that is why your work is impossible to label. Do you agree?

Yes, I think that is fair, although now a lot of other people are doing this, it's become a rather popular attitude, this idea of the 'uncategorizable' genre has become a genre in itself. There is now a place available in the bookstores for books like that, when I started there wasn't, so what happened to me is that my fortunes have improved as more people have started doing this. Now I am seen as one of the people who is involved in this movement, but actually it turns out that, oddly, there are quite a few 'movements' that I'm caught up in, often quite distinct ones: for instance, autofiction, and then those critical books which are also kind of autobiographical.

But would you call your work 'autofiction'?

I find this category of autofiction rather silly. You can trace it back to Henry Miller, or to that famous George Orwell essay about Henry Miller where all that is said about Miller is like a description of autofiction. You can even go back before Henry Miller: autofiction has always been around, I don't know why it became such a thing recently, but I don't think it's a helpful label at all.

Yet, adopting an autofictional device, in White Sands you talk about your personal experiences, but you change the name of your wife: Rebecca becomes Jessica. Why?

That is to remind the reader that it's fiction, it's not a reliable, legally binding document. But more significantly is how the name Jeff is spelt in *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*: changing from Geoff to Jeff graphically brings out that he is not me, Jeff is not Geoff.

There are references to photography in almost all of your books, starting from chapter 20 in The Colour of Memory, where you compare your novel to an album of snapshots. So, I would like to know what photography is for you? Why do you like it so much?

There are two answers to this question: in terms of the way I write fiction, I like the details, which, like John Berger said, enable the reader to see what's going on: it's a way of actualizing the scene, of making fictional scenes seem real. The other thing which is so interesting about photography is of course the way that although you're documenting an existing world, the extraordinary thing for me is how much room there is for subjectivity, so you if you give a camera to six different photographers to record the same thing, they will all have different responses to it. And there is another side, as I grow older: I didn't know much about photography when I wrote *The Colour of Memory*, but since then I have become a sort of scholar of the history of photography which I find endlessly fascinating and enriching, full of new discoveries all the time.

I was fascinated by the way you deal with Luigi Ghirri's work in White Sands, how you expound on this sense of waiting and expectation in his photographs.

He is so fantastic to me. His photographs are documents of an external world, but then he turns everything into this inner 'Ghirri-

world'. It's just this weird thing, when you see his photos you wonder 'Where is this? Where are we? Where are they taken?' Maybe they are taken somewhere in this place called 'Ghirriland.'

The fascinating thing for me is that 'Ghirriland' is just round the corner... Do you remember those images of gates opened on pure nothingness, those brick and iron gates immersed in the fog of the Via Emilia?

Yes, they are fantastic. Well, I came across a quotation of another photographer, the Australian Bill Henson - interestingly, it's a quotation that is ascribed to Éluard or to Yeats - and it runs: «There is another world, and it is in this world». Henson used it in regard to his work; to me it applies so perfectly to Ghirri. Of course, those gates you described so brilliantly are gates opened on another world, which is in this world. I also like the size of Ghirri's pictures, their modesty in size, compared to certain huge photographs you see nowadays, whose size sometimes is just an excuse because there is nothing to look at.

Finally, another theme that recurs in your work is music; starting from But Beautiful up to your latest White Sands there is a lot of jazz in your pages. Are you still a fan?

Just as I like books that are not in any particular category, I like music that is like that, too, and there is an awful lot of it around. Recently I went to hear an evening of jazz metal, it was drums, guitar, and bass and an incredible heavy metal guitar, and it was absolutely fantastic. These days I am obsessed by a band called The Necks. They are piano, bass and drums and they are not like any jazz I have heard before. In terms of classic jazz, my favourite artist is Don Cherry: he was categorized as a jazz trumpeter, but he stopped being a jazz trumpeter at quite an early stage, he just became this musician blending all kinds of music. I like his nomadic way of living. I just adore him still: wherever I lived, I always had a photograph of Don Cherry on my desk, often just a small one: and now I've got this beautiful framed poster of him in our flat in Los Angeles.

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