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Transport, Technology and Ideology in the Work of Will Self

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Department of English Studies

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List of Abbreviations

D - Dorian

DM - Dr. Mukti and Other Tales of Woe

FF - Feeding Frenzy

GA - Great Apes

GA&OS - Grey Area and Other Stories

HtDL - How the Dead Live

'iA' - 'iAnna'

JM - Junk Mail

L - Liver

MloF - My Idea of Fun

PG - PsychoGeography

PT - Psycho Too

QTol - The Quantity Theory of Insanity

S - Shark

TBoD - The Book of Dave

TB - The Butt

TTTFTTB - Tough, Tough Toys For Tough, Tough Boys

U - Umbrella

WtH - Walking to Hollywood

Statement of Copyright

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

Introduction

'Pop ate itself years ago - and for the last half-decade we've merely been listening to it burp.' (FF, p.viii) This is Will Self's typically bodily and delightfully crude summary of the apparently sorry state of British popular culture, suggesting that such a concept no longer has any actual solid substance or reality. Self made this remark back in 2001, and in addition to the suggestion that this has now been an extremely long burp, its timing is curious. This is because, to all appearances, culture in late 1990s Britain was booming. The cultural tags synonymous with the era - namely Cool Britannia, Girl Power, Britpop - attest to this exciting period of creativity; a period in which, of course, Self himself was a prominent, even notorious figure. This mood was matched by a sense of political optimism, which culminated in the seemingly refreshing rise to power of a new, young Prime Minister.

Herein lies the beginning of the problem for Self, however. Tony Blair's vacuity ensured he became a figurehead for the ideological qualities of that entire epoch towards the turn of the millennium and beyond. Interpretations of ideology and collective delusions and manipulations feature heavily over the course of the following thesis, and Self's comment on how 'Pop ate itself' provides a clue as to how they work in relation to his own thinking. Taking its origins from Marxism, an ideology works here as a belief system that instils both individuals and collective societies with a conviction in their own agency, even as they actually and unknowingly become bound up in various oppressive systems, organisations and regimes. In Marxist terms, capitalism played the most significant role in this form of insidious cultural entrapment, and although it would be wide of the mark to define Self as an actively dogmatic Marxist thinker he remains a staunch critic of the tools and effects of capitalism. In turn, this criticism plays a significant role in evidencing the libertarian, socialist and green leanings that form Self's beliefs and writing.

This helps explain the influence of the Marxist thinker Guy Debord (1931-1994) on Self's work. A central part of Debord's theories was the belief that commodities and the mass media were the ultimate ideologies, and he uses what he feels is the logical end point of this argument and the kind of society this leads to as the first thesis - and opening statement of intent - of his seminal 1968 work, *The Society of the Spectacle*: 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that was once directly lived has become mere representation.'¹ This idea of direct experience being reduced to 'mere representation' is essentially what Self channels when he surmises that our self-consuming popular culture has led to us instead only experiencing its gaseous reverberations, even more so because the spectacle itself has an all-consuming quality to it.

Debord's influence on Self becomes increasingly manifest in light of another of his theories - psychogeography - and its accompanying practice - the *dérive*. Psychogeography is the idea that there is an inherent and causal link between physical locations and psychological states, and the *dérive* is the practice of exploring - both literally and figuratively - these varying states by undertaking extensive walks across different locations. The rationale behind this was an attempted form of escapism from the entrapping routines of work, production and capitalism that characterise spectacular society. Self, meanwhile, is a writer with a similar, long-held fixation with the effects that a given location has upon its inhabitants and travellers, to the extent he named his own collections of travel journalism after Debord's theories. The two works - *Psychogeography* (2007) and *Psycho Too* (2009) - illuminate the ways that Self experiences places himself, and shed some light on his own motives for undertaking what, on many occasions, read as being extremely arduous journeys. Perhaps the most succinct

¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone, 1995), p.12

explanation of his motives, particularly in Debordian terms, comes in a walk across the South Downs, during which Self explains that 'I've taken to long-distance walking as a means of dissolving the mechanised matrix which compresses the space-time continuum, and decouples human from physical geography.' (PG, p.69)

This all sounds wonderfully idealistic, but the question that practices such as the *dérive* invariably raises is simply, given the all-consuming nature of the spectacle, whether achieving any meaningful form of escape is actually possible, and even if it is possible, what meaning and form such an escape would entail. These questions dog both Self's travel writing and his writing at large, not least because a prominent characteristic of his work is the awareness of how difficult transcending this kind of society, and recoupling human and physical geography, genuinely is. The effect that this awareness and his engagement with contemporary ideologies have within his work is one of ironic entrapment, and his writings on place and transport are themselves very much entwined within this entrapment. One way in which they play out, for instance, is through the ways that people - including Self himself - experience the differing geographies of a city. He uses his own city, London, and its iconic, artful Underground map as an example of how this works:

Some of us even live more in the diagram of the tube than we do in the physical reality of London... you disappear down a hole in the Mile End Road and then pop out of another one in Chalk Farm. Some people's whole lives must be like that, with no coherent sense of the city's geography; they must find it impossible to circumvent old lovers, evade defunct friendships. (FF, p.39)

Self suggests that while the tube map purports to offer an easier way of being connected to the entirety of London, it does so at the cost of essentially removing a dimension from its regular users' lives, as they become trapped in a two-dimensional landscape haunted by and indistinguishable from memories of failed personal relationships (the short story 'The End of the Relationship' provides an example of this, when the point on the diagram known as Camden Town becomes inexorably and depressingly synonymous with the

promiscuities of the narrator's cheating boyfriend). As this cycle of entrapment continues, those caught up within it become increasingly disconnected from the reality of the city and its physical geography.

Self's analysis of the potential psychological pitfalls of the Underground map is a comparatively archaic example of the kind of entrapment that defines so much of his writing. A detailed example of what this entrapment constitutes comes in miniature in his two very different pieces of Dubai journalism. The first of these charts Self's epic 2008 walk from Shepperton in Middlesex to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. The weariness that permeates Self's piece of extended journalism is a stark contrast to the bemusement of a shorter, later article in which Self discusses 'The night I was trapped in Dubai Airport'. While stuck in the airport overnight, Self realises that the slogan for the shopping centre at the Burj Khalifa proclaims it to be 'The Centre of Now'². This capitalised Now equates the present to an aggressive, entrapping form of consumerism that, far from being confined to one shopping centre, is spread across Dubai's entire landscape. Self's demoralising admission that his 2008 walk was a failure tells us that escaping the all-consuming Now is extremely difficult to do, and this Now appears in other guises within Self's writing to denote other transformative technologies and transports that are irrevocably changing how we experience the world.

Self's walk from Shepperton to Dubai is an homage to the then-terminally-ill J. G. Ballard. As Self explains, in a manner that maintains a focus on the way that the landscape of Dubai plays on traditional notions of past, present and future, 'Dubai represented a very Ballardian place... It's so like the places he describes in collections like *Terminal Beach*, that idea of the dated quality of futurity.'³ This dated futurity

² Will Self, 'The night I was trapped in Dubai Airport', *New Statesman*, 19.2.2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2015/02/will-self-night-i-was-trapped-dubai-airport>

³ Will Self, 'An Interview with Will Self by Christine Fears', *The Literateur*, 6.2.2010 <http://literateur.com/an-interview-with-will-self/>

reinforces an implicit sense of entrapment for Self (which is horrifically explicit for the many people from the third-world enslaved there) that permeates Dubai's landscape. As Lily Bloom, the protagonist from *How the Dead Live* (2000) caustically notes - 'Oh, the future - it's always so fucking dated. For you, for me, for all of us. If only there were some way out of it.' (HtDL, p.313)

In the opinion of fellow writer and psychogeographer Iain Sinclair, Self is one of an inferior generation of post-Ballard writers, advocating that there 'is a line now from Ballard through Martin Amis and Will Self and Alex Garland - young, hip writers who have taken their tricks from Ballard. And yet I don't think any of them had what he had to start with.'⁴ Self openly admits his admiration for Ballard's uniquely influential literary talents, stating that 'There were those writers whose work spoke to me... and then there a very select few who had carved out the conceptual space within which I sought to stake my own claim. Of these, Ballard was the pre-eminent.' (PT, p.13) Ballard's influence is undoubted, yet Self consciously carves out his own 'conceptual space' even when the two writers deal with notably similar themes.

One belief Ballard and Self share is the uniquely transformative power of forms of transport over twentieth and twenty-first century ways of life. Appropriately for a writer who came to prominence in the era of globalisation, Self believes that mass air travel has been - in transportation terms - the most 'substantial' technological development of the past one hundred years. For a London writer, this innovation has had a noticeable effect on his home city, namely that 'transatlantic air travel and the internet, de-centre the importance of the city rather than re-centering it.'⁵ Self's argument here insinuates that air travel has had an unavoidably dislocating effect upon an entire city, a city which for so long maintained faith in its own powerful position at the heart of the world and an

⁴ Iain Sinclair, 'When in doubt, quote Ballard.' *Ballardian*, 29.8.2006, <http://www.ballardian.com/iain-sinclair-when-in-doubt-quote-ballard>

⁵ Self, *Literateur*.

empire. This de-centring is reflected in the mood of late twentieth-century literature according to Patricia Waugh, who argues that the city ‘began to seem less the centre of a nation than an intersection point for a network of world markets and multinational corporations.’⁶ She cites drama from Caryl Churchill and a novel by Martin Amis as examples of how this urban ideology of London as a centre was exposed - and the titles of those two works, *Serious Money* (1987) and *Money* (1984), give away the cause of this dislocation that underpins the actual technologies involved.

Self then homes in further on the attitudes that flying and mass tourism have fostered within the contemporary air traveller. Recently, he has contextualised his problems with these attitudes through his discussion of the fallout of the terrorist attack on a Russian plane over Egypt in October 2015. However, his focus is on the misplaced entitlement of the tourists delayed back in Sharm-el-Sheikh:

is a two-week package tour to some benighted Middle Eastern country really a “celebration of life”? I remember when the British tourists were all stuck in Sharm el-Sheikh last year how flabbergasted - not to say outraged - some of them were. “How could such a thing have happened to us?” they wailed, as if it were some sort of human right to be allowed to sip sugar water and paddle in the Red Sea at the tip of a peninsula that’s been the site of a savage insurgency for well over a decade. Left to me, if I’d been given the job of sorting self-aware sheep from gormless goats, I’d have made sure anyone who complained never got home.⁷

The narrative voice of Self’s 2007 novel *The Butt* refers to ‘that most pitiful of things, a left-behind tourist.’ (*TB*, p.54) For Self, this collective outrage that dominated the aftermath of the attack in the British media proved particularly galling because of the way it came to overshadow both the atrocity itself and the current humanitarian crisis - with the implication that the tourists who had to wait a few days longer to get back to Britain had suddenly been plunged into as desperate a situation as the millions of

⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960 to 1990* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), p.19 [Will be referenced henceforth as *HotS* in running text]

⁷ Will Self, ‘Lock up your tourists: a holiday in some benighted Middle Eastern country isn’t “A celebration of life.”’, *New Statesman*, 8.2.2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/02/lock-your-tourists-holiday-some-benighted-middle-eastern-country-isn-t>

refugees fleeing Syria and the Middle East, and leads Self to hypothesise about a system in which these ‘gormless goats’ could be traded for ‘the doctors, dentists and accountants who are now shivering to death in the waters off Lesbos.’⁸

This gormlessness with which so many people act in the wake of such events is testament to the ideological power of mass commercial air travel. Self acknowledges this when he contrasts the technical wonders of flying to all of the commerciality that goes with it in the present day:

I mean, flying is the thing that really strikes me as this strange sublime. The most radical experience, physical experience, that any of us will have, apart from surgery, childbirth and death, in our lives. And yet it gets drowned by a kind of incredible panoply of boredom and things to damp it down and make it, you know, ‘nine pound ninety-nine one way to the canary islands with Easyjet’. The whole iconography, the semiotics of it is designed to lull you into accepting it as an integral part of [*shrugs*] you know.⁹

The ‘incredible panoply of boredom’ has even expanded, in a post-9/11 and 7/7 world, to broadly dampen down the kind of events that previously and dramatically captured this ‘strange sublime’. Self summons the theories of Debord as a means of explaining the rationale of terrorists attacking planes and other transport systems, noting that ‘Bin Laden spoke of 9/11 as a ‘spectacular’, a horrid echo of Debord... his terrorist affiliates... weren’t only attacking the Twin Towers as the supreme interfusion of capitalistic symbol and Western hegemonic reality, they were also attacking our transport system.’ (PG, p.16) Self adds that ‘The ‘spectaculars’ of both 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London were thus attacks on our notion of ourselves as, above all, a mobile society.’ (PG, p.16)

Not only has our collective belief in our mobility continued to flourish since these attacks, the attacks themselves have, according to Self, bizarrely entered the realm of the comprehensible. The title of a 2014 New Statesman article reveals the effect Self believes this has had upon flyers - for him, ‘Fearless flying is an act of collective delusion’. In his 2014 novel *Shark*, Self depicts this delusion through the RAF veteran

⁸ Self, ‘Lock up your tourists’

⁹ Self, *Literateur*.

Michael Lincoln, who - a quarter of a century after his service in the Second World War - muses that 'the more I flew, the more oddly invulnerable I felt.' (S, p.353) By 2014, this invulnerability has permeated the collective consciousness, and Self broaches the topic of the then-still-missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 as a means of bringing the inherent underlying madness of air travel back into terrifyingly sharp focus:

when the Malaysian Airlines flight went missing over the South China Sea all my feelings about the madness of international air travellers came screaming back to me. Consider this: had the plane crashed in a comprehensible way - due to mechanical or human error, or even terrorism - people might have been upset for a few seconds or hours, but soon enough they'd have got on with it (whatever "it" is). However, the mystery of the plane's disappearance sent a shiver through the collective psyche, because, I'd argue, it darkly shaded the enigma of all our lives: why, in the final analysis, do we get out of bed in the morning at all, let alone get on a plane?¹⁰

This mystery was so disconcerting because there was absolutely no fathomable reason for the plane to have disappeared. The 9/11 attacks may well be the defining moment of this still-young century, but since then a terrorist attack on a plane, or any transport system, has at least become as understandable as it is undeniably tragic. The initial void of understanding around MH370's disappearance served, in Self's view, as a sobering reminder of the incomprehensible and indeed wondrous and sublime nature of flying as a form of transport.

Like Self, Ballard argued that a form of transport constituted the most significant transformative technology of the previous century. In this case, it is the car, and mass-marketed automobility, that fulfil this role because of the car's immense and unrivalled cultural magnitude. As Ballard summarises:

If I were asked to condense the whole of the present century into one mental picture I would pick a familiar everyday sight: a man in a motor car, driving along a concrete highway to some unknown destination. Almost every aspect of modern life is there, both for good and for ill - our sense of speed, drama and aggression, the worlds of advertising and consumer goods, engineering and mass manufacture, and the shared experience of moving together through an elaborately signalled landscape.¹¹

¹⁰ Will Self, 'Fearless flying is an act of collective delusion', *New Statesman*, 28.3.2014, <http://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/03/will-self-fearless-flying-act-collective-delusion>

¹¹ J. G. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium* (London: Flamingo, 1997), p.262

Because the car, in Ballard's words and indeed in his works, has an active effect on 'almost every aspect of modern life', it becomes an especially useful piece of technology to use in an argument that charts the varying stages of the relationship between humans and technology. This is precisely what Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz do in their 2011 work, *The Techno-Human Condition* - the theories of which come to underpin and contextualise many of the arguments in this thesis. Ostensibly, Allenby and Sarewitz argue that there are three levels of this condition, each increasingly complex and convoluted. The development of these levels and their systems mirror the revealing and undermining of an ideology, in that the first level is defined by a false, individualistic confidence that any given piece of technology will purely aid one's own agency. However, when the technology in question is as mass-marketed as the car is, the consequences are often-highly inconvenient social systems that prevent the attainment of the individualistic goals of Level I. These emergent social systems - Level II - are as uncontrollable as they are generally irritating, yet also recognisable and even quotidian (the traffic jam, for instance, denotes a move to Level II from the car) because the goals of the previous level remain in sight. In the context of Self's fiction, the quotidian nature of Level II is similar to the reasons why The Fat Controller of *My Idea of Fun* (1993) casts himself as the 'Magus of the Quotidian'. (*MioF*, p.62) For he realises that 'All these people... they imagine that they perceive what is really there but they don't. Instead their minds are constricted by a million million little common assumptions, assumptions choking them like bindweed - and these they take for granted!' (*MioF*, p.63) These goals, or 'common assumptions', however, disappear come the third and final level of the *Techno-Human Condition*.

Rather than working on the more comprehensible scales of the individual or even one particular society, Level III attempts to grasp the profound and unpredictable impact of technologies on a global scale. The combination of the vast scale and the inherent unpredictability of these impacts (say, the full impact on the environment as a result of

carbon emissions from cars, to continue with that example) ensures that the dynamics at this level remain consciously and necessarily difficult to define, predict and even imagine - something that Allenby and Sarewitz are keen to stress. Their most notable attempt at labelling these emergent behaviours comes when they refer to them as ‘transformative Earth systems’¹². Even this attempt at a definition only provides more questions than answers, however, as the exact nature of these transformations remains unclear. The only certainty is that the profundity of these systems ensures that they come equipped with enough existential baggage to challenge core aspects of humanity in ways that cannot even be envisaged, much less accurately controlled.

Thinking of the necessarily varying difficulties in these levels in relation to Self’s remarks on the boredom and the sublimity of flying, the move from the 9/11 attacks to MH370 vanishing almost reads as the move from Level II to Level III. The sheer perplexity of the plane having vanished off-radar without trace is the crucial factor within this development, because one of Self’s central beliefs centres upon the incomprehensibility and seeming impossibility of getting lost in the present-day. In his view, this stems from:

a steady evolution of technologies designed to make it possible for people to achieve two of the prized desiderata of our civilisation. The first of these is to feel as if they are inside when in reality they are out; and the second is to know their exact location while having absolutely no idea where they are.’¹³

This ‘steady evolution’ of gadgets such as GPS (Global Positioning System), smartphones and smartwatches has an obviously ideological quality to it, purporting to establish agency and knowledge - in this case geographical - while doing the opposite in terms of physical reality. In essence, they are a more contemporary, high-tech and insidious update on the way the Underground map disconnects users from physical geography. Importantly, the current generation of teenagers and young adults (this writer included)

¹²Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz, *The Techno-Human Condition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011) p.65 [will be referenced henceforth as *THC* in running text]

¹³ Will Self, ‘If you want to go “off-grid”, simply leave your smartphone at home’, *New Statesman*, 10.4.2014, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/04/if-you-want-go-grid-simply-leave-your-smartphone-home>

are the first to grow up in a world where the technologies of smartphones and broadband internet are more or less omnipresent. Self has observed the effects of these phenomena on his own undergraduate students, remarking that they:

have known what little adulthood they have experienced in a wholly wired world, [and] are genuinely discomfited by leaving their houses without their phones. For them, that's enough: so used are they to knowing their location (or rather, outsourcing their sense of direction to Google) that this simple omission thrusts them vis-à-vis with the world as it actually is.¹⁴

Self views this generation as being lost without their smartphones in both an emotional and a physical sense, and he revisits the phenomenon of ubiquitous GPS and considers it through a global perspective when he reviews Greg Milner's 2016 study, *Pinpoint*. In this, Milner charts the history of GPS from its inception in 1980 up until the present day, with an especial focus on the militaristic uses of the technology that sought to prevent a repeat of the destructive and fatal messes that were Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Dresden. He also suggests that "GPS reflects a choice, a conscious application of a neutral technology".¹⁵ This idea that any technology - let alone one that Self argues in this review was developed primarily with the intention of killing people - can be 'neutral' and dependent upon individual agency forms Self's main gripe with Milner's ideas.

Another criticism Self has of *Pinpoint* is its lack of engagement with the existential, and indeed human, ramifications of this technology, other than 'a few remarks on the philosophic conundrums it raises'.¹⁶ In Self's view, Nicholas Carr's *The Glass Cage*, and Laurence Scott's *The Four-Dimensional Human* are two works from 2015 that deal more effectively with the existential and psychological consequences of contemporary, transformative technologies. Carr's title and its clear insinuation of entrapment suggests that in this instance the omens for traditional human capabilities are not good, and Self

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Will Self, 'Pinpoint by Greg Milner review: how is GPS changing our world?', *The Guardian*, 4.5.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/04/pinpoint-how-gps-is-changing-our-world-greg-milner-review>

¹⁶ *ibid*

states as much in his review. The title is also directly linked to and gleaned from developments in transport, specifically ‘the virtualised environments of contemporary jet airliners’,¹⁷ and autopilot and the development of Google’s self-driving car are put forward as examples of how human control of and input into these forms of transport are in danger of becoming superfluous luxuries. One argument with regard to this might be that these developments make technologies even more easy and convenient, but Self is quick to seize upon the ideological awareness within *The Glass Cage*:

lurking behind the glassy screens we love to pet, prod and goggle at, there lies a glass cage of automated systems, ones that increasingly manage the extraction of raw materials, their processing, the manufacture of goods, the provision of services and the intellectual labour of their overall control.¹⁸

The title of Scott’s work, on the other hand, suggests a less wholly negative interpretation of the active dynamic between human and technology. It even reads as an opposition to some of Self’s own theories, in the sense that the tech-savvy individual is afforded an extra dimension to their being, rather than losing one as is the suggestion from Self’s points on the uses of GPS and the tube map. Self describes these ‘four-dimensional’ humans as ‘our wired selves, compelled increasingly to inhabit an environment in which the old certainties of space and time are being disrupted by a global network that abolishes distance and privileges instantaneousness.’¹⁹ Despite Scott’s disposition to examine this dynamic in a way that goes beyond a typical perception that contemporary technology has a directly negative effect on its users, there remains at points a distinct tone of weariness, coupled with an insightful description of how the internet falsely appeared as a kind of existential threshold. He muses that ‘In cyberspace’s early days, we were encouraged to view the internet as a

¹⁷ Will Self, ‘Don’t buy *The Glass Cage* at the airport if you want a restful flight, warns Will Self’, *The Spectator*, 28.2.2015, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/02/dont-buy-the-glass-cage-at-the-airport-if-you-want-a-restful-flight-warns-will-self/>

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ Will Self, ‘The Four-Dimensional Human by Laurence Scott review - how has the digital world changed us?’, *The Guardian*, 11.6.2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/11/the-four-dimensional-human-ways-of-being-in-the-digital-world-laurence-scott-review>

mode of transportation, a way of turning there into here, but also of outrunning ourselves. One of the main things we were paying for was an escape route.’²⁰ In his review, Self evokes the ideal of the frontier mentality to capture this train of thought, but adds that this ‘escape route’ was rapidly cut off:

we set off pell-mell into the virtual new-found-land, gleefully abandoning the old strictures of gender, sexual orientation, class, age and ethnicity, only to find them catching up with us - and indeed being still more rigidly imposed by interests for whom it is essential our identities be defined, so they can sell us stuff we don’t need, but which they know we’ve bought in the past.²¹

Again, consumerism plays a central and active role in this entrapment, and Scott engages with this idea too, citing Marx’s line and the title of Marshall Berman’s 1982 work, ‘*All That Is Solid Melts into Air*’ (TFDH, p.61) - again bringing to mind Self’s bodily interpretation of this line. Scott’s understanding of the effects of this entrapment make for some of the bleakest moments of what is a highly engaging and personable work, particularly when explaining that at times ‘digital life feels more like a cage than a flying carpet. The ongoing narrative of toxicity and depression that shadows digital progress, in conjunction with a sense that this progress is both for the best and inevitable, creates a pervasive atmosphere of claustrophobia.’ (TFDH, pp.171-2)

Self owns that Scott has ‘set himself the formidable task of registering the impact of the new digital technologies on our cognition, our perception and our emotions; in short, our phenomenology in the broadest sense.’²² While this task may be carried out imperfectly - and carrying it out perfectly may well not even be possible - Self maintains that Scott’s own existence and, fairly often, misadventures within this digital, four-dimensional life lend his theories a refreshing degree of truthfulness, arguing that ‘One

²⁰ Laurence Scott, *The Four-Dimensional Human* (London: Windmill, 2015), p.21 [will be referenced henceforth as TFDH in running text]

²¹ Self, ‘Laurence Scott review’

²² *ibid*

of the great strengths of this book is that its author offers himself up as the experimental rat in the virtual maze, analysing his own emotional responses'.²³

Where the focus on the effects of technology on the human - albeit more often than not, one individual as test subject - forms one of the strengths of Scott's analysis, Self argues that when Carr turns to these effects his theories begin to fall apart somewhat. A problem for Self 'lies with Carr's privileging of human sentience over all other forms of intelligence... an attitude that itself rests on an uncritical acceptance of that bundle of prejudices and wishful thinking we term 'humanism'.'²⁴ For instance, Carr himself argues that the 'shortcomings of robotic drivers and pilots reveal that the skills we humans take for granted - our ability to make sense of an unpredictable world and navigate our way through its complexities - are ones that computers can replicate only imperfectly' and that it is in fact the machines that are trapped - 'They remain prisoners of their coding.'²⁵ Self disagrees, and suggests that such complacency leads to a form of ironic and intellectual entrapment come the end of *The Glass Cage*, namely that it is 'too mired in the current pieties of humanism to grasp that by appealing to the human 'soul' he is in fact calling upon a *deus ex machina* to save us from our handheld devices.'²⁶

This paradox with which Self rounds off his review of *The Glass Cage* epitomises his belief that technology has unignorably and fundamentally altered what it means to exist as a human being in contemporary society. Ultimately, Self is interested in 'the impact upon our cognitive and physical faculties'²⁷ that technology is having. Allenby and Sarewitz share this interest, and the idea of 'transhumanism' underpins their work to an extensive degree. They argue that there are two dialogues within the transhumanist

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Self, 'Don't buy *The Glass Cage*'

²⁵ Nicholas Carr, 'Are we becoming too reliant on computers?', *The Guardian*, 17.1.15, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/17/nicholas-carr-are-we-becoming-too-reliant-on-computers>

²⁶ Self, 'Don't buy *The Glass Cage*'

²⁷ *ibid*

debate. The first of these dialogues focuses on the visible, 'real' and physical ways that technology changes humans. The second dialogue moves away from physical and visible changes to focus on the cultural ramifications of technology, and 'positions transhumanism as a cultural construct that considers the relations between humanness and social and technological change.' (*THC*, p.5) The dynamic implicit in these 'relations' is that the changes are beneficial to 'humanness', to the point that this way of thinking has fostered an avid sense of optimism in those who have chosen to adopt it. Allenby and Sarewitz cite the World Transhumanist Association's (now, tellingly, known as "Humanity+") initial definition of transhumanism to capture this mood:

The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through *applied reason* [emphasis added by Allenby and Sarewitz], especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities. (*THC*, p.5)

Verbs such as 'improve' and 'enhance' that are synonymous with this transhumanist train of thought do not sit so well with Allenby and Sarewitz. Conversely, the prospect of widespread improvement and enhancement only raises vast uncertainty, and they define it as a 'piecemeal project that tells us nothing at all about what society can expect from the individual who is being enhanced - or about what society can expect from millions of such enhanced humans.' (*THC*, p.25) Their questioning of such utilitarianism becomes even more pronounced once they take into account the technological and systemic complexities that arise, pointing out that, in fact, 'complex technological systems do make a mockery of the Enlightenment fantasies of rational control over our affairs and dominion over nature.' (*THC*, p.44-5)

This idea of 'making a mockery' of human agency is relevant to Self, whose professed interest in the techno-human dynamic primarily manifests itself through satirising the transhumanist idea that technology simply makes us better. This makes the question of his engagement with and interpretations of humanism decidedly interesting. Kate Soper's definition of humanism is a useful starting point from which to explore this;

she defines humanism as a concept that ‘appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood, thus (negatively) to concepts... designating, and intending to explain, the perversion or ‘loss’ of this common being.’²⁸ One of the recurring themes over the coming chapters is that Self is also interested in a ‘core humanity’, even if only as a notion that cannot actually be ‘defined and understood’. More than this, his work never suggests that this notion is a positive thing, as Soper posits it must be. Instead, Self’s work consistently and deliberately reveals - particularly through the ways that both individuals and collectives interact with transport and technology - that there is something inherently troubled and necessarily difficult to define about our ‘core humanity’. Acknowledging this difficulty and trouble often makes for challenging, even disturbing work for both reader and author alike, especially as Self is regularly at pains to stress his own involvement in these processes. This explains why Self is particularly appreciative of Scott’s accounts in *The Four-Dimensional Human*, as their candidness is more truthful, interesting and difficult than an easy defence of any fundamental and positive human qualities.

The Literary Poetics of Technology and Difficulty

Self also suggests that Scott’s status as ‘a creative writer and a perceptive literary critic’²⁹ adds an extra layer of insight to his philosophies. The level of interest that Scott has around the behaviours of people is, for Self, both something that he shares, and believes is vital fuel for the imaginative processes of writing. Self admits ‘I’m a committed people-watcher - all writers are - and I like to take mental snapshots of them in motion just as much as I like to survey them statically for hours. The way the city seems to shuffle the pack of humanity makes face cards of us all.’³⁰ This brings the focus

²⁸ Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), pp.11-12

²⁹ Self, ‘Laurence Scott review’

³⁰ Will Self, ‘Making my way through a mill race of commuters, I glimpse a man holding his amputated leg.’, *New Statesman*, 7.6.2016,

to bear on Self's writing processes and his engagement with the literary landscapes that he emerged from and currently exists within.

In her work *Harvest of the Sixties*, Patricia Waugh analyses the development of the stylistic, historical and socio-political literary contexts that defined the years between 1960 and 1990. Interestingly, shifting this timeframe back by a mere one year marks the year Self was born (1961), and his first notable publication (1991's short story collection, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity*) that subsequently launched his own literary notoriety at the end of the last millennium. Waugh contextualises her arguments by defining this thirty-year epoch simultaneously as one of 'Discontinuities' and 'Continuities', a move which itself reveals the often-paradoxical tensions within the literature of the period. In Waugh's words, 'In a period of rapidly changing identities, new technologies, and a pluralization of aesthetic cultures, imaginative literature has been as important as ever in offering us narratives of recognition and the means to personal and social understanding.' (*HotS*, p.2) For Waugh, these ideas of 'recognition' and 'understanding', on an individual and a collective level, are important to seek out because of the contemporary cultural backdrop. The 1960s was the era that moved Debord to try and expose the insidiousness of the *Society of the Spectacle*, and Waugh eloquently describes the similar cultural conditions that literature was being written in light of. She paints 1960s London in a manner that makes it seem a spectacular cultural precursor to the Cool Britannia of the 1990s, asking if the 'swinging sixties' were not 'simply a myth projected by commercial interest and youth idealism and without any foundation in political or social structures'. (*HotS*, p.5) Waugh's questioning is surely rhetorical, as she goes on to point out that both this culture and simultaneous countercultural movements were as prone as anything else - arguably more so - to commercialist entrapment, and that 'the counterculture was short-lived, and [would] fall prey to commercial

<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/06/making-my-way-through-mill-race-commuters-i-glimpse-man-holding-his-amputated>

appropriation'. (*HotS*, p.7) Waugh's cultural commentary reflects the extent to which this entrapment and ideology dominate contemporary society, and some of the typical literary consequences of this were as follows:

There was a steady drift away from social realism, itself premised on a consensus aesthetics (narratorial reliability and authority, modulation and integration of points of view, the assumption of an intrinsic and even moral organic relationship between the form and structure of the literary text and relations in the world outside it), and towards modes of fantasy, self-reflexivity, absurdism, and the grotesque (*HotS*, pp.20-1)

Waugh argues that the ways in which literature was being constructed became consciously harder to define, not least because more traditional forms of social realism were becoming increasingly inadequate at painting a satisfactory picture of such a rapidly changing society. The effect of this was a heightened level of literary self-consciousness around cultural ideologies, and Waugh offers up Amis - another of the generation of writers who, according to Iain Sinclair, tried and failed to match up to the literary prowess and prescience of Ballard - and *Money* as an archetypal example of this. Amis's appearances in his own plot are examples of how he constructs and displays an often extremely wry self-consciousness, like the moment that the reader is addressed by the protagonist as such: 'This writer's name, they tell me, is *Martin Amis*. Never heard of him. Do *you* know his stuff at all?'³¹

The protagonist of Amis's novel is - purely coincidentally - Will's near homonym John Self, a man who is, by his own admission, 'addicted to the twentieth century.'³² His jet-setting lifestyle is one manifestation of this addiction, and the airport comes to represent a portal and an escape route to another world, as John imagines 'We are fleeing Earth for a newer world while there is still hope, while there are still chances... we entered the ship, two by two, all types represented, to make our getaway...'³³ This

³¹ Martin Amis, *Money* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.71

³² Amis, *Money*, p.91

³³ Amis, *Money*, pp.91-2

getaway is impossible, however, and John soon reveals his entrapment within his own twentieth century life, desperately pleading to the reader:

Look at my life. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: But it's terrific! It's great! You're thinking: Some guys have all the luck! Well, I suppose it might look quite cool, what with the aeroplane tickets and the restaurants, the cabs, the filmstars, Selina, the Fiasco, the money. But my life is also my private culture - that's what I'm showing you, after all, that's what I'm letting you into, my private culture. And I mean look at my private culture. Look at the state of it. It really isn't very nice in here. And that is why I long to burst out of the world of money and into - into what? Into the world of thought and fascination. How do I get there? Tell me, please. I'll never make it by myself. I just don't know the way.³⁴

The effects of the pronounced literary self-consciousness of the period were also felt - and continue to be felt - by contemporary literary criticism. It is easy to believe that what Waugh calls a 'withdrawal of academic critical interest' (*HotS*, p.41) in contemporary literature could have had a liberating effect on writers, however she argues that one of the consequences of this was 'to implicate literature even further in a 'sound-bite' culture'. (*HotS*, p.41) Therefore, the echo-chamber of the literary landscape of the era parallels Self's disdain in the hollow, inauthentic nature of culture in general. His caustic rhetoric on Tony Blair - the champion of the sound-bite during the 1990s - demonstrates this. Self offers to 'give Tony Blair a 'sound bite'! I'll run right across the floor of the House of Commons, sideswipe the Master of Arms, and take a bite out of one of his copious ears; then we'll hear the Leader of the Labour Party really sound off.' (*FF*, p.1)

These inherent difficulties with capturing the contemporary continue into the twenty-first century, and Peter Boxall utilises transportation metaphors to try and impart a sense of them. At the outset of his work *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, he invokes Sartre and speeding cars to make his point about the unavoidably uncertain characteristics of the present, as 'When we look backwards out of a speeding car, the place we are occupying at any given time is a simple, lateral blur,

³⁴ Amis, *Money*, p.123

which resolves itself into a picture only when we have left it behind, as it fades into the distance.’³⁵ For Boxall, this means we find ourselves in what he calls a ‘quivering present’ (*TFCF*, p.3) - a different way of defining Self’s capitalised, commercialised Now that has previously been fashioned by the ‘motor car, the railway, the cinema’ (*TFCF*, p.3) but has been sped up by ‘the computer, the mobile phone, the satellite the internet; by electronic communication at the speed of light.’ (*TFCF*, p.4) In *How the Dead Live*, Self uses the metaphor of the speeding car to describe how the living experience the indeterminate character of the dead suburb of Dulston, as a ‘drive-by span of inattention, a glimpse of their own speeding car warped in a showroom window.’ (*HtDL*, p.175) If, therefore, this process of experiencing the Now has sped up into the twenty-first century, then surely this ‘inattention’ comes to permeate consciousness even more sharply.

Boxall goes on to argue that this increase in pace from twentieth to twenty-first century has a disorienting effect on contemporary writers, positing that there is now ‘a generation of writers who have tuned their aesthetic sensibilities to the gathering momentum of late modernity [and] find themselves lost in a new time for which they have no compass’. (*TFCF*, p.37) Given Self’s views on the likes of innovations such as GPS and Google Maps, it is easy to imagine that he will be absolutely in his element journeying through this rapid ‘new time’ without a compass, and this is an important attitude to keep in mind when studying both Self and contemporary literature more broadly. One of the refreshing aspects of Boxall’s analysis is his understanding that this metaphorical lack of compass in the present-day is an important source of innovation for writers and critics alike. He notes about his own criticism on twenty-first century literature that ‘It is the awkward relationship to the present, to a present moment that will not yield itself to any available vocabulary, that lends a certain urgency to the fiction of our time - an

³⁵ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp.1-2 [will henceforth be referenced as *TFCF* in running text]

urgency that I want to maintain here, to make expressive, rather than to explain away.’
(*TFCF*, p.17)

Boxall’s attitude to contemporary literary analysis - maintaining rather than explaining, and capturing the inherent and so often indefinable awkwardness and ‘urgency’ of our current epoch - is one that will hopefully be replicated in the following analysis of Self’s fiction and non-fiction, and the ways that he engages with transport and technology. With this in mind, the opening chapter is concerned with the inherent difficulties in trying to establish a definitive literary and journalistic aesthetic for Self. Boxall’s point on the inadequacies of vocabulary is an interesting one in light of attempting to do this, as one of the most recognisable features of Self’s writing is his conscious twisting and manipulation of language in a way that deliberately makes his work more challenging and often, in his view, off-putting. Much of the discussion centres on the urgent need for Self to do this, through his self-awareness regarding what he believes is a terminal literary culture and how this apparent fatality actively effects his own writing.

Self believes that the blurry instantaneousness and constant connectivity - both in terms of transport and our online lives - are the culprits for what he proclaims as the death of the novel as a serious literary form. Therefore, another aspect of this chapter involves focusing on how the technologies and medias that provide and facilitate this instantaneousness and connectivity - particularly the internet and social media - bring about the kind of ideological and ironic entrapment that is a vital characteristic of his writing. More than this though, he also casts aspersions over some of the corporations and institutions that play an even more insidious role in what he deems to be a collective and all-subsuming reduction in imagination, critical thinking and creativity. In his 2008 collection *Liver*, Self casts Prometheus as a twenty-first century adman, who realises the potential that the commerciality of the internet has to subsume entire identities. He prophesises that ‘Social networking is only the beginning - some time soon, every man,

woman and child is gonna become their own [advertising] agency.’ (*L*, p.203) One of the ironies of this commercial and seemingly individual reduction is the fact it works on a hitherto-impossible global scale, as Boxall also alludes to in his broader literary, cultural and above all commercial analysis of the present-day:

The novel as a contemporary institution reflects, to a degree, this fluidity, not least in terms of the international market place for contemporary literature, controlled as it is by global corporations such as Amazon and Waterstone’s. It is increasingly difficult to produce a picture of this novel without reaching for a global perspective - however implausible the idea of such a perspective might be - because the very predicament to which the novel is responding is one that has required us to imagine ourselves in a global context. (*TFCF*, p.8)

The ‘fluidity’ that Boxall mentions refers to the free flow of capital, but it could as easily represent the free flow of people and ideas in this age of globalisation. Bringing corporations such as Waterstone’s and especially Amazon into the discussion explicitly reveals the irony of our apparent contemporary entrapment. These are companies that primarily supply people all over the world with literature, and moreover, they do so efficiently and often cheaply (in a way that has regularly been a godsend to penny-pinching doctoral students). However, from where Self views this, there are problems. These begin with the way that online marketplaces such as Amazon tempt shoppers with more, and significantly, similar works based on their purchasing history. The effect this has is almost a bottlenecking of literary tastes, rather than offering readers the opportunity to broaden their literary horizons, and this forms part of the reason why Self believes the frontier of the internet has folded in on itself. Secondly, the low prices of such sites leads to them becoming almost like cartels, in that smaller companies cannot compete with such reductions. These monetary reductions have an effect on prospective creative writers too, in that it creates a situation in which those striving towards a career in writing will find it impossible to secure any financial gain or, and more importantly because of the apparent curtailed reading tastes, literary originality.

One of the most popular tastes over the past few decades has been for ‘the literary biography, and high culture as much as mass culture succumbed to the obsession with

fame and celebrity.’ (*HotS*, p.49) The collective ‘obsession’ with literary biography signifies Self’s own entrapment with these myriad literary and cultural difficulties, through his own self-professed if tongue-in-cheek fascination with the genre. This moves the discussion within the first chapter to notions of literary celebrity, and an analysis of how being a recognisable figure within this simplistic, fallible and hollow culture impacts upon the need to depict ‘urgency’ and difficulty as a means of undermining the expectations that such a culture has of him.

Above all though, these entrapments and complexities that make up what can ostensibly be called Self’s aesthetic - while remaining necessarily fluid and uncertain - form a fundamental part of Self’s troubled humanism. Essentially, the idea of difficulty itself becomes the most human quality possible, and stands diametrically opposed to the entrapping ease that so many modern technologies purport to bring to their users. The effects of this are not positive, as traditional humanism should be, and Self explores the often profound and disturbing consequences of trying to get beyond ideologies through the theme of mental health, and the formal qualities of modernism that his later work engages with even more blatantly. To paraphrase Boxall, maintaining the urgency of the troubled and ambiguous present-day human condition is a healthier alternative than succumbing to the imaginative reductionism of so many contemporary ideologies.

