

## Every Good Boy Deserves Fun: One Dog's Journey to the North

“North...of all geographical terms it is the most personal, the most emotional, the most elusive. And perhaps the one which evokes the most powerful feelings” (Davidson, 2009)

Davidson's description of the powerful symbolism of the North as a destination, as a dream, echoes the romantic hyperbole of the early polar explorers searching for the last untamed wilderness in an increasingly industrial world; “the great adventure of the ice, deep and pure as infinity...nature itself in its profundity” (Nansen, 1894). It establishes North as the direction of adventures. This chapter will examine The North as the site of mystery and adventure... one of the last wildernesses to explore but one which is paradoxically comfortable; populated only sparsely by oddly familiar characters. Through the examination of the author's own short animation *North*, it will look at the use of narrative devices and media references to reflect on the symbolism of the North –and investigate the British relationship with it; not with the media construct of The North-South divide but rather with a broader, more complex idea of a conceptual, an imagined North-ness. This is seen in relation to certain stereotypes of iconic Britishness – our relationship with the sea, and its poetic evocation through the shipping forecast, with our dogs... and with our TV-facing sofas.

Drawing on its author's own travel experiences, and field research in Norway and Iceland, the short animation *North* can be viewed as a Road Movie, a Hero's Journey, with Colin the dog as unlikely hero. He fits into a contemporary animation tradition influenced by both Bob Godfrey's *Roobarb* and Nick Park's *Gromit*. He can be read as as-if-Human, within the Disney tradition of anthropomorphised creatures, and assigned human desires and complex levels of needs. But he can also be read as Dog, in his single-minded determination, his perseverance and childlike enthusiasm... and through his relationships with the other

creatures and the humans in the narrative. As Dog, Colin has a Master; and in the course of his own self-discovery, he disturbs the relationship between dog and master, and opens up his small grey world firstly to the brilliant green of Northern Lights, and ultimately to full colour.

### **The Story**

Colin is seen dreaming of adventures as a pirate, in search of treasure. He wakes to a day characterised by routine, tearing off yesterday's to-do list to reveal today's – identical – beneath it. Walk. Fetch ball. Dinner. Sleep. He goes through these motions with a dog's delight in simple necessities and the familiarity of routine. But as human, Colin is bored. Slumped in front of the TV, we see what Colin sees – the weather forecast, leading into a weather picture of the Aurora Borealis. That night the brilliant green light invades Colin's pirate dream and he imagines himself flying like a kite in its light, surrounded by stars. The following morning, the dream evaporates to a day precisely like the one before, with a third identical to-do-list. This time, he prolongs his walk. The ball is left unfetched in the grass, and he follows the familiar path onwards to the beach. This suddenly opened-out horizon with cycling waves suggests Fellini's use of beach as a metaphorical site of self-realisation, an existential discovery of eternity. But existentialism is not really for dogs. Colin instead finds a boat, equipped with a compass; and as it points North – so does he. Choppy waters make him lose that compass overboard, but a fish shows him how to navigate by the dogstar, and so he reaches the Norwegian coast, by way of Utsira. From there he sets off on foot, simply following the light in the sky, and via two false lights (a broken neon sign outside a remote hotel and the outdoor screening of a lurid B-movie). With the help of stargazing human he finally meets up with another dog, Jacky, who invites Colin to share his hottub, his wine, and his own enjoyment of the spectacle of the Northern Lights.

Meanwhile, Master has been making posters asking for help in tracing his lost dog, and gazing out of the window...through which we see Colin's unannounced return, and their joyful embrace. In the final scene, Colin and Master's front room is subtly transformed, and Colin awakes to a long and eclectic list – in full colour -of things to do with his new-found confidence and ambitions.

This short animation associates certain concepts with the idea of North – a quality of light, and therefore the suggestion of clarity, of seeing and seeing things differently; a sense of wild, untamed natural-ness and therefore a sense of authenticity; a sense of remoteness and adventure, and therefore of freedom. In addition it references the basic search-for-self that underlies both the Hero's Journey and the Road Movie. It suggests that the proper direction for such a search – in the context of the North-East of England – can only be North.

