



NORLIT 2011

Conference on literature and politics

ROSKILDE, AUGUST 4.-6. 2011

ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

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“Will Self’s *Walking to Hollywood* (2010) and Satire”

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[Note: THIS IS AN UNFINISHED VERSION OF THE PAPER. PLEASE, DO NOT QUOTE]

Introduction

British author Will Self (1961-) is a prolific writer of fiction and non-fiction *and* a media personality. Since his debut in 1991 with the collection of short stories entitled *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*, he has published 15 novels, novellas and collections of short stories. Apart from his substantial contribution to British fiction during the last two decades, Will self has also worked as a journalist and columnist. He has published abundantly in newspapers and magazines on a wide variety of subjects, for instance, writers and other public figures, restaurants, politics, walking, literature, and film. His non-fiction has been collected in six books. Will Self has appeared regularly on British television at least since the mid 1990s on shows such as *Have I Got News For You*. Lastly, a biographical sketch of Will Self is not complete without a reference to the 1997 scandal when he was caught on John Major’s campaign jet snorting smack.

His literary work has conformed to Valentine Cunningham’s assessment of modern British fiction, “Being satirical has come extremely natural to every generation of twentieth-century British fictionists” (2007: np). Critics have generally agreed on Self’s affinity with satire. Wright sums him up as a “take-no-prisoners satirist.” (Wright 2000:np) Speaking of debut collection of stories, Tew comments that “each story [...] satirizes contemporary belief systems” (Tew 2008: 118). His use of satire has also divided critics. For instance, Philip Armstrong’s reading of *Great Apes*, a novel which inverts the relationship between human and ape making the latter the evolutionary successful species, stresses its affinity with the satirical tradition exemplified by, for instance, Jonathan Swift. But in contrast to Swift, Self not only humbles human self-importance, his “satire actually reinstates a conventional hierarchy between human and animal,” (Armstrong 2008: 220) lampooning attempts at regarding animals as imbued with human aspects. Ian Gregson also notes the line back to eighteenth century satire (150), but opts for a more positive interpretation of the book: “throughout *Great Apes* there is an unsettling oscillation between chimp and human perspectives that continually subverts any secure sense of where the human stops and the chimp begins.” (2006: 149). Critics are similarly divided over his 2005 novel *The Book of Dave* which one commentator describes as an “intriguing satire consider[ing] many of humanity’s worst impulses”

(Tew 2008: 121) – a view echoed by Jeremy Scott who argues that it constitutes “an extreme and biting satirical attack on almost every facet of contemporary English life (Scott 2009: 173-174) while another reading concludes that “the novel, as we would expect from satire, has no real position other than to perpetuate its own middle-class ideology [...]” (Driscoll 2009: 93)

In the following, I discuss how Will Self’s most recent book *Walking to Hollywood* (2010) takes on some of the problems that arise if you’re a writer who comments satirically on contemporary affairs and popular culture and simultaneously take part in and help constitute that culture. Before I turn to a reading of the novel, however, I begin by taking a look at the promotion video for the book.

The Promotion Video

Promotion videos are widely used by publishers and writers for the purposes of introducing new printed work on the Internet. Thus, the publishing company Bloomsbury offered a video on its website as part of the launching of Self’s most recent book. The video is still available there, but can now be accessed on YouTube. In the video lasting no more than a couple of minutes Self introduces his book in a rather curious manner that both associates it with and dissociates it from the genre of satire:

Walking to Hollywood, as its title suggests, is a novel about Hollywood. And I’d like to tell you that it’s just the latest in a long line of great satires on the American movie industry. Think of *What Makes Sammy Run*, or *The Last Tycoon*, or even Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locusts*. But none of that would be strictly accurate. All I think I can really do to introduce the book to you is to *pitch* it to you the way a player might *pitch* a movie to a producer in Hollywood. This is really a cross between a comic farce and an intense misery memoir. Think of *Angela’s Ashes* rewritten by Groucho Marx, or Woody Allen taking time out from his busy schedule to rescript a Dave Pelzer book. That’s *Walking to Hollywood*. It’ll make you feel profoundly alienated and yet tittering at the same time. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT92eyGxatk>)