Continuing with this train of thought, the second chapter projects these ideas and phenomena on to Self’s 2006 novel, *The Book of Dave*. One of the reasons why this novel is so apt in this discussion is because it, more explicitly than any of Self’s other work, uses a form of transport - the iconic London black cab - as a central plot device, both in the world of contemporary London and the post-apocalyptic world of the distant future that the novel also depicts. In an even more contemporary irony, a decade on from the publication of *The Book of Dave* the taxi finds itself under threat from the same market forces and reductionism - albeit in a transportation sense here - that Self believes is

having a fatal effect on serious literature as well.³⁶ The significance that the taxi and its vernacular actively have on the plot of *The Book of Dave* opens up discussion on an interesting paradox at the heart of the novel. On one hand, the active influence that the taxi has demonstrates how Self shifts the focus of the plot to non-human agents here. Nevertheless, Self does not imbue the taxi with any kind of nostalgic romance in either section. In contemporary London it is consistently a factor in protagonist Dave Rudman's fragile and fluctuating mental state. Meanwhile in the future, its vernacular unknowingly becomes a large part of the doctrines of an authoritarian and patriarchal regime. Self seemingly almost consciously parodies this idea through his inclusion of the motos, the technologically-created, anthropoid creatures of the distant future that play an important role in life on the island of Ham (what had formerly been Hampstead). More theoretically, this brings Self's novel in line with recent theories around the Anthropocene from the likes of Adam Trexler and Timothy Morton, and their ideas contextualise why Self's novel is inherently more complex than a typical environmental catastrophe novel.

The irony of this move away from a fixed human perspective is that, arguably more than any of his other fiction, *The Book of Dave* reveals the true extent of Self's troubled humanism. Dave Rudman is one of Self's most memorable protagonists, and the ironic future metaphor of the novel sees Dave's troubles writ large upon an entire society. As well as family and money troubles having a pronounced psychological effect, Dave's

³⁶ One of the reasons that the taxis are held in such high esteem is the requisite and intricate Knowledge of London's geography that their drivers must have, and are thoroughly tested on before they gain their licence. The threat comes from companies like Uber, who allow passengers to order cabs much more cheaply through an app. Of course, with the severe reduction in price comes the even more severe reduction in Knowledge and even passenger safety, and London cabbies have been forced to emphasise this as they struggle against the free flow of the market. Chris Lockie excellently and savagely riffs on the differences between London taxis and Uber cars, and the market forces that are at play within this conflict - <http://londonist.com/2015/12/why-you-should-take-a-black-cab-not-an-uber-this-christmas>

relationship with the city of London alters him as well, and for this reason the novel also functions as Self's most obviously London fiction.

Self's technique of depicting two radically different visions of London in alternate chapters was employed two decades previously, by Peter Ackroyd in his novel *Hawksmoor* (1985). Ackroyd's novel switches between the Londons of the early eighteenth-century and the 1980s, and his eighteenth-century city 'grows more Monstrous, Stragglings and out of all Shape: in this Hive of Noise and Ignorance... we are tyed to the World as to a sensible Carcasse'.³⁷ This idea of London as a 'monstrous' city recurs over the course of the second chapter, and Ackroyd's historiographical work on the city - the epic *London: The Biography* (2000) - acts as a foil to inform Self's own distinctive treatment of London. Like Self, Ackroyd is a keen psychogeographer, but Self suggests Ackroyd's take on psychogeography 'is more a phrenology of the city. For him, psychogeography is that the city has a psyche, that it's an individual.'³⁸ Despite his awareness of *London: The Biography's* many merits, Self's comparison of Ackroyd's psychogeography to the pseudo-science and pseudo-psychology of phrenology - the idea that skull shape has psychological effects - evokes a sense of self-imposed entrapment and ignorance. Ultimately, however, the difficult and slippery dynamic between individual, urban metropolis, and one of the city's most famous forms of transport makes *The Book of Dave* such a challenging, demanding novel and shows how transport and the way we experience place has intense and unexpected effects on the wellbeing of both individuals and collective societies.

The final two chapters involve something of a transition between the idiosyncratic urban sprawl of London and the seemingly more organised, immediate and comprehensible urban culture of America. In the first of these, the discussion of American culture arises through a deeper analysis of Ballard's influence upon Self. During the

³⁷ Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor* (London: Penguin, 1993), p.48

³⁸ Will Self, 'Interview with Will Self, by Jacques Testard', *The White Review*, July 2013, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-will-self/>

1960s, Ballard was fixated with how components of automobility, advertising, film, celebrity and politics fused all too seamlessly together to create a society and a culture that was unrivalled in its intense immediacy. Consequently, automobility remains the primary focus of this chapter, through an exploration of how Ballard used his automotive fictions of *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973) to represent this significant cultural movement, its origins in the kind of frontier mentality that - just as the internet and the online marketplace have - caught its early adopters up and subsumed them, and also what Ballard viewed as the perceived logical conclusions to this culture. Self's own driving stories during the 1990s represent an intriguing comparison to Ballard's automotive fiction, and the way that Self's stories in turn come to represent some of the mindsets prevalent in 1990s Britain. These stories are 'Design Faults in the Volvo 760 Turbo: A Manual' (1997), 'Scale' (1994), and 'Waiting' (1991), a trio of tales that document the psychological processes and breakdowns that come with urban and motorway driving. *The Butt* then acts as a formal and indeed much bleaker counterpoint to these irreverent stories, revealing how Self fictionalises the sinister as well as the ridiculous unpredictability that individual actions and choices can have in the context of these technological and cultural systems.

Allenby and Sarewitz's *Techno-Human Condition* also returns as a focal point of and a sociological framework for this comparison. The perturbing profundity and controversial graphicness of Ballard's automotive fiction allows him to move towards the troubling existential questions that can scarcely even be comprehended at the final level of Allenby and Sarewitz's theory. The often juvenile humour and wordplay that characterise Self's driving stories ensures that they cannot reach these higher levels or grapple with these weighty philosophical questions, which seems peculiar given how focused Self so often is on the difficult question of what it means to exist as an individual in a constantly connected and mobile society. This may even justifiably warrant the question of why they should even be compared to works such as *The Atrocity Exhibition*

and *Crash*, given their irreverent and markedly different tone. There are some fundamental thematic similarities between Ballard's controversial car crash novel and 'Design Faults', however, as both works engage with the strange psychosexual effects of the driver-car dynamic in our contemporary mobile society. Similarly, Professor Stein - a fictitious academic in 'Waiting' - is described by Timothy Clark as 'pastiche J. G. Ballard'³⁹ because of his millenarian rhetoric. In a sense, Clark's point provides the key to the point at the centre of this chapter. Self is not trying to pastiche J. G. Ballard, nor is he trying to merely replicate his work in the manner Iain Sinclair believed him to be. Rather, in his driving stories, Self pastiches and actively swerves from the grandiose philosophical and existential questions of what it means to exist as a human in the present day. Instead, he depicts his troubled humanism and ironic entrapment here by consciously keeping his driving stories and their protagonists very much in the realm of recognisable social systems and behaviours as a means of effectively highlighting the ridiculousness of so many commonplace and even fairly banal behaviours. Again, *The Butt* forms a contrast to this idea by creating both an unrecognisable landscape for protagonist and reader alike, and a protagonist who cannot begin to fathom what is happening to him as a result of his own actions. In doing so, *The Butt* begins, perversely, to have a touch of the Level III about it in the sense that these individual actions come to have bizarre, unpredictable and totally unfathomable consequences on a much vaster scale. This allows Self to demonstrate how suddenly the ideologies around transport - and technology more generally - that so many people blindly and passively place their faith in can and will be undermined, and how the consequences of this veer from the ridiculous to the disturbing.

American culture and what Patricia Waugh calls the 'hopelessness of America' becomes a major focus - albeit it a blurry one in terms of Self's work - in the final chapter,

³⁹ Timothy Clark, 'Towards A Deconstructive Environmental Criticism', *Oxford Literary Review* 30:1 (2008), p.53

which focuses on the pseudo-autobiographical triptych, *Walking to Hollywood* (2010). Hollywood and the greater Los Angeles area are the main setting for this, as Self walks across LA in the centrepiece of the triptych to discover who or what killed film. This setting has a palpable influence on Self and his mental health as the plot and the walk progress, not least because Los Angeles is a city in which the very act of walking is an aberration. The architectural critic Reyner Banham went so far as to christen the city 'Autopia', such is the extent of the car's domination of the landscape. Banham also discusses how Los Angeles and its car culture have a distinctly ideological edge to them:

Yet what seems to be hardly noticed or commented on is that the price of rapid door-to-door transport on demand is the almost total surrender of personal freedom for most of the journey. The watchful tolerance and almost impeccable lane discipline of Angeleno drivers on the freeway is often noted, but not the fact that both are synonymous of something deeper - willing acquiescence in an incredibly demanding man/machine system.⁴⁰

LA's transport systems are a polar opposite to London's. Whereas the latter is home to two of the most iconic forms of public transport in the world - the Underground and the black cab - the former saw its streetcar network taken over and shut down by General Motors. That is the extent to which the car rules in LA. While LA's public transit networks are currently undergoing something of a renaissance, Drew Reed acknowledges the ideological forces they are still up against when he suggests that 'Los Angeles is dense enough so that many people *could* get to work by transit, most still choose not to. And the reason they choose not to could be because so many important cultural figures, from academics like Reyner Banham to movie stars like Steve Martin, convince them not to.'⁴¹ Reed's point reveals the connection between the car and celebrity cultures of Los Angeles, and these two cultures both form different aspects of what Self calls our 'screen-based lives'.

⁴⁰ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p.217

⁴¹ Drew Reed, 'LA's streetcars: still shaping the city's development 50 years after closing.', *CityMetric*, 11.11.14, <http://www.citymetric.com/transport/las-streetcars-still-shaping-city-s-development-50-years-after-closing-464>

The overwhelming effect of these two cultures and their ideologies is one of psychosis, and in light of this idea, Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Shadows in Paradise* (1972) features a wonderful description of the irrepressible unreality of Los Angeles that is subsequently cited in Mike Davis' notable study of the city, *City of Quartz* (1992):

Real and false were fused here so perfectly that they became a new substance, just as copper and zinc become brass that looks like gold. It meant nothing that Hollywood was filled with great musicians, poets and philosophers. It was also filled with spiritualists, religious nuts and swindlers. It devoured everyone, and whoever was unable to save himself in time, would lose his identity, whether he thought so himself or not.⁴²

Walking to Hollywood - and not just the section set in and around Hollywood - is a dramatisation of Self having his identity 'devoured', by a combination of transport, contemporary technology, physical geography and the mental pathologies that underpin the triptych. This results in often-dizzying displays of self-consciousness, which themselves are closely linked to mental illness. Dr. Zack Busner - the psychiatrist and the most notorious of all of Self's fictional creations - appears as Self's own therapist here, but it is actually an instance of Busner's stream-of-consciousness during the later novel *Umbrella* (2012) that strangely comes closest to describing the innate complexities of *Walking to Hollywood*: 'the me-voice, the voice about me, in me, that's me-ier than me... so real, ab-so-lute-ly, that might not self-consciousness itself be only a withering away of full-blown psychosis?' (*U*, pp.7-8)

The fusion of real and false works right down to the genre of the triptych, and Self's conscious warping of the reconstructive memoir is another aspect of the difficulty and uncertainty on display here. This is the influence of the German writer W. G. Sebald, as both he and Self display an awareness of the inherent futility of writing as a viable monument. Instead, there is an inevitable sense of self-destruction in their pseudo-memoirs. The problem is that both Sebald and Self still need to write, for reasons relating to individual therapy and as a means of shining a light on the troubling and unstoppable

⁴² Erich Maria Remarque, *Shadows in Paradise*, in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992), p.50

march of modernity. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) is a touchstone for *Walking to Hollywood*, and particularly its final section, 'Spurn Head', and both works are characterised by their doubly difficult combination of wry resignation and melancholy. They also both develop upon walks along the east coast of England, and Self's final destination sees him stuck in the Now, candidly demonstrating how neither walking nor writing can adequately stave off the ironic entrapments of our contemporary society.

Walking to Hollywood and *The Book of Dave* are the two works with the most time and space dedicated to them within this thesis. This is because they deal most explicitly with the dynamics and the conflicts that the thesis is interested in exploring. Namely, they offer visions and accounts of how forms of transport - as both technological innovations and a function of the human body - play an active role in undermining and altering traditional perceptions of what it means to exist in an increasingly technological and incredibly mobile society.

These changes are often troubling, upsetting and extremely difficult to comprehend, and Self's realisation around this ensures that his writing is characterised by similar qualities. This further explains why *The Book of Dave* features so prominently here, because it dramatises the troubled humanism of Dave Rudman alongside the active and ironic cultural impact of the taxi. This results in a novel that is infinitely more intricate than the mere religious satire or environmental disaster novel it appears to read as at first glance.

A similar tendency towards a myriad of meanings and layers of difficulty can be found in *The Butt*, a novel that transmogrifies from a satirical and caustic critique of the Iraq conflict into something even stranger and messier than that particularly disastrous exit strategy. In addition to launching an exploration into the concept of the road movie and its characteristics and implications, it reveals an explicitly reflexive awareness of the purposes, limits and expectations of literary narratives, and as such opens up the

discussion in the opening chapter as to how they work - or so often for Self in contemporary writing, do not work - in relation to the idea of the value of difficulty and what Self ominously laments as 'the death of serious fiction'.

Within the context of Self's own fiction and thinking, however, what constitutes 'serious' literature is open to debate. Initially, it would be wrong to make the assumption that 'serious' writing and consciously humorous writing are mutually exclusive. Self believes that 'for some there does seem to be a kind of fetish around the idea that the less jokes you have in something ipso facto the more serious it is, and I never really quite understood that. It seems to me that jokes are just one of the modes of experiencing the world.'⁴³ This belief in a perceived lack of understanding around jokes and seriousness may well have been fuelled in part by *The Butt* winning the Wodehouse Prize for Comic Writing in 2008. In the same interview as the aforementioned 'fetish' comment, Self admits to being 'shocked' at this, because 'There's not a joke in it, it's a story of unconcern.'⁴⁴ The 'unconcern' and the dearth of jokes in the novel - which for much of the novel plays out over the course of an extensive road trip - form the reasoning for analysing it alongside what are three fairly pithy short stories. Indeed the short story itself is a form that Self has regularly utilised over his literary career for essentially telling jokes. Stories such as 'Scale', 'Design Faults' and 'Waiting' form an important part of Self's corpus because they show that alongside the difficult, sublime and troubling side of humanism there exists an overtly ridiculous side to it too. This is a sense of ridicule that for all - or perhaps indeed because of - Self's vivid and idiosyncratic imagination remains distinctly recognisable when thought about in relation to how we understand, use and are so often defeated and even unknowingly manipulated by our commonplace and taken-for-granted technologies, from the car to the smartphone. Therefore, many

⁴³ Self, *Literateur*

⁴⁴ *ibid*

of Self's jokes hinge upon the contradictions within and denials of these forms of technological and ideological entrapment.

The possibility of jokes and serious or difficult literature being plausible bedfellows then shifts the focus back to *Walking to Hollywood*, which more so than any other of Self's works leaves the unshakeable feeling that the reader is the butt of an incomprehensible and unknowable in-joke. This is compounded by the lasting indistinction between author and narrator, and the form and self-conscious construction of the pseudo-memoir; both of which make the task of commenting on any authenticity or authorial intent a virtually impossible task.

This assertion of impossibility may read as something of a dodging of the responsibility of the literary critic, but one of the purposes of this thesis is to try and capture the urgent expression of these profound difficulties rather than attempting to provide a broader introductory analysis of Self's entire corpus. In terms of Self's work, perhaps the spirit in which this thesis should be taken is similar to the time, in 'The Quantity Theory of Insanity', Harold Ford spent under the mentorship of Alkan, whose 'favourite expression was 'I don't know'. Area after area of complex thought was illuminated for me by those 'I don't knows'.' (*QTol*, p.102) Or perhaps the Australian postgraduate student who features briefly in *How the Dead Live*, and who 'at least knew enough to know that he would never know enough.' (*HtDL*, p.331) It might also, however, be best to gloss over the fact that both of these characters go on to suffer complete breakdowns.

Nevertheless, while the specific focus on transport means that some of Self's best-known works (including *My Idea of Fun*, *How the Dead Live*, and *Great Apes*) are not afforded any extensive analysis here, their omission in favour of novels, stories and journalism that actively focus on transport ensures a more effective and focused means of expressing the central difficulties and questions in Self's writing and thinking. In this

respect, this thesis takes a consciously different approach to M. Hunter Hayes' 2007 monograph *Understanding Will Self*, which offers close and chronological readings of all of Self's fiction up to and including *The Book of Dave*. Additionally, Hayes includes a wealth of biographical information as a means of introducing and foregrounding this understanding, and closes his work by focusing on the qualities that Self's non-fiction shares with his fiction.

Hayes eloquently comments on some of the ideological and entrapping qualities of contemporary society that come to the fore in so much of Self's work, most notably in the context of Self's first novel (1993's *My Idea of Fun*). Here, he describes the novel as an 'extended metaphor' that binds together capitalism and addiction, noting that 'modern life is one of inexorable avid consumption.'⁴⁵ Moreover, in terms of the powerful and entrapping cultural factors behind this modern life of ours, he dwells upon the celebrity cliquishness of *The Sweet Smell of Psychosis* (1996) to explain how 'the widespread influence of these sham cultural authorities underscores the failings of a society that Self frequently depicts as enmeshed in a decadent orgy of ephemeral and superficial experiences.' (*UWS*, p.104)

While Hayes hints at these ideologies and entrapments that Self is so concerned with, there are times when his points on them feel somewhat limited or reductive. This is particularly apparent when he talks about the role that technology plays in this culture. He argues that 'Like Ballard, most especially in his novel *Crash* and his anti-novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Self depicts a society on the verge of psychic apocalypse as technology and deracination thwart essential human emotions.' (*UWS*, p.82) The idea of 'essential human emotions', or some kind of essential humanity, being simply 'thwarted' feels too clear-cut. While there is a sense of threat around this 'psychic apocalypse', Self's work is most challenging and rewarding when it focuses on the difficult realisations

⁴⁵ M. Hunter Hayes, *Understanding Will Self* (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina Press, 2007), p.62 [will be referenced henceforth as *UWS* in running text]

that these emotions and a core sense of humanity are being altered beyond recognition by current technologies.

In addition to this, the way that Hayes describes the dynamic of Self's early authorial jokes makes it seem as though they are decidedly one-way. He points out that 'By making his reader the object, if not victim, of this extended joke, Self effectively demonstrates an enduring - and potentially abusive - authority that the author and narrator wield over the narrator.' (UWS, p.44) Hayes makes this assertion in relation to the 1992 novella 'Cock' (one half of *Cock and Bull*), and it stands up in that context, as the narrative structure reveals the framing narrator to be trapped on a train with the vicious don, whose story forms the main narrative of the novella. However, as Self's work develops, and with the hindsight of later work like *Walking to Hollywood* (if the clarity of hindsight is appropriate to relate to such a confusing work as *Walking to Hollywood*), an important and difficult question that arises concerns what happens once the author and narrators also become bound up in these supposed jokes.

Graham Matthews' *Will Self and Contemporary British Society* (2016) is a more recent study that covers a wide range of the key subjects of Self's writing, from - as this thesis does at times - place and consumption, to gender, doctors, satirists and psychiatrists. Matthews demonstrates an acute awareness of the crux of Self's satire, by pointing out that living with his own bile and the bile of others is worthwhile if it means exposing and hopefully dispelling some of 'the illimitable dullness of the contemporary world.'⁴⁶ Matthews also touches upon how Self's writing engages with ideology, when he states that:

Self's literary project is best understood as an attempt to construct an alternative world that maps over the 'real' world and attempts to achieve veridicality, freed from ideological constraints of realism, naturalism, characterization and conventional plot structures. Seen in this light, Self's oeuvre becomes a fictional cartography of structures of power as they are distributed throughout contemporary British society. (WS&CBS, p.3)

⁴⁶ Graham Matthews, *Will Self and Contemporary British Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.2 [will be referenced henceforth as WS&CBS in running text]

While Matthews' point is valid, one of the central arguments here is that these 'attempts to achieve veridicality' are extremely difficult, and Self's awareness of this difficulty, even impossibility at times, permeates his writing. The difficulty lies in the ability to be free from 'ideological constraints'. It is one thing to manage this on the page in a poetic and formal context, as Self has done for over two decades, but not being trapped by social, political and technological ideologies is a wholly different matter. Moreover, it again raises the arguably unanswerable question of what this freedom entails, (again, Lily Bloom becomes the best spokesperson for this, when she poses the question of 'Freedom to do what exactly? Freedom *in* what precisely?' (*HtDL*, p.299)), and the nature of this question and attempts to discern possible answers are important to both Self's writing and the present thesis.

There are also a growing number of shorter critical pieces that tend to focus on a specific theme in Self's work. Two notable essays come from David Alderson (2005) and Emma Parker (2011), who deal respectively with Self's treatment of 'post-gay culture' in *Dorian* and his treatment of gender in *Cock and Bull*. Alderson's argument is as thought-provoking as it is caustic, and he argues that 'Self's satiric purpose is to unmask the present and to reveal to it the deeper truth about itself which it represses.'⁴⁷ The extent of Self's ability to unmask and reveal, and the ways he attempts it in *Dorian*, pose problems for Alderson, however. An important strand of Alderson's essay focuses on Self's clumsiness in dramatising the ways in which gay culture became commodified by market forces following the Sexual Offences Act of 1967. In Alderson's view, this forms part of a more widespread 'denial of the agency of gay men'⁴⁸ that *Dorian* and Self perpetuate. He argues that Self focuses on the 'complex relation between active and passive, domination and subordination, agency and its lack',⁴⁹ but in doing so through

⁴⁷ David Alderson, 'Not everyone knows fuck all about Foucault': Will Self's *Dorian* and post-gay culture', *Textual Practice*, 19: 3 (2005), p.315

⁴⁸ Alderson, 'Dorian and post-gay culture', p.319

⁴⁹ *ibid*

the lens of gender and gay stereotypes (such as pliant femininity and dominant masculinity) fails in expressing any kind of anti-essentialist argument. Instead, Alderson argues that Self has merely appropriated Wilde's narrative by 'robbing it of its complexities, ambivalences and ambiguities. In their place, Self resorts to established ideological convictions and contributes to developing ones.'⁵⁰ As well as wishing to argue that complexities are so often central to Self's work, this thesis takes a different view from Alderson when it comes to the authority of the author. For instance, Alderson believes that 'Self's persona is typically that of the detached, philosophical commentator-cum-satirist, exhibiting a combination of aloofness and animus which he seems to feel confers an unanswerable authority on his determined controversialism.'⁵¹

Parker is more supportive of the distinctive ways that Self portrays gender in his two novellas *Cock and Bull*, theorising that Self effectively 'satirises essentialist conceptions of manhood',⁵² and that his satire 'reifies the binary categories of gender and sex.'⁵³ Possibly the most powerful argument of Parker's essay is when she outlines why Self's satirical idealism is so necessary. To do this, she draws on the emergence of the literary genre of 'fratire' (or, fraternity satire) that existed as both a backlash against feminism and a legitimising of the widespread 'lad culture' of the 1990s, and the outdated yet still-powerful gender conceptions that D. H. Lawrence had lamented were falling apart following the First World War. Parker argues that the 'emergence of fratire underlines the need for ongoing critiques of masculinity such as that proffered in *Cock and Bull*, since disconcertingly, almost one hundred years after the publication of Lawrence's 'Cocksure Women and Hensure Men', it is clear that the cock still crows.'⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Alderson, 'Dorian and post-gay culture', p.313

⁵¹ Alderson, 'Dorian and post-gay culture'. P.310

⁵² Emma Parker, 'Kicks Against the Pricks: Gender, Sex and Satire in Will Self's *Cock and Bull*', *English*, 60: 230 (2011), p.2

⁵³ Parker, 'Kicks Against the Pricks', p.1

⁵⁴ Parker, 'Kicks Against the Pricks', p.22

Parker recognises that Self's writing works towards mocking and undermining tremendously deep-rooted prejudices while simultaneously acknowledging that the power of these systematic prejudices makes doing so extremely difficult. However, this difficulty, alongside Self being a male writer, means that his treatment of gender is characteristically self-aware, but consequently limited. *The Book of Dave* offers a good example of Self reaching and indeed finding himself trapped by these limits. On one hand, the way he creates a dystopia that sees the very worst aspects of a highly toxic masculinity projected on to an entire society is as effective - in terms of exposing and deconstructing such aspects and notions - as it is important. On the other hand, however, the novel falls short in its treatment of female characters. The previous, matriarchal belief system that existed on the island of Ham prior to the discovery of Dave's book is an interesting strand of the novel that feels undeveloped, for instance. Additionally, Phyllis Vance appears in the later stages of the novel as Dave's new partner, but rarely feels more than a backdrop for the projection of Dave's improving mental state.

These limits around the treatment of gender are present in psychogeography and travel writing as well - both Self's and the field more broadly - and therefore also, somewhat inexorably, on the discussions of Self, his influences, peers and practices within this thesis. Again, Self demonstrates an awareness of the masculine nature of psychogeography when he muses over what is, 'dispiritingly', 'the psychogeographic fraternity' (*PG*, p.12) at the outset of his walk to New York:

do I believe that men are corralled in this field due to certain natural and/or nurtured characteristics, that lead us to believe we have - or actually do inculcate us with - superior visual-spatial skills to women, and an inordinate fondness for all aspects of orientation, its pursuit, minutiae and - worst of all - accessories? Absolutely. And so, while not altogether abandoning the fantasy of encountering a psychogeographic muse who will make these jaunts still more pleasurable, poignant and emotionally revelatory than they already are, in my continent heart I understand that I am fated to wander alone, or at best with one other, occasional... male companion. (*PG*, p.12)

As with so much of Self's writing - journalism as well as fiction - the challenge for the reader lies in how much of an eyebrow to raise at, or how large a pinch of salt to take

with, a curious train of thought such as this. Ultimately, however, it exposes that in the fields of psychogeography and travel writing, to reiterate Parker's parting shot, 'it is clear that the cock still crows.'

Unlike Hayes and Matthews, this longer work attempts to focus most of its attention on the specific theme of transport. Transport - both bodily and mechanical - plays an important role when it comes to Self's fixations with physical and human geography, and how experiences of place are interminably linked to individual and collective identities and psyches. Similarly, the connectivity that defines (especially commercial) transport means that it draws parallels with contemporary transformative technologies. Just as innovations in transport continue to ensure that connections between places are made that much faster and easier, broadband did the same for the internet; a technology that has an increasingly obsessive goal towards instantaneousness and altering the ways and opportunities users have to experience the present (through technologies such as Periscope or Facebook Live, for example).

Additionally, transport is something that has long had an ideological quality attached to it. Again, the catalyst of this was commerciality, and the ways that human agency over technologies can be manipulated to sell cars - a trend set on a vast scale by Henry Ford a century ago and one that has still not gone out of fashion, such is its power. This degree of ideological power is significant, in that it makes the questions Self is posing within his work so difficult. Take, for instance, the commonplace, present-day perception (that is particularly levelled at younger generations by older generations) that people are now essentially slaves to their smartphones, cars and various other gadgets and means of transport. It is an understandable line to take, as like any cliché there is a modicum of truth in it, but the relationship between transport and technology, and ideology, extends beyond any understandable or essentialist master/slave dynamic, no matter how much we might like it to conform to one. In *Umbrella*, the malevolent influence of technology on Audrey Death's - the encephalitic heroine of the novel -

condition is telling in relation to this perceived dynamic, as ‘the post-encephalitics’ akinesia and festination had been the stop/start, the on/off, the 0/1, of a two-step with technology.’ (*U*, p.395) However, the individual effects of this are infinitely more profound than a mere ‘stop/start’ or ‘on/off’. For ‘This was not the revolution... but an oppressive alteration to the most fundamental terms of her being: the way she sees and breathes, moves and dreams.’ (*U*, p.285) The triumvirate of transport, technology and ideology is vital in portraying our insidious contemporary entrapments, and the difficulty and trouble in discovering a sense of human or individual identity beyond them. Therefore, the deeply psychological implications of ideology and technology upon a given individual are a starting point within Self’s writing. However, he goes beyond merely attempting to gain an insight into the minds of those who rely and are influenced by technology. Instead, he tries to question the ways that entire societies work in relation to these innovations and the commerce that drives them, and ultimately force his readers to ponder what it is about these ideologies that make them so powerful.

Chapter One: 'Ironic Entrapment and Fundamental Instability: Will Self's Literary Aesthetic'

Introduction

According to Self, the 'hallmark of our collective culture is an active resistance to difficulty in all its aesthetic manifestations.'⁵⁵ This belief goes some way to underlining why there is no easy aesthetic position to take from Self's writing, not least because it comes from an article ominously, if somewhat glibly, entitled 'The novel is dead (this time it's for real)'. Self's literary aesthetic is not merely a case of being wilfully difficult or obscure, however. One of the central tensions that exists within his work takes place between a desire to move beyond the ideologies that have caused this 'active resistance to difficulty', and the lack of faith in the contemporary novel - or indeed any novel after *Finnegan's Wake*, if Self is to be believed - as a literary and imaginative form that is capable of doing so. This is characterised in that article by a palpable awareness that the changes being wrought by contemporary innovations such as the internet are already as irrevocable as they are vast and - in Self's view - damaging. The damage is done to individual thought and creativity, and is done by the consumerist ideologies that technologies are bound up in. Self also realises that he is not able to escape from these changes, damages or ideologies, as much as he may wish to strive against them. Therefore, the most challenging and often-criticised aspect of Self's writing is the combination of wilful difficulty (which is a necessity rather than the writer being awkward for the sake of it), overt self-consciousness, and ironic entrapment. Self's recognisability as a public figure - increased and sustained through his prolific journalism and regular radio and TV appearances - adds another layer of difficulty to this discussion, and the role and the expectations of the literary celebrity become a foil for Self's literary and journalistic aesthetics in the respect that his writing (both fiction and non-fiction) parodies such expectations and conventions while being caught up within them. This

⁵⁵ Will Self, 'The novel is dead (this time it's for real)', *The Guardian*, 2.5.2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction> [will be referenced henceforth as 'TNID' in running text]

complexity that pervades both Self's writing and his status as a writer is as necessary as it is conscious, and one of the overarching revelations - if such a thing is indeed possible - that emerges from a discussion of this is Self's nuanced knowledge of how troubling questions of identity and collective behaviours are within present-day society.

One piece of Self's journalism that captures the peculiar coexistence between wilful difficulty and his self-consciousness about his own status as a writer is a 2014 video interview for Penguin and *The Guardian* in which Self interviews himself. The strange sight of two Selves conducting a conversation with each other onscreen is a visual equivalent to the self-conscious literary and formal trickery that characterises his writing, and the self-consciousness is only heightened when the accusation of wilful difficulty is broached. Self the interviewer puts it to Self the interviewee that 'Your writing nowadays is often accused - if you can accuse something that is passive, like a piece of writing; I suppose it's you who are really being accused - of being willfully difficult and obscure, and creating kind of hard work for your readers... who perhaps don't want to open a book and have to work at it'.⁵⁶ By way of response, Self the interviewee makes the claim that many people may find his writing 'hard work, or difficult, or not necessarily entertaining... and there's something willfully obscure about this as if it's some kind of insult to the reader.'⁵⁷

If it is Self himself - rather than his passive pieces of writing - that is being pointedly accused of being difficult then it raises questions about the figure that Self portrays as a writer and journalist, and the beliefs that define him as an individual. Broadly speaking, Self is a left-wing figure, a socialist and a libertarian. Above all, he is someone who rails relentlessly against inherent unfairness, greed, hypocrisy and stupidity. That being said, the degree to which these negative characteristics define large swathes of contemporary

⁵⁶ Will Self, 'Will Self interviews... Will Self', *The Guardian*, 3.9.2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/video/2014/sep/03/will-self-interviews-will-self-video>

⁵⁷ *ibid*

society and so many prominent and influential individuals - and are often so difficult to look beyond - explains why Self takes such an interest in the behaviour of individuals and collectives, be it good, bad, or somewhere in between. It is against this sincere interest in the way people behave that the idea of difficulty being a distinctly human quality or value is formed, (as opposed to the reductive ease that technologies purport to provide, for instance) that underpins his own troubled humanism. This sincere interest in people is mirrored, albeit in a more directly psychological way, in the recurring character of Dr. Zack Busner. Busner swings non-chronologically from benevolent to murderous throughout Self's fiction and the course of his own career in mental health (and later on, the media), and this enduring interest in mental health is his one constant characteristic amongst his at times schizophrenic behaviour.

Self's interest in the often-troubling qualities of individuals and collectives is regularly explored in the context of politics, and one figure who has proven particularly pertinent to such an exploration is the former Prime Minister Tony Blair. Blair is an individual towards whom Self has harboured a consistent, long-term and intense antipathy, dubbing him the 'Anti-Self'. (*FF*, p.viii) This is because of Blair's conscious indulgence in jargon, empty political rhetoric and general inauthenticity, with Self damning him as a 'poetaster of the glib, this walking autocue in a sensible suit.' (*FF*, p.1) Yet Blair swept to power in 1997 upon an unheralded wave of optimism and remained there for three terms, highlighting either the inability or the refusal of millions of voters to look beyond the 'sensible suit' that slotted in so neatly with the Cool Britannia vibe of the 1990s. Approaching this political problem from the other direction, Self endorsed Green Party candidate Darren Johnson in the run-up to the London mayoral election in 2000 on the basis that:

The Greens are the only party contesting this election on a sound ethical footing, the only party unafraid to state that sacrifices must be made by the citizenry on an individual basis to safeguard our collective future. Should there be congestion charges in London? Of course there should - and now. Should green spaces be protected? Of course they should. Should there be more affordable housing in London? Absolutely. (*FF*, 152)

Ideas such as the protection of green spaces and the environment and an increase in affordable housing are hardly radical or divisive in theory, but Self is all too aware of the fear that so many people have of such ideas meaning a degree of individual hardship or sacrifice - an awareness proven by Johnson's finishing a distant sixth in that election.

More recently, Self has been active in campaigning for the workers at the Ritzy cinema in Brixton to be paid the living wage, arguing about the escapism of cinema taking on a perverse form in relation to this issue. He puts forward that one of the 'awful things about our contemporary society is that people want to be entertained... they love film, they love imagery, but they don't necessarily want to look behind that imagery and look behind that screen... at the reality of the way people are paid in this city at the moment.'⁵⁸ As a means of further highlighting what makes this affair so unsavoury, he ends his 2014 campaign video by explaining that Picturehouse (the company who own the Ritzy) 'present themselves... as being involved with the community, as being a little bit hipper, a little bit more avant-garde, a little bit more multi-ethnic. But the reality is that in terms of their labour relations they're acting like the most soulless, faceless, uncaring international corporate setup you can imagine.'⁵⁹ Such hypocrisy, driven by greed, is the kind of characteristic that drives Self to act, but in acting he retains an awareness that such traits are ones that all humans - himself included - remain susceptible to.

Therefore, a fundamental tenet of Self's literary aesthetic and what makes it so willfully difficult is that his writing displays the causes, effects and enablers of these susceptibilities and difficulties to readers as a means of forming an uneasy, troubled idea of how and why people behave in contemporary society. As well as influencing Self's writing style and helping to explain his literary influences, such as J. G. Ballard, this is

⁵⁸ Will Self, 'Will Self - Ritzy Living Wage', *Ritzy Living Wage*, 29.4.2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjJNAktWLTE>

⁵⁹ *ibid*

frequently tied in to various contemporary technologies, corporations and other institutions. So the purpose of this chapter is to broadly detail some of these - and the difficulties that they cause - with a view to explaining later how they work more specifically in relation to transport systems and the ideologies within them.

Willful difficulty and the death of serious literature

A useful, if possibly very apparent, starting point from which to begin examining the specific and wilful difficulties within Self's oeuvre is the way in which he consciously manipulates language, and the effects that he knows this manipulation has upon many of his readers. In Self's view, his penchant for obscure language actually overtakes his subject matter as the most off-putting aspect of his work for critics and readers alike, and his self-identification as a 'sesquipedalian' ('an obscure word that means 'a lover of obscure words'')⁶⁰ prompts the following analysis of the reception his work often receives:

now I confine myself to making the rueful point that although the subject matter of my stories and novels - which includes such phenomena as sexual deviance, drug addiction and mental illness - has become quite unexceptionable, the supposedly difficult language they are couched in seems to have become more and more offensive to readers.⁶¹

Self's fascination with obscure language is one means by which he clearly and consciously embraces difficulty, but rather than subsequently discounting his subject matter as 'unexceptionable', Self's vast and imposing vocabulary becomes an appropriate linguistic counterpart to the regularly startling, uncomfortable and complex topics and themes he broaches. Therefore, when it comes to teasing out and embracing difficulty within this apparently 'unexceptionable' subject matter, Ballard becomes a hugely important literary influence; and Self has long been aware of Ballard's ability to express this unavoidable complexity within both his writing and his persona. He tells Ballard in a 1994 interview that 'You have fostered contradictions both in your self-presentation as a

⁶⁰ Will Self, 'A point of view: In defence of obscure words', *BBC*, 20.4.12, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17777556>

⁶¹ *ibid*

writer and in what you have allowed... well, you don't allow people to interpret you as they wish.' (*JM*, p.355) As with *Self*, the idea that there is no easy position to be taken and understood is something that is true of Ballard's work, and in the same interview Ballard is revealing in providing clues as to why this is so important. He speaks of the relationship that exists between the individual and late-twentieth-century society, and argues that there is a deep-rooted simulative and performative quality to this society:

The way we see the world, thanks to movies and TV, the car, the presentation of a commodified landscape through thousands of mini-film dramas - I mean, so many advertisements in magazines look like stills from films. It has changed the way we see the world, and the world of the imagination as well. (*JM*, p.396)

Ballard's point here is that the individual imagination is unavoidably and constantly having changes wrought upon it by various cultural and technological developments. These developments bring with them their own set of almost exclusively commercial or consumerist expectations for how the individual is supposed to behave within this society, but Ballard's problem with this is his belief that the imagination of the individual is distinct from social expectations and codes. He puts forward that the 'imagination is not a moral structure. The imagination is totally free of any moral constraints or overtones... Society has social needs that the individual imagination doesn't have. There is no reason why a mass murderer shouldn't write a beautiful poem.' (*JM*, p.390) This resistance to these 'social needs' and 'moral constraints' in favour of the unrestrained power of the imagination forms the basis for the amorality of Ballard's masterfully crafted literary worlds and metaphors, and he is at pains to stress that 'this Leavisite notion of the novel as a moral criticism of life doesn't belong in the present world. This was the world of the past. A world of static human values.' (*JM*, p.373) Rather than this outdated stasis, the present day is defined by constantly mobile, constantly fluid moralities and sensibilities that are impossible to pin down to any neat and final definition, and this is a reasoning that plays into *Self*'s aesthetic as well. For example, one thematic occurrence is *Self*'s reworking of the 'murderer/beautiful poem' claim,

namely the short story 'The Nonce Prize', in which three convicted paedophiles enter a creative writing contest whilst in jail.

However, Self also explains that 'arationality and the unfettered pursuit of what the imagination is prepared to throw up is fine as long as it is not coupled to some programmatic political aim.' (*JM*, p.367) Amorality and 'arationality' are a problem in terms of the satirical bent of Self's work, as Self is aware of the incompatibility of a satirical imagination and amorality. To elaborate on this, he talks about the influence of the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, who in Self's words has studied the 'fundamental instability in the satirical mentality. That the satirist, while seeking to locate the moral centre of the text outside the text itself, is at the same time endlessly in search of a moral certainty and dogma. That is the tension that produces a good satirical perspective.' (*JM*, p.374) Therefore, Self's satirical writing is unavoidably grounded within moral and social constraints, and this adds a level of moral difficulty to the conscious cognitive difficulties that already characterise both his and Ballard's writing.

Move forward twenty years from Self's interview with Ballard and it becomes apparent why such a championing of difficulty is vital in Self's opinion. Again, the clue comes in Self's belief that 'The novel is dead (this time it's for real)'. In this, Self outlines his belief that the arts of reading and writing serious prose fiction are in terminal decline, and in an echo of Ballard's point on technological and cultural development impacting upon the individual imagination, he posits that the most damaging factor is the collective mindset that has been fostered by the advent of the internet. Specifically, his argument is that the instant connectivity that broadband internet provides causes, ironically, a disconnection from the imaginative processes required for reading and writing serious prose fiction:

There is one question alone that you must ask yourself in order to establish whether the serious novel will still retain cultural primacy and centrality in another 20 years. This is the question: if you accept that by then the vast majority of text will be read in digital form on devices linked to the web, do you also believe that those readers will voluntarily

choose to disable that connectivity? If your answer to this is no, then the death of the novel is sealed out of your own mouth. ('TNID')

The reasons that this connectivity is so fatal to the novel are twofold. The first is purely that it causes a distraction. The second - and most concerning - is that it quickly and easily provides solutions to the imaginative challenges that reading and writing prose fiction traditionally pose. For instance, 'if, as a writer, you reached an impasse where you couldn't imagine what something looked or sounded like, the web was there to provide instant literalism: the work of the imagination, which needs must be fanciful, was at a few strokes reduced to factualism.' ('TNID') This 'instant literalism' is a symptom of a more widespread cultural condition, namely that 'we are in danger of becoming morbidly obese through the consumption of such fast culture.'⁶² For Self, the end result of this destruction of the fancifulness of the imagination is 'a standardisation of understanding itself, as people become unable to think outside of the box-shaped screen.'⁶³ The negativity of this outlook is one way that Self's attitudes differ from Ballard's. While it would not necessarily be true to say that Ballard is optimistic about the vast changes that technology is capable of wreaking, he remains more intrigued than damning; retaining an interest in the nuances of the ever-changing present as an alternative that is favourable to - while simultaneously being shaped by - a past that has been defined by the antediluvian English class system. So for Ballard, these changes come to represent liberation as well as entrapment.