## **Light**

Light appears as both a signifier and an actor in the narrative. The green light – the only colour in Colin's otherwise monochrome world – signifies not only the Aurora but the North itself, in the compass's sympathetic green glow, in Colin's eyes as they reflect his desire.

When that compass is lost, Colin uses starlight to find North; thus he begins to leave behind the constructed world of humans and interact with the natural world. When Colin eventually finds the Light he is then able to see; this is signified in the reciprocated green glow in his eyes. He sees his own life in perspective, his relationships...himself.



Colin's Dream of the Northern Lights

Colin travels an imaginary North composed of elements of Iceland, Norway and the Island of Svalbard - Corina's wild imagined outposts of the North" (Corina 2008 p42) The chief signifier of this North is the Aurora Borealis - a light he follows , like the biblical Magi, to wherever it leads him. For Davidson the nature of the light is a key distinction of the North as a place of Beauty; – a mysterious, wild and affecting beauty, characterised by the nature of the light and the emptiness; a place outside of time. He cites William Morris' description of Iceland as holy ground, (Davidson 2005) a romantic notion later echoed by Auden "in my childhood dreams Iceland was holy ground...at 57 it was holy ground still, with the most magical light of anywhere on earth" (Auden, 1967 p11). This quality – among others -has led to Iceland's choice as film location by producers such as Stuart Cornfeld "the quality of light is truly different from anywhere on earth...you look off into the distance, you can see forever." (Cornfeld, 2014) This forever is important, suggesting North as both a vast empty expanse, and as a space of limitless possibility. The clean air, reflected light from sea, ice and volcanic rock; the low angle of the sun, producing a dramatic horizontal light, and the disruption of the diurnal alternation of light and dark give the light a dramatic strangeness. The Aurora Borealis is the most dramatic aspect of this light, strange, elusive and – even in the face of considerable scientific explanation – incomprehensible. It possesses the magical and ephemeral quality of a firework display, and the fragility and elusiveness of a shy wild animal; and to follow it Colin travels by twilight – itself a mysterious and liminal space.

Marr(2014) refers to the suggestion that "the (Northern) lights represent the force of nature, an unspoilt beauty which locates itself in the north. Contemporary boreans embrace the strangeness inferred on the north by the lights, taking them as a symbol of remoteness."

Historically, the Aurora – like many natural and apparently inexplicable phenomena - have been invested with significance as omen, portent of disaster or of battles, but in the hyperbole of contemporary travel writing they have become a spectacle to be experienced and not

merely seen. They are the greatest lightshow on earth...nature's own theatre...with you in the front row" (visitNorway 2014). They are not only magical, but crucially they are natural – authentic. This sense of theatre is underscored in the animation by the sound of an orchestra tuning up, which accompanies the dramatic display of the lights.

The Lights themselves have become commodified as a form of spectacle tourism, particularly following the BBC's *Joanna Lumley in the Land of the Northern Lights* (Takeaway Media, 2008). The lights are now part of the tourist experience expectations of 'bucket list' holidays in Iceland, (where several hotels offer guests a wake-up call should the Aurora appear) Norway and Canada. Text-based or twitter Aurora alerts are available detailing geomagnetic activity likely to result in Aurora sightings over the UK. But such 'artificial aids' would undermine the purpose of Colin's journey – indeed of all our journeys of exploration and discover – by mediating them through a third party. The world of the animation is a simpler one, of no specified date but lacking some of the contemporary references to ubiquitous media, wifi computers, smartphones. Master uses paper posters rather than social media to search for his lost dog. Colin uses a compass and the stars to navigate, rather than GPS. Fitzroy is still Finisterre. Colin's joy and wonder at the Northern Lights is that of a child seeing something wonderful that he has found all by himself.