In the first sentence, Self gives an uncomplicated and totalising account of his new book – it’s a novel about Hollywood. The title signals the content of the book in a straightforward manner. Moreover, the generic marker is unproblematic – a novel. This sentence stands in contrast to the rest of his introductory discourse which falls into two parts that destabilise the simple account of the opening sentence. First follows a kind of negative definition where he relates his novel wishfully to the tradition of great satire, spelling out the titles of specific filmic and novelistic texts within this canon. Thus, Budd Schulberg’s novel *What Makes Sammy Run* (1941), Fitzgerald’s unfinished

novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941) adapted by Elia Kazan (1976), and Nathanael West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939) adapted by John Schlesinger in 1975. The disjunction *but* underlines the incorrectness of this act of wishful thinking. Contextualising his novel in this manner is not exactly correct. On the other hand, this must mean that it is not exactly incorrect either. We're meant to read his new novel against the tradition of satire. Secondly, failing to identify his novel with the great satires of the American movie industry (but nevertheless succeeding in relating it to that tradition at the same time), Self changes his approach and tries a positive definition by pitching his book instead. His pitch is preceded by a careful introduction of this specific mode of communication – a mode of communication used by writers to convince Hollywood executives to give their scripts the green light. The meta-discourse concerning pitching suggests a high degree of self-awareness and contains an intertextual reference to Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) – a satire on many aspects of the Hollywood film industry – not least pitching. His pitch opens with a generic definition suggesting we are dealing with a mix of extremes. On the one hand, we have comedy and even farce. On the other, we have a forceful personal account of unhappiness and grief. We are dealing, then, with a combination of features such as laughter and sorrow, existential lightness and intensity, issues both conventional and public and individual and private. The generic definition is followed by an invitation to imagine the nature of the book by invoking the combination of, on the one hand, two great comic film makers and, on the other, the autobiographical work by Frank McCourt (*Angela's Ashes* 1996) and Dave Pelzer¹ detailing the terrible effects of poverty, alcoholism, and abuse on children. The combination is almost beyond one's imagination in linking farce and child abuse. Imagining this combination produces exactly the experience Self's pitch outlines in the concluding sentence which promises that readers will experience intense estrangement and nervous amusement simultaneously.

Walking to Hollywood: Satire as tittering alienation.

I want to begin my reading of Self's latest book by giving what I consider a fairly clear-cut example of satire. Then, I move on to suggest the several ways in which the straightforward lampooning of,

¹ Dave Pelzer was a victim of child abuse and “nearly died several times by the hands of his mentally disturbed alcoholic mother.” Against those odds he became “a living testament of a self-made man, who as an optimist strongly exudes resilience, service to mankind, personal responsibility and faith in humanity.” (<http://www.davepelzer.com/about.html>)

in this case, violence in film is problematised by the context in which it appears. Consider the following extract from Self's novel. During the conclusion of shooting for *Quantum of Solace* at Pinewood Studios, the narrator-protagonist is suddenly physically attacked and hit repeatedly

[...] in the face with blows of a chronometric precision: 'Paff! Paff! Paff! Paff! Paff! Paff! Paff!' So hard that these bones are pulverized in this order: 1. glabella 2. nasal bone 3. supraorbital margin 4. superior orbital fissure 5. lacrimal bone 6. zygomatic bone 7. inferior orbital fissure.

I have to act fast, and jerk my knee up into his crotch so hard his testes are mashed into his pelvic bone, which in turn ruptures his bladder. The assassinalike barely flinches, merely shifts the locus of his blows lower, so that 'Paff! Paff! Paff!' The maxilla, mandible and mental protuberance are all shattered. My face is a blood-filled sponge of traumatized tissue and bone fragments, but scrabbling among the Evian bottles my hand discovers a hammer left there by a careless chippie; I swing this again and again at my attacker's spine, popping his atlas, his axis and his cervical vertebrae (1-7 inclusive) like ...popcorn.

Instant paralysis should rightfully ensue, [...] (162-63)

Indeed, instant paralysis should be the rightful outcome of the trauma sustained to the bodies in the description above. The fact that the combatants are capable of continuing as if nothing really serious has happened to them and the fact that it takes place at a famous studio during the shooting of a Bond movie identifies the convention under attack here: the filmic representation of violence perpetrated by and against the human body. More specifically, the propensity of the visual media for the fantastic representation of ultra violent acts is satirised by detailing the effects of that violence on the human body. Minutely listing the consequences of the attack on the human anatomy brings out the frailty of the human body – all the different things that may be fractured in an attack as the norm against which filmic representations of violence can be judged and ridiculed. Moreover, the almost absence of any relationship between the massive somatic trauma sustained and the psychological or mental responses (for instance, "I have to act fast," and "the assassinalike barely flinches") makes the representation of violence in film look embarrassingly foolish.