It was the apparent if brief evolution from class constrictions during the 1960s that helped foster Ballard's infatuation with that period, and it is from the same decade that Self draws theories from to explain and contextualise his own arguments in the 21st century. Specifically, Self takes the seminal theories of Marshall McLuhan as a starting point for explaining and contextualising his own arguments on this point. McLuhan, writing in the 1960s, analysed the complex and fluid dynamics between communication,

⁶² Self, 'In defence of obscure words'

⁶³ *ibid*

technology, print media, and individual and collective consciousness, particularly in works such as *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964). Many of his arguments are notably prescient given the advent of the internet and social media, and the reductive effect that they have on individual thought. In one of the opening statements within *Understanding Media*, for example, McLuhan claims that that ‘In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind and to incorporate in us, we necessarily participate, in depth, in the consequences of our every action. It is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and disassociated role of the literate Westerner.’⁶⁴ The example of the ever-increasing interweaving of literary texts and social media is one that Self seizes on as one means of beginning to demonstrate how this notion of the ‘disassociated’ ‘literate Westerner’ is now a fallacy, arguing that the instant connectivity of the internet leads to the ‘populist Gutenbergs prat[ing] on about how digital texts linked to social media will allow readers to take part in a public conversation.’ (‘TNID’) In theory, this marriage of text and social media has enlightening qualities, giving readers the opportunity to instantly discuss and debate texts regardless of any physical or geographical boundaries. Self, however, believes that this is purely idealistic, and that the ‘populist’ technology instead culminates in an inevitable and fatal lean towards ‘factualism’ and ‘standardisation’ as far as reading and writing fiction are concerned. To underline this, he draws the conclusion that ‘the kind of psyche implicit in the production and consumption of serious novels... depends on a medium that has inbuilt privacy.’ (‘TNID’) One of the reasons that this ‘inbuilt privacy’ is possible is because of the anonymity of the reader, as Self explains:

On the page, the reader and writer meet, shorn of gender, race, sexual identity, class, even nationality... it is an anonymous encounter; the novel is a kind of pre-modern chatroom in that way. You can be your essential self in the context of reading, and I’m never too interested in who my readers are, in the sense of where do they fit in to society.

⁶⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p.4

I leave that for people who are producing what I would call ‘commercial’ books, who are trying to angle something towards a marketplace.⁶⁵

The perverse inclusivity of this ‘anonymous encounter’ creates a paradox in light of the consciously difficult - and therefore surely exclusive - nature of Self’s writing. Additionally, this rhetoric is decidedly similar to that which Self uses to describe the ways in which people are able to project themselves on the medium of the internet, stating that ‘the medium sucks away and strips you of all your contingent characteristics. You’re free of your gender, of your race, of your class, of your nationality, of your age, of your sexual identity, your appearance.’⁶⁶ Of course, this means that the medium of the internet also strips away all of these contingencies from whoever it is you are communicating with, and makes its users susceptible - potentially instantly - to whatever vitriol, prejudice or designs they may have against you or upon you. Online bullying and trolling are two commonplace and distinctly nasty forms that this takes, and Self also cites the paedophile grooming the child as the most ‘egregious’ example of this instantaneous anonymity.

However, Self stresses that this anonymity operates, more insidiously, at a highly commercial level as well. He refers to the practices and recommendations of online marketplaces to explain how ‘websites masquerade as potentially personalized relationships, but of course are anonymous at a fundamental level.’⁶⁷ By doing something such as providing all-too-similar, unimaginative reading suggestions, the ostensible help that websites seem to provide becomes another contribution to the ‘standardisation’ Self is worried about. Therefore, although Self is conscious not to try and ‘angle’ any of his work ‘towards a marketplace’, there is an inevitability that it will happen nonetheless.

⁶⁵ Will Self, ‘Will Self on The Butt’ 26.10.2011, *MenOfLetters*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEPD1CWEOGE>

⁶⁶ Will Self, ‘Is the internet inherently psychotic?’, *English National Opera*, 5.5.2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eLiW6iPGjE>

⁶⁷ *ibid*

Peter Bürger takes a similar approach to the idea of the vitality of the 'essential self' in relation to reading when he argues that 'A literature whose primary aim it is to impose a particular kind of consumer behavior on the reader is in fact practical... Here, literature ceases to be an instrument of emancipation and becomes one of subjection.'⁶⁸ However, the novel is a form of technology in its own right, and is one that remains inextricably bound up in the processes of commerciality. This is something that has been the case for a long time, through trends such as promotional book tours - that Self himself has long been involved in as well. The difference would appear to be that these more traditional forms of literary promotion and commerciality did not ultimately have an effect on the privacy that Self argues is crucial to the medium. Conversely, the new commerciality of the internet is supported by the instant connectivity that creates what Self calls 'a permanent Now' and ensures that privacy becomes impossible, and the entrapping 'subjection' of serious literature becomes unavoidable.

Self's belief that the internet is 'a false friend' and a realm in which 'whatever you are, you have the potential to find confreres of various kinds'⁶⁹ is similar to the attitude that he feels has had such a damaging impact upon creative writing. More specifically, Self focuses on the creative writing courses prevalent in higher education. He observes that on such courses there is 'a wider culture... which valorises group consciousness at the expense of the individual mind.' ('TNID') As with the internet, the influence of consumerism is palpable here, as such groups are 'a self-perpetuating and self-financing scheme purpose built to accommodate writers who no longer can make a living from their work' ('TNID') - not least because of the financial reductionism carried out by corporations such as Amazon. Self also brings in some anecdotal evidence to explain how this works. He tells the story of a creative writing student he has mentored, who rushed to finish his assessed work in order to begin teaching creative writing, and of course, be

⁶⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), p.54

⁶⁹ Will Self, 'Will Self questions the rituals of our digital life', *English National Opera*, 18.5.2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwFAF4g9JLM>

paid for doing so. Therefore, there is a vicious and self-perpetuating circle of entrapment that present-day aspiring creative writers will find it extremely hard to avoid being caught up in.

The 1994 short story 'A Short History of the English Novel' - which imagines that all of the waiters in London are actually frustrated writers - features an early and caustic variation on the theme of 'the sad state of the English novel.' (GA&OS, p.35) Gerard, the narrator's companion throughout the story who happens to work in publishing, is particularly adamant that the form is in terminal decline, and that market forces are behind it. His work requires him to think:

of books as so many units, trafficked hither and thither as if they were boxes of washing powder. And when he spoke of authors, he managed somehow to reduce them to the status of assembly line workers, trampish little automata who were merely bolting the next lump of text on to an endlessly unrolling narrative product. (GA&OS, p.36)

What has been depicted in 1994 as the opinionated ranting of a minor publishing worker - Gerard didn't do 'anything editorial or high profile' (GA&OS, p.36) - has seemingly spread to become, for Self, a serious cultural condition, to the point where either finding any new and truly innovative writing, or making a career from almost any kind of writing, look like impossibilities:

In a society where almost everyone is subject to the appropriation of their time, and a vast majority of that time is spent undertaking work that has little human or spiritual value, the ideal form of the writing life appears gilded with a sort of wonderment. The savage irony is that even as these aspirants sign up for the promise of such a golden career, so the possibility of their actually pursuing it steadily diminishes; a still more savage irony is that the very form their instruction takes militates against the culture of the texts they desire to produce. ('TNID')

The 'savage' irony that undermines the ideals of these groups is this valorisation of collective consciousness, to the detriment of the individual imagination. Consequently, there is the expectation that any new writing must necessarily conform to contemporary culture's 'resistance to all forms of aesthetic difficulty' (Self caustically notes that 'the kidult boywizardsroman and the soft sadomasochistic porn fantasy are clearly in rude good health' ('TNID')) in order to reap any kind of rewards or success, be this in terms

of readership or finances. Damningly, Self summarises that ‘with the creative-writing programmes and the Facebook links embedded in digitised texts encouraging readers to “share” their insights, writing and reading have become the solitary acts of social beings. And we all know how social beings tend to regard solitary acts - as perversities, if not outright perversions.’ (‘TNID’) This belief explains why the paradoxical inclusivity of Self’s work is most definitely a ‘perverse’ one. Paul Sheehan’s argument that the expectation of narrative - especially pertaining to realist fiction - is that ‘in more recent vernacular, there must always be sufficient links to the home page’⁷⁰ highlights just how inescapable and savage this irony of collective conformity actually is. Therefore, it is somewhat curious for the reader to discover that Self is involved with such programmes. It is almost as if they provide him with another means of self-consciously demonstrating how he is not immune from such ironic entrapments.

Self’s awareness of the ironic entrapment of technology and the internet, and the way it works so effectively and on a global scale as an ideology - in that it purports to instill those who use it with a sense of agency, while actually doing the opposite - also marks him out as a writer with a fascination around the conflict between technological determinism and his own style of troubled humanism. His focus on technological determinism brings his work closer to some of the ideas surrounding posthumanism, so it helps that posthumanism, by its definition, is as fluid and complex a concept to try and grasp as Self’s writing is. Cary Wolfe defines it as follows:

[Posthumanism] actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on. It forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself... But it also insists that we attend to the specificity of the human - its ways of being in the world, its ways of knowing, observing, and describing - by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a

⁷⁰ Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p.10

prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically “not-human” and have nevertheless made the human what it is.⁷¹

Wolfe’s points on ‘removed meaning’ and his belief that ‘taken-for-granted modes of human experience’ are being altered and reconsidered in profound ways bear some similarities to Self’s characterisation of the internet and what makes it so radically different from previous media and technologies. Unlike the examples of television, cinema, the rise of the car, pop music, print media and even religion, Self describes the internet as ‘an arena that is not the ordinarily understood social arena or cultural arena’.⁷² This is because ‘unlike these other mediums, because of their very visibility, their very kind of presence and salience and discoverability, are more obviously policed by the same kind of social and moral codes that have always been in operation. Not true for the internet.’⁷³ Consequently, the global dominance of the internet as a medium is fundamentally altering human ‘ways of being in the world’, in terms of commerce, in terms of morals, in terms of social interaction, and as Self stresses, in terms of reading and writing serious literature. Because this happens in often unforeseen ways and on a global scale it also means that Self’s definitions of the internet and its effects reach the level of a Level III technology in Allenby and Sarewitz’s categorisation of the techno-human condition. There are significant moral and cognitive difficulties directly caused by this technology, and this is why it is so important that Self embraces these difficulties within his writing. Returning to Wolfe’s definition of posthumanism, the idea that it is crucial to ‘rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience’ is similar rhetoric to Self’s longtime belief that ‘What excites me is to disturb the reader’s fundamental assumptions. I want to make them feel certain categories within which they are used to perceiving the world are unstable.’⁷⁴

⁷¹ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.xxv

⁷² Self, ‘Rituals of our digital life’

⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁴ Brian Finney, ‘Will Self’s Transgressive Fictions’,
http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.501/11.3.r_finney.html

The 2011 short story 'iAnna' is, in the context of this argument, a direct example of this in that it deals with the internet, the relevant hardware, and the way that so many people conduct themselves online. It tells the story of a young woman, Anna Richards, who has been confined to a mental institution because of her conflation of the external world with an iPad. Self's notorious fictional psychiatrists, Shiva Mukti and Zack Busner, also feature in the story, and it is Busner who ponders the following about Anna's psychotic delusion:

But surely you cannot be unaware that every successive wave of technology has nightmarishly infected the psychotic? That in the preindustrial world they were possessed by devils and that once magnetism had been discovered their minds turned to the lodestone? When electricity appeared it immediately zapped their thoughts - and the coming of the telegraph dot-dot-dashed away on the inside of their skulls? This, um, *iPhrenia* is only the latest sad fancy to grip these distressed early-adopters, who have already been plagued by X-Rays and atomic bombs and Lord knows what else.' ('iA')

Busner dwells here upon the fact that rapid technological development is not something that is exclusive to our digital age, or indeed our 'fast culture'. However, he also realises that such developments impact upon entire cultures and the collective consciousness, as well as just individuals, and this is where the joke of the story lies. It begins with Mukti's revelation that this '*iPhrenia*' is an 'emerging pattern', ('iA') and ends with Busner - after having suggested that Anna's psychosis can be cured or at least managed by being provided with an actual iPad - gazing out over the crowds of a central London lunchtime and realising that Anna is far from alone in her affliction. This reaffirms the realisation that '*iPhrenia*' is a form of psychosis affecting the masses, and Busner takes leave with a wry parting shot to Mukti about 'the holes those palliative iPads will make in your savagely reduced budget.' ('iA')

Self has used short stories to offer his vision on the disturbing and unforeseen consequences of an overindulgence in technology previously, however. As far back as 1991, 'Mono-Cellular' takes a similar approach to the early adoption of mobile phones. Written from an anonymous first-person perspective, the insomniac narrator is on the board of directors (along with, among others, an invalid and a Labrador) of Ocean Ltd,

which is seemingly masquerading at the time of the tale as a mobile phone company. Waiting on a phone call from the other director, Gavin, is one of the agonies of the narrator come the end of the story. The other nuisances that dominate the narrator's existence are a wart in the pit of his elbow and a loss of appetite, and towards the end of the story the narrator begins to assume that these problems are interrelated, and hence the tension of waiting on a phone call unexpectedly but directly heightens the pain of the wart and his loss of appetite. He philosophises about his wart that 'What I need to do is give it some real nourishment, something that will completely assuage it. Since the wart owes its very existence to the founding of Ocean Ltd, the act of satiating its relentless hunger will necessarily bring about the completion of Ocean Ltd's business.' (*QTol*, p.170) The final, orgiastic scene involving various foodstuffs and company invoices is, surely enough, interrupted by a mobile phone ringing. It transpires at first to be from one of the hundred mobile phones that are being stored for the company in the narrator's house that he has designated his 'children' (*QTol*, p.172) - further evidence of the mental fragility and odd emotional connections that such an attachment to technology creates. Stylistically, the narrator's fragmented and desperate train of thought as the story fades out is at odds with the brash aural sensation of what has turned into a hundred mobiles ringing at once, 'in a synchronous cacophony... pulsing like some insane electric cicadas... pulsing in and out... expanding and contracting... expanding...' (*QTol*, p.172)

Mental health and modernism

The narrator of 'Mono-Cellular' is by his own admission 'but a single-celled creature capable of one giant, knee-jerk reflex.' (*QTol*, p.160) Likewise, Anna Richards is merely one of the 'early-adopters'. Much of Self's interest then, and subsequent source material for parodying, is the collective consciousness that exists within our increasingly 'fast culture', that these two individuals happen to be broadly representative of. His interest in the state of this consciousness and his own past mental health issues makes Self's fascination with the ways mental health is dealt with, particularly through the 'psy

professions' an understandable and important one. Zack Busner is a central figure when it comes to assessing the complicated nature of this interest, and this is something that works through both his recurring appearances in Self's work, and the practitioners he is based on. He explains that 'Busner has acted as a conduit for working out my own thinking on these questions, and the main question I want to kind of solve - though I know it's insoluble - is 'what is madness?' And so by reintroducing him into fiction after fiction he works to kind of investigate it on my behalf.'⁷⁵ One obvious way this 'insolubility' is represented is through the non-chronological and anomalous nature of Busner's appearances, to the point where trying to compose a timeline of his life and actions is virtually - and of course purposefully - impossible. A case in point begins with his appearance alongside Mukti in 'iAnna'. In this, Mukti has coerced Busner out of retirement to assist him, despite the fact that the 2004 tale 'Dr. Mukti' tells the story of Busner's involvement in Mukti's murder while they were both active psychiatrists. Another is Busner's curious and amusing role as Self's own therapist in the pseudo-memoir *Walking to Hollywood*.

His first appearances come in 'Ward 9' and 'The Quantity Theory of Insanity', in Self's first short story collection. The titular story of that collection is based upon the theory that 'there is only a fixed proportion of sanity available in any given society at any given time'. (*QTol*, p.126) The narrator and inventor of this theory, Harold Ford, charts his encounters with Busner from their student days right up until their status as 'virtually household names'. (*QTol*, p.102) He also provides the first hint at Busner's eventual hubristic downfall, as Ford notes:

Busner was beginning to be taken up by the media as the prophet of some new movement and his vanity was insupportable, as was his pretension. He would sit for hours in a darkened room, thrumming mindlessly on an electric bass guitar and composing what he called 'verbal tone poems'. Let me tell you, what I could see at the time prefigured his eventual fall from grace. I knew he would end up on television game shows. (*QTol*, p.124)

⁷⁵ Will Self, 'Busner is like my dad', *BBC Open Book*, 17.9.2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ynrzs>

Busner's infamy surrounding his inglorious television appearances (this is another recurring joke when Busner turns up in Self's fictions) provides a nod towards the insidious infiltration by the media and popular culture of issues such as mental illness, and it also forms another self-conscious parody - given Self's own prominence on television, particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s - of the phenomenon of the media intellectual.

'Ward 9' is a story that features Busner in his most recognisable guise, as 'senior consultant in the psychiatric department' (*QTol*, p.24) at the fictional Heath Hospital. The malevolent tests that he inflicts upon the art therapist and narrator Misha Gurney highlight some of the figures that have inspired Busner's creation. Busner tells Misha at the story's conclusion that 'On Ward 9, you could have been therapist or patient; it seems that you have decided to become a patient.' (*QTol*, p.67) The interchangeable nature of mental illness and mental health care shows the influence upon Self of psychoanalysts such as R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz, whom in *The Divided Self* (1960) and *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961) respectively put forward the idea that afflictions such as schizophrenia were less diseases and more behavioural patterns that were frowned upon by society. In Laing's case, the interrelationship between such afflictions and social behaviour was one that worked both ways, in that such behavioural patterns were frowned upon but simultaneously caused by social effects. Self interviewed Szasz back in 1992, and in this interview the psychiatrist outlines his views on the reductive qualities of group consciousness, stating - in the context of Self's suggestion that groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous form the most 'pernicious and misguided' kind of therapy - that 'If people think that they can be helped by these things, that's their own affair. Just as it's their own affair if they want to belong to a certain religion or take a certain drug. But as far as I am concerned they are all equally stupid.' (*JM*, p.303)

The 'Concept House' in Willesden is something else that Busner is (in)famous for, both within Self's literary world and for regular readers of his fiction. It is also another

experiment that perseveres with the idea that there is consciously no distinction between doctors and patients when it comes to mental health, as it is ‘an autonomous community of therapists and patients, except that instead of these roles being concretely divided among residents, all were free to take on either mantle at any time.’ (*QTol*, p.119) This demonstrates how the Concept House is the clearest link to Laing and Szasz, and the high-modernist *Shark* (2014) gives the greatest insight into the Concept House. It is ironic, therefore, that *Shark* (and its predecessor in Self’s modernist trilogy - *Umbrella* (2012) - which is itself based on the neurologist Oliver Sacks’ work on encephalitis lethargica) offer a radical departure from the controversial theories of Laing and Szasz. Indeed, Busner caustically offers his opinion on Laing’s self-caused downfall in *Shark*, recalling how ‘he’s become rather a victim of his own rhetoric’. (*S*, p.94) By adopting a stream-of-consciousness narrative in these two novels, Self is able to furnish Busner with an emotional and psychological ‘hinterland’⁷⁶ for the first time. The figurative journey into Busner’s consciousness reveals him to be a character with, above all else and regardless of the questionable impulses that he regularly acts upon - such as falling under the influence of Laing, which is derided in *Umbrella* as ‘pathetic reductionism’ (*U*, p.85) - an intense and sincere interest and belief in mental health and those who have issues with it. This figurative journey is a troubling one, as Busner demonstrates a startling self-awareness of how this interest so often traps him. He considers this within the walls of the Concept House in *Shark* when he ruminates over the mental breakdown of his brother, which subsequently:

made him determined to see every patient not as a function of their disease... *but as a human being*. And it was this striving for humanity... *and fundamental decency*... that had brought him to this... *pretty pass*, where he cordially and unthinkingly despised the... *human refuse* he’d waddled about himself... *as a tramp makes his bed*. It might well be that at the Concept House residents received no encouragement to play the parts of either patients or psychiatrists, yet... *there’s still no end to the bloody histrionics!* (*S*, p.85)

⁷⁶ Self, ‘Busner is like my dad’

This interest is in part highly personal, and also part self-consciously egotistical, as Busner also realises he is the 'vulnerable prey of his own soaring enthusiasm'. (*U*, p.83) It is also highly ideological however, as Busner's prolonged and ultimately doomed involvement with the encephalitic patients leads him to the realisation that 'the psy professions are *in and of themselves mental pathologies*.' (*U*, p.309) Moreover, Self shares both this interest and the awareness of the paradoxical, subsuming nature of it. Therefore, while this technique also depicts the unsettling crises of an individual mind, it reveals how Self's troubled humanism and embracing of difficulty is evident in his use of modernist techniques such as stream-of-consciousness as a form of psychological liberation.

While *Umbrella* and *Shark* are more obviously modernist due to their style, Self has long been engaged with the ideas of modernism. He argues that 'we are still solidly in the modernist era, and that the crisis registered in the novel form of the 1900s by the inception of new and more powerful technologies continues apace.' ('TNID') This forms another central tension within Self's work, as the crisis in objective knowledge that helps define modernist thought paradoxically proves liberating because of the literary and formal conventions that come out of this thought and move it away from traditional, realist fiction. As Self outlines:

I think realism is a highly artificial convention, a kind of Kulturkampf that dominates peoples' thinking. It's partly connected to the fact that most novels are written by people who read too many novels. It's like a worm eating itself. There are certain ways that people write novels that are meant to be realist that are so ingrained that they can't see them for how artificial they are. I think I've been engaged in my career in a kind of permanent revolution and I'm more and more interested in getting beyond those kinds of ideologies of how we can conceive of novels and how we conceive of prose fiction.⁷⁷

For Self, realist fiction has the same ideological qualities as both commercial fiction and creative writing courses, in its stifling, 'self-consuming' and 'self-perpetuating' artificiality that is destined to entrap anyone who becomes too involved with it, not

⁷⁷ Self, *White Review*

unlike the allure of the internet. Sheehan, in his work *Modernism, Humanism and Narrative*, explains that realism ‘was incapable of accommodating, in the twentieth century, the sense of rupture and disjunction, the dissolution of certainties and terrifying losses of faith.’⁷⁸ Sheehan’s choice of language here is designed to come across as unsettling and challenging, and this is the point that Self is trying to make as well, and the point that helps to define Self’s particular brand of humanism. His work *needs* to be capable of accommodating these crises and these losses of faith, because acknowledging them and at least attempting to come to terms with them - even if properly doing so is ultimately impossible - is infinitely healthier and more beneficial than either evading them or being ignorant of them through an indulgence in and reliance upon technology. Therefore, any of the deterministic or fatalistic aspects of Self’s work that may appear posthumanist because of their refusal to allow space for individual identity are actually at odds with the perverse, terrifying, but psychologically liberating qualities that embracing a modernist crisis and rejection of objective knowledge allows for.

Subverting cultural expectations through narrative technique

Self’s narratives have to both depict this consciously difficult humanism and satirise the all-encompassing and simplistic characteristics of contemporary culture and society. Conflict between narrative and culture is, as H. Porter Abbott points out, something that has existed as long as narrative itself, yet Self has ways of subverting this kind of conflict.

Abbott states:

The agon, or conflict, has been so central a feature of narrative throughout its recorded history that it is reasonable to assume that it serves important cultural purposes. One very plausible possibility is that the representation of conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least make living difficult). In this view of narrative, its conflicts are not solely about particular characters (or entities). Also, in conflict, and riding on top of the conflict of narrative entities, are conflicts regarding values, ideas, feelings, and ways of seeing the world. There is, of course, no culture without many such conflicts. Narrative may, then, play an important social role as a vehicle for making the case for one side or

⁷⁸ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, p.14

another in a conflict, or for negotiating the claims of the opposing sides, or simply for providing a way for people to live with a conflict that is irreconcilable.⁷⁹

Typically, there is much in this definition that brings to mind Self's work, but also some aspects of it that Self's work notably deviates from. The ironic entrapment and fundamental instabilities that consciously characterise Self's writing are so profound that they bring to mind Abbott's point regarding the 'irreconcilable' conflicts that exist in present-day culture. Yet the subversiveness of Self's writing is exemplified through Abbott's belief that narratives can work to alleviate cultural difficulties, and in this light Abbott becomes a foil for what Self is actively not doing. For this, of course, is precisely the opposite of what Self seeks to do - he seeks to 'un-alleviate' and highlight such fractures and difficulties as a means of championing, in correlation, the intricacies of the individual intellect and imagination, and it is through these means that Self primarily revolts against narrative and cultural conformity.

Self's role in relation to, and ultimate entrapment within, what he views as this simplistic culture is represented within his fiction through two of his fictional anthropologists - the sinister, Kurtz-like Erich Von Sasser in *The Butt*, and Janner, who visits the remote Amazonian Ur-Bororo tribe in the short story 'Understanding the Ur-Bororo'. That Self chooses to discuss the state of contemporary literature explicitly, and make allusions to his own role within it (albeit less explicitly) through the medium of anthropologists - those concerned with the study of social and cultural development - is telling as it demonstrates the links between culture and the expectations that readers have of narrative development and resolution. In doing so, it also provides more evidence towards an engagement with moral difficulties within Self's fiction that is absent in Ballard's.

⁷⁹ H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), p.55

Von Sasser appears towards the end of *The Butt*, after protagonist Tom Brodzinski has completed a nightmarish journey across an imagined and highly tribal landscape that ostensibly resembles both Australia and post-war Iraq. Brodzinski has had to travel across this country as reparation for accidentally flicking a cigarette butt on to the head of a fellow hotel guest, which due to certain tribal customs becomes an act of attempted murder. The anthropologist then becomes the spokesperson for the consciously moral and cultural difficulties within the novel, and is a figure who staunchly advocates the inseparability of social and moral thought when he puts forward that ‘I view human morality, in the final analysis, yeah, to be a purely instrumental attribute of social systems.’ (TB, p.301) Compare this to Self’s claim in a 2008 interview that ‘morality is a socio-cultural construct. I believe that, but it doesn’t make me any more prey to moral relativism than anyone else... Just because your morality derives from your place and time doesn’t mean that you don’t cleave to it anymore.’⁸⁰ This sense of inseparability is also tackled by the anthropologist Edward Bruner who, on the subject of the relationship between anthropology and literature (anthropological or otherwise), posits that the ‘idea of a scientific, supposedly objective, ethnographic report that left the individual observer out of the account is not only a cliché, it is an impossibility. Every ethnographer inevitably leaves traces in the text.’⁸¹ This unavoidable degree of moral relativism within the anthropological process leads to Self treating anthropology in a notably reflexive way, almost treating anthropology anthropologically as it were. Take, for instance, the level of reflexivity that Von Sasser shows in relation to his field, when he insists that ‘anthropology has always been a kind of imperialism: the noble conquest of authenticity.’ (TB, p.305) Von Sasser’s belief that there is inexorably an ‘imperialism’ within the field of anthropology removes the possibility of any sort of pure objectivity. Moreover, the

⁸⁰ Will Self, ‘Smoking Gun’, *The Guardian*, 22.3.2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/22/fiction.willself>

⁸¹ Edward M. Bruner, ‘Introduction’ in Paul Benson (ed.), *Anthropology and Literature* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois Press, 1993), p.2

way in which Von Sasser reveals this betrays, to paraphrase Bruner, traces of Self - and the presence of Self's own argument - in the text through a self-conscious realisation of the inherent complexities of the subject matter and the entrapment within it.

If Von Sasser's approach is an overtly intellectual one, another side of Self comes about through a similar revelation in 'Understanding the Ur-Bororo'. This is perhaps unsurprising given the tendency of many of Self's early short stories to take the form of elaborate literary jokes (he owns that *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* 'started life as a series of riffs and gags that I would tell people'⁸²), and Self uses the punchline of this story as a means of detailing ironic entrapment. Ostensibly, it is Janner who is the butt of the joke here, as it transpires that the obscure anthropological research to which he has dedicated his life is merely a means of his predecessor and benefactor, Professor Lurie, fulfilling his desire 'for some other poor idiot to suffer the same unbelievable tedium he experienced when staying with the Ur-Bororo in the Thirties.' (*QTol*, p.91) Janner becomes the victim of the field he has endeavoured to study his entire life, just as Self invariably becomes entrapped by the society he is satirising. But just as Janner is ultimately at peace with the way proceedings have panned out, so Self would prefer to acknowledge this entrapment rather than remain ignorant of it.

The interrelationship between narrative and anthropology becomes significantly more pronounced when Von Sasser riffs on the subjects of narrative development and closure. The anthropologist ruminates extensively on the narrative expectations that the 'Anglos' (the Westerners in Self's novel) cherish so deeply, posturing 'How does it all end?... Isn't that the question that torments the Anglo - bothers him like a fly in his eye? The Third Act problem, the thrilling climax... then the drowsy resolution. Yes, yes, the Anglos' lust for this is blatantly bloody sexual'. (*TB*, p.326) It then becomes apparent that this is the influence of his father - another anthropologist - who before his death

⁸² Self, *White Review*

tells his son that the 'lust for an end: that... is the true leitmotif of Western civilization, and it's the very one we've come here to rid them of. Don't let our people fall victim to the narrative fallacy of the Anglos!' (*TB*, p.327) The expectation of a neat sense of closure and an easily recognisable aesthetic position is what constitutes this 'narrative fallacy'. Ironically, it is a sense of expectation that Stephanie Merritt bears out in her review of *The Butt*, which in her view:

feels thinly stretched, built on the kind of clever conceit that might have lent itself more readily to a short story. When Tom reaches his destination after his gruelling journey, he is astonished to find his lawyer and the consul there ahead of him, and asks why he had to drive all that way if he could have just flown. Likewise, the reader can't help feeling that we have all taken an unnecessarily long and tortuous route to get to the point of it all.⁸³

Merritt makes some valuable points here, not least when she talks about *The Butt* being more of a 'clever conceit'. This is telling, not only because *The Butt*, like much of Self's short fiction, ends - despite Self's insistence that there are no jokes within the novel - on what at least resembles a punchline (albeit a fairly bleak and weak one), but because in doing so this provides more evidence for the close link between writing and performance, and the similar kind of expectations that audiences and readers have for both. In a separate review of *The Butt*, David Kelly takes a different approach, noting wryly that the 'subtitle is "An Exit Strategy", but it could just as easily be "How Fiction Doesn't Work". He's [Self] never had much use for literary niceties like plot and characterization, and why should he?'⁸⁴ Kelly may well mean this question to be rhetorical, but it remains a pertinent one, for the alternative subtitle he comes up with suggests that the novel subverts the 'narrative fallacy' surrounding the ways in which fiction is so widely expected to work. The answer to this would seem to be that anthropology becomes a self-consuming process in light of these expectations of literary production. Namely, the 'lust' for neat endings within narratives propels many readers

⁸³ Stephanie Merritt, 'Smoke, yes, but where's the fire?', *The Guardian*, 13.4.08, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/13/fiction.willself>

⁸⁴ David Kelly, 'Smoked', *The New York Times*, 19.9.08, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/books/review/Kelly-t.html?_r=0

to the imagined position of pseudo-anthropologists that are able to determine and apply meanings relative to the culture and the world as they understand it. Of course, given Self's opinion that there is a widespread cultural distaste for difficulty, applying this limited understanding would seemingly become a particularly problematic trend for Self. As a case in point, the subtitle itself refers to one of the most bloody and destructive desires for closure in recent years, namely the coalition strategy for making a swift, clean exit from the Middle East following the Iraq war in 2003. The mess that the coalition ultimately made of this serves as a deadly real-life example of how this 'narrative fallacy' of neat closure is so hard to achieve, regardless of how easy it may seem at first.

In a literary sense, the reductive nature of this 'narrative fallacy' is at odds with what Self outlines as the characteristics of serious literature, and the valuable, human results of entrapment and difficulty. He argues that:

The capability words have when arranged sequentially to both mimic the free flow of human thought and investigate the physical expressions and interactions of thinking subjects; the way they may be shaped into a believable simulacrum of either the commonsensical world, or any number of invented ones; and the capability of the extended prose form itself, which, unlike any other art form, is able to enact self-analysis, to describe other aesthetic modes and even mimic them. ('TNID')

According to Self then, prose fiction - both the creative writing and perceptive reading of - involves uniquely intricate narrative processes, that implicitly are not supposed to be convenient or straightforward. Rather, they are necessarily unsettling and challenging - and accordingly rewarding - for both writer and reader. It is these complex imaginative processes that form the basis of the 'suspension of disbelief' that underpins Self's writing, and further reinforces his attacks on both naturalistic fiction and the culture of simplicity he believes we exist in.

An exercise in examining these attacks comes through looking at two of Self's epilogues, from *The Butt* and *Dorian* (2002). The purpose of an epilogue is, in a sense, a curiously paradoxical one, in that it exists simultaneously as a part of, yet consciously at a distance from, the main narrative. The effect that such distance has is that it, in

theory, provides a greater degree of hindsight, in terms of the effects that the events of the main narrative have wrought upon the characters - or, in essence, a whole extra level of closure.

The Butt's main narrative concludes with Brodzinski - the portrait of the quintessentially mundane Western everyman - about to have his brain operated on by Von Sasser. In these final moments, Brodzinski realises with a resigned, absurd sense of amusement that 'he was only doing what he had always done: passively conforming to an invented belief system.' (*TB*, p.351) This is a moment of characteristic self-awareness for Self, and in that regard the novel's epilogue becomes an intriguing one. Taking place 'some years later', it ostensibly offers closure in the respect that the reader gets to witness the results of Brodzinski going under Von Sasser's knife. Yet there is a significant regression from the momentary lucidity that defined Brodzinski's final moments in the main narrative, to a state of hopeless, brain-damaged inertia. One fleeting moment of optimistic individuality does occur, however, when Brodzinski purposefully isolates himself from the 'ridiculously tiny and insignificant' (*TB*, p.353) Brian Prentice, Winthrop Adams and Jethro Swai-Phillips, the totems of the bizarre and horrifying culture that has dominated both Brodzinski and the narrative.

Rather than solitude, however, it quickly becomes apparent that Tom's consciousness has merged with the imaginary voice of 'Astande' - the native spirit and state of mind that allegedly equates to individual agency (and one that Brodzinski has mistakenly believed himself in possession of throughout the entire novel). The utter hopelessness of Brodzinski's situation becomes a brutal undermining of any expectations of hindsight or character development occurring in the intervening period between main narrative ending and epilogue opening. The voices in Brodzinski's broken mind expose a lasting false belief in his own active superiority - a lack of development symbolised with a damning finality with Brodzinski taking a drag on a discarded cigarette butt, in a bleak mirroring of the novel's opening moments.

The epilogue of *Dorian* also contains the trope of the protagonist hearing voices in their head - on this occasion it is the narrative voice of Henry Wotton that ultimately drives Dorian Gray into a breakdown. The joke within this epilogue is in its metafictional qualities, as the re-telling of Oscar Wilde's novel transpires to be a typescript of Wotton's own narrative. It is a joke met with disbelief by Dorian, who expostulates that Wotton 'always swore blind he'd never write a novel, let alone a *roman a clef*.' (*D*, p.258) Nevertheless, Dorian moves on from this, and ascends to a place at the very heart of 1990s British culture. Within this culture:

Street fashion synergised with pop music, pop music energised politics, politics draped about its suited shoulders the humanitarian mantle of the Princess, and the cartoon antics of conceptual artists galvanised everybody. So what if the whole giddy rondo had the air of the fin-de-siècle about it? Because it was the end of the twentieth-century, and after a hundred years of willed decline, there was a feeling abroad in the land that things could only get better. (*D*, p.267)

The pun that closes this quote, the title of the song that soundtracked Blair's first election campaign, highlights the widespread naïve optimism that dominated this society, and that Dorian finds himself so 'in his element' (*D*, p.266) in this role marks him out as the arch-populist within a culture defined by an apparent standardisation and collective merging of so many different social, political and artistic spheres. It seems appropriate, then, that Self chooses this moment to reintroduce the narrative voice of Henry Wotton into Dorian's head, as a means of disjuncting such complacent cultural indulgence. To prolong the joke, the narrative voice even calls out Dorian's pretentiousness in describing his hearing of the voice as 'distinctly *unheimlich*.' (*D*, p.268) At this juncture, Wotton's typescript is inside of a locked room, and the thought that 'Perhaps there's something inside you'd rather not see' (*D*, p.269) acts as a metaphor (of which Dorian is the embodiment) for a culture that is defiantly unwilling to face up to any kind of difficulty. The final uncanniness of the epilogue is the mutation of the narrative voice from the voice of the deceased Wotton inside of Dorian's head into the very real Ginger - the James Vane figure of Self's adaptation - and the fatal consequences that this has for Dorian. His withdrawal from society that has preceded

this has taken the form of a total psychological breakdown and an enactment of the levels of untold debauchery of Wilde's anti-hero. The message implicit here is that the only ways from which to disconnect oneself from such a connected contemporary society consist of total breakdown and death. Without these, one will necessarily remain trapped in the 'whole giddy rondo'.

The literary journalist, and the literary celebrity

On the subject of narrative and cultural expectations, Self's ability to crack jokes consistently within his writing is an important trait, and one that is linked to the perception of him as a literary celebrity, and the expectations of performance and sense of ironic entrapment that exist within this. Writing in the comic mode may seem like a strange tactic to adopt for someone who is bemoaning the death of serious fiction, but jokes and seriousness - much like psychiatrists and mental patients - are not distinct from one another. In the context of Self's writing, jokes are an important means of highlighting some of the paradoxes that are at play within both his writing and his persona, as well as feeding back in to the performative nature of society that Ballard outlined and explaining how Self reacts to and within the expectations of this society. For instance, the disparity between the individual intellect and the collective consciousness becomes even more complex through Self's role as both an individual author and a notably recognisable public figure. While jokes do not exist in inverse correlation to serious literature, some broader sense of entertainment still does, as Self feels that 'In line with the decline of serious solitary reading, punters demand to be entertained collectively.'⁸⁵ Once again, the sense of expectation manifests itself in a consumerist way through the reduction of the collective to mere 'punters'. Another reason their demand to be entertained will be heightened is because of Self's history as a television personality, particularly in such irreverent guises as a team captain on the comedy panel show

⁸⁵ Will Self, 'Most performers want their audiences to like them. I just want to be Stewart Lee', *New Statesman*, 19.10.2015, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2015/10/most-performers-want-their-audiences-them-i-just-want-be-stewart-lee>

Shooting Stars and as a regular panellist on the satirical *Have I Got News For You*. These roles are what make Busner's television appearances so recognisably self-aware, however Self is also acutely aware that entertainment and jokes have interesting and varied psychological effects on both audiences and performers:

for an audience, laughter is a balm and a restorative, lifting it collectively out of the rut its massed feet have worn throughout the daily go-round: for the performer, however, laughter is always an easy way of gaining acceptance. "Laugh," as the hoary old adage has it, "and the world laughs with you." But really this formula should also be subject to reversal; from the isolated performer's point of view, the important thing is that if the world is laughing, and you're laughing as well, the world will assume you're part of it, rather than some weirdo scam-merchant trying to pull one over.⁸⁶

There is a polymorphousness to laughter that makes it so important to the complexities of Self's work. Laughter can function as a consumerist self-critique, it can reveal and reflect absurdity, and - significantly - expose a sense of hitherto unknown entrapment. Simon Critchley focuses on this particular kind of laughter when he channels the comic writing of Swift, Sterne and Beckett to describe a laughter 'which arises out of a palpable sense of inability, impotence and inauthenticity... that is more joyful (not to mention being a lot funnier), and also more tragic.'⁸⁷ This is also the sense that Self's humour arises from. The literary jokes and conceits outlined in this chapter ('iAnna', 'The Quantity Theory', *Dorian*, *The Butt*, among others) seize on and undermine fundamental aspects of contemporary human existence in a way that is simultaneously preposterous and convincing. The same applies to Self's other notable humorous literary constructs, be it the idea that when you die you simply move to a different part of London (explored in *How the Dead Live* and 'The North London Book of the Dead'), or an alternate world in which apes and chimpanzees, not humans, are the dominant evolutionary species (*Great Apes*). Self even pushes the joke in *Great Apes* to a characteristically self-conscious degree by including an authorial foreword, imagining himself as an ape. It is this pushing the joke to its limits that ultimately characterises Self's humour, as it instills

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.106

the impression in the reader that there is always still a joke being played upon them (the afterword of the already highly reflexive *Walking to Hollywood* and the question of the extent of its sincerity is another example of this) that they cannot get, just as any easy meaning cannot be found in his work, or in society in general.

As a means of contextualising this unknowability, Self relates his experience of being a member of the audience for a gig by the comedian Stewart Lee, who becomes a telling if somewhat leftfield influence in this light:

he continually told us we were too slow and stupid to get his jokes, and that we needn't bother laughing, as he considered us of no account. At the same time, he presented a portrait of himself as a deeply insecure man, fed up with the thankless cycle of touring mid-sized venues, who feels an affinity with prostitutes because, like them: "I do something for people they desperately want, but they've nothing but contempt for me." ... This seemed like reverse psychology: what we were meant to feel as Lee berated us was that we were perspicacious enough to see through his act and appreciate his real message: namely, that we were sufficiently wise and witty to appreciate how wise and witty he is. But actually, Lee is a good enough actor to keep the other possibility open. In line with Papa Sigmund's dictum, he isn't joking at all, but hoodwinking us with his own ironic sensibility as he kvetches and badmouths in plain sight, cackling internally all the while.⁸⁸

For Self, the genius of Lee's distinctively uncomfortable comedy lies in the indeterminacy surrounding his performance. There is the chance that Lee is sincerely insecure and downtrodden, for example; however, there is also the unshakable possibility that there is a deliberate, subversive duality to his comedy. Lee is undermining the audience's expectations for a comedy show through this discomfort, with the intention of, as Self puts it, seeking 'constantly to raise their [the audience's] game.'⁸⁹ Similarly, Self seeks to raise his readers' game through his insistent championing of intellect and defence of difficulty, and he does so with an awareness - like Lee - that to properly achieve this within the confines of our 'fast culture' is probably impossible.