### **Authenticity**

For Davidson, North represents the site of authenticity – of reaching the essence. For Colin, the journey North is a search for authentic, unmediated experiences. Prior to this journey, his life is unexamined, a series of performative norms, and repeating vicarious experiences. As dog, he should be happy with his world . But as human, Colin is understimulated and unchallenged, as his exotic dreams of adventure and flying reveal. The television fuels Colin's imagination and this mediated world crosses over into his dreams. Ultimately it is

Colin's frustration at the contrast between the intensity of the vicarious experience, the spectacle offered by the mediated world and the dull grey looping of reality that forms the catalyst for his journey. Formally, this reality is represented through monotone, through repeated sequences and the device of Colin's sadly under-populated to-do list. This list in itself can be read as an attempt by Colin to lend significance to his activities, to his life. Muchinsky (2012) describes the act of filling, and subsequently crossing off and crumpling, a to-do list as a "demonstrative display of power and mastery over your environment". Colin's list at this point is an attempt to populate the infinite emptiness...and provide evidence of an authentically-lived life. By the end of his journey, his fuller life needs organisation. His new, longer list comes closer to Eco's view of the list as an attempt to grasp the incomprehensible and face infinity (Eco 2010)



False Lights: the 'Bates Motel'

As Colin follows his journey he encounters false lights; a broken sign, referencing the iconic image of the Bates Motel. This is a false light but seems to be the real motel, reinvented in film. The sign's prohibition of dogs underlines the gap between Colin's two identities as dog and human. Later, he encounters a second false light – from an outdoor film screening. The viewers are surrounded by natural beauty, shooting stars... but choose instead the B-movie, suggesting these are adults who have lost their child-like wonder at the simple joy of beauty. Yet there is a sense that the authentic beauty here is normalised, unremarkable... an accepted

backdrop to everyday behaviour. As he travels further North he moves from the mediated world to the real, uninterpreted world; from TV screen to (apparently) actual film location, to observing the stars through glass and finally face-to-face. His journey is arduous – rowing, climbing steep mountain paths – and the sight of the Aurora Borealis can be seen as a reward, a repayment of his effort. This notion of hard work validating the results, of the value of labour and a mistrust of things too easily obtained, can be seen as a stereotypically British outlook. It is however echoed in Skretting's analysis of a Norwegian identification as hard-working, puritanical... and suspicious of rewards gained by luck and without labour. (Skretting 2005)

### **Hero's Journey**

Vogler (1985) sets out a simplified model of Campbell's Hero's Journey as a meta-narrative of both physical and inner, mental journeys and a cycle of distinct stages. Colin's journey can be related to this, modified for a very short form.

His ordinary world is technologically simple, thus he exists not as a spatially-distributed consciousness, but as a double consciousness, dog and man. His world is not separated from nature but his experience of nature is domestic, familiar...unspectacular. Spectacle is mediated through TV. The Call to Adventure comes, as in the genre of romantic comedy, from the first sight of a special beauty; the Northern Lights. In the tradition of Hero's Journey, the hero must at first be reluctant or afraid. We see Colin dream of the Northern Lights and wake to his to-do list, as though he would dismiss this as merely another fantasy. But Colin, as human, seeks adventure and something larger than his small world – and as a dog he must chase the shiny new toy. It is important that at this point the Master has not yet been seen – except for a brief glimpse of hand. Master has yet to be established as an actor –

and so Colin is not straying – not being a Bad Dog. Rather his journey begins apparently spontaneously, and without focus or direction, setting out on his habitual walk and simply continuing into the unknown. On the beach – a wide panorama suggesting limitless potential – he finds an unguarded rowing boat which facilitates the adventure. This overcomes his first obstacle.

On the course of his journey Colin meets a Mentor, and a human helper; a star-gazer, representing a connection, an engagement with the natural world. He encounters several obstacles including false leads – following the conventional Rule of 3 in comic animation. But there are no ordeals or specific dangers for Colin, only the frustration and disappointment of false lights, the long walk and his own dogged determination.



Setting out – the long walk

At the end of his journey Colin succeeds in seizing the prize – witnessing the Northern Lights. But like Vogler's hero he finds far more – a friendship. Engaged in the very human – very Northern - activity of drinking wine in a hottub and watching the lights, is a dog; one who reflects and so validates Colin's choices and aspirations. The strangeness of the North has become familiar, comfortable through realising the journey's end. Jacky here represents Colin's finding of himself, of another dog who shares his world-view; a validation of Colin's



hope that he can run away to sea, embark on an epic journey North without the Master...and still be a Good Dog.

The 'elixir' with which Colin returns home is his own confidence and sense of self. His return alters his view of home and shifts the balance in his relationship with Master.