The satire of violence in the movie industry, however, is problematised by the circumstances from which it springs and the broader context in which it is situated. First of all, in the novel all characters are played by famous actors. Thus, the narrator-character, i.e. Will Self's persona, is played by alternately by either Pete Postlethwaite or David Thewlis. Secondly, the narrator-character believes that film is dead and is on a quest to Hollywood uncover who killed it and why. Thirdly, before embarking on his quest the narrator-character consults with his psychiatrists, Dr Shiva Mukti and Dr Busner, characters familiar from other novels and short stories by Will Self. Fourthly, the narrator-protagonist is at Pinewood Studios accompanied by a dog – a

Dobermann he rescues from the *The Wolfman* set at the Studios and which he identifies as Scooby “[...] a cartoonish hound who stood on hind legs puckering his muzzle to bow-wow-wow the near discernible words’ Ruffankyournufferymuch” (158) familiar from television and cinema since the late 1960s. To the other characters Scooby, dressed in camos, is introduced as Rex – possibly a reference to Rxxxx the Irish terrier starring in Tod Holland’s *Firehouse Dog* (2007). Fifthly, the narrator-protagonist, at this moment played by David Thewlis dressed like James Bond, is at Pinewood Studios to interview Daniel Craig. During the interview, Craig notices the interviewer’s Bond-like outfit and becomes increasingly suspicious and hostile and asks why the interviewer is dressed like him [Bond that is]. To this the interviewer [Thewlis] replies why he [Daniel Craig] is “dressed like Daniel Craig when he’s meant to be dressed like James Bond” (162), discovering, in fact, that he is facing not Craig, but his stunt double. At this point, the acts of violence outlined above erupt.

The narrator-character / Will Self’s persona	Played by David Thewlis	Dressed like James Bond
Daniel Craig	Played by Daniel Craig’s stunt double	Dressed like Daniel Craig
Doberman dog	Played by Scooby	Dressed in camos (like Rxxxx?)

Fig. 1

Ontological confusion does not quite cover the effect produced by the blending of the levels outlined in Figure 1. In fact, the “levels” are not even distinct but identical with one another sometimes. For instance, during the interview where Craig feels accused for the death of cinema, he reminds the interviewer, i.e. Thewlis, that he should remember that Thewlis was the one who did *Dinotopia*. Here a note is inserted in Self’s text identifying *Dinotopia* as a “TV miniseries in which David Thewlis played the part of Cyrus Crabb” (162, note). Further, the note goes on to justify the miniseries as “far more imaginative than anything conceived of by Ian Fleming” and that “I [not Thewlis] had no reason to feel any shame for having portrayed Crabb.” Here Thewlis is represented in the third and first person, suggesting a seamless merger of narrator-protagonist and Thewlis. To the above mix of levels we have to add another level of intertextuality. On three occasions during

the events taking place in the Pinewood Studios references to Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* are inserted in italics: "*Of the life of man the duration is but a point, its substance streaming away*" (155), "*the things of the body are as a river, and the things of the soul as a dream and a vapour*" (156), "*all things of the body are as a river?*" (158), suggesting the intensely personal rather than the public and satirical.

The straightforward satire of action movie violence, then, is embedded in or surrounded by a number of "levels" that make problematic the act of speaking satirically. We are alienated from satire as an uncomplicated convention shared by writer and reader and we're left tittering rather than laughing out loud at the object of satire.

Towards a Conclusion

The question of whether or not satire is still possible has been raised before, for instance, by Ian Sinclair in an interview with J. G. Ballard who replied, "Why not? I think so. I think anyone in the public eye is —horrible phrase — fair game" (quoted in Cunningham). The fact that satire is far from an unproblematic act for Will Self in *Walking to Hollywood* and its promotion video, the fact that the days of the great satires are perhaps over and writers are reduced to the level of Hollywood's lowest possible denominator: the pitch, and the fact that satire produces an alienated titter rather than a healthy laugh in its audience is, perhaps, explained with reference to Self's biography as writer *and* celebrity. Perhaps more general changes in our culture are reducing writers to the status of sports stars, politicians, and criminals. Today writers like anyone else in the public eye have become the "fair game" Ballard mentioned.