Another layer of this paradox is, of course, that Self remains a notably recognisable public figure within contemporary culture. Self's radio and TV appearances come because

⁸⁸ Self, 'I just want to be Stewart Lee'

⁸⁹ *ibid*

of the recognition he has received for his writing, and in turn an immersion into this celebrity culture has an effect on his writing and the expectations that readers may have of it. This status as a literary celebrity or media intellectual provides explanation and even justification for the overtly complex, self-conscious aspects of his literary aesthetic, and the parallels between Self and Busner's eventual role as mainstay on television gameshows are fairly apparent. It is appropriate then that the phenomenon of the literary celebrity, and the relationship between the writer and their public, is one that is rife with contradictions and traps.

The intricacies of this two-way relationship are explored by Wenche Ommundsen in her 2004 essay, 'Sex, Soap and Sainthood: Beginning to Theorise Literary Celebrity'. On one hand, Ommundsen highlights how there are aspects of the dynamic between famous individual and adoring collective that play out so that agency exists entirely with the celebrity. Using Jeanette Winterson as an example of this, Ommundsen talks about how 'it is possible for the author to have it both ways: to court the audience's veneration and to mock it too... mocking the tendency to fetishise writing and authors, treating them as the spiritual equivalent of fast food or quick-fix solutions to all the ills of the modern world.'⁹⁰ Self pushes this privileged position further, however. The first part of this dynamic - the courting of an audience's veneration - is not one Self is interested in. As the title of his article on Stewart Lee's comedy style reveals: 'Most performers want their audiences to like them. I just want to be Stewart Lee'. The indifference that permeates the performance and work of those two artists therefore allows for even greater scope with which to mock this fetishising of writers, and is particularly significant because, as Ommundsen insinuates, such veneration is another outlet for a collective culture of simplicity. If writers are being reduced to 'the spiritual equivalent of fast food', then as Self has mentioned, audiences are attempting to grow obese on them.

⁹⁰ Wenche Ommundsen, 'Sex, Soap and Sainthood: Beginning to Theorise Literary Celebrity', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 3 (2004), p.47

Ommundsen then elaborates on this veneration as part of an exploration into the specifics of literary celebrity, and in doing so she begins to highlight some of the contradictions that help foster it. She argues that writers become:

the projection of a hunger that is variously sexual, social and spiritual, a repository for values that are able to be at the same time crassly commercial, loftily aesthetic and anti-materialist. It is within these contradictions that we need to locate not only the celebrity writer, but important aspects of the function of literature itself in contemporary public culture.⁹¹

The contradiction arises here from the fact that the novel is a form and an object that is bound up in the processes of commerciality - a binding aided in no small part by the ubiquity of the online marketplace - regardless of any anti-materialist content that it may contain. Joe Moran argues that such contradictions ensure that the phenomenon of literary celebrity is necessarily more complex than 'a straightforward effect of the commodification of culture' and instead focuses on the interrelationship 'between "high", "low" and "middlebrow" culture.'⁹² Significantly in relation to Self's literary aesthetic, this cultural interrelationship instils a sense of ironic entrapment to the role of the literary celebrity. Ommundsen captures this succinctly when she points out that it is 'possible for public literary culture to adopt a rhetoric of authenticity and artistic autonomy... at the same time as this culture itself stands accused of partaking in the postmodern fabrication of surfaces, simulacra and commodities, precisely the kind of effects high art culture professes to despise.'⁹³ Ommundsen's argument here is similar to Self's belief that the culture serious literature purports to exist within is unavoidably subject to the simplistic processes and false ideologies - the technological determinism of social media and the internet more generally, as examples - that it seeks to escape. As Self has pointed out, this does not bode well at all for aspiring writers or indeed the novel as a traditional literary form in its own right. However, as far back as 2000 he also demonstrates an awareness of the enduring projection of a writer who appears to - but

⁹¹ Ommundsen, 'Sex, Soap and Sainthood', p.52

⁹² Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p.4

⁹³ Ommundsen, 'Sex, Soap and Sainthood', p.53

ultimately does not and cannot - exist outside of this realm, that helps explain why writers continue to court so much veneration:

The writer, in an age of mass standardisation, corporatism, stereotypy, and the remorseless eradication of any meaningful individuality... represents the promise of an untrammelled life, a *modus vivendi* in which the individual lives by a product to which he alone has access, like a private mine for a unique mineral. All the jinks, high or low, that go along with this, are merely the gravy. The lay reader is interested in the writer's life, because it holds up the teasing possibility (although it is seldom truly the case) of a life that can be considered to be *sui generis* [unique]. (FF, p.140)

In this article, on the subject of literary biography, Self offers another perspective on the apparent 'wonderment' with which aspiring writers tend to view the writing life. Here, the focus is instead on the idea of the individual author, and the desire of the reader to live vicariously through a combination of their work and their lives. And given the tendency towards acknowledging his own involvement in such forms of entrapment, Self owns that when it comes to literary biography, 'I devour the stuff.' (FF, p.141)

The perpetual, irresistible interest in the biography or autobiography of an author feeds into the genre of literary journalism as well; a genre which Self is prolific in. Norman Sims highlights the role that autobiography plays in literary journalism, when he defines the latter genre as typically involving 'immersion reporting for a year or longer, the active presence of the author in the narrative, and tools long associated only with fiction such as elaborate structures, characterization, and even symbolism, but with the added requirement of accuracy.'⁹⁴ As well as the active presence of the author being a particularly appealing trait of literary journalism, the major defining characteristic of it centres around a merging of the accuracy and factuality that is expected of traditional journalism, and the imaginative 'tools' of literary fiction. John C. Hartssock goes into finer detail on a similar point in his own definition of literary journalism, when he states that literary journalists 'reshaped literary styles to permit passages across the borders between fact and fiction, journalism and autobiographical, and reporting and sociology

⁹⁴ Norman Sims, 'International Literary Journalism in Three Dimensions', *World Literature Today* 86:2 (2012), p.33

in such a way that their readers' expectations and confidences were not violated.'⁹⁵ Self has done this too, in one sense, through his regular merging of journalism, autobiography and - increasingly in recent years in collections such as *Psychogeography* and *Psycho Too* - travelogue. Moreover, *Walking to Hollywood* is a work that incorporates all three of these aspects while offering an eradication of the parameters that exist between fact and fiction.

The problem with Hartsock's definition is its ultimate assertion that any merging must not undermine or confront the expectations that readers would usually have of journalism (the overall 'requirement of accuracy', for instance). Self is a writer who, in his fiction, is at great pains to confront, challenge and ridicule the expectations of readers, and this is a mindset that heavily influences his own attitudes towards what journalism should achieve. As he summarises, 'I take the aim of journalism to be to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted... and the way in which you comfort the afflicted is by exposing them to alleged betters.'⁹⁶

The kind of collective comfort that Self wants to disrupt is heavily aided by the reductive tendencies of technology, and it is these kinds of ideologies that the 'New Journalism' movement sought to engage with and challenge during the 1960s and 70s. The term itself was coined by Tom Wolfe, as an umbrella for a style of journalism that was significantly more subjective, immersive and literary than more traditional, dispassionate and factual forms of journalism. David Eason argues that this journalistic movement was concerned with what he refers to as the 'image-world'. He defines New Journalism most succinctly when he argues that reports of that nature 'usually focus on events as symbolic of a cultural ideology or mythology, emphasize the world view of the individual or group under study, and show an absorption in the aesthetics of the reporting

⁹⁵ John C. Hartsock, 'Foreword' in Norman Sims (ed.), *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth-Century* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2008), p.xiv

⁹⁶ Self, *White Review*

process in texts that read like novels or short stories.’⁹⁷ The standard process of New Journalism therefore involves the analysis and debunking of false, surface-level cultural ideologies, but in a way in which the journalist was not exempt from them.

Another strand of Eason’s thesis is the belief that New Journalists fell into one of two categories, and that there were realist and modernist versions of New Journalism. The latter of these styles of journalism continues with the idea that the writer is bound up in the subjects and phenomena they are reporting on, with Eason pointing out that ‘Modernist reports transform what is taken for granted in writing and reading a report into an object of analysis. Reporter and reader are implicated in the social changes themselves.’⁹⁸ He is also keen to stress that ‘Modernist texts reveal that coming to terms with disorder is not synonymous with making events comprehensible for the outside world.’⁹⁹ This enduring incomprehensibility is notably similar to the beliefs that drive Self’s writing and perception as a public figure. Namely, this is the realisation that a troubled take on humanism is necessary even if it does remain out of reach of straightforward definition, and the subsequent impression that often arises is that Self is playing a joke on the reader.

An example of modernist New Journalism that Eason uses is Hunter S. Thompson and his gonzo journalism. More specifically, he analyses Thompson’s Las Vegas journalism (most famously documented in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*), positing that Thompson:

Describes Las Vegas as the metaphorical centre of the image-world, a place where “everydayness” is created from surreal transformations of movies and television shows. Against this backdrop, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo search for “the main story of our generation”, the transformation of the American Dream into a neon nightmare organized around the hedonistic pursuit of “the now”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ David Eason, ‘The New Journalism and the Image-World’ in Norman Sims (ed.), *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth-Century* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2008), pp.191-2

⁹⁸ Eason, ‘The New Journalism’, p.202

⁹⁹ Eason, ‘The New Journalism’, p.194

¹⁰⁰ Eason, ‘The New Journalism’, p.195

While the idea of Self as a disciple of Thompson may be a tempting myth to perpetuate, it would be wrong to do so. The comparison between the two was one of many accusations, in this case lazily, levelled at Self in the wake of a scandal of his own, which saw him transformed from the role of political journalist to ‘human bait for a media feeding frenzy.’ (FF, vi) Self’s actions were less ‘a gonzo journalism stunt in emulation of Hunter Thompson’, more the less sensationalist narrative of the regrettable actions of someone in the grip of heroin addiction. What are more intriguing are the curious parallels that seem to present themselves between Eason’s neat definition of Thompson’s Vegas journalism, and Self’s Dubai journalism. Self’s observations around the images that create Dubai’s unique landscape have much in common with Eason’s views on Thompson’s work, in that they almost become an updated version of them for the twenty-first century and the age of globalisation and the internet.

The tagline - ‘The Centre of Now’ - that marks both the Mall of the Emirates and Dubai itself out as a physical and geographical manifestation of the instantaneousness that is demanded of and provided by globalizing technologies such as air travel and the internet, not least because Self uses remarkably similar rhetoric in describing the internet as having ‘created a permanent Now’. (‘TNID’) The sheer audacity of the shopping centre is one that transfixes Self and allows the process of ironic entrapment to begin taking place, as he realises ‘to conceive of it as a sort of zeitgeisty black hole, into which the future and the past alike ceaselessly gurgle, requires true vision.’¹⁰¹ The wryness with which Self responds to the advertisement and the shopping centre is largely representative of the tone of the article in general, but this differs from Self’s longer stay in and essay about Dubai from 2008 and 2009 respectively, which feels much more overtly pessimistic and drawn-out. In this, the overbearing, oppressive link between Dubai’s landscape and the present is placed within a vaster - and correspondingly bleaker - historical timescale. Looking back, first of all, Self channels Wilfred Thesiger’s 1947

¹⁰¹ Self, ‘The night I was trapped in Dubai Airport’

journey across the empty Arabian Desert, aided only by compass, to comment how ‘A mere sixty years later, the remaining hinterland of Dubai, on the fringes of the Empty Quarter, was once again unmapped, except on a scale of 1:400,000, woefully inadequate for someone proceeding at 3 mph.’ (PT, p.27) Self then uses the same timescale of sixty years to prophesise the future ruination of the conurbation:

within a lifetime the oil to fuel this simulacrum of the temperate zone will be gone, the fountains will piddle to a finish, the air conditioners clatter to a halt, the skyscrapers, and the mock-mock-mock-Palladian villas, will begin to disintegrate, the artificial eminences they stand upon will start to crumble; the pseudo-pools, fake lagoons and ersatz rills will choke with sand - and so the western escarpment of Dubai City will subside into the Empty Quarter. In the 2000s it boasted the only seven-star hotel in the world - in the 2060s it will indeed be the eighth wonder of the world: its greatest and most futile ruin. (PT, p.46)

The striking aspects of this hypothesis are the ways both past and future are defined by nothing but emptiness, and the extent to which the intervening present consists of façade after façade that have arisen seemingly overnight from the Arabian desert. Moreover, Self argues that this wholly unreal landscape is destined to impact upon the emotions and relationships of the people who inhabit it, leading to a visibly Ballardian realm of ‘modular and introverted zones, where social relations had been defined by a CAD-CAM [computer-aided design, computer-aided manufacturing] program’. (PT, p.27) The clue to what has caused all of this comes at the start of the above diatribe, namely the unrivalled capital of the oil trade that transformed this corner of Arabia into the ‘most glaring example of Debord’s society of the spectacle: the mounding then patty-cake-shaping of capital itself into an image - or an idol.’ (PT, p.22) Consequently, the significant extent to which the shadows of Debord and Ballard loom over Dubai make it seem an obvious place for Self to travel across, given the unique exposure to both the psychogeographical tropes of Debord and the ‘inner space’ of Ballard. Ultimately, Dubai is a location to which people from the first and third worlds flock, in, to quote Eason, the ‘hedonistic pursuit of “the now”’.

Self owns, however, that he finds himself swept up in this pursuit, no matter how much he may try and wish to avoid it. This works to the extent that it undermines his own narrative expectations for how journeys such as these are supposed to develop. Airport walks have become a forte of Self's literary journalism over recent years, but on the occasion of his journey from Shepperton to Dubai 'the airport walk hadn't worked'. (PT, p.37) Walking on either side of the flight is supposed to make it seem as if the locations before and after the intervening flight are one place. This is not the case between Shepperton and Dubai, however. It may be that the former location is to blame, but what is certain is that the overwhelming "now" of Dubai means that narrative expectations that Self has of his walks have been severely undermined here. The expectation is thus, as Self explains, 'my method imposed on the raw data of experience a prefabricated narrative: everywhere was the same; everyone was forced to follow the same road/rail/flight path, only I had escaped the man/machine matrix to saunter, barefoot, along the median strip.' (PT, p.37) The epiphany that this results in, however, is both dispiriting and ironic. For he has indeed escaped, but only to a realm where pedestrianism is the practice of the horrifically-exploited third-world workers in Dubai, and ironically a different sense of ignorance from that which the man/machine matrix causes:

But wasn't the truth that I was just as determined? Moreover, in eschewing any ground transport, my view of these alien lands was grossly circumscribed, while my ambitious mileages meant that I had no time to stop and stare - let alone sit down in a shisha café and chew the fat with the locals... Instead, driven full speed ahead by my ambulatory engine, I sat inside the hot, rubbery compartment of my own skull, maddened with frustration, staring out through the windscreen of my own eyes. (PT, pp.37-8)

It is Self's own 'ambulatory engine' in this instance that prevents him from acquiring knowledge and entraps him in a screen-based life that exists entirely within his own mind. He uses his own despair in Dubai as a depiction of the discomfort that occurs once the collective narrative expectations that enshroud not just writing, but geography and travel as well, have been eradicated. Hugh Kenner argues that readers of literary journalism 'were never meant to think about it [the prose and content of literary

journalism], any more than airplane passengers are meant to brood about what holds them aloft - thin air.'¹⁰² Self, on the other hand, demands that we - readers and plane passengers alike - think about what holds us up, no matter how baffling or frightening that is.

Conclusion

'We aren't looking for dry, linear or causal explanations - you should appreciate that by now'. (GA, p.77) These are the words of Zack Busner the ape on the extraordinary human delusion of Simon Dykes, but it is a worthwhile mantra to consider when it comes to understanding - or indeed not understanding - the forces, influences and aims that drive Self's writing style and complex literary aesthetic, not to mention the multitude of extraordinary human delusions that Self sees playing out in everyday society. For Self, an embracing of difficulty is as necessary as it is conscious, and this is one of the ways in which the profound influence of J. G. Ballard asserts itself in Self's work. Both writers are particularly concerned with the ways that their respective contemporary societies are becoming increasingly performative and artificial - and in Self's case, simplistic - as a direct result of significantly transformative technologies, be it the rise of film and the car for Ballard, or the new online realm of the internet for Self.

Self believes that the internet is already having a direct and damaging impact on the processes of reading and writing serious literature, because of its instant and global connectivity that ironically fosters a disconnection from the vital imaginative processes needed for serious literature to survive. A further irony here is that Self portrays both the page and the website as empty spaces with a strange sense of negative freedom, with both having no need for their users' contingent identities. The difference, however - and the ideological nature

¹⁰² Hugh Kenner, 'The Politics of the Plain Style' in Norman Sims (ed.), *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth-Century* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2008), p.187

of the internet by extension - is revealed through the inherent and above all else instant commerciality of the internet. This commerciality also has a direct effect on reading and writing through ostensibly helpful means such as online reading recommendations and the cyclical qualities of creative writing courses, that actually hinder rather than help understanding and creativity.

These ironic entrapments have something distinctly and distastefully 'post-' about them. Self refers to this present-day malaise as 'a culture typified by a consumerist ethic [that] was convinced that it - that we - could have it all. This "having it all" was even ascribed its own cultural era: the postmodern.' ('TNID') When taking into consideration Self's belief that we have yet to move on from the modernist era, the fundamental instability of the current, postmodern mindset is that it is defined by what it is not. As such, it becomes a further consumerist manifestation of a collective resistance to difficulty, and even despite these obviously questionable foundations it remains an almost impossible mindset not to be allured by or caught up in to some degree. In addition to postmodernism, the internet also has a posthumanist quality in that it fundamentally changes what it means to exist as a human being. One way that Self's work represents this is through the belief that psychological afflictions are being caused, worsened and in some cases potentially even managed by the technologies and interfaces associated with the internet.

Mental illness, the treatment of it, and above all the profound complexities associated with it find a representation in Self's work through Zack Busner. Busner is a character who is extremely difficult to pin down within Self's fiction, because his intentions and impulses vary from murderous and malevolent to empathetic and benevolent from novel to novel or from story to story. Similarly, he is a character whose actions often have ostensible connections to the outlandish ideas of figures such as Laing and Szasz, ideas that specifically undermine previously-assumed categories and meanings

right down to the reality of mental illness itself. Therefore, the genius of Self's recent and more overtly modernist fiction is to lay bare Busner's consciousness to the reader, because by doing this it becomes all the more apparent that the one constant in Busner (aside from his apparently ever-present mohair tie) is an intense fixation with mental illness and the vast and destructive effects it has on both its sufferers and its practitioners. That Self takes on a distinctly modernist style to achieve this is appropriate too, as a tension within his work involves the crisis that arises from looking beyond the taken-for-granted means of objective knowledge and existence in favour of a more exploratory, less certain mode. This clarifies Self's claim that we have yet to move on from the modernist epoch, something reflected in his self-conscious literary innovations and trickery. However, such innovations are crucial for establishing Self's unique brand of troubled humanism, and the firm belief that a willful difficulty is infinitely more valuable in human terms than the willful ignorance that is all-too-often fostered and abetted by technology.

Self's necessarily troubled humanism is also reflected by his conscious and subversive reaction against more traditional narrative expectations. He utilises the sense of conflict that typically lies at the heart of so many narratives as a means of pushing cultural complexities to their limit rather than providing any easy resolutions to them. His manipulation of epilogues to create more confusion and misery at his characters' expense rather than offering the extra degree of closure to their narratives that epilogues are supposed and expected to do - as demonstrated brutally in *Dorian* and *The Butt* - is one example of this. Such a subversion of expectations is an important feature of Self's idiosyncratic, caustic and knowing humour, however. The challenge - and for many readers, inevitably and understandably, the most infuriating aspect - of Self's writing is that there is more than a vague hint that he is always and will always be having the last laugh over the reader, and that the reader will never be able to truly comprehend the punchline of the gag. Such self-awareness forms the basis of a much broader social satire

in which everyone is prey to some form of entrapment - including the author himself, of course. This inclusion of himself within this entrapment is highlighted in his awareness of what is expected of him from audiences in his role as both a literary celebrity and performer, and not unconnectedly, his role as a prolific literary journalist. Ultimately then, the best that can be hoped for within this 'fast culture', as well as within an attempt to define an obvious aesthetic to Self's writing, is to be aware of the impossibility of figuring the entirety of it out and to retain a sense of resigned, sardonic humour about the 'whole giddy rondo'.

Chapter Two: *The Book of Dave*

Introduction

Self's 2006 novel *The Book of Dave* centres upon the troubled life of Dave Rudman, a London cabbie whose dysfunctional family life and psychological problems form the basis of half of the alternating chapters of the non-chronological novel. The other half depicts a post-apocalyptic civilisation of the distant future which has taken the ramblings Dave wrote to his estranged son as the basis of their religious beliefs. In the contemporary sections of the novel, Self uses the taxi to depict the difficulties and consequences of defining individual identity in relation to a fatalistic, and even destructive, technology. In the future sections of the novel, Self pushes these difficulties and consequences as far as he possibly can to create a highly ironic metaphor characterised by religious fanaticism and patriarchal totalitarianism. However, the intricacies and pitfalls of personal relationships remain a central theme within the novel, and these relationships lead to stark but often touching depictions of Self's troubled humanism. *The Book of Dave* leans towards, yet consciously resists and transcends, the tags of religious satire and environmental catastrophe novel. This creates a vivid, brutal picture of how individual lives are defined, and ultimately altered, trapped and destroyed, by technology, transport and the beliefs that are bound up and nurtured within them; and from this Self crafts a metaphor to show how such entrapment and destruction occurs in ways that may well remain incomprehensible to contemporary readers.

The Book of Dave is also Self's most quintessentially London fiction. He remarked in 2007 about its composition that 'I was able - perhaps more thoroughly than ever before in my fiction - to paint a word-picture of the city of my birth, and the city where I still live. Some people have human muses - mine is a city. I feel a startling ambivalence towards London, but for better or worse my work has come utterly to depend upon it.'¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Will Self, 'In the beginning', *The Guardian*, 17.6.2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/16/willself>

London undeniably signifies a unique and strangely enticing form of identity for Self, and the dreams of the young Dave Rudman, marooned in the outlying suburb of Finchley (where Self also grew up), reflect this:

All Dave's peers wanted to get out of London - at least for a bit - while Dave wanted to go deeper in. Lun-dun - how could such leaden syllables be so magical? He craved London like an identity. He wanted to be a Londoner - not an assistant manager on twelve grand a year, married to Karen, who liked *Spandau-fucking-Ballet*. (TBoD, p.89)

The question of what it means for Self and Dave to 'be a Londoner' is answered through Self's candid demonstration of how this identity is inextricably linked to the city's transport. Dave's life as a taxi driver, the beliefs and attitudes that this life fosters within him, and the power dynamics that exist between taxi driver and fare or passenger help define Self's work in relation to current trends in contemporary London writing. These include the ideas of urban visionary satire, the blurring between an 'unreal city' and a 'city of referents', and a stoic, polycultural optimism in the post 9/11 and 7/7 city. Moreover, these ideas assist in contextualising Self's writing within the lineage of twentieth-century London writing. Specifically, Peter Ackroyd shares with Self an intense preoccupation with the ways in which the city is experienced, and Ackroyd's historiographical *London: The Biography* becomes a valuable foil for both a psychological analysis of Dave Rudman, and an exploration into Self's attitudes towards the city.

In the earlier short story 'Waiting', Self uses a notably intricate knowledge of London's geography as the basis for the fanaticism and cult mentality of a small group of rogue individuals. Here, he pushes this link much further, by using taxi-specific knowledge of London's geography as the basis for mass religious fundamentalism in the distant future. It would be easy to read *The Book of Dave* purely as a religious satire, but to do so would be to disregard the more complex point Self is attempting to make. Keeping this inherent complexity in mind, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman's *The Bible Unearthed* (2001) is an important influence on Self's novel. Their work is a skillful amalgamation of theology and archaeology that explains how many events

depicted in the Pentateuch and the Old Testament are historically impossible. However, despite this acknowledgement, they remain keen to maintain that ‘our purpose, ultimately, is not mere deconstruction. It is to share the most recent archeological insights - still largely unknown outside of scholarly circles - not only on *when*, but also *why* the Bible was written, and why it remains so powerful today.’¹⁰⁴ It therefore demonstrates how a seemingly easy undermining of religion and religious texts on the basis of mere historical and archaeological facts is inadequate in the face of the enduring power of the Bible. In turn, this explains how Self’s treatment of religion is a broader and more complex questioning of the enduring power of anthropocentric faith in disembodied, material ideologies more generally.

Paradoxically, Self’s engagement with religion and faith also demonstrate how *The Book of Dave* is a novel that does not deal solely with human perspectives but indulges in Self’s intrigue towards ‘anthropoid species that are not human.’¹⁰⁵ The motos - the curious, anthropoid creatures that exist only on the remote island of Ham - are the most obvious example of this. On Ham, the motos are creatures with a strange, ambivalent sacredness whose influence is useful for exploring how the novel and the characters within it develop upon and are significantly influenced by non-human - and technological, as it transpires - entities. Drawing on the ideas of Adam Trexler and Timothy Morton clarifies this move away from the singularly human perspective - that may seem such a peculiar suggestion at first given the overbearing influence of Dave on both sections of the novel - by framing it within an ecocritical context. This furthers Self’s point that, far from any human agency at play, it is the entities of transport and London itself that have more profound effects on the lives of individuals than any of their own actions would be capable of. Self is a self-professed ‘novelist of ideas’, and one idea at the forefront of

¹⁰⁴ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (London: Free Press, 2001), p.3

¹⁰⁵ John Mullan, ‘Broken English’, *The Guardian*, 23.6.2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/23/featuresreviews.guardianreview3>

his consciousness is that 'I'm not attempting to say things about individual psychopathology; I'm attempting to say something about social psychopathology.'¹⁰⁶ While this novel may readily appear as a manifestation of Dave Rudman's 'individual psychopathology', Self's treatment of religion and environment, coupled with the distinct influences of London and the taxi, lead to a neat exposure of the entrapping 'social psychopathology' - in both sections of the novel.

London writing, and the dynamics of the taxi

Dave realises his desire to immerse himself deeper into the fabric of London - 'to be a Londoner' - through cabbage. The inspiration for this is somewhat touching, too - the young Dave's admiration of his grandfather, the mercurial cabbie Benny Cohen, as Dave 'loved the way his grandfather exuded his Knowledge, a comprehensive understanding not only of the London streets - but what went on in them as well. After thirty-odd years behind the wheel, Benny Cohen gave the distinct impression that he'd been plying for a hire for a couple of millennia.' (TBoD, p.98) The seemingly wondrous idea of indeterminacy between city and taxi is thus ingrained in Dave from an early age, and it is an idea that remains fulfilling throughout the formative years of Dave's career. Admittedly there is more than a tinge of consumerism to this early fulfilment, abetted in no small part by the boom years of the 1980s that ensured the 'bliss of driving when the only goal was money - and money was everywhere - was still with him a year into the job.' (TBoD, p.101) The culmination of this fulfilment comes in June 1987, and at first appears to be a distinctly human one. Dave picks his future wife Michelle Brodie up twice on this fateful summer night, and ends up 'Feeling the city wheel about the cab - a widening gyre of miles and years - Dave thought, *I'm never going to be this connected to anything ever again... I'm falling.*' (TBoD, p.110) The unspoken complicity that has arisen

¹⁰⁶ Self, *White Review*

between Dave and Michelle becomes blurred with and ultimately engulfed by Dave's perfect, dizzy oneness between himself, taxi and London.

Despite the iconic status of London's black cabs, Self has expressed his surprise that they are scarcely portrayed within London literature. When discussing why it was that he chose to write a novel with a cabbie as its protagonist, he acknowledges his incredulity at such an omission, but also his belief as to why it is the case:

Is it any surprise that the cabbie... struck me as such a perfect protagonist for a novel which attempts to express the zeitgeist? The only wonder, for me, was that so few narrative artists had used him before. Sure, the cab is always at the door, and the characters always clamber in and then debouche, but the cabbie himself remains a link man, stitching together scenes with his stereotypic presence. Perhaps this is the way we want it? Because to acknowledge that in the very interstices of our lives - the workaday A-to-B - there sits such a powerful psychic presence, is simply too much.¹⁰⁷

Self outlines how the taxi is the perfect vehicle - literally and figuratively - for moving beyond the comfortable, if 'workaday', 'interstices of our lives'. The taxi and the driver are in fact far from inconsequential background figures that make the lives of individuals and collectives easier, and instead form a 'powerful psychic presence' that disrupts the convenience which this 'zeitgeist' is ostensibly but falsely characterised by. In *The Book of Dave*, Self's contemporary 'zeitgeist' runs from the boom of the late 1980s, past the turn of the millennium, up until 2003, and the society and the city that he depicts throughout these years become interesting comparisons to other mindsets that were prevalent on either side of this millennial divide.

In her 2010 essay, 'This Monstrous City', Magdalena Maczynska proposes a literary movement dubbed 'urban visionary satire'. For Maczynska, this is a particularly salient trait within late twentieth-century literature, as it combines 'superrealist explorations of imaginary cityscapes with a satirical critique of London's material, cultural, and social

¹⁰⁷ Will Self, 'Rank Outsiders', *The Independent*, 18.5.2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/columnists/will-self/rank-outsiders-478688.html>

conditions at the end of the second millennium.’¹⁰⁸ London, having what she calls a ‘heterogeneous, palimpsestic character’,¹⁰⁹ is the most fertile breeding ground for these fictions to play out in, and they do so in three ways: necropolis, metamorphosis and apocalypse. *How the Dead Live* and *Great Apes*, along with works by Martin Amis and Maggie Gee, form a large part of Maczynska’s discussion, and she asserts that Self’s fiction ‘develops a sustained critique of the spatial and ideological structures of twentieth-century urban life, denouncing its failed communality, class isolationism, oppressive patriarchal regime, and infantilizing consumerism through a playful exploration of fantasized London topographies.’¹¹⁰

Maczynska’s summary of Self’s fiction is extremely insightful, and just as applicable to *The Book of Dave*; yet the novel is not mentioned within ‘This Monstrous City’. Granted, this may be a simple case of the novel being published and largely set in the twenty-first century (and way beyond), but this insinuates a significant shift in the zeitgeist in the intervening few years. Rather, there are ways in which *The Book of Dave* forges its own path from the lineage of urban visionary satire. Maczynska posits that the ‘destabilization of the capital’s social order contributed to a pervasive mood of anxiety, compounded by the widespread fears provoked by growing environmental damage and nuclear proliferation.’¹¹¹ Although ‘Waiting’ will be analysed more closely in the following chapter, it is worth mentioning as a comparison to *The Book of Dave* again here, as it is a short story that mocks this ‘pervasive mood of anxiety’ around nuclear development and environmental disaster in the run-up to the new millennium. The constant taxiing (and polluting) by Dave over his career obscures this anxiety in the ‘recent past’ of *The Book of Dave*, however. This makes the disjunction between ‘recent

¹⁰⁸ Magdalena Maczynska, ‘This Monstrous City: Urban Visionary Satire in the Fiction of Martin Amis, Will Self, China Miéville, and Maggie Gee’, *Contemporary Literature* 51: 1 (2010), p.59

¹⁰⁹ Maczynska, ‘This Monstrous City’, p.58

¹¹⁰ Maczynska, ‘This Monstrous City’, p.70

¹¹¹ Maczynska, ‘This Monstrous City’, pp.60-1

past' and 'distant future' an even more ironic one, as the visionary aspect of the novel hypothesises a hugely metamorphosed, post-apocalyptic London that is most likely the result of global warming. The irony of this disjunction is only heightened through Self's conscious refusal to depict the actual destruction of London, which suggests that the troublesome realities of global warming stay comfortably out of the minds of contemporary city-dwellers.

John McLeod analyses how literature captures the mood of London in the early years of the twenty-first century. In his view, this mood is notably different from the anxiety that pervades the city in the late twentieth-century, despite the irony that the threat of terror and the prejudices that surround and are caused by such threats are distinctly real. McLeod uses works by Zadie Smith, Stephen Frears and Chris Cleave to demonstrate how:

twenty-first century representations of London often refuse the divisive logic of prejudice and do not give up on those ghostly figures who walk through the city's walls or stir beneath its streets. These are rarely naïve or glibly celebratory visions, of course; but they can be hopeful in the best sense, in that they do not despair of representation's power to alter vision. And they retain a battered and bruised faith in the city's capacity to show that there is another way to be amidst the turmoil of the twenty-first century.¹¹²

Rather than this 'divisive logic of prejudice', McLeod puts forward that the 'hopeful' and resilient attitudes of London and its inhabitants are caused by the city's 'polycultural' makeup. However, Dave Rudman's mental deterioration after the turn of the millennium reads as an unfortunate irony in the context of McLeod's argument. Dave's first book imagines a way of living that is extremely divisive and prejudiced, and the brutal treatment of women on Ham and Ing (the archipelago that was once England) attests to this. McLeod's argument also stands opposed to the 'stereotypic' perception of cabbies, who in Dave's words are '*Fat, thick, racist, ugly, rotten wankers. In their dumb fucking*

¹¹² John McLeod, 'Writing London in the twenty-first century', in Lawrence Manley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.258

zip-up jackets carrying their stupid little change bags, giving it this, giving it that, and saying fuck all.' (TBoD, p.50) However, the real irony of this tirade comes about as it demonstrates Dave's own ironic entrapment within a stereotype he professes to detest. This highlights the complexities that occur through constructing an individual identity in and around the taxi.

The connections between struggling to establish an individual identity and contemporary depictions of the city are even more apparent when considered in light of Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga's arguments. She argues that London has traditionally been depicted as either an 'unreal city' or a 'city of referents', but that a postmodernist crisis in representation has led to a blurring between the two, which has in turn resulted in a proliferation of these 'unreal' cities and spaces in contemporary London literature. Within *The Book of Dave*, this crisis of representation brings to mind the imagined New London of the distant future, a city which 'was not only incomplete but quite wrong. That its winding, muddy lanes and narrow, cluttered alleys bore no more relation to the city of Dave than a child's drawing to what it depicts.' (TBoD, p.307) This new, almost unrecognisable version of Dave's city is a deliberately infantilising example of how Self pushes the joke of collective misinterpretation and misunderstanding in his novel.

On the flipside of this ridiculously 'unreal' city, the runs and points of the cabbie's Knowledge appear to form a particularly tidy example of the 'city of referents' while also, ironically, playing an important role in the eventual formation of the inaccurate 'New London'. Terentowicz-Fotyga's argument is that, despite this interesting blurring between the two kinds of urban spaces, writing and writers that depict this 'document more or less successful processes of recuperation and meaning.'¹¹³ *The Book of Dave*, on the other hand, consciously resists any such resolutions or comprehensible meanings. The

¹¹³ Ursula Terentowicz-Fotyga, 'Unreal City to City of Referents: Urban Space in Contemporary London Novels', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 39:3 (2009), p.325

population of Ing calling over the runs and points of the Knowledge with a religious fervour but absolutely no anchor to their original meaning highlights just how ironic Self's future metaphor is. Rather than any blurring between the two worlds of the present and the future, there is only a deliberate disparity that highlights not only the absurdity of Ing's social and religious practices, but the fact that contemporary behaviours have nevertheless caused them.

In the 'recent past' of contemporary London, the runs and points play a more ambiguous role that deepens Dave's ironic entrapment. They, and the taxi more broadly, are important facets in the simulative quality of contemporary London, a city which has been reduced, in Dave's mind, to '*a nine-hundred-square-mile souvenir t-shirt, decorated with tit-helmeted coppers, red phone boxes, Mohican-sporters, tiara-jockeys and black-bloody-cabs.*' (TBoD, p.29) This 'unreal' London exists at the forefront of Dave's disdainful mind, but just as he finds himself bound up within the stereotypical prejudices of the taxi driver, the act of cabbing perpetuates the broader urban simulacrum he is so contemptuous of here.

Developments in technology are continuing to have similarly reductive and simulative effects on the way in which people understand and experience cities - again the innovation of GPS technology and the proportional diminishing of the chance of getting lost or experiencing the realities of physical geography. Self continues his riff on the importance of generational differences when it comes to this evolution, and he believes that it is particularly difficult for younger generations to overcome this supposed failure to have any idea of where they actually are. For older generations, 'it's simply a case of taking the unfamiliar left turn instead of the well-worn groove to the right.'¹¹⁴ However, those who have grown up accustomed to using such technology are going to

¹¹⁴ Self, 'If you want to go "off-grid"'

find it extremely hard to step off what Self calls ‘the treadmill of our simulacrum’.¹¹⁵ Self argues that this is because people do not want to give up the appearance of knowledge that technology imparts, and ‘don’t want to get lost because we’d prefer not to see the reality of where we are and so either be appalled by its conformity or thrilled by its alterity’.¹¹⁶

Self craves the defamiliarisation that getting lost or disoriented within a previously familiar urban locale brings, however. The idea of being able to ‘apprehend the neighbourhood in a new way’¹¹⁷ is something he has recently incorporated into his writing routine through renting a small flat a short walk from his home. This has the effect of making familiar urban streets ‘seem slightly strange; just as all my local trips... have had to be recalibrated.’¹¹⁸ Dave Rudman, conversely, does a job that ensures such disorientation is impossible, and carries out journeys strictly calibrated by the taxi driver’s Knowledge. Where Self uses disorientation and strangeness as part of his work, Dave relies on the process of calling over the runs and points so much that they become coping mechanisms for aspects of his life outside of the taxi, such as the first, fateful sexual encounter with Michelle, and his stint on the psychiatric ward of Zack Busner’s Heath Hospital.

The vitality of believing oneself to be oriented bears more relation to Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography*. Ackroyd attempts a hugely comprehensive detailing of London’s history, in which he mediates upon the significance of knowledge and familiarity for Londoners, positing that:

It may be that each citizen has created a London in his or her own head, so that at the same moment there may exist seven million different cities. It has sometimes been

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ Will Self, ‘Want to see your neighbourhood in a new light? Move around the corner’, *New Statesman*, 14.3.2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/03/want-see-your-neighbourhood-new-light-move-around-corner>

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

observed that native Londoners experience a kind of fear, or alarm, if they find themselves in a strange part of the city. It is partly the fear of becoming lost, but it is also the fear of difference. And yet is a city so filled with difference, also, therefore filled with fear?¹¹⁹

Ackroyd links unfamiliarity and difference with fear and alarm here, in rhetoric that is diametrically opposed to Self's belief in the thrilling alterity of becoming lost. The psychological reactions that Ackroyd describes are relevant when it comes to understanding Dave's epiphany regarding the loss of agency he believed that taxiing provided him with - 'When he looked in the rearview he saw that he had more passengers than he was licensed for. Far more - approximately seven million in fact. *They're all back there, the whole population of the fucking city... it's gonna kick off...*' (TBoD, p.277) What ostensibly starts as the taxiing transgression of carrying more passengers than he should transforms into the realisation that there are seven million other Londoners experiencing the city in ways that do not involve being relentlessly oriented, and the fear that this provokes hastens Dave's slide into depression and eventual total breakdown. The impending threat of the 'kick off' provides a link between this individual pathology and broader social pathologies - such as the ignorance and denial surrounding climate change, and the subsequent irony of London ending up underwater, for instance - too, as Dave's fears here are heightened by the underlying, simmering threat of violence and tension that exists post-9/11. Dave's angst and paranoia here are therefore understandable due to his role at the very forefront of our 'mobile society' that is such a target.

For Self's characters, these feelings of fear and alarm are depicted through a toxic combination of individual mental breakdown and contemporary social anxieties. However, Ackroyd's reasons for feeling fearful are markedly different. Alex Murray argues that Ackroyd's fear of difference that is on display in *London: The Biography* stems

¹¹⁹ Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), p.772

from the writer's own conservatism, surmising that Ackroyd is someone with an 'unwillingness to engage with contemporary British life'.¹²⁰ In addition to this, Ackroyd has a tendency in both his fictional as well as his historiographical and biographical works to prioritise myth over historical evidence. For Murray, this is a problematic characteristic of Ackroyd's work, and one that is most apparent in his depictions of post-war London in *London: The Biography*. Murray feels that there is a 'mis-alignment of organizing principle and historical evidence. This antagonism becomes... barely sustainable as Ackroyd struggles to integrate radical post-war social, economic and cultural change into his mythic structures.'¹²¹ Following the vast amount of destruction wrought on the city during the Second World War, Ackroyd talks about the 'atavistic tendency of London to go on doing all the things which it had been doing before the unhappy interruption of hostilities. Yet it could not, and did not, succeed. The desire to impose a set of familiar conditions, in changed circumstances, led only to a vague atmosphere of oppression.'¹²² The problem for Ackroyd here is that any semblances of his mythic London have been undeniably altered by the massively destructive physical phenomenon of the Blitz, which leads him to bemoan that 'the map of the city has been redrawn', and to pose, 'Is London, then, just a state of mind? The more nebulous its boundaries, and the more protean its identity, has it now become an attitude or set of predilections?'¹²³

In essence, Ackroyd's distinctive idea of London - and the history and urban legends that have shaped it for him - being challenged and undermined is what prompts an overwhelming sense of fear and oppression. This is unsurprising given that it is a specific idea of the city that encompasses more than 2,000 years of history and urban legend, yet

¹²⁰ Alex Murray, *Recalling London: Literature and History in the Work of Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p.3

¹²¹ Murray, *Recalling London*, p.20

¹²² Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*, p.753

¹²³ Ackroyd, *London: The Biography*, p.767

it still highlights how *London: The Biography* represents the kind of disembodied ideology that Self wishes to move away from in his own work. Alternatively, Self's claim that the taxi and the cabbie are an effective means of depicting the zeitgeist and the city offers a clue as to how he differs from the more conservative and nostalgic Ackroyd. Where Self acknowledges that *The Book of Dave* sought to get a glimpse of the mindset of contemporary London, a criticism of Ackroyd's work is his reluctance to engage with contemporary thought. This disparity between the two writers is never clearer than the strong feelings that the prospect of disorientation causes. Ackroyd's ideas of his London of the distant past being undermined following the destruction of the Second World War result in fear and oppression. Meanwhile, Self is of the persuasion that becoming lost within an otherwise familiar urban space is a hugely exciting prospect, as he notes, 'the true contemporary adventurer strikes out for the known.'¹²⁴

The opposing feelings of fear and adventure that urban difference instills in Ackroyd and Self respectively play out over the course of *The Book of Dave*, from the first taxi journey the novel depicts to the aftermath of Dave's cabbing career. The first journey is notable in that it so strongly establishes the unique relationship between driver and fare that a taxi ride engenders. Very possibly not a native Londoner, the latter find themselves thrust into the unique psychological backdrop that is London. Ackroyd's 'fear of becoming lost' and 'fear of difference' are therefore likely to be weighing heavily on their consciousness at this point. From their perspective, one way to remedy this is by getting into a taxi, and when they do the driver - with all of his or her Knowledge - becomes the paid-for figure that they now rely upon as a means of getting through this new and disorienting metropolis. As this Knowledge is working in their favour, the passenger finds

¹²⁴ Will Self, 'Forget the wilderness, true adventurers should head for the housing estate', *New Statesman*, 19.6.2014, <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2014/06/will-self-forget-wilderness-true-adventurers-should-head-housing-estate>

themselves being propelled straight towards ‘their exact location while having absolutely no idea where they are.’