Although he encounters other creatures – a fish, a man, and eventually another dog – the solitude is an important element of his adventure. His search for the Northern Lights is also a search for himself. This solitude- emptiness, aloneness with nature - is also an important element of the idea of North. Eriksen (1996) describes the Norwegian relationship with the outdoors, and the importance of the hytte or wilderness hut present in huge numbers in both Norway and Iceland as a retreat and a place to connect with nature. In particular, he describes the importance of the act of hiking as a means to “leave civilisation and all its comforts and depravity behind, to get in touch with your inner self”. Hiking here is associated with quiet and solitude, the purpose of which, Eriksen suggests, is contemplation and spiritual peace.

Like the Hero's Journey, the Road Movie could also be seen as “the classic American way of finding out who you were and what you were about” (Cohan & Hark, 1997 p 11)

## **The Road**

North (2009) describes the Road Movie as “leaving for the future without a map...the road is the passage to which a new beginning is possible, free from the bonds of the past”. He suggests the Road Movie as an essentially American genre; necessarily encompassing hardship and danger, and which is “ill-suited to the British Landscape”, since there are no great – no really long or iconic - roads. The Road itself in American culture is imbued with

mythic status, from Route 66 to the Pan-American Highway, preserved in cultural artefacts of film, novel and popular song.

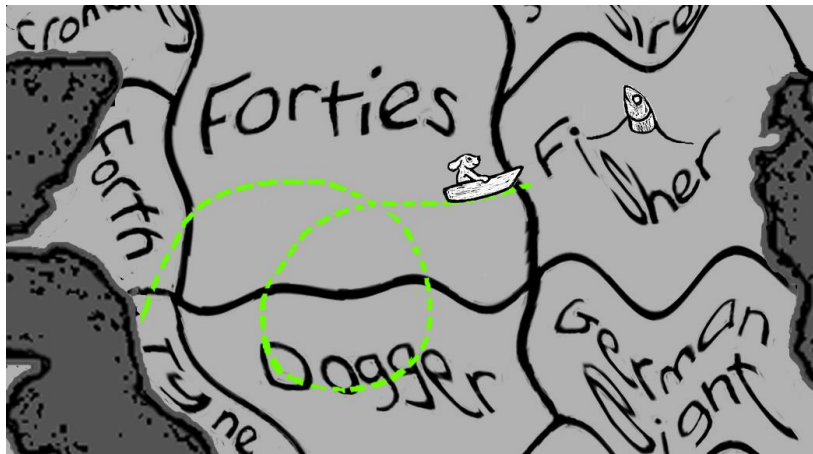
Characters in Road Movies, whether Billy and Wyatt or Thelma and Louise, often begin by being trapped in pointless or stifling, limited lives, like Colin's. Their road journey offers hostile reception, potential dangers, and the need for a stubborn resilience. Although the characters mature, and the relationship between them strengthens and shifts, this American model is often characterised by negativity – false hopes, and a road which leads nowhere – or to death.

By contrast, Martin-Jones(2010) identifies a model of the road movie as an exploration and critique of contemporary society and culture, and of national identity. He describes this as a process of not going home, but finding home – a process begun by the journey but which does not stop on arrival at the destination. The British – or Scottish - Road Movie is here seen as more optimistic and up-beat; a cultural, metaphorical journey, encompassing a shift in class or escape through self-improvement. While Road Movies contain an interweaving of physical and spiritual, inner journeys, Stringer suggests that “the open highway does not offer escapes and a mystical ‘finding of the self’ so much as the chance to redefine and recontextualise...existing relationships”(Stringer 1997, p166)

*North* might be seen as a road movie in this context, although there is no road – rather that most British of highways, the shipping lanes, as enshrined in British culture for more than 9 decades via the iconic radio Shipping Forecast. “It’s always there, always has been, always will be, lodged inexplicably in our subconscious” (Connolly 2004 p2). Radio 4 controller Mark Damazer summed it up as “it’s eccentric, it’s unique, it’s British” (Young 2007)

The first leg of Colin's journey appears as a dotted line across a map – a familiar movie stereotype marvellously deconstructed in Peter Lord's *The Pirates! In an Adventure with*

*Scientists!* ( in which the pirates throw a series of large red discs off the stern to create the dotted line on the sea's surface).