This first journey takes place in December 2001, a significant date in relation to McLeod’s arguments - for here is a moment at which the terror of the 9/11 attacks was still at the very forefront of Western consciousness. Yet rather than a basis for any unity or optimism arising from this fear, Dave’s teasing line of ‘I imagine you’d rather be at home, what with all this business - ’ (*TBoD*, p.29) takes on a sneering irony given the instant contempt he has formed towards his American passenger. This establishes the ridiculousness of the fare in Dave’s mind, which is then heightened through the fare’s perceived stoicism, when he admits that ‘I’d booked the flight before 9/11, I figured it would be giving like succour to the enemy if I didn’t come over.’ (*TBoD*, p.30) The idea of the fare continuing bravely on in the face of global terror is a truly absurd one, given that his recent ineptitude at merely crossing a road very nearly caused him to become roadkill. For Dave, this merely confirms his own superiority, a sense of superiority that melds into his role as both a taxi driver and a Londoner - “‘You don’t say.’ *I do fucking say. I fucking know. I know it all - I hold it all. If all of this were swamped, taken out by a huge fucking flood, who’d be able to tell you what it was like? Not the fucking Mayor or the Prime Minister - that’s for sure. But me, an ‘umble cabbie.*’ (*TBoD*, p.33) Dave’s ‘umbleness is ironic to the point of being Uriah Heep-esque here, as his Knowledge becomes a curious, yet fallible, delusion of grandeur that masks both his prejudices and a fear of being overwhelmed - a fear that will come to explicitly demonstrate itself in the aforementioned moment at which Dave envisions the entirety of the city in the back of his taxi.

Dave’s belief in his sense of superiority starts to get called into question once the taxi itself comes into closer focus. This is not least because of the regularity with which fares are prone to ‘Confusing the cab’s number with his own, confusing the cab with him.

But everyone did that - even Dave.' (TBoD, p.45) This indeterminacy is more than just an irritation for Dave, as he finds himself inseparable - even in his own mind - from a vehicle and a technology that he asserts is particularly troublesome. In his mind, he knows that *'That's the trouble with cabs - they're all fucking ringers, they're all pretending to be cabs but none of them are the real thing.'* (TBoD, p.37) It is one thing, therefore, for an unknowing passenger to place their faith fleetingly in something that is inherently fraudulent or mythical. Yet Dave continues to indulge in a career and a vehicle that he staunchly believes is inherently inauthentic, but defines his entire life and identity by. Dave's conscious decision to persist with this is a narrative and fictional equivalent of Ackroyd's defining his historiographical work primarily through London's urban legends, potentially and often knowingly ahead of historical accuracy.

Furthermore, given the closeness between Dave and his taxi, an offshoot of the vehicle's fraudulent nature reintroduces the concerns and complexities surrounding Dave's own identity; yet it is at this point that the novel tends toward its more humanistic, poignant side. In addition to being enthralled by his granddad during his childhood, Dave's acquisition and retention of the Knowledge have another, equally personal motive, as he despairs, *'What's the point in knowing that there's a time tunnel there if you've got no one to go down it with? Now I understand that I learned this city to hold in my mind for a while - then lose it to my boy. Without him it's starting to disappear - like a fucking mirage.'* (TBoD, p.34) The sympathy that can be garnered for the racist, sexist, and often violent cabbie is one of the intricacies at the heart of the novel, as Self creates a narrative in which personal relationships defined and trapped by the city and its transport are still both poignant and meaningful - perhaps even more so because they are destined to fall apart.

The eventual discovery that Carl Rudman is not Dave's biological son actively hastens the disappearance of Dave's Knowledge. Yet rather than this discovery prompting

a further regression into any depression or fear, Dave's subsequent disorientation proves - as it does for Self - liberating rather than oppressing. He starts walking through the city instead, and as he does this he realises that he:

knew none of it - his Knowledge was gone. The city was a nameless conurbation, its streets and shop signs, its plaques and placards, plucked then torn away by a tsunami of meltwater that dashed up the estuary. He saw this as clearly as he'd ever seen anything in his life. The screen had been removed from his eyes, the mirror cast away, and he was privileged with a second sight into deep time. (*TBoD*, p404)

This is a visionary moment that, uncharacteristically for the novel, hints at a link through 'deep time' between its two worlds. Significantly, this is possible because Dave has managed to escape from the beliefs instilled by a false vehicle and the constraints imposed by a false family - the two things that have defined his identity. This escape allows him to move beyond the simulative urban space of contemporary London and take a glimpse at the world to come in the distant future. Dave's version of psychogeography, or the new, subversive and unobstructed way that he experiences the city, offers a rare successful undermining of the material ideologies that bind the lives of so much of contemporary society - just as the taxi and Carl had, for Dave, embodied flawed beliefs in supreme Knowledge, individual agency, invulnerability and familial stability.

Self's fixation upon the zeitgeist and contemporary thinking does not necessarily mean that *The Book of Dave* falls into line alongside the work of his contemporaries. The essays of Maczynska and McLeod detail how either side of the millennial divide has its own unique psychological outlook, from the millennial concerns beforehand, to the resilience in the increased threat of global terror that characterises a great deal of early twenty-first century London literature. By flitting from one side of this divide to the other in the 'recent past' sections of the novel in a non-chronological manner, it becomes apparent that such outlooks are, for Self, more complex than this. While the novel is subtler than 'Waiting' when it comes to parodying any fears about the turn of the millennium, hopeful optimism abounds for Dave in both 1987 and 2003. Again, this all

centres around both the taxi - the blissful early cabbie years, and the relief at losing the simulacrum of the taxi years later - and specific personal relationships - the first liaison with Michelle, and the positive influence of Dave's new partner Phyllis Vance and her son Steve, for whom Dave takes on the role of father figure. If this interplay between the city, the taxi, and fulfilling relationships is Self's version of what McLeod calls being 'hopeful in the best sense', then this hopefulness is sadly and ironically transient. After being shot during the 'misadventure' with the Turks who were owed money by Dave and who now, by chance, own Dave's old cab, it is the cab's rearview mirror in which Dave's last breaths are viewed, 'As the Fairway pulled off up the lane with Mustafa driving, he adjusted the rearview mirror, so that he could check that the ex-cabbie truly was dying.' (TBoD, p.470) Just as so much of Dave's life in London was defined by the taxi, so is his death in rural Essex. Yet this is - chronologically at least - still merely the beginning, as the taxi comes to define many more lives in previously-incomprehensible, sinister ways come the distant future, as Self looks to analyse and deconstruct disembodied ideologies even more thoroughly.

Religion

'*Religion... any fucking religion whatever... it ain't for me...*' (TBoD, p.233) The irony of Dave's angry atheism in 1992 is that, in the distant future world of *The Book of Dave*, his beliefs and prejudices are the foundation on which all religion is built. Ostensibly, these sections tell the tale of the young Hamster Carl Dévúsh and his mentor Antonë Böm, as they flee Ham suspected of being heretics, or 'flyers', in search of Carl's dad, who prophesied an alternative, notably more tolerant way of living based on what Dave wrote in his second book, written under the benevolent influence of Phyllis. In the contemporary sections of the novel, however, the narrative voice shares Dave's disdain for religion, and uses Dave's funeral as an opportunity for a sizeable diatribe on the state of contemporary Christianity:

the dissipation of the Church's doctrine - its moral authority knocked over as casually as a drunk topples a beer glass... self-murder and the mildewed hassocks, the musty drapes, the tarnished communion rail, the worm-holy rood screen, the foxed flyleaves of the prayer books - it all sat well together. After all, the church had murdered itself, as with every decade more and more depressed dubiousness crept into its synods and convocations, until, speaking in tongues, it beat its own skull in at the back of the vestry. (TBoD, p.474)

Self's argument here - and the rant is typical of Self due to its viciousness and caustic humour - is that the Church has become an increasingly self-destructive ideology through a cycle of immorality, hypocrisy and 'dubiousness', culminating in it becoming 'a state cult for which the state no longer had any use.' (TBoD, p.474) The ferocity with which the self-perpetuating doctrines of the Church are attacked here is anomalous within *The Book of Dave*, however. Overall, religion is offered a more nuanced treatment by Self, and the influence of Finkelstein and Silberman's *The Bible Unearthed* reflects this. Just as Self's blistering tirade at the conclusion of *The Book of Dave* is not representative of the novel's wider handling of religion, *The Bible Unearthed* is predicated upon the following assertion that takes it beyond mere denunciation of the bible:

By the end of the twentieth-century, archaeology had shown that there were simply too many material correspondences between the finds in Israel and in the entire Near East and the world described in the Bible to suggest that the Bible was late and fanciful priestly literature, written with no historical basis at all. But at the same time there were too many contradictions between archaeological finds and the biblical narratives to suggest that the Bible provided a precise description of what actually occurred.¹²⁵

What Finkelstein and Silberman seek to do then is focus primarily on these 'material correspondences' - and indeed their often-conspicuous absence - as opposed to any higher spiritual or ideological interpretations of the Bible, and Self echoes this reduction to the material in *The Book of Dave*. In Finkelstein and Silberman's work, this material consists of hard archaeological fact, used to offer an analysis of the complex power of the bible while putting question marks over uncompromising faith in the holy text. In *The Book of Dave*, Self creates obvious material inconsistencies between the two worlds of

¹²⁵ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, pp.19-21

his novel; inconsistencies that work right down to the cabbie vernacular that transforms into everyday in the distant future (the sun becomes the 'bigwatt', the sky becomes 'screen', for instance). This undermines what Self believes is humanity's innate tendency towards naïve faith - a naïve faith that transcends religion to work on a much broader ideological scale. While many of these may be relatively trivial, such material inconsistencies begin to reveal how the taxi becomes an even more important means of transport within *The Book of Dave*, in the sense that the unique dynamic that has existed between driver and fare, and the reliance upon and faith in the driver that the fare necessarily has, have taken on ominous new connotations. This is because a driver now denotes a high priest, and significantly a sacred member of the totalitarian, patriarchal regime of Dave's new religion.

Robert Detweiler's work *Breaking the Fall* (1989) examines ways in which religion is portrayed in contemporary literature, with particular emphasis on sacred spaces and how religious experience is altered and influenced by post-apocalyptic landscapes. One of the novels that Detweiler pays close attention to is Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), another prominent touchstone for *The Book of Dave*. Hoban's novel is set in a distant future, post-nuclear Kent, in which the church plays an integral role within the state, and misinterpretation of past legends forms a central part of their doctrines. In addition to this, one of the most striking comparisons between the two novels is that of their respective invented languages, with Hoban's manifestations of the Kentish dialogue providing inspiration for Self's Mokni of the distant future. Indeed Self has hailed the merits of Hoban's invented language against the apparent, comparative shortcomings of his own, stating that:

It is written completely in this broken down language, in this cracked and spalled English, and what Hoban does in that is much more sophisticated than what I do in *The Book of Dave*. It's brilliant. In *The Book of Dave*, Mokni is nothing but a phonetic transliteration of hard cockney with a few numbers thrown in, text-speak chucked in and a few accents

to indicate stresses. It's got contemporary rhyming slang in there and contemporary argot that's also phonetically transliterated so it looks quite dense on the page.¹²⁶

For Detweiler, the uniquely complex language of *Riddley Walker* 'enables one to enter into the fiction of a regressed future society, whereby the very ponderousness of puzzling out the dialect provides a parallel to the confused conceptualizing of the characters themselves',¹²⁷ summarising that 'religion in *Riddley Walker* consists in the confused interpretation of events and documents of a distant past.'¹²⁸ These degrees of manipulation, misinterpretation and above all difficulty are what impress Self most about the novel, and are what he strives to replicate in *The Book of Dave*. In his view, however, this mission proved a failure, because in terms of difficulty and sophistication his own invented language fails to measure up to Hoban's, as his merely has the effect of appearing difficult when written down. Similarly, only half of *The Book of Dave* features the made-up language, in comparison to both *Riddley Walker* and Self's original plans for his novel, which he envisaged as consisting totally of Mokni. Yet switching between the two languages has the effect of pushing the boundaries of religious satire further. By concurrently delving into the past from which the religious document originates, Self heightens the absurdity of the Hamsters' 'confused interpretation' and 'conceptualizing' of something that the contemporary reader is uniquely privileged to discover is, as Dr. Jane Bernal explains, 'a bundle of proscriptions and injunctions that seem to be derived from the working life of London cabbies, a cock-eyed grasp on a mélange of fundamentalism, but mostly from Rudman's own vindictive misogynyism.' (*TBoD*, p.281) Or as Phyllis rather more succinctly puts it, 'it's full of the craziest shit.' (*TBoD*, p.415)

Vindictive misogyny aside, the taxi and its accompanying Knowledge are the main sources from which the language of Ham and Ing stem. The Knowledge, because of its

¹²⁶ Self, *White Review*

¹²⁷ Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.161

¹²⁸ Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall*, p.163

contrast to disorientation, is instilled with implications of omniscience and omnipotence, and Dave's belief in them in contemporary London has been magnified in the distant future, as Antonë Böm highlights:

The Law is the very engine of Dave's cab. Here the secular and sacred aspects of the Knowledge gear one into the other, each functionary is a part of that engine, his robe patterned so as to resemble cog, wheel and alternator. In their revolutions from inspection pit to bench is to be seen the drive shaft of the Knowledge, which extends from the Forecourts of Justice into the city, the burbs and even the sticks beyond. (*TBoD*, p.426)

This diatribe demonstrates how the supposedly all-powerful nature of the Knowledge becomes an integral part of the law system of Ing, and therefore ominously writ large upon an entire civilisation of powerless fares. This ominousness is only matched by its illogicality, however, as this powerlessness that now defines the everyday lives of fares has mutated from what is a mere triviality of the past. Although during a 21st century taxi journey the fare will possibly be reliant upon the driver's Knowledge of the city, the mutual benefits for driver and fare mean that this future, authoritarian dynamic is obviously and wildly disproportionate from the past. The absurdity of this disparity between past and future - and more importantly the appropriation of blind faith in this future - is captured by Böm when he acknowledges that 'The Driver's calling over is designed to make them [the general population of the distant future] affirm a truth, while removing from them any responsibility for what it entails.' (*TBoD*, p.124) Just as any responsibility is removed, so is the possibility that any of the original meanings of the process of calling over the runs and points still exist, and this removal of meaning and responsibility forms the crux of Self's satire.

The difficulties of Christian language, and the belief that the ways religious language is used to express faith needs to be open to re-evaluation, are the central ideas of Sallie McFague's critical work *Models of God* (1987). She argues that the nuclear age has heralded a second watershed moment for humanity (the first being the

Enlightenment), and that this demands we reassess how faith can be most appropriately expressed because of the obsolescence of current the Christian metaphors of ‘lord, king, and patriarch’.¹²⁹ She argues that:

this language is not only idolatrous and irrelevant - besides being oppressive to many who do not identify with it - but it may also work against the continuation of life on our planet. Our nuclear capability places human beings of the late twentieth century on the verge of eliminating not only themselves but also most if not all other forms of life on earth.¹³⁰

McFague’s argument implicates language and metaphor in broader late-twentieth century fears in a curiously similar way to Professor Stein in ‘Waiting’. He puts forward the belief that ‘although previous cultures have thought that they possessed the power to destroy the world themselves, they in fact didn’t. We are dealing in this instance with a reality that which can be empirically verified.’ (*QTol*, p.186) McFague continues on the importance of language in relation to human faith and existence by opening her first chapter with the assertion that ‘We are the preeminent creatures of language, and though language does not exhaust human reality, it qualifies it in profound ways.’¹³¹ Invariably, the importance of the dynamic between language and faith is something that influences literary representations of religion, with Detweiler concluding - in relation to *Riddley Walker* - that the novel is ‘a more than faint parody of the manner in which reckless exegetes exploit religious texts toward any conclusion, however ludicrous, that they want, but it is also an instance of the human need to simply make and have meaning.’¹³² However, while these ideas very neatly superimpose themselves on to *The Book of Dave*, this overwhelming dominance of the human viewpoint that McFague and Detweiler put forward only covers part of the way in which Self treats religion and faith in the novel.

¹²⁹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (London: SCM, 1987), p.xiii

¹³⁰ McFague, *Models of God*, p.ix

¹³¹ McFague, *Models of God*, p.3

¹³² Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall*, p.170

Detweiler's rhetoric on another post-apocalyptic religious dystopia - Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) - offers an opening into how *The Book of Dave* is not only insistent upon reducing social ideologies to a material level, but is also concerned with offering alternative viewpoints to the human. For Detweiler, *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts 'a society marked by three traits: a high technology interacting with repressing strategies, an exploitation of women which is strongly supported by women, and a stress on spectacle.'¹³³ All three of these traits are salient when thinking about Self's novel, but the latter is particularly so in the sense that there is something of the *dérive* about London cabbng, despite its pre-determination. Initially, this works from the pseudo-Dantean circles of the city that have differing psychological effects upon Dave as he drifts through them in the taxi. For instance, upon driving through Kilburn with a fare, 'Dave felt at home here - he'd reached the right circle of the city, the one where he more or less belonged. Built up over centuries in concentric rings, like the trunk of a gargantuan tree, London districts derived their character from their ring'. (*TBoD*, p.35) In addition to this, the idea that a firm grasp of the Knowledge (in the worlds of both the past and the future) elevates an individual to some quasi-mythical, higher plane of existence is a prevalent one. Yet while this all still suggests a focus on a human reliance upon and naïve faith in a fairly commonplace technology, Self's future metaphor allows him to push this unyielding faith in technological advancement so far that another, consequential, perspective arises - that of the peculiar, ambiguously-sacred motos that live on Ham.

The Motos

These are the 'large, viviparous, omnivorous, mammalian creatures native to Ham and found nowhere else. Used by the Hamsters as a source of meat and oil alone. The moto has the functional intelligence of a two-and-a-half-year-old human child'. (*TBoD*, p.491)

¹³³ Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall*, p.175

The motos' ambiguity and peculiar sacredness stem from both their origins and their etymology. The latter of these is an example of the material reductionism within *The Book of Dave*, as the intricacies of a motorway service station logo transform into a hugely contentious religious and institutional debate in the future world. Their origins, meanwhile, are revealed by Dave's American fare during their December 2001 taxi ride. The fare offhandedly mentions to Dave that 'I work for CalBioTech - you may have heard of us. We're one of the organizations developing human genome patents...' (*TBoD*, p.32) It seems likely that Dave has not heard of them, ignoring this comment to focus instead on his disdain for the grid systems that characterise urban America. It is only some time later when he recalls how 'the American's colleagues were splicing genes, humanizing antibodies and growing ferny little forests of stem cells. The occasional puppy's eye was dissected, the live animal pinioned in a savage clamp' (*TBoD*, p.41) that the origin of the motos is hinted at, and sure enough the CalBioTech logo comes to serve as the mark of the creatures' authenticity in the distant future.

These distinctive creatures - and the way that the humans of the novel interact with and react to them - have a long lineage throughout Self's fiction. The superficial animal worship of the remote Amazonian Ur-Bororo tribe, then the planned human-bovine settlement in the titular story of *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* are extremely tentative precursors, but most notable are the emotos of 'Caring, Sharing' (1997). An earlier incarnation of the motos, these creatures stand at fourteen-feet tall with a mental age (supposedly) of no higher than seven. The creatures offer 'absolute reassurance' (*TTTTTTB*, p.91) to the celibate, emotionally-stunted adult humans of the story, who are mortally and ridiculously afraid of any physical intimacy. The twist of the story is that once left to their own devices, the emotos unashamedly smoke, drink, mock their humans and eventually copulate - while making sure not to 'say a word to the grown-ups'. (*TTTTTTB*, p.108) 'Caring, Sharing' is a short, sharp ridiculing of the tendency for so much of adult society to desire and require being infantilised rather than

acknowledging or confronting any of the physical and mental challenges that their lives throw up - and the motos' knowledge of this lends the story its eventual punchline.

The idea that these peculiar creatures fill an emotional need for humans is one that also plays out between the motos and the Hamsters in *The Book of Dave*. Not that there is any equivalent of this to defend Dave Rudman from the inexorable onset of manic depression in contemporary London, however. Ostensibly pining for his estranged son, Dave laments that '*If only I could see him for a few minutes, half an hour, give him a little cuddle, read him a story...* Yet it wasn't Carl that he truly wanted; his desire was for competent arms to hold him, smooth skin to smear on oily love, insulation against the terrifying, heaving green swell of madness.' (*TBoD*, p.277) Dave's desire is transformed into a native practice of Ham come the distant future, thanks to the exclusive existence of the motos on the remote island. This practice starts from childhood, and Carl Dévúsh like other lads has a longstanding relationship with them. Moreover, having passed the age where the changeover occurs (where the children of Ham, up until a certain age, spend half of the week with either of their parents) and now living permanently with the dads, the motos become even more significant for Carl:

It was with the motos that Carl was able to be himself and accept his secret mummyself. The motos gathered together in a rank in a woodland clearing under the screenwash, their backs shiny with moisture. When the shower ceased their bristles caught the bigwatt like jewels. The motos were always prepared to admit him to their cuddling and nuzzling. (*TBoD*, p.121)

The affection of the motos acts as a momentary escape from the rampant masculinity and the harsh realities that define life on Ham. Their infectious, unadulterated innocence also counters the fanatical religious faith of this future world, as when Carl is with his moto, 'It mattered not what doubts the lad had, for... the creature's simple faith and his own scepticism were at one.' (*TBoD*, p.9)

'Scepticism', however, is an apt word when it comes to the motos. As life 'After Dave' progresses, culminating in the novel in the year 524, Ham falls increasingly under the sway of the totalitarian PCO ('Public Carriage Office'). Their regime has 'no need for the motos', (*TBoD*, p.450) and as such the denouement of Self's future world is the imminent slaughter of the entire moto population (as opposed to the sacred slaughter of selected motos on Ham each year). Yet prior to the formation of the PCO's regime, the motos formed part of a matriarchal faith on the island, and it is the lingering influences of this faith that cause the PCO to detest the motos and the island itself so much. According to the ancient folklore of the novel that exists separately from Dave's doctrines, Ham was originally considered as a foetus:

the aborted child of the Mutha, an ancient warrior queen of the giants, who leaped from island to island across the archipelago of Ing, pursued by her treacherous enemies. Fearing herself about to be caught, the Mutha sucked seawater into her vagina as an abortifacient, then squatted in the Great Lagoon and voided herself of Ham. When her pursuers saw the foetus, they were terrified, because it was an abomination - part moto and part human - and so they fled. (*TBoD*, p.58)

Between offering respite for Carl from oppressive masculinity - 'his secret mummyself' - and the enduring matriarchal legends, the motos retain close links to the females of the island. In addition to this, the sacred slaughter of the creatures is one of the rare occasions on Ham where the mummies and daddies of the island are allowed to interact freely, something which is unheard of and severely punishable across the rest of Ing. The creatures represent an opportunity to rediscover lost emotional aspects of childhood that have been suppressed by extremely religious doctrines and an absurdly masculine society. The language surrounding the motos and their limited number of names reveals this as well, as their lineage explains: 'Darlin an Shoogar ad Hunnë, an Hunnë an Gorj ad Boythë, an Boythë an Poppit ad Wunti, an Wunti an Thweetë ad me.' (*TBoD*, p.121) These are the infantile pet names that Michelle and Dave have bestowed on their son Carl in the past, and the eventual separation of the lads of Ham and their motos is inevitable because there has come a point at which Dave has realised 'Runty... Boysie... Champ...

Tiger... These babyish nicknames were no longer applicable to the rootless stripling who flopped along by Dave's side.' (TBoD, p.339)

Aside from referencing a brief time of happier family dynamics, the PCO's intense hatred of the motos is borne out of misinterpretations of an innocuous gripe of the 21st-century cabbie. It is a grumble that, in all of its ridiculousness, reveals why the creatures are dubbed motos, and also the sacred rituals surrounding them:

Heston Services. Moto 1 and 32. Since when has this been a Moto Services? Used to be Granada - I think. Moto? Moto? Bloody stupid name for a motorway services. Bloody stupid logo as well... A man, lying back, arms behind his head, a sort of crown on his head, at atomic swirl of lines in the region of his supine belly like 'e's bin fucking gutted. (TBoD, p.49)

In his short story 'Scale', Self riffs on motorway service stations as an example of the specious yet persistent contemporary political ideologies that so baffled him. Here, Dave's strange rant on service stations has huge implications for the existence, in a still incomprehensibly-distant future, of a creature that has apparently yet to exist. Additionally, the mangled-looking stomach of the service station logo is interpreted into one of Ham's most sacred, or Dävine, practices - the moto slaughter. As Carl explains to his moto, Runti, 'Weel uze yaw meet 2 feed ve Ack an iz dads, yer oyl fer vair woonz, an yul be wiv Dave á lars, yeah.' (TBoD, p.9) The lack of understanding by the moto of what this truly entails is one of the more touching moments within the novel, and the perspective of the moto is an affectingly influential one, as it is here that Runti's 'simple faith' supersedes Carl's sceptical nature. (TBoD, p.9) If 'simple faith' in humans equates to something naïve, that needs to be exposed and ridiculed, then in this strange creature it becomes a significantly more positive quality.

The poignant irony of these positive qualities, however, concerns the sinister circumstances surrounding the motos' creation and the shady experiments of CalBioTech back in the twenty-first century, as post-deluge Ham reveals the results of such

experimentation. Prior to the slaughter, part of the ritual of the dads on Ham is to check whether the moto is real, or 'toyist'. Meaning something that is 'fake, unreal, or taboo', (*TBoD*, p.495) the term stems from the seven-year-old Carl Rudman's interpretation of something indeterminable and fake he has chanced upon during a taxi ride with Dave. Dave, in turn, seizes this coinage to refer to the city itself, in accordance with his own mental health troubles, as 'on bad days almost everything could be toyist', (*TBoD*, p.47) in keeping with the realisation that his identity within the metropolis as a cabbie has been no more than that of a passive participant in the urban simulacrum. Back in the future, meanwhile, the checking takes place as 'Fred grabbed the skin, so that the two men held it stretched between them. The foglight streamed through the membrane, perfectly illuminating the phonics C-A-L-B-I-O-T-E-C-H.' (*TBoD*, p.19) The debate as to whether the creatures are real or toyist centres entirely upon interpretations of Dävinanity, with the view of the Driver being that the motos are 'toyist beasts, with their infantile slubberish and gross bodies', (*TBoD*, p.123) and on the true reading of the book, 'as higher authorities would tell you, if you listened clearly, it is an abomination.' (*TBoD*, p.13)

Herein, however, lies the irony at the heart of Self's narrative. For a relentless, Enlightenment-esque faith in progress and pursuit of technological advancement in a long-submerged world has spawned these creatures. And now, a similarly relentless faith, this time in creating a New London and a rigidly Dävine society, is hastening their destruction, and the destruction of a wider community. As such, Self's picture of the future becomes an ironic repetition of the contemporary society that he analyses. Upon the impending slaughter of the entire moto population towards the end of the novel, one of the dads, Gari Funch, declares that he may as well be killed because 'Wivaht ve motos... vare aynt no Am ennewä.' (*TBoD*, p.449) While the situation of both the motos and Ham itself is perilous here, the contemporary reader is secure in the knowledge that all of this is faintly ridiculous, and that any disagreements over religious readings have

only even come about through the highly unlikely, totally arbitrary intersection between the experiments of CalBioTech and Dave's disdain for the logo of a motorway service station. And as Self has previously said in relation to service stations, 'on such minute ephemera was destiny poised.' Indeed, this notion of the inherently chance and minute nature of our faith is reflected in the epiphany Carl experiences in the closing moments of Self's future narrative, with the realisation that 'He needed no intercom to tell him this: that if it hadn't been Dave who so blighted the world, it would've been some other god - Jeebus or Joey or Ali - with his own savage edicts.' (TBoD, p.450) This epiphany shows Self at his most anthropological again. Firstly, it perpetuates the idea that morality is merely a social construct. Additionally, it demonstrates how he argues that there is, in human nature, a constant, base set of needs and desires that will always exist. These needs and desires will always transcend any arbitrary happenings or coincidences that can prompt ideological and spiritual significance, such as the discovery of the book or the naming and rituals involving the motos. This is an attitude that dominates the entire novel, something embodied by Dave's recognition towards the end of his own narrative, when he reflects over '*Devenish and his ill-gotten dosh... Michelle even with 'er creams an' slap... They're all worshipping sumffing... like those fucking nutters totaling themselves in Bagdad... It's only that they want a heaven here, on earth.*' (TBoD, p.463)

Claire Allen argues that when it comes to how Self depicts religion in his work, his primary focus is on "how Western society engages with religion during a time of fear", and how 'writing in a post-9/11 world, the prominent fear is that surrounding the contemporary "War on Terror"'.¹³⁴ The problem with this is that the empty rhetoric of that soundbite is as convincing and successful as the 'Exit Strategy' of the Iraq war. Consequently, Self seeks to achieve a greater level of complexity within his work that

¹³⁴ Claire Allen, 'Wampeters and foma? Misreading religion in Cat's Cradle and The Book of Dave' in David Simmons (ed.), *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.213

goes beyond merely mocking religious fanatics. His development and move away from religious satire is characterised by the same traits of successful literary journalism - that it should 'afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. The trouble with a lot of so-called "satire" directed against religiously-motivated extremists is that it's not clear who it's afflicting, or who it's comforting.'¹³⁵ Therefore, the targets of Self's ire become consciously more difficult to identify in *The Book of Dave*. Fanatical exegetes who exploit the faith of others are a starting point, but the passivity of the masses who blindly keep the faith in spurious ideologies, promises and progress - 'Nú Lundun', for instance - are open to just as much, if not more, scrutiny. This is not confined to religious themes either; it imposes itself on to political, economic and technological ideologies, which the taxi, its driver and fares are consistently caught up in. In *The Book of Dave*, Self conjures up a protagonist with a belief that '*There is no God but you, Dave... and you can be your own prophet.*' (TBoD, p.345) As such, Dave Rudman and the leap from recent past to distant future offer a perfect realisation of the transition from individual to social critique Self is so fond of - one that is conveniently embodied by religious practices. However, the real genius of Self's novel is that the reduction of this 'social psychopathology' to a material level is depicted in a way that is both empirically measurable (the motos being as they are a technological creation of the CalBioTech corporation) yet consequently all the more affecting.

Ecocritical and Environmental Concerns

The move beyond a purely human perspective through the anthropoid form of the motos paves the way for a discussion as to where *The Book of Dave* sits alongside current trends in ecocriticism. While ecocriticism itself is a term not without its complications, fictions that deal with environmental concerns or - as Adam Trexler specifies - the Anthropocene

¹³⁵ Will Self, 'The Charlie Hebdo Attack and the Awkward Truth About Our Fetish for 'Free Speech'', *Vice*, 9.1.2015, http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/will-self-charlie-hebdo-attack-the-west-satire-france-terror-105

era in which we now exist, offer a necessary departure from human-centric canonical criticism. As Trexler puts it, such a narrow focus on human and on character ‘isn’t how the world works, of course, and it isn’t actually how fiction works. Landscapes, animals, devices, vehicles, geological formations, and buildings are formally constructive entities in fiction.’¹³⁶ He adds that the ‘best Anthropocene novels are not solely “character-driven.” Nor do they reduce climate change to a unitary phenomenon, such as the “Great Storm”. Instead, they explore how things like ocean currents, tigers, viruses, floods, vehicles, and capital relentlessly shape human experience.’¹³⁷ Looking past the uniquely ironic way in which *The Book of Dave* is ‘character-driven’, Self is not actually overemphasizing the importance of character in this novel. Rather, the effects of technology (namely the taxi), the ways in which places are experienced, and a fair amount of chance have as much if not more agency within and influence over the development of the plot as any single character does.

Furthermore, Trexler’s remarks are indicative of this current trend in ecocriticism - through works by the likes of Timothy Morton, and Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann - to analyse the effects of climate change on a more material level. Iovino and Oppermann, for instance, base their ideas of a ‘material ecocriticism’ on an amalgamation of ‘a distributive vision of agency, the emergent nature of the world’s phenomena, the awareness that we inhabit a dimension crisscrossed by vibrant forces that hybridize human and nonhuman matters, and finally the persuasion that matter and meaning constitute the fabric of our storied world’.¹³⁸ Self’s attempt to drag simplistic, disembodied human belief in their own agency back down to a material level ends up providing a dramatisation of these theories. His distant future is a world transformed,

¹³⁶ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia Press, 2015), p.13

¹³⁷ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, p.26

¹³⁸ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2014), p.5

not only by the catastrophic effects of global warming, but by an absurd logic that has pushed these 'emergent' phenomena to their extreme.

Morton crystallises the immense unknowability of global warming when he states that 'Global warming is so huge and so impossible to see in one single constantly present thing - we can't ever say, "Look over there! There is global warming!"'¹³⁹ This evident incomprehensibility forms his ideas on what he calls hyperobjects - things that lie beyond our comprehension, thanks in part to the huge, Kantian gap between thing (physical object) and the phenomenon (ideas that surround and define the object). Hyperobjects have a consciously troubling and distorting effect on the ways in which we experience the world and think about global warming, as Morton explains, 'I can think and compute climate in this sense, but I can't directly see or touch it. The gap between phenomenon and thing yawns open, disturbing my sense of presence and being in the world',¹⁴⁰ and also 'Because they so massively outscale us, hyperobjects have magnified this weirdness of things for our inspection: things are themselves, but we can't point to them directly.'¹⁴¹ A similar sense of conscious disjunction in Self's novel is the one that exists between past and future, as the gap between the material objects of the past and their disturbing transformation into their future interpretations displays an ironic lack of understanding. This lack of understanding works on both sides of the disjunction too, however. It is easy to point out the humour in the many warped interpretations of Dave's cabbie vernacular, but the extremism with which they have been infused with remains a metaphor for a more insidious faith in technology in the present day. In Morton's view, ecocritics must 'investigate and come to terms with [the] nothingness'¹⁴² of this gap, in

¹³⁹ Timothy Morton, 'The Liminal Space between Things: Epiphany and the Physical' in S erenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2014), p.279

¹⁴⁰ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.12

¹⁴¹ *ibid*

¹⁴² Morton, 'The Liminal Space', p.279

order to at least attempt to gain a greater understanding of the immediate environmental concerns of the Anthropocene. The fact that a primary hyperobject within *The Book of Dave* - the carbon-emitting taxi - is part of the problem only heightens this ironic environmental entrapment.

However, once Dave has succeeded in freeing himself from the taxi he is suddenly capable of comprehending and visualising this gap, that is given the pseudo-Ballardian tag of 'deep time'. This comprehension is a wonderful moment within the novel, as it exposes how truly insignificant the objects that so many people place their faith in and define their lives by actually are:

The screen had been removed from his eyes, the mirror cast away, and he was privileged with a second sight into deep time. The great wave came on, thrusting before it a scurf of beakers, stirrers, spigots, tubes, toy soldiers, disposable razors, computer-disc cases, pill bottles, swizzle sticks, tongue depressors, hypodermic syringes, tin-can webbing, pallet tape, clips, clasps, brackets, plugs, bungs, stoppers, toothbrushes, dentures, Evian bottles, film canisters, widgets, detergent bottles, disposable lighters, poseable figurines of superheros, cutlery, hubcaps, knick-knacks, mountings, hair grips, combs, earphones, Tupperware containers, streetlight protectors - and a myriad other bits of moulded plastic, which minutes later washed up against the hills of Hampstead, Highgate, Harrow and Epping, forming salt-beached reefs, which would remain there for centuries, the lunar pull of the new lagoon freeing spiny fragments to bob into the cockle-picking hands of *know-nothing carrot-crunchers* who would scrutinize them and be filled with great awe by the notion that anything ever had - or ever would be again - Made in China. (*TBoD*, pp.404-5)

This epiphany of Dave's is an idealisation of what an individual can understand if they manage to begin existing outside of the parameters of the 'screen-based' life, that Self claims is so dominant in the present-day. It is the one occasion within the novel that Dave actively visualises and can comprehend the Hamsters of the distant future, and this moment of clarity is tellingly prescient. An exchange between Carl Dévúsh and Salli Brudi in the year 523 AD - one of the very first of the novel - centres upon the authenticity of a Davework. These Daveworks are 'plastic fragments deposited in the sea by Dave at the MadeinChina. Worn by Inglanders as charms and talismans, periodically proscribed by the PCO.' (*TBoD*, p.484) The reader discovers that there are millions of these Daveworks

floating in the lagoon south of Ham, in keeping with both Dave's vision and the implication that collective societies continue to place an unwavering faith within them.

Another of Dave's revelatory glimpses into 'deep time' occurs shortly before this, towards the end of his career as a taxi driver. Still very much trapped by the taxi and the need to make money from it, this glimpse is catalysed by the consumerist 'received channels of communication'¹⁴³ - in this instance, an advertisement for mineral water:

he peered up through the windscreen of the Fairway at the huge electronic signboards covering the buildings of Piccadilly Circus. One showed the Circus itself - the teeming crowds, the enmeshed traffic. Then, without warning, water began to flood between the buildings, a tidal bore that came surging along the rivers of light. Dave was shocked - what could this apocalyptic vision be selling? Then the flooded concourse wavered, fragmented and was replaced by a slogan: DASANI MINERAL WATER, A NEW WAVE IS COMING. (*TBoD*, p.294)

At this point Dave is still totally bound up within the 'screen-based' life, which allows for indeterminacy between the destructive consequences of global warming and a flashy advertisement for an everyday product. The vision itself is inherently unreal, as the advertisement plays upon the stereotypical conventions of a disaster movie in an attempt to instill a sense of drama and spectacle into a mundane object. This is another event that mirrors 'Waiting' and Professor Stein, who riffs that fears around some millennial apocalypse have boiled down to 'at worst indifference and at best... some quite good television retrospectives.' (*QTol*, p.186) This pithy remark demonstrates how global anxieties are reducible, because of an over-indulgence in these various screens and technologies, to indifference, ignorance, and even a product of the same technologies. Self is troubled with how commonplace it is for societies to become fixated with, and idealise, the end-products of these processes, such as the TV retrospectives and the attention-grabbing advertisements; rather than facing up to the very real, very difficult and very troubling problems that underpin them, such as global warming. In this example,

¹⁴³ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, p.101

Morton's gap between thing and phenomenon becomes even more cavernous thanks to the phenomenon being utilised in an unashamedly commercial way. The apocalyptic flood evokes mineral water as opposed to any actual effects of global warming, and in an ironic twist Dave is unable to even dwell on this, as he must carry on taxiing and in turn hastening the destruction that the advertisement prophesises.

Conclusion

Dave's very first glimpse into 'deep time' comes in the blissful formative stages of his cabbie career on the fateful night he picks up Michelle. About to begin his night's work, Dave pauses before stepping into his taxi to momentarily contemplate the vast complexities of the city around him:

Dave unlocked the cab and stood for a moment looking west to where the buildings of the City stacked up. There were new blocks at Aldgate and down towards the Tower of London; a thicket of cranes sprouted over the old Broad Street Station, and above it all reared the black, glassy stack of the NatWest Tower. Another course of London was being laid on top of the last, millions of tons of steel, concrete, brick and stone, weighing down on the present, pressing it into the past. (*TBoD*, p.95)

This impending, contemporary layer of the palimpsestuous city threatens - in a fashion similar to Ackroyd's feelings towards London - to undermine Dave's idealistic fantasy of a London defined entirely by the Knowledge. His subsequent unease attests to this, as 'Round and round it went, London's auto-cannibalism. It made Dave feel queasy to be standing suspended over such deep time, on the taut cable of a summer evening. He lowered himself into the cab and, starting the engine, felt better immediately'. (*TBoD*, p.95) The destructive, and indeed self-destructive, nature of driving the London streets leads to a distinct unease around the vulnerability of his own identity within the city. However, just as Ackroyd leans upon urban legends within what remains a remarkable charting of London's history as a coping mechanism for this unease, Dave can continue to drive his taxi. The taxi becomes a coping mechanism and a reminder - if only to Dave himself - that his Knowledge and therefore his own agency remain bulletproof. In doing

this, he denies the troubling visions of ‘deep time’, preferring to indulge in the spectacle and the ideologies of cabbaging as a means (albeit an ultimately futile one) of staving off his profound mental health problems. Therefore, both Ackroyd and the city itself become useful foils for an analysis of Dave’s individual psychopathology during the contemporary sections of the novel.

In turn, the religious and environmental concerns within the future sections of the novel denote a neat development towards Self’s representations of ‘social psychopathology’. Rather than working at the level of mere religious satire, *The Book of Dave* candidly demonstrates how Self is concerned with exposing the combination of a lack of understanding and blind faith that characterises the majority of contemporary belief systems, both religious and secular. Not satisfied with merely exposing them, however, Self is also at pains to reduce them to a material level and explain how difficult it is to escape from them. This lack of understanding is an insidious one, and Self highlights how he is not immune from it himself. His epiphany that he, a native Londoner, had never visited the mouth of the Thames is a geographical case in point:

You couldn’t have had more solid confirmation of the fact that London’s geography remained, for me, exclusively emotional. What would you think of a peasant who had farmed all his life on the banks of a river if he told you he had never been to where that river meets the sea, some thirty miles away? You’d think he was a very ignorant, very insular, very landlocked peasant. There are millions of peasants like that in London; in imagining themselves to be the very navel of the world, Londoners have forgotten the rest of their anatomy. (*FF*, p.39)

This epiphany works in a similar way to the kind of chasm, or Kantian gap in terms of Morton’s hyperobjects, that exists between emotional and psychological perceptions of London and its physical geography. The effect this has is, as Self notices, to instill many Londoners with a collective belief in their own infallible superiority that totally obscures and overrides their actual ignorance. The deliberately vast disparity between contemporary London and the ‘New London’ of the distant future is an ironic dramatisation of this, and as such the city itself becomes, when reading the novel in the

context of Morton's theory, another key hyperobject. Additionally, despite Dave's huge influence on the both sides of the narrative, the centrality of London begins to reveal how the novel is less concerned with a focus on a character-centric plot, in keeping with much recent ecocritical theory. The black cab's contribution to London's pollution problems is a further ironic twist. However, that this fascinatingly unique urban landscape is home to one of the most iconic forms of transport in the world - and importantly that said transport plays a pivotal, active role in the simulacrum and the emotional phenomenology of the city - cements how Self's work places more emphasis and influence on both transport and place than any individual, irrespective of how much influence that individual may feel they have.

Chapter Three: Driving Fiction

Introduction

In the same 2006 interview that he derided Self and others as unworthy heirs of J. G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair offered a categorisation of writers as ‘either walking writers or driving writers’.¹⁴⁴ Placing Self definitively within one of these categories is ultimately a reductive exercise, but ‘Design Faults in the Volvo 760 Turbo’, ‘Scale’, ‘Waiting’ and *The Butt* are fictions that, on their own, place Self into the latter of Sinclair’s categories. As well as being notably predicated on driving, the three short stories share Self’s characteristic fascination with the intricacies of geography and locale, be it the streets of London or the M40 corridor. They also share the sardonic humour that Self so often infuses his short fiction with, and are three examples of Self’s belief in his short stories existing primarily as riffs or gags. It is this humour that moves Self’s writing style consciously away from Ballard’s, and justifies Sinclair’s belief that Self is one of a coterie of post-Ballard writers who seek their influence from Ballard but fail to match up to his genius and prescience.

With that in mind, the first section of this discussion focuses on the obsessions and styles of Ballard that make him such an influential literary figure for Self. This is framed by the ideological rhetoric that continues to define car advertisements, citing Henry Ford’s manipulation of the frontier mentality as a way of selling his cars, to Heathcote Williams’ sharp dissection of - coincidentally - a Volvo slogan. Both of these campaigns are insistent upon highlighting the idea that individual agency is a key feature of their products, and even go so far as to purposefully blur the boundaries between their cars and powerful human emotions. This anthropomorphism of technology feeds into perceptions of violence, sex, and individual power, and the varying and profound extents of this anthropomorphism also underpins one of the main theoretical arguments within this chapter: Braden Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz’s *The Techno-Human Condition*, which

¹⁴⁴ Sinclair, *Ballardian*.

categorises the complexities of the dynamics that exist between humans and technologies and examines the inherent complexities within the transhumanist debate. The combination of Ballard's obsession with the immediacy and the spectacle of American culture, and his awareness of the contemporary collective obsession with the car, creates a perverse logic which Ballard pushes - in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* - to its extreme limits to drastically alter fundamental aspects of humanity - again, sex and violence - in ways that are similar to the theoretical arguments surrounding Allenby and Sarewitz's final, transformative level of *The Techno-Human Condition*. Moreover, David Wills' *Prosthesis* (1995) acts as a valuable foil for these ideas within Ballard's work, as his celebratory tone around the possibilities that prosthetics and technology open up to the human body is mirrored by the ambivalent affirmation of Ballard's writing.

With these social, technological and literary contexts established, the discussion moves on to 'Design Faults'. This is one of two stories from *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys* (1997) that features the wildly promiscuous psychiatrist Bill Bywater as its protagonist. In 'Design Faults', Bill spends most of his time cruising the streets of London in his Volvo 760 Turbo as he attempts to consummate an affair with the socialite Serena; an affair that progresses alongside the psychiatrist's own mental breakdown. Like *Crash*, it explores the link between sex, the car, and the consequences of obsessional behaviour, but unlike Ballard's novel it does so in a deliberately more playful way, as Self manipulates language to spin a humourous yarn that ridicules the belief in the perceived power dynamics between driver and car.

Self pushes this manipulation of language to its extreme in 'Scale'. Set away from but still within sight of London, the story ostensibly deals with the twin addictions of morphine and motorway driving. It is a story that highlights Self's consistent interest in the inherent difficulties surrounding definition, by taking in every possible definition of the word 'scale', from size-related scales, bathroom scales, the scales of a lizard, the scaling involved in climbing, and even the scale that has formed on the inside of the

narrator's kettle. Moreover, Jeanette Baxter's application of the doctrines of surrealism to Self's work - as a means of explaining how his writing transcends the often lazily deployed tag of 'surreal' - demonstrates how Self's conscious language games instil a level of complexity that belies the story's often-puerile humour. In turn, 'Scale' becomes a valuable critique of the insidious commodification of place and history, and the simulative nature of an idealised - and utterly non-existent - English past.

The reading of 'Waiting' in this chapter engages with Allenby and Sarewitz's contemplations on the idea of transhumanism. By including a remarkable passage of highly-idealised urban driving, Self reveals the absurdity behind this belief that technology merely enhances us. Just as Self includes unachievable levels of agency over technology to expose this, 'Waiting' also anticipates his later interest in the paradoxical and self-consuming qualities of spectacular society. To this end, the presence of the Carlos, the bizarre, all-knowing motorcycle courier, becomes a version of the Debordian celebrity figure whose baffling abilities set up the story's punchline. In this instance, this relates to the ways that these ideals and the subsequent obsessions they foster - in this story, the obsession with never having to wait again - manipulate people against more valuable existing personal relationships.

These three short stories feature a significant amount of driving in specific, even quite intimate locales. Accordingly then, *The Butt's* drawn-out form reflects the 'unthinkable' (*TB*, p.172) distances that Tom Brodzinski has to drive across. Not only is it a formal counterpoint to the three short stories, *The Butt* consciously swerves from the punchy kind of humour that characterises them. Instead, it falls under Self's description of 'slapstick', as something that is absolutely not funny. Self talks about slapstick in the context of addiction, and his treatment of addiction in *The Butt* is a development from the obsessive behaviours he details in 'Scale' and 'Waiting'. Here, addiction is initially linked to action, and from this Self portrays the disappearance of any predictable connections between actions and consequences. The seemingly

insignificant action that interrupts Brodzinski's normality, and from which the plot unfolds, happens when Brodzinski 'flipped the butt [of his last cigarette] into the sodden air.' (*TB*, p.7) This disappearance is interesting to consider in light of the final level of the *Techno-Human Condition*, as Self creates a protagonist whose semblances of agency are blown apart by the fact he has no idea what is going on, on a frighteningly large scale - much more so than the obsessions of the characters of his driving short stories. Far from embodying the apparently superior car culture of America (Brodzinski is American, though this is never explicitly stated), Brodzinski is grotesquely trapped by the tribal and ethnic minutiae and beliefs of *The Butt's* fictional country.

Car Advertising, American Culture, and J. G. Ballard

'Drive it like you hate it - Volvo. / Car as enemy. The enemy only you can control.'¹⁴⁵ Heathcote Williams' commentary on this emotionally-charged 1960s Volvo slogan demonstrates how important the promise of individual power is as a marketing tool. The perverse ingenuity of this slogan is the coupling of this belief in control with the intense, violent emotion of hatred; a coupling that resonates with Ballard's belief 'that the twentieth century reaches almost its purest expression on the highway' due to 'the speed and violence of our age, its strange love affair with the machine.'¹⁴⁶ The traces of the 'strange love affair' that came to define the twentieth-century, and that Ballard created extreme yet perversely logical metaphors from, go back further than the 1960s, however. Like Volvo would half a century later, Henry Ford used the idea of individual agency to gain huge commercial success from his Model T, the first 'motor car for the great multitude.'¹⁴⁷ This was a car that came with the promise of being able to 'enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces.'¹⁴⁸ Ford linked individual agency to both a canny manipulation of the frontier mentality that dominated

¹⁴⁵ Heathcote Williams, *Autogeddon* (London: Cape, 2001), p.13

¹⁴⁶ Ballard, *User's Guide*, p.262

¹⁴⁷ Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (London: Heinemann, 1922), p.73

¹⁴⁸ Ford, *My Life and Work*, p.73

American consciousness at the turn of that century, and major moralistic institutions such as Christianity and the family. This is a huge contrast to the hatefulness of the Volvo slogan, but both reveal the play upon the perceived interrelationship between agency and powerful emotions. These emotions become indistinguishable from the vehicle itself, and Ingrid Piller points out that a vital part of car marketing is creating ‘positive “personalities” carrying overtones of strength, aggressiveness, adventurousness, masculinity or prestige.’¹⁴⁹

Anthropomorphism of the kind that Piller describes also underpins the three levels of Allenby and Sarewitz’s *Techno-Human Condition*. The first - and only neatly definable - level (Level I) is the level where the ideological qualities of individual agency persist. Here, at ‘the level of individual use... technologies are volition enhancers: they give us a better chance of accomplishing what we want to do than would otherwise be the case.’ (*THC*, p.37) The rhetoric of this level is deliberately similar to that used so often within car advertisements, and the car is given as an example of how technologies work at this level and then become more complex. Initially, the car is a ‘technological solution to the problem of getting from one place to another effectively, relatively safely, at a time and rate of one’s choosing.’ (*THC*, p.39) This seems a perfectly justifiable attitude - indeed it is one that so many drivers believe in - but it is comprehensively undermined even by Level II. At this level, ‘We can see what the technologies do, and we can recognize what is in the system and what is not, even though acting to achieve a particular intended outcome is often difficult because the internal system behaviour is too complicated to predict.’ (*THC*, p.61) The traffic jam is an example of this. It is an accepted, if inconvenient, part of driving which the driver is powerless to do anything about. The individualistic goals from Level I remain visible here, which gives Level II a distinct sense of familiarity. This disappears by the intrinsic complexity of Level III, however:

¹⁴⁹ Ingrid Piller, ‘Extended Metaphor in Automobile Fan Discourse’, *Poetics Today* 20: 3 (1999), p.496

The point is not that any particular technology may affect a particular human; the point is that we cannot understand what humans are unless we also understand the meanings of the technological systems that we make, and which in turn re-make us. For as individuals, as members of communities and larger societies, and as members of the dominant species of this planet, the state of technological play is bound up with what it means for us to be human. (*THC*, p.83)

Unlike the taken-for-granted systems of Level II, the point of Level III is infinitely more far-reaching, as it consists of emergent, global behaviours that work towards re-defining our entire identity. Allenby and Sarewitz summarise these as ‘transformative Earth systems’ that evade both definition and understanding. As they helpfully point out, ‘At this level, it’s not just that you can’t handle the truth; it’s that you can’t even grasp it.’ (*THC*, p.64) These emergent, ‘transformative’ systems are curious in relation to Self’s aesthetic of consciously eschewing any easy meanings or understandings in favour of expressing the difficulties of individual and collective identities, and also Ballard’s unrestrained literary experiments that explore the limits (if indeed there are any) of the relationship between human and automotive technology.

The unprecedented commercial success of the Ford Model T catalysed the cultural significance of the car in American culture. Therefore, given the importance that Ballard believes the car had, his own fascination with American culture is unsurprising. This is predicated on the cultural landscape of 1950s and 60s America being ‘intensely in the present’,¹⁵⁰ and the first event that fully captured this was James Dean’s death, in 1955, in a head-on collision. Ricarda Vidal talks about ‘car crash culture’ as having ‘developed from car culture, but it is also a concept in its own right.’¹⁵¹ Ballard, in light of Dean’s death, is noticeably aware of the specific characteristics of the car crash:

A car crash harnesses elements of eroticism, aggression, desire, speed, drama, kinaesthetic factors, the stylising of motion, consumer goods, status - all these in one event. I myself see the car crash as a tremendous sexual event really, a liberation of human and machine libido (if there is such a thing). That’s why the death in a crash of a

¹⁵⁰ Simon Sellars and Dan O’Hara (eds.), *Extreme Metaphors: Selected interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p.300

¹⁵¹ Ricarda Vidal, *Death and Desire in Car Crash Culture: A Century of Romantic Futurisms* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p.5

famous person is a unique event - whether it's Jayne Mansfield or James Dean - it takes place within this most potent of all consumer durables.¹⁵²

Dean is an example of how, for Ballard, the systems involved in the both the car and the car crash alter entire societies in remarkable ways. Moreover, the sudden prospect of technological sex and violence is hugely liberating rather than entrapping. This is not least because it is married to the face that defined Hollywood and teen rebellion in 1950s America, which opened up an array of possibilities and ensured that Dean remains the touchstone, or the ideal, for what Ballard feels is the sensuous prospect of the car crash. David Cronenberg seized on this in his 1996 film adaptation of *Crash* by including a recreation of Dean's collision, and Roy Grundmann details how the 'Dean intertext of Fifties drag strip races, teen rebellion, and car sex suggests the close link between the sexual revolution and the car culture... As Cronenberg explains: "The first guy who had a convertible in High School was the guy who had the sex... He had a mobile bedroom."¹⁵³

Eight years on from Dean, America witnessed another kind of death within the car: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This event inspired the writing of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and Ballard explains that 'I wanted to write directly about the present day, and the peculiar psychological climate that existed in the middle sixties... I think the key to that book was Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, which I saw - and still do see - as the most important event of the whole of the 1960s.'¹⁵⁴ This momentous event in the American political landscape led to the rise to prominence of Ronald Reagan, an individual who embodied an uneasy amalgamation of Dean's Hollywood stardom and Kennedy's political attractiveness. Reagan became a focal point of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, particularly because of the 'smooth, teleprompter-perfect tones of the TV auto-salesman to project a political message that is absolutely the reverse of bland and

¹⁵² Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), *Extreme Metaphors*, p.31

¹⁵³ Roy Grundmann, 'Plight of the Crash Fest Mummies: David Cronenberg's *Crash*', *Cineaste* 22: 4 (1997), p.25

¹⁵⁴ Sellars and O'Hara (eds.), *Extreme Metaphors*, pp.51-2

reassuring. A complete discontinuity existed between Reagan's manner and body language... and his scarily simplistic far-right message'.¹⁵⁵ Ballard consciously highlights the ideological disparity that exists between the appearance and the ideal of Reagan, and his contrasting, prejudiced political messages. The disparity may seem obvious, but *The Atrocity Exhibition* hypothesises the complete inability - in what reads almost as a precursor to the slickness with which Tony Blair fitted into 1990s Britain - of the American public to realise it. Ballard's hypothesis here is that Reagan's 'verbal material was found to have minimal effect, as demonstrated by substitution of an edited tape giving diametrically opposed opinions'¹⁵⁶, and Reagan's ascension to Governor of California and eventually President of the United States bears this out.

The nucleus of *Crash* first appeared as a section of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, but as Roger Luckhurst notes, the 'move from the polylogue of *The Atrocity Exhibition* to the remorseless monologism of *Crash* is a startling transition. The complex compositional techniques of collage, juxtaposition and condensation are abandoned for a single, sustained, intolerably intense narrative voice.'¹⁵⁷ *Crash* follows the interrelationship between sexual desire, violence and technological advances to a harrowingly logical conclusion, the extent of which becomes apparent in a comparison between the novel and sociological, automotive theory such as Tim Dant's 'Driver-Car', in which:

The programme of action of both subject and object is transformed once they come together - combined they may act towards a quite different goal than either could have achieved independently. It is in this sense that the assemblage of the driver-car brings about a form of social being and a set of social actions that is different from other forms of being and action.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp.168-9

¹⁵⁶ Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, p.166

¹⁵⁷ Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls: The Fiction of J. G. Ballard* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1997), p.123

¹⁵⁸ Tim Dant, 'The Driver-Car', *Theory Culture & Society*, 21: 4/5 (2004), p.70

Dant argues that the 'Driver-Car' brings about an unheralded kind of social existence through the fusion of the two previously independent conduits of the driver and the car. In *Crash*, Vaughan works towards a similar, if perversely skewed, theory, which the narrator James Ballard becomes immersed into after his own serious car accident. James' acknowledgement that his 'pleasant domestic idyll, with its delightful promiscuities, was brought to an end by the reappearance of Robert Vaughan, nightmare angel of the expressways'¹⁵⁹ reads as a move towards the new 'form of social being and set of social actions' that Dant outlines. The comfortable banality and adulterous promiscuity that define James' marriage before the crash are irreversibly altered from his first affair following his crash, with fellow crash victim Helen Remington. In this, 'the presence of the car mediated an element which alone made sense of the sexual act.'¹⁶⁰ To be successful, Dant's new 'social actions' require a network 'to which the humans and non-humans must be contributing',¹⁶¹ and the contingency of the car to James and Helen's affair becomes a psychosexual version of this sociology. The pre-existing promiscuities of James and Helen fuse with the stylisation of the car to create a previously unrealised form of sexual desire - just as mobility requires both driver and car, sex now requires person and car to achieve any gratification.

The gratifying union of flesh and technology is at the heart of David Wills' *Prosthesis*. Wills uses the personal experience of his father's prosthetic leg to explore the effectiveness with which the human body becomes a tool. One of the anecdotes he draws on involves the complexities of re-learning how to ride a bicycle following the loss of a leg and the acquisition of a prosthetic:

a familiar ride on a familiar bicycle suddenly becomes a difficult apprenticeship, he is suddenly aware of the rank mechanical otherness of this machine he used to climb on without hesitation, without so much as a second thought, stepping spryly into the saddle, pedaling like second nature through rain or shine, up hill and down dale, but now he feels

¹⁵⁹ J. G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p.66

¹⁶⁰ Ballard, *Crash*, p.97

¹⁶¹ Dant, 'The Driver-Car', p.69

the apparatus, is conscious of the limitations of his body as though he were required to learn it all over again, the familiar suddenly thrown back into an uncanny warp¹⁶²

This excerpt is poignant because of how obvious it is that the changes have not taken place in the 'familiar' bicycle, but that the sudden defamiliarisation of one's own body is what is troubling here. However, Wills actively moves away from this attitude of 'conscious' 'limitations', and undermines perceived attitudes of pity towards amputees. Instead, the new limb - like every prosthesis - has a hyperreal quality to it, with Wills asserting that 'the duality of every prosthesis, its search for a way between emulating the human and superseding the human'¹⁶³. This means that 'the model... can always surpass the original in its functioning, simply do the job better; or rather do all sorts of other jobs the original could not conceive of'.¹⁶⁴ The new physical and psychological possibilities that the prosthesis opens up are not to be pitied, but rather discovered and celebrated.

In *Crash*, these attitudes are explored in a sexual context through Gabrielle, formerly a 'conventional young woman', yanked by her car crash out of her 'cozy and passive life, of minor flirtations in the backs of cheap cars enjoyed without any sense of the real possibilities of her body'.¹⁶⁵ The transformation is from a passive ignorance of her own physical possibilities to an active embracing of them, and the first sexual encounter between her and James transforms his attitudes and brings them closer to something like Wills' outlook:

For the first time I felt no trace of pity for this crippled woman, but celebrated with her the excitements of these abstract vents let into her body by sections of her own automobile... these sexual apertures formed by fragmenting windshield louvers and dashboard dials in a high-speed impact.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.22

¹⁶³ Wills, *Prosthesis*, p.26

¹⁶⁴ Wills, *Prosthesis*, p.29

¹⁶⁵ Ballard, *Crash*, pp.78-9

¹⁶⁶ Ballard, *Crash*, p.148

James and Gabrielle's sexual epiphany prompts feelings of celebration and excitement, as her altered body proves a highly effective sexual tool, one that in Wills' words can 'simply do the job better' than an intact, unchanged body could. The tone of this sexual celebration is representative of Ballard's scientific fascination in the physical and psychological possibilities of a coupling of human and technology, and that this affair is only so fulfilling because of the impact of the car on flesh skilfully reinforces his hypothesis.

Ballard's interest in these possibilities lends his writing a posthumanist edge, and if Ballard's posthumanism is viewed primarily through the car windscreen, then another aspect of the 'screen-based life' - the cinema screen - is important when it comes to discussing how Ballard engages with redefining the contemporary human. Neil Badmington, in his work *Posthumanism*, compares the ways the concept was handled by 1960s Parisian theorists and Hollywood:

There was one fundamental difference between Paris and Hollywood: whereas the intellectuals were celebrating the demise, popular culture was committed to a defence of humanism (the aliens were always defeated, frequently by a uniquely 'human' quality). Man, the films insisted, would survive: this was destiny, the law of nature.¹⁶⁷

Hollywood projects a rigid, fundamental essence of humanity that will always win out, no matter how illogical it may appear. Ballard attacks this 'human' quality and its illogicality by envisioning a previously-inconceivable interrelationship between human being and car that Vaughan follows right the way to his death. Grundmann captures how Ballard achieves this when he posits that:

The narrow meanings of such terms as 'straight' and 'gay' seem to get eradicated in techno-porn's larger attack on conventional sex. Instead, *Crash's* fetishism proposes an inherent bisexuality that would strictly revolve around sex acts instead of proclaiming sexual identities. While contemporary audiences find themselves mired in these

¹⁶⁷ Neil Badmington, *Posthumanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p.8

identities, science fiction is supposed to give us a vantage point from which we may critically examine them and entertain the potential benefits of dissolving them.¹⁶⁸

In Ballard's work, this 'techno-porn' makes establishing any kind of individual identity an impossible task. However the tone of his writing highlights how he believed that such identities should not be sought out. Doing such a thing was in fact a means of entrapment, and as Grundmann succinctly puts it, audiences became 'mired' within these ideas of identities. Ballard's scientific style of writing obliterates the universality and limitations of these identities, and doing so appears to take his writing closer to the troubling questions surrounding Level III of *The Techno-Human Condition*. More than redefining fundamental aspects of humanity - such as sexuality - Ballard convincingly presents a world in which traditionally rigid attitudes towards sexuality and technology - such as the widespread belief in individual human agency manipulated so often by the car and its marketing - have been banished, and that this banishment leads to an altogether more affirming existence.

Design Faults in the Volvo 760 Turbo

This short story is the closest of Self's work thematically to *Crash*, as it develops on the active influence that the car has on a sexual affair. However, reading the story in light of *The Techno-Human Condition* highlights how Self consciously moves away from the profound and disturbing hypothesis of Ballard's novel. Whereas *Crash* unerringly removes any physical and sexual boundaries to move towards Level III, 'Design Faults' humourously creates a distinct connection between the minutiae of social systems that emerge from urban driving and Bill Bywater's mental collapse. This reveals how no matter how trivial or inconsequential these systems seem, they still powerfully undermine an individual's belief in their own agency to the point of mental breakdown.

¹⁶⁸ Grundmann, 'Crash Fest Mummies', p.26

The story starts by inviting the reader into ‘the terrifyingly tiny world of the urban adulterer.’ (*TTTTFTTB*, p.155) This immediately outlines the fearful limitations of the world Bill is operating within, compared to how Ballard portrays adultery in *Crash* as something that veers between banal omnipresence and even an actual proviso for sexual desire within a marriage. Nevertheless, the car still defines adultery and the psychosexual states of the characters in both works, and for the first meeting here ‘Bill had arranged to meet her car. A metal rendezvous.’ (*TTTTFTTB*, p.158) Bill has decided, prior to meeting Serena, that the car provides an important and effective means of conducting the affair inconspicuously and on his own terms. This, and the metallic quality of their rendezvous, may evoke the extreme psychosexuality of *Crash*, but Bill’s belief in both his own agency and his car as ‘volition enhancer’ are about to be undermined.

The emergent and transformative behaviours in Ballard’s work are perversely affirming in a sexual context, but the systems that emerge in ‘Design Faults’, and Bill and Serena’s first meeting, are typical of the infuriatingly familiar Level II. These ‘subvert the usefulness to the individual of the car as artefact’, (*THC*, p.39) and on this occasion take the form of parking regulations:

Serena had a Westminster permit - Bill didn’t. He couldn’t find a meter for aeons - he imagined her growing old, her face wizening, an old apple on a draining board. When he did eventually find a space - by the needle exchange Portakabin on South Wharf Road - he had neither pound coins or twenty-pence pieces. He wanted to ejaculate and die - simultaneously. (*TTTTFTTB*, p.158)

The change from Level I to Level II comes through Bill’s intense frustration at being unable to get parked, and the rules of Westminster parking render any usefulness of his Volvo totally false. These rules also send Bill’s imagination into overdrive, and his thoughts and actions become increasingly absurd even during this meeting. The specifics of London’s physical geography are important to this, as ‘As he is snogging, Bill is acutely aware of the time: 6.30 p.m.; the place: Sussex Gardens, W2; and the implied logistics: his wife, Vanessa, cycles home every evening along Sussex Gardens, at more or less this

time.’ (*TTTFTTB*, p.156) This area of London begins playing an active role in one of Bill’s anxieties - the terrifying prospect of being caught out by Vanessa - that underscore the story’s humour. The subsequent imaginative process is a distortion in scale that represents how conspicuous Bill feels. Suddenly, he is ‘at least sixty feet high. He bestrides the two lanes of bumpy tarmac, his crotch forming a blue denim underpass for the rumbling traffic.’ (*TTTFTTB*, pp.156-7) Moreover, as he attempts to quickly and quietly leave the scene of his infidelity, Bill realises that the terrifying scaling up applies to his Volvo too:

But just as he pulls away he realises - given that he has absolutely no justification for being in this part of London, on this day, at this time - that the car is grotesquely elongated. When he turns right out of London Street and on to Sussex Gardens, the back end of the vehicle is still in Praed Street. When he reaches the lights on the corner of Westbourne Street, his tail end is still blocking the lights, causing traffic in all four directions to back up (*TTTFTTB*, p.158)

The inexplicable growth of Bill and his Volvo look like a grotesque parody of Level III of the *Techno-Human Condition*. When Bill set out for this rendezvous, confident in his control over the car, he would have not conceived the possibility of trying to sneak away from Sussex Gardens in an eighty-foot long car. An impending mental breakdown is just as inconceivable to him despite this warning, as Bill blames the failure of this meeting on the impracticalities of the Volvo rather than his own shortcomings. In his view, the car is the reason why the affair was not consummated, because ‘the Volvo 760 Turbo was out of the question on various design faults.’ (*TTTFTTB*, p.158) This is a far cry from the sexual functionality that defines *Crash*, with Bill instead agonising over the emergent social systems of automotive design and parking regulations as the factors preventing him from having sex with Serena. Yet even in Bill’s mind, the distinction he tries to maintain between human and car is not as clear as he would like. Bill’s reverie over a specific idiosyncrasy of the Volvo becomes blurred with the cyst on the inside of Serena’s surgically-repaired mouth when he notes that though working the ashtray of the Volvo ‘was technically difficult - he did at least know how to empty the ashtray. The manual

expressed it quite succinctly: 'Empty ashtrays by pulling out to the limit and pressing down the tongue.' Bill was masterful at this - he could even avoid the cyst.' (*TTTFTTB*, p.160)

Bill's momentary, unconscious inability to distinguish between Serena and his Volvo is the closest the story comes to embracing the marriage between flesh and technology that defines *Crash*. Serena's surgically-repaired mouth even makes her seem like a version of the disfigured Gabrielle writ small. However, where James Ballard dreams of 'other accidents that might enlarge the repertory of orifices, relating them to more elements of the automobile's engineering, to the ever-more complex technologies of the future'¹⁶⁹, there is no such affirmation for Bill. Instead, Serena's disfigurement and its similarities to the Volvo merely catalyse the sexual regression that characterises the story.

Yet as Bill's sexual frustration mounts, driving becomes a way of alleviating it and regaining control, as 'he reflects on the paradoxical sense of control offered by reckless driving.' (*TTTFTTB*, p.163) Moreover, Bill suddenly gets the opportunity to live out the Volvo slogan by driving it like he hates it. The nationalist spectacle of the England game that scarcely provides Bill with a reason to leave the house for his next meeting with Serena now gives him a brief opportunity to carry out some idealised urban driving. Now, London is 'emptied of traffic - the whole city is inside, watching the match. Bill banks to the right, to the left, he feels the weight of the car shift beneath him like a body.' (*TTTFTTB*, p.164) Bill's 'reckless' driving, and his disregard for the mechanical wellbeing of the car and the imposed speed limits, offers the level of control promised in the old advertisement.

¹⁶⁹ Ballard, *Crash*, p.148

Bill's sudden seizing of control means he has the object of his desire ensconced within his vehicle of choice, alongside an almost mythical lack of traffic on London's streets. However, the unconscious links he makes between Volvo and Serena become harder to repress the closer he gets to fulfilling his sexual aims, and explode into panicked consciousness when Bill learns that Serena needs 'a really good orgasm every day': (*TTTFTTB*, p.166)

Bill feels the sweat burst from his armpits like spray from a shower fitment. He grips the wheel so tightly that as the Volvo bucks across the junction with Hampstead High Street, he feels he might wrench it clear off and twist the O of metal, foam and plastic into an involved pretzel shape. (*TTTFTTB*, p.166)

Just like having control over his car, Bill has always maintained that he has been in control of the affair with Serena; but Bill's nervousness highlights how she has undermined his agency as comprehensively as the car does. She 'has also, predictably, been a model', (*TTTFTTB*, p.157) which taps into the sexualisation that Piller notes is vital to car advertising, and the perverse emotional pull that Volvo employed in the 1960s. Whereas consumers were lured in by the prospect of being able to control an enemy, as Heathcote Williams notes, Bill desires sexual control over Serena precisely because she is 'an awful, venal, unprincipled and deeply alluring woman.' (*TTTFTTB*, p.164) Serena therefore becomes the must-have female product, with Bill playing the role of desperate consumer in a consciously distasteful display of consumerism usurping intimacy or indeed any human feeling.

Continuing this analogy, the final section of the story sees Bill experiencing buyer's regret. He has consummated the affair with Serena, but this brings on an exacerbated set of psychological repercussions. Initially, this reverts to the kind of oppressive, entrapping space that panicked him so much at the beginning of the story, which has now been scaled down to his own study:

Bill thinks it suitable that his study should occupy this in-between place, neither up nor down, because he has an in-between kind of psyche - especially at the moment. This is now the terrifyingly tiny house of the urban adulterer and Bill moves about it with

incredible subtlety, acutely aware that every movement - from now on and for the rest of his natural life - will constitute a potential, further violation. (*TTTFTTB*, p.169)

Bill's 'in-between kind of psyche' sees him permanently trapped by guilt and fear of being caught, and his attempts to fight this entrapment and reassert his control become increasingly ridiculous. He again draws on psychoanalysis through a conscious and absurd display of repression. This involves the Volvo's manual and a bottle of Tipp-Ex, as Bill tries 'to convince himself that by eradicating the word 'Volvo' from the manual, he will also annul his obsession with Serena's vulva, which has got quite out of hand.' (*TTTFTTB*, p.169)

This crisis - unsurprisingly unresolved by the Tipp-Ex - prompts Bill to seek the services of his old friend Dave Adler. Adler is an individual with psychiatric and mechanic expertise, and 'has worked on Bill's Volvo for many years now - ever since he [Adler] gave up psychiatry.' (*TTTFTTB*, p.172) Self has consciously chosen Adler's name, after the psychologist Alfred Adler who theorised the inferiority complex. Hertha Orgler describes this phenomenon by explaining that Adler 'understood that the normal inferiority feeling impels the human being to solve its problems successfully, whereas the Inferiority Complex prevents him from doing so. Adler... finally decided upon the definition of "inability to solve life's problems".'¹⁷⁰ The fact that Bill has asked Dave Adler for help exposes his total inability to solve any of his own growing psychological or automotive problems by this stage of the story.

Allenby and Sarewitz define Level II of their *Techno-Human Condition* by the social systems that develop from collective use of technology, and explain the ramifications of the emergence of these systems:

Modern society long ago lost its innocence about technology and progress... We have gone from technology as a particular artefact or machine that just does its job to understanding that it emerges from social systems and thus necessarily reflects, internalizes, and often changes power relations and cultural assumptions. We recognize that social systems are

¹⁷⁰ Hertha Orgler, *Alfred Adler: The Man and his Work* (Ashingdon: The C. W. Daniel Company, 1947), p.74

in reality techno-social systems, that these systems impose certain orders of behaviour on our lives about which we have little choice (*THC*, p.32)

They suggest that contemporary society has grown to understand the emergence of these systems and the inconveniences they can cause. However, Bill's entrapment and mental breakdown - caused not only by his loss of control, but his sexual inadequacy, his car, and various urban driving codes - takes him an extremely long time to comprehend, when it has been clear to the reader from early on in the story. The introduction of another psychiatrist - who also, of course, happens to be a Freudian - allows the reader a more objective look at Bill's deteriorating psyche. Neil Badmington claims that 'To read Freud is the waning of humanism. Unmasked as a creature motivated by desires which escape the rule of consciousness, Man loses 'his' place at the centre of things.'¹⁷¹ The conclusion, or punchline, of the story sees Bill definitively losing the 'place at the centre of things' he has so tenuously maintained a belief in. Instead, Allenby and Sarewitz's argument that techno-social systems 'make possible hierarchies of expertise, influence, and exploitation', (*THC*, p.32) helps to explain how Bill's position within such a hierarchy is one of utter subservience to a man schooled in both psychiatry and mechanics. Self reveals this in the story's final twist:

Meanwhile, in Putney, Dave Adler lowers himself into the inspection pit of the Bywaters' marital bed. He has the necessary equipment and he's intent on giving Vanessa Bywater's chassis a really thorough servicing. As far as Dave Adler is concerned a car is a means of transport, nothing more and nothing less. (*TTTTTB*, pp.173-4)

Self's final joke here is not only Bill's cuckolding, but the effortless with which Dave Adler embraces the automotive innuendos that have amounted to psychological torture for Bill. Dave Adler, the only character with a knowledge of the finer points of car mechanics and the human psyche, and therefore the only character with an understanding and acceptance of how the complex dynamic between person and car

¹⁷¹ Badmington, *Posthumanism*, p.6

works, takes his place at the top of this hierarchy. And as Allenby and Sarewitz so wryly summarise, ‘who, today, can argue with an auto mechanic?’ (*THC*, p.32)

Self has cracked another joke during Bill’s final involvement immediately before this, however. He simultaneously arrives at Adler’s garage, only to find it closed (for some reason...). Instead, ‘Bill guffaws, albeit a little wearily’ (*TTTFTTB*, p.173) at the pseudo-Freudian sign notifying any potential customers that ‘BEARING IN MIND THE FACT THAT EVERYONE HIDES THE TRUTH IN MATTERS OF SEX - WE’RE CLOSED.’ (*TTTFTTB*, p.173) The initial humour arises from Bill contemplating this while he is being cuckolded by the sign’s owner. However, Bill has also repressed any awareness of how he is trapped within the systems of a mass-technology, and that this has had a direct effect on both his sex life and his mental health. These effects represent how difficult it is for complacent individuals and collectives to get beyond the individualistic goals that technology simultaneously sets, and then hinders the fulfilment of.

Scale

Self himself is prone to some of the obsessive tendencies that these automotive systems can lead to. In particular, motorway driving is ‘highly addictive. Once you’ve acquired the habit of motorway driving, it’s damned hard to kick it. You may set out on completely innocuous excursions, fully intending to take the scenic route, but yet again the slip-road will suck you in, a lobster-pot ingress to the virtual reality of motorway driving.’ (*JM*, p.138) ‘Scale’ dramatises this addiction by placing it alongside the narrator’s DIY morphine addiction and desire to become a successful academic writer to create a story dominated by the deep and entrapping complexities of language, writing and driving.

The narrator has already had previous success as a fiction writer, although this is insignificant compared to his current struggle to have his academic work and his ‘Motorway Verse’ recognised. The narrator’s father was one of his son’s harshest critics, complaining that ‘There’s no sense of scale in your books... really important writing

provides some sense of the relation between individual psychology and social change, of the scale of things in general.’ (GA&OS, p.103) Self knowingly employs this criticism, as it connects his own experiences of motorways and John Major’s 1992 Conservative Party conference speech on the need for more motorway service stations, in a consciously ridiculous play on the ‘relation’ between individual and social. Self explains that ‘I was living in the M40 corridor, and thought this predication of political ideology on pissing opportunity a perfect example of the Lilliputian character of the age: on such minute ephemera was destiny poised.’¹⁷² This is the ‘political ideology’ that Self parodies when he creates the motos in *The Book of Dave*, and the ridiculousness of ‘Scale’ consciously mirrors the reductive, ‘Lilliputian’ ridiculousness of both Major’s policy and the society he wished to implement it in.

Self also parodies the obsession with clear definition and the belief that language can be reduced to signify easy, singular meanings. Jeanette Baxter captures this in the broader context of Self’s work and the idea of his work being ‘surreal’. She argues that ‘surreal’ as an adjective is used ‘arbitrarily in discussions of literature, film and popular culture to mean something that is a bit odd, weird or shocking. In other words, surreal has become something of an empty descriptor, and this, I fear, is how it predominantly functions in reviews of Will Self’s writings.’¹⁷³ Baxter posits that surreal becomes a convenient umbrella term for, and simplification of, all of the consciously troubling aspects of Self’s writing (and media and culture in general) that are casually accepted as ‘odd, weird or shocking’, as if that were enough on its own to alleviate the need for any further analysis as to why his writing and his ideas are this way. In the immediate surroundings of ‘Scale’, the opium dreams of the narrator fall under this simplified term. However, Baxter also channels Georges Bataille and his surrealist *Dictionnaire Critique*

¹⁷² Will Self, ‘Bigness and Littleness’, *The Guardian*, 28.8.2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/aug/28/will-self-bigness-and-littleness>, accessed 26.5.2014

¹⁷³ Jeannette Baxter, ‘Will Self: A Critical Dictionary’, 24.6.2013, <http://will-self.com/2013/06/24/the-critical-dictionary/>

to make the point that 'surrealism has always been - and continues to be - caught up within an anxiety of definition',¹⁷⁴ and Self overtly mocks these anxieties in definition and the reliance people have upon them through the multitude of definitions for 'scale' he dramatises in the story.

'Scale' and Self's manipulations of language also call to mind another surrealist thinker, André Breton. Breton originally defined surrealism as 'Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other matter - the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.'¹⁷⁵ Again, reading Breton's definition in light of Self's work reinforces one of the central tensions within Self's writing. Breton - like Ballard - proposes language and thought free from any kind of morality, whereas Self highlights the lack of control within language, but does so within a satirical, troublingly moral framework. He does, however, hone in on the decidedly arbitrary nature of language, arguably even more so than in *The Book of Dave*, and he admits that while writing 'Scale' 'I gloried - as we monoglots all must - in the rich synonymy of the English language.'¹⁷⁶ Therefore, the meticulousness with which Self ticks off each definition of scale, coupled with the narrator's success as a writer being achieved by incorporating motoring symbols and jargon into the language, read as an inversion of Breton's idea that 'Language has been given to man so that he may make Surrealist use of it.'¹⁷⁷

The narrator's relationship with the M40 motorway is almost as affirming as the relationships that take place within cars in *Crash*. The fantasies for him are academic rather than sexual, however. The narrator's concerns surrounding his work dominate the

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*

¹⁷⁵ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p.26

¹⁷⁶ Will Self, 'At the Blackrose Netcafe', 2.2.2006, <http://will-self.com/2006/02/02/at-the-blackrose-netcafe/> accessed 6.6.2014

¹⁷⁷ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p.32

early sections of this story, from his admission of how ‘Not only is the subject matter obscure (some might say risible)’, (*GA&OS*, p.96) to the critical panning his invented genre of ‘Motorway Verse’ receives. These anxieties contribute to the narrator’s broader, fragile mental state, which deteriorates over the first four sections of the story. They begin when the expectations that the individual driver has of the motorway are undermined. The narrator opens the narrative by explaining that motorway driving has a unique synchronicity to it:

By the time you draw level with the third sign you should have already begun to appreciate the meaning of the curved wedge, adumbrated with further oblique white lines... Furthermore, the ability to co-ordinate their sequence with the falling needles on the warmly glowing instrument panel of the car is a sound indication that you can intuitively apprehend three different scales at once (time, speed, distance), and merge them effortlessly into the virtual reality that is motorway driving. (*GA&OS*, pp.93-4)

The narrator’s analysis of the ease of motorway driving and the control that the driver should have while on the motorway are notably similar to a 2004 essay by the sociologist Eric Laurier entitled ‘Doing Office Work on the Motorway’. In this, Laurier argues that the specific conditions of the motorway are so simple that they work in favour of the driver while requiring hardly any concentration on the road:

the motorway is built to provide a visually supportive environment for speed under normal conditions; you can see things coming from a long distance away. There are no hairpin bends, no hidden entrances and it has wide lanes, cambered corners and gentle inclines [that]... provide categorically organized expectations of hazards, acceptable speeds, absence or presence of oncoming traffic and so on, but they also have typical rhythms that their regular drivers get to know.¹⁷⁸

The similarities in rhetoric are startling, especially given that ‘Scale’ was published a decade before Laurier’s sociological work. To borrow Laurier’s terminology, the complexities of ‘Scale’ start to manifest themselves when these ‘typical rhythms’ of the motorway disappear. The narrator worries that ‘At the Beaconsfield exit there is far too long a gap between the last sign and the start of the slip road. I fell into this gap and lost my sense of scale.’ (*GA&OS*, p.94) This shock to his expectations is not enough to

¹⁷⁸ Eric Laurier, ‘Doing Office Work on the Motorway’, *Theory Culture & Society*, 21: 4/5 (2004), pp.266-7

undermine any belief in his own knowledge or control, however. To explain it he draws on his own academic work, and so 'It occurred to me... that this gap, this lacuna, was, in terms of my projected thesis... an aspect of what the French call *délire*.' (GA&OS, p.94) Nevertheless, the trauma of a loss of a sense of scale and an annoyingly complex motorway junction hastens the narrator's need for opiates. The fixity of motorways is also the most effective way for the narrator to describe his opiate addiction:

the history of my addiction has been mapped out by me, in the same way that the road system of South-East England was originally constructed... Now, when I stand on the broken bathroom scales and contemplate my route-planning image in the full-length mirror, I see a network of calcified conduits radiating from my groin. Some of them are scored into my flesh like underpasses, others are raised up on hardened revetments of flesh: bloody flyovers. (GA&OS, p.95)

This corporeal unpleasantness briefly forces the narrator to fret over his mental and physical health, believing that 'I might lose a limb and cause tailbacks right the way round the M25. Sometimes I wonder if I may be losing my incident room.' (GA&OS, p.96) The transformation of the circulatory system into a motorway system is a disturbingly literal vision of the 'man-machine matrix'. It is also a grotesque passage that remains anomalous within 'Scale', but still exposes a fundamental characteristic of Self's literary humour. This is, as Simon Critchley describes, 'disgust produced by an excessively acute description of the sensuous, where all the awful imperfections of the flesh are revealed by being too microscopically detailed.'¹⁷⁹ In short, it is unpleasant, imperfect, but demands our attention.