Colin travelling the Shipping Forecast areas

This map is of the shipping forecast areas, which heave and roll as though in a storm. This agitated motion is in tension with the formal poetics of the forecast itself, a litany of exotic but familiar names, recited in calm and measured tones like a bedtime story for adults. It is a mediation, a taming of the terrifying vastness and power of the sea and its strategic importance in war or in trade to this small island. Soanes, one of the Shipping Forecast readers, described it as a “nightly litany of the sea...(which) reinforces a sense of being islanders with a proud seafaring past”. (Hudson 2012). The Shipping Forecast, Brannigan says, “belongs to the imperial discourse of sea power, and represents another phase in the attempt to master oceanic space” (Brannigan 2014 p3). Similarly there is a tension between the familiarity of the names, their prayer-like intonation, with the suggestion of remoteness, strangeness and bleakness of the actual places named. But of course a British Road Movie, an epic adventure, should take place at sea. For Colin, the sea is the site of adventure, of dreams, even before the catalyst of the Aurora Borealis steers him North. Starting from Tyneside, “once the engine room of the British at Sea” (Connelly 2004 p76), he must travel not South into the narrow confines of the Channel, but North into the open sea and the romantic tradition of explorers such as Franklin and Hudson.

In traversing the actual shipping forecast areas, Colin moves out of that comfort zone into real danger; from the name of the thing, to the thing itself. But this danger is diagrammatic – in the slapstick animation tradition of Wile E Coyote or Tom and Jerry, we are encouraged to feel that no *permanent* harm threatens.

### **North is the new West**

In Hollywood film tradition, West is the direction of adventure – of opportunity – a movement inland, seeking land, space, freedom... and subsequently Gold. This was the west of Cole Porter's *Don't Fence me in* - a romanticisation of freedom through hard work and self-determination. Olwig (2008) describes how a common American identity is established in relation to the definition of the Wild West as a wilderness, populated by wild beasts and indigenous 'wild' people. This wilderness must be preserved through cultural artefacts and mythologies as well as through the creation of National Parks in order to protect this identity. Similarly he identifies an equivalence in Sweden's Wild North – a forested wilderness populated by nomads and preserved via National Parks. In either case, the wilderness lies directly counter to the direction of settlement, invasion...civilisation.

The publisher's precis for Davidson's *The Idea of North* includes the suggestion that North is "the direction taken throughout history by the adventurous, the curious, the solitary and the foolhardy" (Reaktion, 2014); (but, interestingly, only in the US version). Although England has been invaded and settled from – arguably – all four compass points, in the English psyche the wilderness is most often constructed as the North; the Other to the overcrowded and government-centred South-East. In the media construct of the North-South divide, the North is strange, incomprehensible and inhospitable in contrast to the imagined rural idyll of thatched cottages, and village greens forming the country's spiritual underpinning (Taylor 2001). Maconie(2008, p2) comically describes the Southern view of Northern England as

“desolation, arctic temperatures, mushy peas ...a cultural wasteland populated by aggressive trolls”. Further North then equates with more wild : Møller’s(2005) description of the world view of Iceland as untamed nature, rural innocence, naivete and magic. Further North still, the Pole itself represents, in the Twentieth century, one of the last possibilities of discovery, adventure and proving oneself through hardship. Having no landmass beneath it, the North Pole is shifting, less tangible than its Southern counterpart, almost unmappable. The disputes surrounding its alleged discovery and first human contact by Peary, Cook and Byrd, and the lateness of its final conquering underline this sense of strangeness, of elusiveness.

This wilderness offers a challenge; Davidson(2009) suggests that North is a metaphor for the edge of the known world – every North has another relative North and so it is an individualised concept. Colin, beginning his journey at the Tyne, must look beyond the North – South divide and the apparent familiarity of neighbouring Scotland ... across the sea.



The dog star, reflected in the dog’s eye

The compass’ fixed reference is direction North. All the arrows – the dogstar, the hotel’s weathervane and the compass itself, glowing with a magical green ‘Go sign’ – keep pointing further North. Ultimately there is a final, authentic North. Unlike the journey West, which

can take an adventurer around the globe and home again, the journey North is necessarily linear, and eventually reaches a finite point – the Pole, from where every road leads South.