The troubling physicality of the narrator's addiction being mapped out is transitory, however. Instead, his opiate reveries dispel these fears and take him to an imagined distant future at 'the M40 as it will be some 20,000 years from now, when the second neolithic age has dawned over Europe.' (GA&OS, p.96) This reverie has a distinctly affirmative tone to it, not least because - as *The Book of Dave* would come to do - the

¹⁷⁹ Critchley, *On Humour*, p.45

narrator has envisaged a world that worships his proposed thesis as a religious text. In his vision, the narrator meets the chieftain of the 'Junction 2 clan', who tells him:

we view the M40 as a giant astronomical clock. We use the slip roads, maintenance areas, bridges and flyovers azimuthally, to predict the solstices and hence the seasons. Ours is a religion both of great antiquity and of a complexity that belies our simple agrarian culture. Although we are no longer able to read or write ourselves, our priesthood has orally transmitted down the generations the sacred revelations contained in this ancient text.' With this, he produced from a fold in his cloak a copy of 'No Services: Reflex Ritualism and Modern Motorway Signs (with special reference to the M40)', my as yet unwritten thesis. (GA&OS, pp.97-8)

The 'uncharacteristically upbeat ending' (GA&OS, p.98) of the narrator's narcotic dream is caused by academic affirmation rather than violent or sexual gratification. The vast timescale of the dream makes it representative of another facet of Self's humour, namely the 'question of scale, of the familiar becoming infinitely small or grotesquely huge.'¹⁸⁰ Whereas 'Design Faults' carries this out through Bill's entrapment in the 'terrifyingly tiny world of the urban adulterer', 'Scale' tends towards the huge as a means of depicting the extent of the narrator's unwavering faith in his own knowledge. Coincidentally, this faith appears to be justified by, once again, the curiously similar language Laurier uses, when he argues that the 'road (like the railway) is a departure point for a socio-technical development whose current azimuth is the motorway.'¹⁸¹

The narrator's drug addiction and doomed literary endeavours continue as the story develops, and the culmination of his anguish comes during a confrontation with one of Beaconsfield's 'model-heads' - a group that 'congregate around the model village, venerating it as a symbol of their anomie. It's as if, by becoming absorbed in the detail of this tiny world, they hope to diminish the scale of society's problems. In the winter they go abroad, settling near Legoland in Belgium.' (GA&OS, p.114) The ridiculous, empty counterculturalism of the group is pastiche Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss posits that 'the intrinsic value of a small-scale model is that it compensates for

¹⁸⁰ Critchley, *On Humour*, p.15

¹⁸¹ Laurier, 'Doing Office Work', p.273

the renunciation of sensible dimensions by the acquisition of intelligible ones.’¹⁸² The group’s attempts to rationalise their problematic society by loitering around a model village - believing it will make social problems ‘intelligible’ - is exactly the kind of pseudo-anarchic nonsense that Self is so sneering of. Equally as unintelligible is the encounter between one of the group and the narrator. After the ‘model-head’ tries to steal the narrator’s bathroom scales, the narrator mocks up a haphazard court within his bathroom. This falls apart when the narrator daydreams back to the affair that took place on the very same scales and ultimately catalysed the breakup of his family and his current, desperate situation.

This ludicrousness makes the narrator’s change of fortune in the final section of the story even more remarkable. Ambiguously set ‘Many years later’, (*GA&OS*, p.118) it reads as an epilogue of sorts that remains just within the narrator’s lifetime to provide a degree of comprehensibility. This is undermined by the vastly altered physical landscape however, as Beaconsfield now resembles the early tropical stages of Ballard’s *Drowned World*. Despite this apparent impending deluge, the narrator has reason to boast, that ‘Since the publication of the last volume of my magnum opus, *A History of the English Motorway Service Centre*, I have gained a modest eminence. People tell me that I am referred to as ‘the Macaulay of the M40’, a sobriquet that gives me no little pleasure. I feel vindicated by the verdict of posterity.’ (*GA&OS*, p.119) This academic eminence lets Self take another shot at etymological and linguistic anxieties as well. This stems from the narrator’s scholarly dispute with one Professor Moi from the University of Uganda. The narrator establishes the rule that ‘a motorway cannot be said to be a motorway unless it is longer than it is broad’, (*GA&OS*, p.121) and in doing so provides a concrete definition to a physical object that he has relied upon, mentally and physically, so much. However:

¹⁸² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p.24

The ill-fated Lusaka Bypass was to have been the centre-piece of the Ugandan Government's Motorway Construction Programme. However, resources ran out after only one junction and some eighty feet of road had been built. Faced with the options of either changing the nomenclature or admitting failure, the Ugandans had no alternative but to take issue with the theory itself. (GA&OS, p.121)

The story of a government placing a disproportionate amount of importance on the technicalities of a road system emphasises Self's bewilderment at Major's service station policy in the 1990s. The story's ending dramatises other issues Self was concerned with, however - particularly what he saw as the aggressive commodification of the English landscape. The narrator's trip to the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall - and the reasons why he says he would never return - reveal the nature of Self's concerns:

For those younger than I, who cannot remember a time before the current Nationalist Trust Government took power, the prospect may still seem inviting. But personally, I find that the thought of encountering the Government's Brown Shirts, with their oak-leaf epaulettes, sticks in my craw. I would bitterly resent being compelled by these paramilitary nature wardens to admire the scenery, register the presence (or even absence) of ancient monuments, and propitiate the wayside waste shrines with crumpled offerings. (GA&OS, p.119)

The increasing ubiquity of the 'Nationalist Trust' symbols implies an aggressive, almost authoritarian, commodification of the England's natural landscapes and physical geography. Self argues that these trusts are primarily concerned with their commercial interests rather than protecting any nature or buildings, remarking in relation to geography that 'for all we valorise "areas of outstanding natural beauty", [geography] is overwhelmingly a human construct: we understand places in terms of the economic imperatives associated with them. We drive to work, or to buy stuff, or to paid-for leisure activities. Even our relationships are mediated by mileage costs'.¹⁸³ These 'economic imperatives' will always insidiously overrule any untrammelled pleasure there is to be gained from scenery or monuments. These processes also work towards commodifying the past through what Self describes as a tendency towards 'longing residually for some

¹⁸³ Will Self, 'J. G. Ballard's Shepperton is under water - so turn on your mind, relax, and float upstream', *New Statesman*, 28.2.2014, <http://www.newstatesman.com/energy/2014/02/j-g-ballard%E2%80%99s-shepperton-under-water-%E2%80%93-so-turn-your-mind-relax-and-float-upstream>, accessed 6.6.2014

English arcadia' (*JM*, p.224) In light of this, the model village represents an idealised, unattainable English past, the 'sort of place Prince Charles would be happy for us all to live, a silver-wedding, commemorative-plate, biscuit-tin place.'¹⁸⁴ In the model village of 'Scale', The Trust 'intend to introduce their ubiquitous signs to the village. These will designate parts of it areas of (albeit minute) 'outstanding natural beauty'. (*GA&OS*, p.119) This is not only a humourously literal example of the 'minute ephemera' on which Self believed destiny was poised, it is an example of how not even physical place or natural landscapes are able to prevent being bound up in the commercial ideologies that define contemporary society.

Waiting

According to Timothy Clark, 'Waiting' endorses 'Jean Baudrillard's view that we live in a world in which the 'will to spectacle and illusion' is more powerful and enduring than anything else.'¹⁸⁵ This Baudrillardian 'will to spectacle' that dominates the story is not dissimilar from the more overtly Debordian spectacle that, for Debord, characterised modern society. In more recent years, Self has actively engaged with Debord's ideas, but he has always maintained an awareness that there is a hidden level of cultural complexity within them. He explains that following Debord 'risks becoming the same sort of self-cancelling exercise as the spectacle itself... it risks placing one in an invidious position',¹⁸⁶ and 'Waiting' - though written before Self's increased engagement with Debord - is a neat story for depicting and exposing the 'self-cancelling' processes and ideologies that alter the way we live and how it is so difficult, if even possible, to exist outside of them. Debord's spectacle therefore consciously embodies the same anxieties around concrete definition that characterise both surrealism and Self's work.

¹⁸⁴ Will Self, 'The appeal of miniature villages', *Financial Times*, 18.7.2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/65fa5c18-7260-11de-ba94-00144feabdc0.html#axzz33r3kKusn>, accessed 6.6.2014

¹⁸⁵ Clark, 'Towards a Deconstructive Environmental Criticism', p.59

¹⁸⁶ Will Self, 'On Guy Debord - Podcast', 31.1.2014, <http://will-self.com/2014/01/31/guy-debord-podcast/>, accessed 6.6.2014

The principal 'illusion', meanwhile, that exists at the heart of this story is interesting to consider in light of Allenby and Sarewitz's more contemporary transhumanist debates, as this story reads as an effective debunking of the Enlightenment, transhumanist fantasies that are prominent in this increasingly-technological day and age. Carlos, the unsettling leader of a cult of motorcycle couriers who insist on never waiting, becomes the embodiment of the absurdities behind these fantasies, which Allenby and Sarewitz outline as the individual and human desire 'to understand, modify and control its surroundings, its prospects, and its self, and to couple to the technologies that surround us ever more intimately.' (*THC*, p.2)

The conflict in 'Waiting' is between the narrator and Carlos, which is ostensibly for control over Jim Stonehouse, the story's protagonist. Carlos drags 'Waiting' outside of the parameters of realism through his extraordinary knowledge of London's geography, and seemingly impossible ability to predict and totally avoid traffic. The narrator exclaims 'He could not possibly know what he seemed to know - the only way he could have seen the route we took was from the air, and even then he would have had to have made constant trigonometric calculations to figure out the angles we seemed to have followed intuitively.' (*QTol*, p.198) In Clark's view, Carlos represents the 'primal fantasy of motoring... fed by innumerable car chases on film or television where the audience is invited to identify with an exciting, invulnerable dash through the most improbable kind of obstacle course.'¹⁸⁷ The cinematic qualities of Carlos' driving recall Badmington's point on Hollywood's unwavering defence of humanism, and applies a curious humanism to these skills, in the sense that they witness the individual triumphing and retaining control regardless of all logic. As Self points out though, 'the car windscreen has been more influential in making us all cineastes than film has itself'. (*JM*, p.395) Self's comment demonstrates the power and the unreality of the ideologies of driving, and the

¹⁸⁷ Clark, 'Towards a Deconstructive Environmental Criticism', p.59

cult mentality that Carlos instils within Jim and his followers depicts this power in 'Waiting'.

The Hollywood qualities of Carlos' driving, and the inseparability of driving and cinema, means that he and his cult become an example of how the spectacle is 'understood in the limited sense of the "mass media" that are its most stultifying superficial manifestation'.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, Carlos casting himself in the lead role of this strange driving tale implies a connection to the role of celebrity culture within spectacular society. Self explains the ideology of celebrity lies in giving the impression of an authentic life, arguing that 'money and power can liberate you from the spectacle. He [Debord] thinks that powerful and rich people don't live in pseudo-cyclical time, that they get to have proper lives, and that's part of what makes the spectacle commodified, they become pictures of people living authentic lives.'¹⁸⁹ With this in mind, Carlos' power to successfully alleviate the need to wait for anything marks him out as a celebrity, or an individual to be worshipped, in Jim's eyes. The unattractive flipside of this are the hordes of people stuck waiting in 'pseudo-cyclical time', as Jim explains to the narrator:

For the end of the lunch break, for a nuclear war, for the poisoning of the earth, for old age, for the millennium, for the last judgement, for their hair to turn grey, for retirement, for a big gambling win, for a strange sexual experience, for the hand of God to touch them, for their children to support them, for the right person, for a new car, for the interest rate to fall, for the next election, for their bowels to get back to normal... I've said it once, I don't care if I say it a thousand times - everyone is waiting. (*QTol*, p.180)

If this strange celebrity status makes Carlos the embodiment of the spectacle, then the contempt shown towards him by the narrator implies that the latter is the kind of Debordian figure who would seek to actively bring the spectacle down. However, where Debord and the Situationist International movement sought to bring down capitalist, spectacular society through any action whatsoever, the narrator's own inaction reads as a direct contrast to this. At the start of the story, the narrator and Jim have been stuck

¹⁸⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

¹⁸⁹ Self, 'On Guy Debord - Podcast'

in traffic so long that Jim has gotten sick of waiting and ran off, leaving the narrator in the following situation:

By rights, in a situation such as this, left, unable to drive, in the passenger seat of a car hopelessly jammed on the M25 in the middle of the night, the scene ought to fade out. It was a natural ending. But after three minutes the traffic started to edge forward and I panicked... I was left sitting. The knob atop the steering column of the Sierra clicked on and then off - what a drama queen - sending a false message of hopeful hazard, nowhere. (*QTol*, pp.173-4)

The narrator's total passivity here is caused by his misplaced faith in the cinematic expectations he has of the situation. This undermines the idea of the narrator as a Debordian figure. Jim's response, on the other hand, is a passable impression of the Situationist tendency to indulge in any form of action to alter the situation, no matter how absurd or undetermined. When faced with the traffic jam, 'he was off and running. He vaulted the grooved steel barrier that divided the carriageways and bolted across the eastbound side of the motorway, narrowly evading the oncoming traffic'. (*QTol*, p.173)

Jim's continued admiration for Carlos and his cult extends to the different plane of existence they inhabit. The rhetoric he uses to describe this is similar to what Allenby and Sarewitz describe as what constitutes becoming 'transhuman'. They point out how there is an 'amazing range of customized enhancements', (*THC*, p.2) technological and pharmacological, pointing out that 'you may just have absorbed some psychopharma to enhance your concentration and cognitive function... maybe coffee, maybe something more potent... You are, in other words, enhanced; some would say transhuman, that is, in transition to the next evolutionary phase of humanness.' (*THC*, p.2) The methods and permutations of these heightened functions appear similar to the practices of Carlos and his crew that are so entrancing to Jim:

They're shooting methedrine, or basing coke, or snorting sulphate. They're driving at all hours of the day and night, existing at a level of frayed neural response that we can only faintly imagine. They're operating not at the level of other traffic, a straightforward level of action and anticipation, but at the level of nuance, sheer nuance. They perceive the tiniest of stimuli with ghastly clarity, and respond. Think of it, man. Weaving your way through heavy traffic astride a monstrosly overpowered motorcycle, always pressured to

meet a deadline, the ether plugged into your helmet. They have to mutate to survive!
(*QTol*, p.190)

Carlos and Jim believe that the only way in escaping the trap of waiting in their spectacular city and society is to alter themselves in ways that increase their neural responses to levels that cannot even be envisaged by normal people. They have mutated to embody 'the next evolutionary phase of humanness', a kind of humanness free from the drudges and entrapping social systems that the current phase of humanity unknowingly finds itself bound up in.

The narrator eventually gets to meet Carlos, and explains his issues with Jim's increasingly obsessive fantasies of not waiting, telling Carlos that Jim 'has tried to draw me into the fantasy world that he's constructed around this obsession, but I'm not interested - I think he needs help. Apparently you are an active player in this fantasy world.' (*QTol*, p.195) The narrator is about to discover how active a player Carlos is, as the courier then demonstrates his increased neural responses and capacities by dragging Jim and the narrator on an impossibly rapid journey across central London. While in the passenger seat of Jim's car, the narrator notes that 'There was an unreal, static sensation to the journey. The long London roads were panoramic scenery wound back behind us to provide the illusion of movement.' (*QTol*, pp.197-8) As the journey continues, it becomes apparent, if incomprehensible, that 'Carlos had not only apprehended every road, he had anticipated every alleyway, every mews, every garage forecourt and the position and synchronization of every traffic light.' (*QTol*, p.198) This hugely bizarre orientation reads as a strangely - with it being two decades previously - neat, even literal, dramatisation of an idea at the heart of transhumanism, namely 'new ways of thinking about who we are and where we are going.' (*THC*, p.3)

Self includes this impossible journey as a means of exposing the absurd realisation of the fantasy that technology merely serves to make humans better, and this is confirmed when Carlos explains how he managed this unbelievable feat:

I assess the flow, at one location, for one brief moment. But because I know, you see, I know so much about this... it means that all this movement stands still. I know ev-ery-thing... All the tail-backs, all the hold-ups, every burst water-main and dropped lorry load in the metropolis - at that moment I realise them all. Take me to any street, any street in London whatsoever where there is a constant traffic stream and just by looking at it I can know the state of every other road in the city. Then there's no waiting. You understand? I never have to wait. (*QTol*, pp.199-200)

Carlos' 'trancing' that brings about this knowledge not only provokes nausea in the narrator, but becomes a grotesque ridiculing of the transhumanist belief in 'application of reason to human betterment'. (*THC*, p.7) In doing so, it also remains relevant in terms of exposing the preposterousness in actually realising the ideal of instantaneousness that underpins so much contemporary technology, from transport to the internet. Of course this ideal is unachievable, and one of the most humourous parts of 'Waiting' comes when Jim attempts to drive with Carlos' omniscient levels of anticipation and apprehension. This proves to be a disaster, however, as he gets stuck in traffic on the Marylebone Flyover and ends up assaulting another driver and a police officer. Jim impotently laments how 'It was infuriating, the sense of being contained to no purpose, and it was all the fault of an intellectual decision. If I'd tranced the way Carlos taught me, I'd have been all right.' (*QTol*, p.201)

Jim's eventual abandonment of his long-term relationships with his wife and the narrator in favour of a newfound addiction to driving, which is only satiated by cabbing, reads as a parallel to the idea of dropping personal relations for commodity relations, which Debord believed formed the crux of spectacular society. Yet 'Waiting's conclusion is solely concerned with the ridiculous ways individuals and collectives can be moved to act by the power of ideologies. After being convicted of the assault, Jim is spared the 'waiting in a class of its own' (*QTol*, p.203) that he regards jail time as. Instead, he is ordered to continue psychiatric assessment under (who else?) Zack Busner. Busner's role within 'Waiting' is to provide an objective, official account of Jim's neuroses that fully exposes the absurdity of the story and his actions. Busner summarises:

He has spent most of these sessions expounding in great detail a series of views he holds concerning the probable impact of the millennium on our society. Views he characterises as “Immanence and Imminence”. It is Mr Stonehouse’s contention that the two assaults on Mr Christos and PC Winch, and the damaging of Mr Christos’s van, were necessary revolutionary acts in terms of the propagation of his ideas. (*QTol*, p.209)

The disjunction between Jim’s base, violent actions and the apparently weighty and philosophical reasons he gives for committing them is fully emphasised when spelled out by a medical professional in a court of law. The reader - not to mention the narrator - has known this since the beginning of the story, however. The narrator soundly analyses Jim’s behaviour by referring to it as ‘a neurotic, knee-jerk reaction. Rather than for what he would have it be: some profound statement concerning The Way We Are and The Way In Which We Live.’ (*QTol*, p.178) Self’s focus on the psychological quirks of Jim and the cult, rather than being concerned with attempting some grandiose revolutionary statement, is confirmed by the reason why Jim avoids jail. His solicitor puts it simply: ‘I’m afraid it really had nothing to do with us... Mr Stonehouse has evaded imprisonment because there isn’t enough room in it for him at the moment, not because of the merits of the case.’ (*QTol*, p.210) This outcome looks like a strange take on Hollywood humanism: Jim inexplicably wins out, despite all the rules of the system seemingly working against him, and in doing so reiterates Self’s feeling that any individual superiority in the face of complex social and technological systems is merely an absurdity. ‘Waiting’ details the kind of ideologies within modern society that can and will corrupt an individual very easily, and in all kinds of bizarre, sinister and even humorous ways. Indeed it is amiss to overlook the humour that permeates ‘Waiting’. Walking out of court and wondering where his wife is, the narrator sardonically informs Jim that ‘she was here Jim, but I think she got fed up with waiting.’ (*QTol*, p.211) In obsessively seeking a constantly heightened, more authentic form of existence, Jim has neglected and subsequently been rejected by the real personal relationships that have defined him previously.

The Butt

The final tale of Self's 2008 collection of stories, *Liver*, is narrated from the perspective of the HIV virus, and contains the line that would become a tagline of sorts for the collection as a whole. The viral, narrative voice ponders, 'Do I remain as amused as Billy by the slapstick of addiction, the inability of these Buster Keatons to do even one thing properly at once?' (*L*, pp.261-2) In a 2013 interview, Self clarified exactly what he meant by this term 'the slapstick of addiction', and refuted the suggestion that he was attempting to portray addiction as something humorous:

Well I don't really find addiction that funny, do you? It's not that funny. It's like watching those shows on TV where there are clips of the family pet falling over into the swimming pool. I was using 'slapstick' in that phrase to express the idea that it's not funny... What the trope sets up immediately is this idea of witnessing it from the outside rather than from the inside, and the most salient thing about people who are intoxicated is that they are clumsy. They are not just physically clumsy, they are emotionally and intellectually clumsy as well, so they are engaged in slapstick.¹⁹⁰

The prominence of addiction - in this instance specifically nicotine addiction - as a theme in *The Butt*, alongside Self's declaration that the novel is devoid of jokes and is instead a novel of 'unconcern' places it under the same umbrella as the stories of *Liver*, that paint bizarre and brutal portraits of drug and alcohol addiction. The inclusion of a huge amount of motorway - or rather 'Interprovince Route' (*TB*, p.148) - driving also marks *The Butt* out as a progression of sorts from the ways in which Self treats both driving and addiction in 'Scale'. The close and even causal links between the two tropes are not as obvious as they are in that short story, but driving will still come to - or at least in the mind of the protagonist - work in similar ways when it comes to dealing with addiction.

Addiction plays an active role from the very beginning of this novel, and as well as relating to the act of driving later on, it is a useful theme for the dramatisation of a disorienting lack of connections between specific actions and their wider consequences. This chasm between the differing scales of action and consequences is also a defining

¹⁹⁰ Self, *White Review*

feature of the latter levels of the *Techno-Human Condition*, and Allenby and Sarewitz discuss how individual choices around technology:

help determine how the technologies will evolve, in ways we cannot possibly know far in advance - especially since it isn't entirely clear how our individual choices, summed up across these complicated social, cultural, and economic systems in complex ways, affect the evolution of technology to begin with. (*THC*, p.35)

The important individual choice of *The Butt* is Brodzinski's decision to flip his cigarette butt over his hotel balcony and unwittingly onto the head of his countryman Reginald Lincoln III in what he decries as a 'moment of utter unthinking.' (*TB*, p.7) This singular moment and action - and what follows throughout the novel - shows how rapidly and how little it takes for any perceived power within individual agency to be muddied and then subsumed by a whole array of legal, 'social, cultural, and economical systems' and infrastructures. Bill Bywater may not have foreseen his guilt or mental anguish as a consequence of his adultery, but his problems and his entrapment remain localized. Brodzinski has to deal with so much more, namely terrifying unknowability on a tribal and vastly nationwide scale. Additionally, where readers may smirk at Bill's antics and comeuppance, Brodzinski's actions - and the 'unthinking' nature of them - conforms with the unfunny intellectual clumsiness of slapstick.

Self reaffirms his focus on the dynamic between actions and consequences through the beliefs of the Tayswengo tribe - of whom Lincoln III is a member, due to his native wife - who believe that there are no such things as accidents, and all actions have intent within them. As such, Brodzinski is arrested for attempted murder. In the immediate aftermath of his arrest, he retains a sense of complacency - and a similar blind faith to Kafka's Josef K during the opening stages of *The Trial* - that his charges will be waved away as some kind of unfortunate and inconvenient misunderstanding. However,

Brodzinski's complacency and his belief that he maintains control over his situation begins to waver in the face of the tandem of addiction and withdrawal, as 'it dawned on Tom that his own alterations between belligerence and passivity in the face of this whole grotesque situation could be entirely accounted for by the effects of nicotine withdrawal.' (*TB*, p.57)

Tom's belief that his own agency is directly linked to the lingering effects of nicotine addiction alters as he becomes increasingly and forcibly immersed into the 'byzantine magical system' (*TB*, p.108) of *The Butt's* unnamed land. The vast number of different indigenous tribes, the negotiation of their belief systems and their relation to neighbouring groups is one of the most overtly complicated aspects of Self's novel, and one that has already trapped Brodzinski. In addition to their lack of belief in accidents, the Tayswengo believe in a spiritual dynamic that they call 'astande' and 'inquivoo'. The latter of these means 'inert, passive in the matter. For the desert tribes, all important aspects of their existence are governed by this principle: when to act, and when to remain still. Astande and inquivoo.' (*TB*, p.20) 'Astande' on the other hand, according to the Honorary Consul Winthrop Adams, is 'the "Swift One" in Tayswengo cosmology, the "Righter of Wrongs"'. (*TB*, p.96) Brodzinski buys into this ideology readily, although partly out of necessity in the belief it will lead to his exoneration. In his mind, and indeed in theory, it presents a straightforward dynamic: active against passive, a swift mobility against inertia, decisiveness against ineffectiveness. Brodzinski's assertion that this is a comprehensible, black-and-white dynamic - and also his narcissistic belief that his actions and autonomy are positive things - make him look like a pitiful embodiment of the 'incoherence and wrongheadedness' (*THC*, p.59) that Allenby and Sarewitz argue too often characterises debates on transhumanism and prevents such debates getting to grips with the higher levels of their condition.

Brodzinski's fixation on his status begins to build after he believes himself to have been judged 'astande' following a ritual in which his thigh is cut by one of the tribesman. This also - or so Brodzinski is told - happens to Prentice, his British 'road buddy' (*TB*, p.134) on their long journey of reparation. The road trip itself therefore becomes another way for the Tayswengo dynamic and all of their complexities to manifest themselves, in the form of driver against passenger. The unstated but nonetheless evident national differences between the two men form an interesting conflict within the confines of their sports utility vehicle (SUV) and in turn ensure that Brodzinski becomes a stereotype for the perceived attitudes around America and its unrivalled car culture. More specifically, this returns to Brodzinski's belief in his own agency and superiority, that is allowed to come to the fore once he is behind the wheel. In the same essay that Self confesses to and describes his motorway addiction, he also outlines the differences between the possibilities of British and American driving epics. He argues that 'Britain seemed so notably deficient in motorway culture compared with other countries, particularly the United States. The idea of a proper British road movie was laughable - there just wasn't enough track.' (*JM*, p.141)

Brodzinski's belief in his superiority and individual agency over a specific technology or form of transport swiftly and predictably falls apart, however; initially in the face of the immense complexities of the dangers during the drive, the ideologies of the native tribes that Brodzinski persists in believing, and consequently his own increasingly troubled imagination. Changes in the landscape are one of the prompts for such a crisis, as an uneventful stretch of their journey paradoxically has the effect of negating Tom's imaginative belief in his own sense of control and thus trapping him: 'Tom couldn't suspend disbelief in his own driving: it felt as if he was being rolled over and over through the desert. The lack of low-flying helicopters, checkpoints and even the threat of ambush, far from being a relief, was a further oppression.' (*TB*, pp.253-4) Even more worryingly for Brodzinski, his increased obsession with the nuances of

Tayswengo ideology (which often cost him the driver's seat over the journey as his and Prentice's intricate grades of 'astande' switch) prompt Brodzinski to finally try and contemplate the significant and unpredictable relationship between seemingly trivial actions and their vast consequences:

Can I see the very point where my thought becomes an action? Just suppose that, when the little bit of paper moves, it moves the air, and the air becomes a breeze, and the breeze blows on the sand, and the sand starts to cascade, becoming a landslide that ends up burying somebody. Then what? Is it all down to me? (*TB*, pp.280-1)

When talking about the complexities of Level III of the *Techno-Human Condition*, Allenby and Sarewitz point out that 'the world we are making through our own choices and inventions is a world that neutralizes and even mocks our existing commitments to rationality, comprehension, and a meaningful link between action and consequence.' (*THC*, pp.64-5) At the end of Brodzinski's journey in *The Butt*, Erich Von Sasser emerges to become the figure who does the neutralizing and mocking. One of Von Sasser's main purposes within the novel is to chastise a more collective lack of imagination. Tom's own ignorance and lack of individual responsibility or self-awareness is projected on to an entire collective by bringing the focus back to his status as an 'Anglo' (a white Westerner). Indeed, to paraphrase Self, Brodzinski is the 'Ur-Anglo', average almost to the point of caricature:

Tom Brodzinski had only ever had average looks to begin with. His was a face, he knew, that cried out to be ignored: his nose small and lumpy, his cheekbones ill-defined, his chin irresolute. His eyes... were brown, but they held nothing more than a certain mildness, together with the bafflement of middle age. Even Tom's height and build were - if such a thing is possible. Dull. Average. (*TB*, p.9)

The non-entity and standardisation of Brodzinski's physical description is only matched by his generally nondescript imagination and lack of awareness about his situation. If Self had been partial to telling jokes in this novel, this might form its punchline. As it happens, it reads merely as a weary realisation on the protagonist's part of something that has been plain to the reader for a long time - almost a cognitive equivalent of taking an arduous car journey when one feels he simply could have flown to reach this point much

quicker, to paraphrase Stephanie Merritt's review. Upon meeting Von Sasser, Brodzinski discovers he has been 'inquivoo all along' (*TB*, p.349), and the Tayswengo customs turn out to have been fabricated entirely by Von Sasser and his father as an anthropological experiment.

Harking back to the question of the 'narrative fallacy' of Westerners - the demand for closure and neat, understandable endings - brings the question of the collective lack of Western imagination back into focus. Von Sasser explicitly mentions this in terms of race again, and he describes the neurological intricacies of this by drawing metaphorically upon both the internet and the road:

The corpus callosum... information-bloody-super-highway of the human brain, that's what it is, yeah. Same as the internet, the corpus callosum fuses together two hemispheres, the right and the left. Movement, speech, sensation, visual recognition - they dominate, yeah, they're the *Anglos* of the brain. But over on the right, well, that's where dreams are, that's where spirits find their voice, and that's where humans have the imagination to actually hear what they're bloody saying! (*TB*, p.338)

Von Sasser decries the Western cognition of being 'all to do with order, systemization, push-bloody-button-A.' (*TB*, p.338) He views the operations he carries out on various tribesmen and Anglos as a solution to this problem, and in theory this appears to be a metaphor for Self's own belief that so much of modern-day society is afflicted with this apparent lack of a 'right hemisphere'. In terms of the *Techno-Human Condition*, while Level III is concerned with huge external factors, the disturbing, often brain-damaging results of Von Sasser's operations become a metaphor for the ways that fears around these vast technological changes nevertheless interact with our imaginations. So in this novel, and in more serious discourses about the dynamics between technology and humans, this troubled imagination takes the form of the profound and unpredictably vast consequences that individual actions can and do have on a much wider scale. Moreover, *The Butt* offers no solution to this crisis, and Self knows there is not one. Brodzinski ends up wandering the streets of Vance in a severely mentally-impaired state, which has only been a pyrrhic escape from his own ignorance, as before this, 'At high speed the entire

narrative spooled through his viewfinder of his awareness, and the depth and complexity of the set-up, and the shallowness and simplicity of his own responses, stunned him with blow after blow.’ (TB, p.348)

Conclusion

For J. G. Ballard, sex ‘can no longer be regarded as a personal and isolated activity, but is seen to be a vector in a public complex involving automobile styling, politics and mass communications.’¹⁹¹ Moreover, if this idea is a hypothesis that *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* test to its extreme limits, then the outcry that their publication caused highlights the effectiveness and indeed logic of the results, which summarised:

Apart from its manifest function, redefining the elements of space and time in terms of our most potent consumer durable, the car crash may be perceived unconsciously as a fertilizing rather than a destructive event - a liberation of sexual energy - mediating the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity impossible in any other form.’¹⁹²

Ballard took hugely significant cultural and technological developments, like the car and mass media, and envisioned in his writing what he believed were the next logical steps of such a rapid rate of advancement. His work casts aside traditional, entrapping notions of sexuality in favour of mechanised sex acts that go so far as demanding fundamental changes to the human body in order to succeed. The ‘impossible’ intensity that this creates works in two ways. Firstly, it denotes an unprecedented way of both living and dying that is on a par with the philosophical and existential questions that exist around Level III of *The Techno-Human Condition*. Secondly, it works in relation to Ballard’s distinctive writing styles compared to literary disciples such as Self. Although there are thematic parallels between works such as *Crash* and ‘Design faults’ and even ‘Scale’, Self consciously differentiates his style from Ballard’s. Ballard’s writing is peerless because of the clarity in his pseudo-documentary writing style - a style that even apes the form of an experiment being written up in the latter sections of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. He

¹⁹¹ Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, p.148

¹⁹² Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, pp.26-7

details (often extremely presciently) his imagined future of a society that was becoming increasingly and irreversibly brainwashed by the interconnected and commercial ideologies of the car, politics and mass media. However, he does so in the tone and the mindset of a scientist with an unquenchable fascination in the results of their own experiment, and with what William Burroughs describes as ‘a surgeon’s precision’¹⁹³.

This is where Self differs from Ballard, as in place of ‘precision’ is an indulgence in distortions of temporal, spatial and etymological scales. These distortions deliberately obliterate any hope of comprehension, but such comprehension is surely not Self’s aim. Similarly, in favour of the almost scientific fascination that characterises Ballard’s writing, the humour of his short stories demonstrates Self’s attitude of self-awareness and resignation within this technological society. Ultimately, this attempting to come to terms with the powerlessness of the individual - in contrast to what films or advertising may have had them believe in - is what defines the reflexive difficulty of these stories and Self’s troubled humanism.

If the three driving stories show how this individual powerlessness can be depicted effectively through often fairly juvenile humour, then *The Butt* equally effectively demonstrates the disturbing side of this powerlessness. The horrifically confused and dangerous culture that Brodzinski finds himself trapped in and driving across is a malevolent dramatisation of the ideas towards the highest level of *The Techno-Human Condition*. Namely, this is the idea that it is impossible to so much as grasp what is happening around us. In a technological sense, Allenby and Sarewitz are blunt about this when they state that ‘the problem with trying to even figure out how to draw a better map is that people don’t understand technology, or the complexity that technology engenders, very well.’ (*THC*, p.12) Brodzinski’s futile cry of ‘D’you understand it?

¹⁹³ William Burroughs, ‘Introduction’ in Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, p.vii

Because I sure as hell don't' (*TB*, p.230) portrays him and his complete lack of understanding as a cultural counterpart to this.

Just as Level III cannot be explained away with any kind of comprehensible dynamic, so we remain trapped in this lack of understanding. A generation on from *The Atrocity Exhibition* and the original publication of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord highlights the endurance of the self-consuming processes of the spectacle when he argues that the 'continued unfolding of our epoch has merely confirmed and further illustrated the theory of the spectacle.'¹⁹⁴ Contemporary culture is still being altered by a fusion of advertising, politics, the car and mass media. In *Walking to Hollywood*, Self offers his own interpretation of a contemporary car advertisement to show the changes that have taken place, by pointing out that 'Those adverts for Citroën cars that feature innocuous hatchbacks metamorphosing - à la Transformers - into huge dancing robots express a fundamental truth: the servant has become our master.'¹⁹⁵ These ideologies that exist in the dynamic between human and technology, that have defined the twentieth-century, fascinated Ballard and trapped Debord, endure. All Self does in his driving writing is, in his own distinct, sardonic and sinister way, expose - in his paraphrasing of Debord - 'the shit we're still in.'¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p.7

¹⁹⁵ Self, 'Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*'

Chapter Four: *Walking to Hollywood*

Introduction

The prospect of transportation playing an influential role in shaping both individual and collective identity takes on even more personal and provocative connotations in Self's 2010 triptych, *Walking to Hollywood*. By setting out the narrative, ostensibly, as his own reconstructive memoir, Self offers up his own psyche - so that within *Walking to Hollywood* the reader is forced to contemplate both Self the author and 'Self' the narrator and protagonist, and thus deal with another form of difficulty - as a canvas upon which he paints a picture of the often-troublesome interplay between transport, technology and mental health. The resulting psychic afflictions act as a representation of the effects of an increasingly technological, mobile and capitalist society, and it is a representation that is compelling, absurd and disturbing in equal measure. Indeed, the complexities of the triptych are typified in a reflexive afterword in which Self explains that the factors underpinning the triptych are not only the deaths of J. G. Ballard, his father-in-law, and the murdered Stockwell teenager Freddy Moody, but the 'mental pathologies that underlie the three memoirs - obsessive-compulsive disorder for 'Very Little', psychosis for 'Walking to Hollywood' and Alzheimer's for 'Spurn Head' [that] are themselves displacements of a single phenomenon.' (*WtH*, p.431-2) The notable disparity of these pathologies (from the anxiety-fuelled tics and rituals that characterise OCD, to the loss of a sense of the real inherent in psychosis, and finally the loss of memory associated with Alzheimer's) highlights the overarching complications within *Walking to Hollywood*. The question of what this 'single phenomenon' actually is - and indeed Self's sincerity in the afterword - remain uncertain, fostering a simultaneous sense of importance alongside an often infuriating lack of context, a combination which itself defines large parts of the narrative. Ultimately, the triptych and Self's depictions of transport within it demonstrate a shattering of traditional and more stereotypically Hollywood visions of humanism, towards a more complex and cognitive portrayal of the

ideologies and effects of a world in which technology is increasingly an integral part of both the collective and his own psyche.

The first section of the triptych, 'Very Little', deals with the resumption of a childhood friendship between 'Self' and Sherman Oaks. Sherman - with his name taken from an LA suburb - is an artist of restricted height, whose gargantuan fame stems from the equally gargantuan structures he forms based upon his own body. Dwarfism becomes the catalyst for the OCD that plagues 'Self' during this tale, and the affliction itself sits all too neatly alongside Self's longstanding fixation with distortions and losses of scale. Here, this is also dramatised through Self's satirising of and entrapment within celebrity culture, which in turn makes 'Self's' impending North American promotional book tour all the more problematic during the story. In terms of transport, 'Very Little' is defined by the vast amount of air travel that 'Self' and Sherman undertake, and air travel in its role as a major transformative technology becomes an extremely useful motif here. This is because it demonstrates both the playing out of two important mantras in the context of Self's own psychogeographical leanings - what he calls the 'modern sublime' and the 'man-machine matrix' - and importantly, the profound consequences of these façades breaking down.

The eponymous central section resumes Self's narrative in June 2008, just as 'Self' is going to embark on a 120-mile walk around Los Angeles. If walking through America's car capital - Reyner Banham's 'Autopia' - was not anomalous enough, 'Self' is walking on the premise of discovering and taking down 'who killed film - for film is definitely dead, toppled from its reign as the pre-eminent narrative medium of the age.' (*WtH*, p.122) The influence of cinema is directly linked to the psychosis that defines 'Walking to Hollywood', and Self discusses the idea that there is something both pathological and psychotic about film in a 2014 article, arguing that:

In the 20th century, film provided us not only with a narrative form and a series of techniques that could be applied to the literary, but with a new method of shaping our sense of both individual and collective reality... another way of looking at our times wilful, but mostly unconscious substitution of the virtual for the real, is that it's a kind of disease.¹⁹⁶

The advent of modern cinema brought on an altered sense of narrative expectations that were not only applicable to literature, but our own individual and collective identities. However, the ubiquity of these expectations has resulted, in Self's view, in an endemic loss of individual identity, as entire collectives come to imagine and define themselves by the virtual reality that film presents. This forms the basis for Self's exploration of Hollywood and Los Angeles as an amoralistic and deconstructed landscape, and introduces the cinematic philosophies of Gilles Deleuze as a foil for this. Deleuze placed great emphasis on the fluid, uncertain boundaries between reality and imagination, once stating that 'the world is an outright fiction of the imagination.'¹⁹⁷ Deleuze also theorises that cinema and the technologies involved within it are responsible for actively effecting pre-conceived notions of time and movement in often unfathomable ways, and a similar level of complexity characterises 'Walking to Hollywood'. As well as the practical complexity of the walk itself, the theme of an active loss of individual identity is depicted through everyone appearing in the narrative being played by a celebrity. This entraps 'Self' too, who is simultaneously played by David Thewlis and Pete Postlethwaite. Ultimately, the way 'Self' interacts with and travels across the geography of LA leads to a literal and metaphorical exploration into a consciously troubling struggle with identity against the backdrop of cinematic and automotive technologies and the expectations they relentlessly foster.