### **Colin and Master**

In the beginning, Colin and Master have a secure relationship. Colin is Dog to the human's Master, but also child – perhaps 'everychild' - to his adult. Significantly, Master has no name...rather an un-animable smell; this is Colin's story. Colin does not speak, and so his story has no dialogue – a picture-story in which any verbal explanation is handled visually, as when the fish blows bubbles containing an image of the dog constellation. He sets off, unprepared, with no luggage, map or plan - like a small child 'running away to the circus'. On his return, Colin has become an adult, surrounded by books, maps, and evidence of future planning.

In spite of his long-suffering morning sighs, Colin appears contented, smiling and enjoying his food. His frustration is not with Master but with the mismatch between the media world and his own limited life. The Master's matching slumped position in front of the TV is not seen but can be inferred; a companionable lethargy. Only when Colin goes missing do we begin to see Master's viewpoint, and to sense the affection between the two characters and the air of melancholy in the static shots of the empty lane, Colin's name on the ball. Like master and dog Wallace and Gromit, they are "almost like an elderly husband and wife" (Park, 2005), with a sense of the habitual and stale in their relationship. Like Gromit, Colin is "a very intelligent dog...the dog is much smarter than the guy" . (ibid) which perhaps explains his frustrations... yet Colin's limitations appear self-imposed and internal; he is a self-contained dog . Master is much less adventurous; we see him looking out of the window at the world while Colin is exploring it, leaving the house again apparently only when Colin

returns. Yet there is no sense that Master is unkind or imprisoning his dog; rather that Colin stays out of affection. When Colin returns we see him and Master running towards each other and hugging – a simple gesture not only of affection but of each mirroring the other’s posture, as though the two were now equal.



Master Missing Colin

In the final sequence we see Master’s living room becoming a shared space. The gap between Master’s sofa and Colin’s bed is bridged by shared resources – a travel book, a star atlas, a 5 year diary suggesting a commitment to a larger future. Where earlier we saw Colin eating from a dogbowl, we now see matching mugs, indicating a shift in the balance between Colin’s dog and human natures. He now sees in full colour, something a dog cannot do. We see Colin’s new, larger to-do list which includes both physical activity (sailing, astronomy classes) and social (a reminder to call Jacky), and a note of a TV documentary on North Utsire... referring back to his journey through the shipping forecast areas but also demonstrating a more critical, less passive approach to media consumption. Finally, he lists the joint activity of Dog-Master swim and we see that Colin has now become the leader in the partnership. His journey of self discovery has made him the mentor, enabling him to pull Master out of his rut and broaden his horizons.

The hero, Colin, sets out on a journey of adventure and exploration, prompted by a visual, a media stimulus. He begins single-mindedly but without a specific plan as befits a dog, following the Northern Lights which act as a beacon, a guide towards some ill-defined excitement, beauty...joy. He travels North toward adventure, space, freedom and a search for an authentic, unmediated experience. As he moves further North he moves further from the comforting mediation of 'civilisation' but rather than any real danger he meets a very personal test of endurance and determination... and the kindness of strangers. Finally he meets Jacky, another human/dog and a reflection of his own self. His journey can be seen as a form of 'walkabout' – a solitary connection with the self, with the spiritual, and with one's own histories. We can imagine the stories – about the North, about their shared Dog and as-if-human natures - that Jacky told Colin, or that they dreamed together in the hottub.



Colin and Jacky watching the lights

The Northern Lights represent the idea of the North – elusive, mysterious, distant and strangely compelling. The Light is pure and beautiful; like a sunset, but so much more rarely seen. The North in turn stands in for 'the end' – the limit of what is possible, of *where* is possible. It is a metaphor for human, or canine, endeavour and the belief that we are transformed by the process of that endeavour itself. Ultimately, as any journey to the extreme North must, this ends in a return - to Master, to Home, to Self; and each of these three is



subtly redefined by the journey. The long walk becomes a dance - with the dancing lights, the dancing waves, and finally Colin and Master, dancing for the joy of life. Finally, both Colin and Master can be seen to be Good Boys; and we can believe that they will, in future, be

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