¹⁹⁶ Will Self, 'I had planned to write Jaws without the shark', *The Guardian*, 22.8.2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/22/will-self-planned-jaws-shark>

¹⁹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p.80

Finally, 'Spurn Head' sees 'Self' return to England, where his need to walk becomes even greater. The scene here shifts to the fast-eroding east coast of England, as 'Self' attempts to cope with the impending memory erosion of early-onset Alzheimer's disease. The locale and the idea of walking as a form of therapy mirrors W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), a work and a writer that have a huge influence over the entirety of *Walking to Hollywood*. *The Rings of Saturn* is characterised by a distinctive, entrapping sense of melancholy, coupled with a wry self-awareness that the true nature of this melancholy will remain incomprehensible to the reader. Likewise, 'Spurn Head' has a notably more sombre tone than the two tales preceding it, but is still infused with Self's characteristic self-awareness. The awareness in this case is that, as 'Self' continues walking and the symptoms of Alzheimer's become more apparent, the idea of walking as therapy becomes an increasingly futile one. The poignancy in 'Spurn Head' therefore stems from a combination of this awareness and the necessity of continuing the walk anyway - a combination that goes so far, for both Self and Sebald, as to impact upon the writing process itself as being relative to this. What makes *Walking to Hollywood* such a remarkable work is its ability, not only to dramatise and satirise the blinkered attitudes that society has relating to transformative technologies in often very funny ways, but to allow the reader just an occasional glimpse at the truly sublime, terrifying, troubling moments that fleetingly escaping from these ideologies leads to.

Very Little

Towards the end of his North American book tour, 'Self' stands in the woods outside of Chicago's O'Hare airport, 'my boots buried in damp leaf mould, I stared into the white face of a deer. Overhead a jet's headlights carved a tunnel out of the autumn dusk.' (*WtH*, p.93) In a 2010 interview, Self describes this same scene (which itself raises interesting questions as to the degree of authenticity within *Walking to Hollywood*) as the epitome of what he calls the modern sublime. The difference between Self's concept and the Romantic sublime of Wordsworth and Edmund Burke (who is knowingly

namechecked in a chapter title of 'Very Little' - he shops at Walmart, according to Self) is the active influence of the man-made on the former. In Self's view, man-made technology means that individuals and societies:

don't experience it as sublime, they experience it as quotidian in fact, because they can't allow themselves to experience it as sublime, because to experience it as sublime is to acknowledge all sorts of things about humanity. One: we're animals. Two: we're part of the natural world. Three: there is something kind of monstrous and frightening about US.¹⁹⁸

Self's definition reveals how man-made technologies consciously hide the inherent monstrousness of our humanity. However, an inevitable side-effect of this convenient obfuscation about our human nature is that the 'quotidian' becomes increasingly ingrained on our minds the more we use these technologies and leads to a comfortable ignorance. Air travel is an example of this playing out, and Self explains how this works when he argues that 'I think you've got to stop flying because you'd impose these localisms on your perspective. You'd stop thinking 'I understand China because I can get a plane there' and you start realising you know fuck-all about China. So it places the world back in scale.'¹⁹⁹ Constantly flying falsely instills flyers with the belief that they understand their landscapes, where in reality they essentially only understand their airports. This reductionist quality of mass mobility is captured by the sociologist John Urry, who outlines a concept dubbed 'portable personhood'. As he explains:

the rise of an intensively mobile society reshapes the self - its everyday activities, interpersonal relations with others, as well as connections with the wider world. In this age of advanced globalization, we witness portable personhood. Identity becomes not merely 'bent' towards novel forms of transportation and travel, but fundamentally recast in terms of capacities for movement. Put another way, the globalization of mobility extends into the core of the self.²⁰⁰

Just like the car had done throughout the twentieth-century, the globalizing technology of the aeroplane is altering identity and humanity in unheralded ways. Self depicts the

¹⁹⁸ Self, *Literateur*

¹⁹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰⁰ John Urry, *Mobile Lives* (London: Routledge, 2010), p.3

anxieties around this, and the 'monstrous' humanity that still exists behind it, in the context of an old but uneasy friendship. The unease is exacerbated by Sherman's celebrity status upon the resumption of their friendship, a status which places Sherman as the Debordian celebrity being able to exist on a heightened temporal and spatial plane, and hastens 'Self's' entrapment as their narrative progresses.

There are parallels in Self's thinking between the false knowledge of air travel and the cult of celebrity. Just as increased flying fosters an increased ignorance, Self undermines any supposed superiority of celebrities. In 'Very Little' he dramatises this by drawing thinly-veiled comparisons between Sherman and Damien Hirst, and the new wave of conceptual artists that emerged in 1990s Britain. For Self, this group embodied the 'abject willingness to be fucked up by the nineties cult of celebrity; fucked over by the nineties boom in consumerism; fucked sideways by its adoption of the styles and modes of popular culture.' (*FF*, p.317) However, Self's tirade is complicated by both his own position as a precocious literary talent within this artistic zeitgeist, and the promotional book tour within 'Very Little'. Both points highlight how Self is still trapped within this contemporary, self-consuming commodification of art, and one of the morbid jokes within 'Very Little' is that literary promotion comes to have a damaging impact upon the imagination and the psyche of the author, as his eventual, all-consuming obsessions attest to.

The consumerism that underpins this entrapment, and its links to our globally mobile society, bears resemblance to David Harvey's theories on postmodernism and geography, and the 'time-space compression' is one concept that arises from a combination of the two. This involves:

Processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves. I use the word 'compression' because a strong case can be made that the history of

capitalism has been characterized by a speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us.²⁰¹

Harvey defines the increasing rapidity of capitalism as a breaking down of traditional spatial barriers. This is a point relevant to air travel, a form of transport that allows users to travel right across the world at a pace that would have previously been inconceivable. The commercial nature of 'Self's' tour in 'Very Little', and the amount of flying he does during it, reads as a dramatisation of these ideas. Again, Self has acknowledged the inevitable effects of commercialism on the creative process of writing, in a 2014 article that decries the 'assumption that the cultural value of reading and writing wasn't reducible to its economic worth.' He adds that, 'Nowadays all we can say about the production and consumption of the written word is that it is subject to exactly the same iron laws of supply and demand as every other widget or pixel.'²⁰² Therefore, the ironic entrapment of 'Self's' promotional tour, alongside Sherman's notoriety, catalyse the anxieties and obsessions that define 'Very Little'.

'Self's' angst increases as the tour approaches, but for the time being remains relatable. It originates from the possibility of a plane crash, which in 'Self's' mind brings about a fear of 'television news images of rayon blouses, frumpy brown skirts and smalls unlaundered for the entire fortnight, now caught in the bushes at the airport's perimeter... holdalls and suitcases that lay ruptured like sickeningly burst boils.' (*WtH*, p.25) This is the clichéd and defining image of what 'Self' calls his 'luggage phobia', (*WtH*, p.34) which at this juncture offers a curious, anxiety-fuelled inversion of the suspension of disbelief that characterises his writing. The power of the imagination only works here to create an overwhelming and fearful gullibility, which Self believes is representative of society more broadly, suggesting that this is the inevitable and

²⁰¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.240

²⁰² Will Self, 'The fate of our literary culture is sealed', *The Guardian*, 3.10.2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/03/fate-literary-culture-sealed-internet-will-self>

detrimental effect upon a society that is 'spoonfed everything'.²⁰³ In the context of air travel, the remarkable ability to be transported around the world and through the skies is undermined by the inherent commercial aspect of flight, as demonstrated by Self's assertion that any kind of sensation 'gets drowned by... things to damp it down and make it, you know, 'nine pound ninety-nine one way to the Canary Islands with Easyjet'. The whole iconography, the semiotics of it is designed to lull you into accepting it as an integral part of [shrugs] you know.' Being constantly and unavoidably spoonfed this 'iconography' is an example of how this mass transit system plays upon our emotions to foster a passive sense of fear and ignorance that banishes any imaginative possibilities beyond the clichés that already exist. Indeed, this is not the first time air travel has been exposed as entirely and ridiculously clichéd within Self's fiction. In 'Leberknödel' (one of the stories in *Liver*), the protagonist considers the absurdity of similar fears while flying. She eventually touches down in Zurich and cannot help but notice that the 'only clichés were the airport, the runway, the plane breaking to a halt, the co-pilot announcing: 'Welcome to Zurich, ladies and gentlemen, where the local time is 11.48. I hope you enjoyed your flight with us today, and on behalf of the crew I'd like to wish you a safe onward journey.' (L, p.67) The dark irony of her initial fears and this final cliché is that she is headed on an onward journey to a euthanasia clinic.

The other aspect of 'Self's' anxiety is the latent fear about the nature of his and Sherman's relationship that has festered between their teenage years and their reunion. 'Self's' self-professed sizeism is the main source of this fear, and it has manifested itself in peculiar and often humorous ways over the intervening years. The - admittedly mean - game 'child or dwarf' (basically, spotting a small person from behind from out of the car window and guessing whether they are, in fact, a child or a dwarf) that 'Self' plays

²⁰³ Self's attitudes are again echoed by Laurence Scott on this subject, who argues that 'anxiety stems from the problem of self-expression in a digital climate where only 'things' count, and all such things have, by definition, been done many times before. An inescapable truth of a hive society... is that everything is done to death.' [Scott, p.90]

with his children is one example of this. However, this irreverence belies the very real anxieties about the 'unsayable' aspect of their friendship - the height difference between the two, and the subsequent scaling up of Sherman's artworks to Self's height. This stems from one particularly fractious moment of their teenage years, in which 'Sherman said a lot of the unsayable things - about how it was for him, and how he feared it would be.' (*WtH*, p.9) This fear of confronting their formative years is matched by 'Self's' admission that 'I could no longer cope with all the infantilizing demanded by intercontinental air travel. It was over: no more would I dutifully respond to those parental interjections to go here, go there, empty my pockets and take off my shoes.' (*WtH*, p.29) These regressions that trouble 'Self' so much manifest themselves in the present of 'Very Little' in a way that consciously plays on distorted scales. 'Self' develops an obsessive-compulsive tic that sees him multiplying and dividing any numerical value he encounters by ten, with the original value becoming incomprehensible ('1.7 trillion barrels of bitumen - *but why not 17,000,000,000,000 or 170,000,000,000*', (*WtH*, p.53) for example). These transport and personal fears thus plague Self as he prepares to set off for North America.

'Self' manages to set off for the first leg of his tour, however. His neighbour on the flight from London to Toronto is Howard Reichman, a Jewish man burdened by the kind of enormous luggage that 'Self' has consciously eschewed. The flight is delayed upon take-off - and as such any control the passengers have had upon their journey is instantly forgotten - which has disastrous ramifications for Reichman. Learning of the delay, he commences 'making a flurry of phone calls, sloshing Yiddish into the only clamshell he was allowed.' (*WtH*, p.39) Although Reichman appears to represent the typically irritating passenger, 'Self' is able to vicariously buy into his behaviour as a means of allaying his own anxieties:

I found the frummer heartening; his contradictory behaviour - at once mystical and insufferably worldly - seemed wholly in keeping with the paradox of modern air travel,

whereby millions of pounds of thrust, a galaxy of halogen lights and leagues of concrete encapsulate a mundane environment dominated by the most trivial concerns. (*WtH*, p.39)

'Self' appropriately understands how the influence of the mobile phone instills banal fears rather than the sublime ones that Self believes are inherent within the paradox of mass air travel. On the reverse of this, when take-off is finally announced and Reichman is suddenly forbidden from using his phone - his taken-for granted method of global communication - his own restlessness heightens.

It transpires that Reichman is so anxious because he is going to miss an important Shabbat, as the delay has ensured that the flight will not land in Toronto before sundown, at which point he is forbidden from taking any form of mechanised transport. Prior to this, however, 'Self' spends the flight analysing his neighbour's meticulous practicing of Judaism. In comparison to Reichman's strict faith, 'Self' wonders 'What was my own life beside such finicky precision? Cack-handed! Anomic! Eton messy!' (*WtH*, p.40) While this provokes self-consciousness within 'Self', Reichman's actions are merely another way in which an individual places their faith in a certain belief system. Moreover, given Reichman's immediate predicament, it is a belief system that is incompatible with the modern ideologies of commercial flight - as a stereotypically mundane, Level II travel inconvenience has disproportionately dire consequences for him.

This allows Reichman to play another role in the narrative, however, as he becomes Self's companion on the latter's airport walk through Toronto. 'Self' even overcomes his luggage phobia sufficiently enough to offer to carry Reichman's case, despite the repeated guilty and troubling visions he has of Sherman emerging from it. Reichman's presence brings a certain spirituality to the walk, as 'Self' describes how they were:

entering a kind of Eden - vetch tangled with brambles, maple saplings and the occasional wild iris. We were both entranced: the mondial groan and turbofart of the Lester B. Pearson International Airport had been utterly abstracted by this profound localism. In place of the multi-storey car parks there was only an ear of wild wheat bowed to listen to the breeze. (*WtH*, pp.49-50)

At this moment, 'Self' moves away - both physically and emotionally - from the archetypal Ballardian landscapes of airports and multi-storey car parks, and all of the curious psychology within these spaces. However, because the airport walk in its nature is designed to be subversive, it is difficult to shake the feeling that 'Self' still looks to probe, reduce and undermine. More specifically, he looks to manipulate Reichman's faith as a means of actively subverting his own guilty anxieties:

Reichman may have been grateful to me for leading him through this suburban netherworld, but I was equally grateful to him. His sanctity enfolded me and I felt as hermetically sealed as a suitcase encased in polythene by one of those weird machines at the airport. I needed this: I needed my cheating heart to remain safely inside of me, foetally curled in my own dirty laundry. I had foolishly craved the freedom of travelling light, yet arrived in the New World more encumbered than ever. It was better to at least share the psychic burden (*WtH*, pp.50-1)

'Self' and Sherman's lives continue to intersect as the pair jet across North America. This starts after 'Self' has attempted suicide (his first of two attempts in 'Very Little') by trying to jump from the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Moreover, as their lives become increasingly intertwined, 'Self's' guilt around the 'unsayable things' of their relationship comes concurrently closer to the surface, and his mental state deteriorates proportionally. 'Self' notes that:

functioning in this odd new realm where the median had been annihilated, leaving only ever accelerating electrons, and lumbering Shermans, was... taxing. I had thought it was hard enough dealing with my tics and compulsions without having to cope with troublesome emotions... So, when they dropped me off at the Prescott, and he began saying, 'Listen, Will, it strikes me that you need a little human comfort in your life', I was about to interrupt him when his phone did it for me (*WtH*, p.81)

Sherman's inseparability from his mobile phone - one of his simultaneously humorous and irritating quirks throughout the story - staves off a troubling, emotional realisation between the two, as it does again following 'Self's' second suicide attempt in Los Angeles. Ironically then, it is a phone call 'Self' receives that signifies the beginning of the disturbing end of 'Very Little'. It is from Sherman, informing him of his deep vein thrombosis - itself a physical result of immersion into the systems of air travel. The remedy to Sherman's illness is walking, so a previously-proposed trip to the remote

Scottish island of Foula becomes a reality. More than this, 'Self's' throwaway remark on proposing the trip, that 'given the lack of network coverage, I very much doubted Sherman would agree to go' (*WtH*, p.28) is suddenly lent a menacing subtext.

Their time on Foula is the emotional equivalent of the 9/11 attacks, or the moment at which flight MH370 vanished from the radar in 2014. In essence, terrifyingly sublime, previously-inconceivable moments that are impossible to escape from or forget about. On Foula, all of the ideologies of air travel and globalisation hit a material limit, the lack of mobile network coverage. When Sherman had his phone, or was able to jet off at any moment, their relationship maintained what 'Self' called an 'easy commerce'. (*WtH*, p.16) Now that Sherman has been forcibly grounded and his mobile phone rendered suddenly useless, the two men are confronted by a massive emotional sublime with nowhere to hide. The events of the notably punctuated chapters that round off 'Very Little' remain threateningly vague, with the most explicit revelation being that 'I hurt him and there was only this way.' (*WtH*, p.102) After this, Sherman is gone. By placing themselves in a location free from the entrapments of modern technology, they enable a form of escapism impossible for entire collectives bound up within them. That this seemingly results in 'Self' driving Sherman to suicide is just one part of the cruel twist here, however. The only possession left behind by Sherman after he has plunged from a cliff top is his omnipresent mobile, which maintains - as the title of the final chapter reveals - its 'Global Reach'. (*WtH*, p.105)

The truncated chapters at the end of 'Very Little' are a formal aspect of Self's conscious difficulty and trickery within *Walking to Hollywood*. Yet Self has been doing strange things with the chapters ever since the first suicide attempt. After the misadventures in San Francisco in chapter five, the story progresses to 5.5 rather than six. From there, there is a decimalised regression, with each chapter being halved and the story ending after chapter 5.000244140625. One possible interpretation of this

numerical and formal trickery is that Self starts devising the story in an almost mechanical way, representative of the infantilisation and compression of knowledge that global air travel entails. The very last chapter paradoxically proves both the most and the least telling. It consists of one word - 'phone' (*WtH*, p.105) - and its singularity brings to mind the 'single phenomenon' that ultimately defines *Walking to Hollywood*. This technique is deliberately enigmatic and open, and justifies the creeping feeling that so much of the triptych exists as an unknowable joke at the reader's expense. Similarly, and more sinisterly, the events on Foula retain a conscious and disturbing ambivalence.

Walking to Hollywood

The centrepiece of the triptych opens in a self-consciously metafictional way. It is June 2008, and 'Self' has recently been referred to Shiva Mukti by Zack Busner. This echoes the plot of his 2004 short story, 'Dr. Mukti', in which troublesome psychiatric patients are used as weapons in a psychological and physical feud between the two psychiatrists. Here, however, 'Self' is the current test subject for Mukti's unorthodox therapeutic techniques. Mukti 'videoed psychotics during their flamboyant episodes, then showed the films to them when lucid, in order to persuade these patients of the necessity of taking their medication.' (*WtH*, p.109) His techniques immediately introduce cinema and the screen as vital motifs within this story - motifs that will facilitate 'Self's' psychosis as the narrative progresses.

In keeping with the autobiographical pretense of *Walking to Hollywood*, 'Self' also outlines his longstanding professional and personal relationships with Busner. These run from his teenage years up until the moment he proposes his walk across Los Angeles, at which point 'Self' narrates how there is suddenly something amiss about his psychiatrist:

He wasn't merely familiar to me - I knew every hair that sprouted from the tragus of his annoyingly complicated ear - but overly familiar; his mannerisms were exaggerated, his coughs studiously rehearsed. It seemed he was an accomplished actor, called upon to play the part of Dr Zack Busner. (*WtH*, p.122)

Busner's sudden hyperreality is bewildering for 'Self', but the prospect of him being played by an actor is even more troubling. This is because of the necessary disjunction between psychiatrist and actors, with the former being those who assist in revealing the truth of our mental states, and the latter representing all the unreality of the screen-based life. As Self points out in a 2011 video:

We have a not particularly unconscious mind that is preoccupied by sexuality and by violence, but we know absolutely what the difference is between that and the external world, or the world of social codes and social mores. Indeed if we don't we're insane, and are treated as such as a form of psychosis.²⁰⁴

Therefore, the figure who sits masquerading as Busner in front of 'Self' represents a destruction of this difference between unconscious and external worlds. The psychosis that this results in is, in this instance, actively influenced by Self's fascination with the intricate technologies of cinema. This is because - as Self quickly realises - it is Orson Welles who is playing Busner, despite Welles' death in 1985. Welles is a significant figure when it comes to the cinematic philosophies of Gilles Deleuze, and these philosophies can be read alongside Self's depictions of cinematic - and indeed automotive - psychosis to form an understanding of just how powerful these technologies are. More specifically, Welles is an archetypal example of Deleuze's philosophies of the 'time-image' and 'Power of the False'. The qualities of the 'time-image' arise from Deleuze's development of the Bergsonian concept of time as a social and chronological construct. Deleuze discusses his thoughts on time as being a dominant trait of post-war cinema, a technology that alters how we experience time in what he calls an 'affective' way. This marks an anarchic move away from previously fixed, human perspectives on both time and movement, and the advent of technologies such as CGI and 3D cinema increase the

²⁰⁴ Self, 'Is the internet inherently psychotic?'

possibilities of this anarchic difficulty, and Tom Conley argues that this difficulty does not tend 'to favour narrative or beg the spectator to identify with their content.'²⁰⁵

In light of this, Patricia Pisters summarises that a medium 'in which truthful narration (where we could still believe our eyes) has been replaced by falsifying narration (where nothing is what it seems).'²⁰⁶ Deleuze refers to this 'falsifying narrative' as the 'Power of the False', and he believes that Welles plays an active role in perpetuating this:

[Welles] isolates a direct time-image and makes the image go over to the power of the false... There is a Nietzscheanism in Welles, as if Welles were retracing the main points of Nietzsche's critique of truth: the 'true world' does not exist, and, if it did, would be inaccessible, impossible to describe, and, if it could be described, would be useless, superfluous. The true world implies a 'truthful man', a man who wants the truth, but such a man has strange motives, as if he were hiding another man in him, a revenge²⁰⁷

The significance of Welles appearing in 'Self's' psychotic mind is depicted through the extent of this power, as it has managed 'to convince an audience of one who was sitting within feet of him.' (*WtH*, p.135) Self's equivalent of this 'power of the false' is 'a suspension of disbelief that has endured my entire adult life.' (*WtH*, p.135) Moreover, the dramatisation of this psychosis in 'Walking to Hollywood' appears to sit neatly alongside Deleuze's assertion that any fundamental truths around either individual identity or the world at large are not only necessarily impossible to define, but the process of trying to do so is inevitably futile. Indeed, a similar futility of definition is ironically depicted when 'Self' makes his claim for walking across LA:

If I want to discover who - or what - did for film I'll be better off walking. Walking is so much slower than film - especially contemporary Hollywood movies, with their stuttering film grammar of split-second shots - and it isn't framed, when you walk you're floating in a fishbowl view of the world. There can't possibly be any editing: no dissolves, no cuts,

²⁰⁵ Tom Conley, 'The time-image', in Adrian Parr (ed.) *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2010), p.286

²⁰⁶ Patricia Pisters 'Illusionary Perception and Cinema: Experimental Thoughts on Film Theory and Neuroscience', in Mark Poster and David Savat (eds.), *Deleuze and New Technology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.235

²⁰⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.142-3

no fades, no split-screens - and, best of all, no special effects, no computer-cheated facsimiles of the world. You see, if I walk to Hollywood I'll be creeping along outside the ambit of the filmic - like Vietcong insurgent tunnelling through the jungle - and they won't be able to see me coming! (*WtH*, pp.124-5)

Walking is, in 'Self's' mind, the only way he can avoid and infiltrate the murderous rapidity of contemporary Hollywood cinema. However, he steps outside of LAX airport to be met by a camera crew - dubbed 'the Jeffs' - he has hired to film the walk in its entirety. 'Self' wants and needs his walk filmed 'as a single continuous shot, at times static, at others panning, at still others tracking or zooming.' (*WtH*, p.173) This decision undermines the idea of walking as a means of travelling that will keep 'Self' out of the psychotic clutches of both Hollywood cinema and LA car culture. Instead, it highlights how 'Self' remains ironically trapped within the troublesome technologies - cinematic and otherwise - that he wishes to bring down.

Moreover, the filming process itself raises complexities, both in terms of its immediate practicalities and the genre of *Walking to Hollywood* as a whole. This involves cameraman and sound man:

the two men passing me, then stopping, panning as I went by to my departing back, then passing me once more. It reminded me of overtaking a truck with a shiny aluminium tank, then pulling in front of it, then dropping back behind, then passing it again - all this in '94, on the Santa Ana freeway, with Polly Borland in the passenger seat, filing our reflection in the mirrored belly of the grunting beast with a Super 8 camera... this was our anticipation of what became the signature CGI shot of urban destruction (*WtH*, p.172)

The anecdote about Polly Borland - the photographer who accompanied him to report on the cryonicists of LA in the 1990s - heightens the ambiguity of this pseudo-memoir, in the sense that he recalls this actual event during 'Self' fantasizing in-depth about being gifted with destructive, CGI-abetted superpowers after being irritated by a gas station cashier, with stereotypically violent results. Additionally, 'Self' comments that 'while the shot appears to be about the destruction of technology, it reinforces the notion that planes, trains and automobiles are like boulders tumbling down the hillside of civilization - natural and unstoppable.' (*WtH*, p.172) It is also apt that Borland's camera trickery

takes place on the Santa Ana freeway - deep in the heart of 'Autopia' - as it highlights how cars and other forms of transport are now an integral and, to paraphrase Deleuze, affective part of existence in the modern world.

Imagination works in the same way as transport in this respect, in that both alter the ways we experience time and place. This is because this entire recollection has taken place within a 'milliseconds-long void' upon which, according to him, 'we are impelled to place a face'. It is a void that shares the properties of Deleuze's 'time-image', as the most seemingly natural and spontaneous thoughts and emotions that we experience become influenced and contaminated by cinematic clichés. In this instance, the banal annoyance that stems from his encounter with the cashier is transformed into a spectacularly destructive yet long-winded fantasy with the help of CGI. Self vividly intertwines the fantastical and the anecdotal to dramatise his own psychosis-ravaged imagination. The power of this is captured in Deleuze's argument that 'By raising the false to power, life freed itself of appearances as well as truth: neither true nor false, an undecidable alternative, but power of the false, decisive will'.²⁰⁸ This 'decisive will' is imperative here, as it demonstrates the active and often difficult level of engagement required to harness the power of the imagination and fully suspend disbelief. In this light, 'Walking to Hollywood' becomes the antithesis of the standardised, clichéd imaginative tropes that contemporary cinema causes. Simultaneously, however, Self offers his own psyche up as an example of how these clichés and the technologies behind them can so easily and totally consume the individual.

In case the entrapment of cinematic technology was not troubling enough for Self, the physical geography of Los Angeles is set up in a way that means walking across it

²⁰⁸ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, p.150

cannot lead to any form of psychic relief. During his walk, 'Self' is forced to acknowledge that:

Counter-intuitively, a grid-plan city forces more decisions on the walker than the winding folkways of an older more haphazard urbanity. Since diagonal progress can be made equally effectively by any given series of horizontal and perpendicular traverses, at each intersection the choice of two directions remains, maddeningly. (*WtH*, p.177)

In a psychogeographical light, the layout of Los Angeles that ostensibly appears to be more convenient for its inhabitants has the opposite effect for 'Self'. Its simplicity negates the kind of psychic decision that a *dérive* should entail, and also introduces the idea that walking as therapy is a fallacy - an idea that Self develops in a sobering manner come 'Spurn Head'. The result of walking through this grid system is an increased level of anxiety and increased reliance for 'Self' upon his camera crew. He frets that 'Somewhere out there was a killer or killers and I needed the crew's prophylaxis badly; unprotected, who knew what I might become prey to'. (*WtH*, p.179) The ironic entrapment of this admission is of course that 'Self' is dependent on the very same filmic technology he purports to be working against, as his anxiety ultimately stems from '300 square miles of eyes and camera lenses.' (*WtH*, p.179)

The link between mental health problems and the camera lens becomes even more pronounced when 'Self's' narrative sees him meeting Bret Easton Ellis, who is also being played by Orson Welles. Ellis is an important figure as he fulfils the role of both novelist and screenwriter, although in Alex Bilmes' description of this there remains a distinction. Bilmes suggests that 'His novels are infatuations. His screenplays are flirtations'²⁰⁹, and a similar impression arises from the conversation between Ellis/Welles and 'Self'/Postlethwaite. The former claims that 'A script is a commodity... nothing more - oftentimes a hell of a lot less.' (*WtH*, p.227) This shows how cinema is, perhaps due to

²⁰⁹ Alex Bilmes, 'All this is real: interview with Bret Easton Ellis', *GQ*, 6.7.2010, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2010-07/06/gq-books-bret-easton-ellis-interview/page/4>

its dominance as a medium in the twentieth-century, every bit as subject to commodification as the novel and art have been shown to be throughout the triptych. This commodification provides one link between the novel and film, and 'Self's' admiring comment on Ellis's pseudo-memoir *Lunar Park* (2005) subsequently places it within the context of psychosis:

I love the way you play with your own identity, create a doppelgänger - but isn't that what the movies can do now, there's no disbelief so heavy that it can't be winched with fleets of computer-generated helicopters? I mean, it's also like a psychosis, believing in this stuff even for a second - that's why they're putting so much into the new 3-D technology... and well, this is what we fear, isn't it? The numbers of people with mental illnesses are increasing exponentially - bipolar, hypomania, OCD, dementia, addiction, schizo-fucking-phrenia - it's a plague, and these Hollywood movies are expressing that fear! (*WtH*, p.236)

This analysis of Ellis's novel and its likenesses to contemporary Hollywood technologies reads as a telling indication of the anxieties and pathologies that dominate *Walking to Hollywood* as a whole. It is particularly driven by the effects of 3-D technology, and captures the troubling and definite link between advances in cinematic and transport technology, and their degenerative effects on the individual and collective psyche.

While 'Self's' meeting with Ellis and discussion of *Lunar Park* frames these difficult anxieties in terms of the memoir, the final stages of his LA journey does so with the characteristics of the travelogue in mind. As 'Self' begins walking back towards the airport, he ruminates how:

Going home always feels like the real getaway to me. To depart on a journey is to simplify your identity: you must present a serviceable persona to strangers shorn of ambiguities - be just x, or y, or possibly j. But when you scoop up the strange coins from the unfamiliar bedside table... you begin to feel the first stirrings of adventurousness: who will I be when I get back? Will I have changed? Will they have changed? The world is all used up - only tourists or salesmen set off on journeys; the real explorers strike out for the known. (*WtH*, p.304)

This highlights how mass transit systems actively have a reductive effect on individual identities. As Self points out about the act of flying to China, doing this does not make you a more cultured or intelligent person, despite what the commercial ideologies of

flying imply. On the contrary, it reduces individuals to an easily identifiable, neatly packaged 'serviceable persona'. The setting of Los Angeles makes this thought an even more relevant one, being as it is the home of the ultimate example of the 'serviceable persona' - the famous actor - that 'Self' has been plagued by on his trip.

There is still time for 'Self' to encounter two more celebrities, as he passes the set of an upcoming film. Kevin Spacey is the first of these figures, an actor whose instant recognisability paradoxically stems from what 'Self' calls 'that quality of being pre-known, his face not so much a visage as an a priori category waiting to be filled with a serviceable identity.' (*WtH*, p.313) Spacey's lack of identity is matched by the failure of the narrator (who is ostensibly the same person as the author) to define his own identity against the backdrop of a major psychotic breakdown. This inevitable failure is highlighted by the fact that the film set 'Self' has walked in to is filming his own earlier conversation with Busner (now being played by Spacey). Yet this metafictional quirk is not the most troubling thing for 'Self'. Instead, his extreme anxiety is triggered when Spacey innocuously drops a wristwatch on set. This leads to 'an overpowering intimation of death: Death pressed me back against the rough concrete wall, Death rubbed my belly, Death circled my wrist with his bony finger and bony thumb and all the rottenness of this world oozed from the holes in his skull.' (*WtH*, p.314) This intimation of death brought on by time prompts 'Self' to ponder that 'I set off along Dell pursued by the sinister intimations I'd had when Spacey was sorting through the watches. Watches! Such a cliché - whether on wrists, mantelpieces, or melting in the corner of Dalí canvasses, timepieces were always just that. Still, what did I have to fear? I'd survived it all'. (*WtH*, p.316)

This, however, is untrue. 'Self's' final encounter on the streets of LA is with Mac Guffin, the Chandler-esque, neo-noir parody of a private detective. The name is lifted from a coinage of Alfred Hitchcock; the MacGuffin is a plot device that ostensibly works towards a certain goal, but is rendered largely inconsequential due to a lack of

connection to the rest of the narrative. The detective exposes both the total failure of 'Self's' quest to track down the 'killer of the movies', and the extent to which 'Self' has been consumed by Hollywood. He tellingly probes 'Self' by questioning 'You mean there's no illusion of a core self that's giving you direction?', (*WtH*, p.319) and then revealing the technology behind 'Kidnapping someone, forcing them to undergo systematic motion-capture filming and standard-deviation, then replacing them with a 3-D image of themselves.' (*WtH*, p.319) As Mac Guffin reveals then, 'Self' has become the latest victim of the 'killer of the movies', and to cruelly and ironically paraphrase Debord - all that he once directly experienced is now three-dimensional representation.

Herein lies Self's unique dramatisation of the inverse correlation between technological advances and our collective imaginative capabilities, however. His narrator - himself - meets with a fantastical, terrifying fate, apparently made possible by cutting-edge technology, and yet all that pervades from this startling revelation is an overarching sense of banality. 'Self' explains that, 'Having nothing else to do, I went on. Isn't this what we do: go on, no matter how depersonalized and useless we feel, no matter how lost in our own lives and confused about our role in the universal - if any?' (*WtH*, p.321) On one hand, 'Self's' final footsteps through LA are characterised by a weary existential resignation. Yet there is a perverse sense of optimism here, in the very fact that we can and do 'go on', irrespective of all logic, and in this case, irrespective even of death.

The reader has very little time to process this curious mixture of weariness and optimism, however, as 'Self' and the narrative are immediately transported back to Mukti's office in London. It transpires that this has all been a flamboyant, psychotic take on the clichéd Hollywood 'it was all a dream' trope, and 'Self' is initially angered by this. He exclaims to Mukti, 'Put out! Of course I'm put out - wouldn't you be if you discovered it had all been a videotape that your psychiatrist had made of you? And such lousy production values as well.' (*WtH*, p.324) His annoyance is justifiably felt by the reader

too, who has likely suspended disbelief in a hugely convoluted narrative only to become the butt of another one of the author's jokes. Yet the tale cannot end without a further level of ambiguity. Once the narrator's initial annoyance passes, the reader learns that his delusions around cinema being murdered and celebrity culture have not only endured, but have become a perverse form of entertainment. His enduring psychological afflictions call to mind Deleuze's philosophies for one final time, particularly his idea of the 'sick man', a phenomenon that bears some similarities to Self's necessarily and consciously difficult work. Deleuze argues that:

Behind the truthful man, who judges life from the perspective of supposedly higher values, there is the sick man, 'the man sick with himself', who judges life from the perspective of his sickness, his degeneration and his exhaustion. And this is perhaps better than the truthful man, because a life of sickness is still life, it contrasts life with death, rather than contrasting it with 'higher values'.²¹⁰

Although the twist ending of 'Walking to Hollywood' may well prove irritating for the reader, there is a paradoxical sense of honesty within it. This works through the acceptance of sickness rather than the easier option of defining one's life by ephemeral 'higher values'. Setting the triptych out as a memoir gives Self the opportunity to show how he is not immune from these entrapments and sicknesses, and this becomes increasingly important as his depictions of sickness intensify into the final tale.

Spurn Head

The idea of walking as a form of transport - and a form of transport with distinct and important benefits to the individual - becomes even more explicit in the final tale. In this, 'Self' describes his journey along the Holderness coast in East Yorkshire as 'a unique walk of erasure - a forty-mile extended metaphor for my own embattled persona, as its foundations were washed away by what I suspected was early-onset Alzheimer's.' (*WtH*, p.345) This attempt to come to terms with a degenerative disease underpins 'Spurn

²¹⁰ Deleuze, *Cinema II*, p.146

Head', and the story bears the closest resemblance to the curious blend of memoir and travelogue that is W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*.

Sebald's digression on the extensive memoirs of the Vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) is one of the most telling within his work. Although Chateaubriand entitles his memoirs *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* (*Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*), he remains worried about his own posterity, pondering 'Will what I have written survive beyond the grave? Will there be anyone to comprehend it in a world the very foundations of which are changed?'²¹¹ Chateaubriand's questions and Sebald's digression are so significant because they expose the innate, unavoidable fallibility and unreliability of writing and the writer. Sebald's narrator surmises that:

The chronicler, who was present at these events and is once more recalling what he witnessed, inscribes his experiences, in an act of self-mutilation onto his own body. In the writing, he becomes the martyred paradigm of the fate Providence has in store for us, and, though still alive, is already in the tomb that his memoirs represent. (*TRoS*, p.257)

This point reveals the memoir to be a genre of writing that is as inherently paradoxical and futile as trying to deny one's own mortality. Both Sebald and Self explore the act of walking as an attempt at therapy to break this entrapment, but even their walks become bound up in this inevitable and dispiriting cycle. J. J. Long posits that from the 'desire to resist modernity and the simultaneous realisation that this desire is destined to be forever unfulfilled - however long the narrator's pilgrimage and narrative digression may defer this acknowledgement - stems the melancholy that constitutes Sebald's most recognisable signature.'²¹² Modernity is central to Sebald's work, but it is a consciously difficult term. It specifically stems from the horrors of the Holocaust, and takes in the fundamental struggles with existence and identity that followed it. Maurice Blanchot's arguments on the same struggles highlight how, as Long suggests, this is impossible. This

²¹¹ W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.253 [will be referenced henceforth as *TRoS* in running text]

²¹² J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.146

is because, for Blanchot, the Holocaust was ‘an absolute that interrupted history, this one *must* say, without, however, being able to say anything else. Discourse cannot be developed from this point... there is almost no affirmation possible’.²¹³

The impossible struggle of Sebald’s narrative opens with its narrator enacting a cycle of walking and writing as a form of therapy. Initially, the narrator walks ‘in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work.’ (*TRoS*, p.3) The grim futility and entrapment of this cycle soon become apparent, however. Far from proving at all therapeutic, the constant confrontations with erosion and destruction while walking bring on a ‘paralysing horror’ (*TRoS*, p.3) that triggers a Kafkaesque physical malaise - the narrator, while hospitalised, compares himself to Gregor Samsa - that in turn makes it necessary for him to chronicle the walking tour. Consequently, it is now the turn of writing to try and occupy a psychically therapeutic role, but the inescapably paradoxical nature of the memoir ensures this is impossible:

For days and weeks on end one racks one’s brains to no avail, and, if asked, one could not say whether one goes on writing purely out of habit, or a craving for admiration, or because one knows not how to do anything other, or out of sheer wonderment, despair or outrage, any more than one could say whether writing renders one more perceptive or more insane. Perhaps we all lose our sense of reality to the precise degree to which we are engrossed in our own work, and perhaps that is why we see in the increasing complexity of our mental constructs a means for greater understanding, even while intuitively we know that we shall never be able to fathom the imponderables that govern our course through life. (*TRoS*, pp.181-2)

By deed of its genre, *The Rings of Saturn* is a work that consciously participates in its own disintegration. Chateaubriand is even more explicit in this awareness, bemoaning ‘How wretched this life of ours is! So full of false conceits, so futile, that it is little more than the shadow of the chimeras loosed by memory. My sense of estrangement is becoming more and more dreadful.’ (*TRoS*, p.255) The irony of this is that Chateaubriand

²¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p.114

was an individual who charted the events of his own, apparently futile, life over thousands of pages. This typifies the memoir as being as necessary as it futile, and acting as a monument despite the pervading awareness of entrapment. Long sums this up accurately when he points out that 'the digressive narrative, the narrative that entails a 'stepping away from', can only be conceived in relation to that form from which it steps away and to which it is therefore inevitably sutured.'²¹⁴ Therefore, writing a memoir as a kind of monument demonstrates a self-conscious acknowledgement of both the futility of life and the inescapability of death, and Self - like Sebald and Chateaubriand before him - has this awareness, as the bizarre monument of filming his doomed quest in Los Angeles proves.

'Spurn Head' opens with 'Self' also ruminating over the cause and effect relationship between walking and writing, reaching the conclusion that:

all of my little walking tours were methods of legitimizing. Towards the end of my drug addiction it had occurred to me that the manias of cocaine, the torpors of heroin and the psychoses of the hallucinogens - all these were pre-existing states of mental anguish that only appeared to be self-induced, and so, perhaps, controllable, because of the drugs. So it was with the walking, which was a busman's holiday; for, while I trudged along... I remained sunk deep in my own solipsism - then I returned to the chronic, elective loneliness of the writing life. (*WtH*, pp.336-7)

The entrapment within this cycle of walking and writing in 'Spurn Head' is complicated in a different way from Sebald. The mental health problems that originally propel 'Self' into this cycle are caused by prolonged drug addiction, and these addictions and walking both purport to offer a semblance of agency for 'Self'. Additionally, the isolation that defines this cycle also suggests a degree of agency here, as 'Self' mentions the 'elective loneliness' as a comparison to the paralysing horrors of the Holocaust that drive *The Rings of Saturn*.

²¹⁴ Long, *Sebald*, p.145

The ramifications of the Holocaust are also discussed in 'Spurn Head', in a way that simultaneously captures both the futility and necessity of charting them. 'Self' holds the historical event up against the inevitable march into the future and subsequently suggests that:

there will be Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day Remembrance Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day Remembrance Day Remembrance Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day Remembrance Day Remembrance Day Remembrance Day - until the significance of the Holocaust itself - which no one any longer living has had direct experience of - is quite forgotten. (*WtH*, p.343)

'Self's' point lends the Holocaust a Debordian edge, as the direct event ceases to have any conceivable meaning and becomes unavoidably subjected to increasingly distant levels of representation. However, this highlights how vital it is that Sebald charts the struggles that have come from the Holocaust. It may suggest a cynical level of detachment from Self, but the prospect of a future in which the atrocities have been 'quite forgotten' means it is essential that Sebald creates his own personal monument. This remains the case despite Sebald's awareness that 'in reality, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable.' (*TRoS*, p.177)

This awareness instills a sense of pathos into Sebald's narrative, and the unreliability of memory often has the same effect during 'Spurn Head'. The narrative becomes particularly touching when 'Self' details a documentary about an unknown woman suffering from Alzheimer's. 'Self' has his own personal reasons for finding the documentary 'unutterably poignant' (*WtH*, p.335) - because of the connection he sees between the woman and his father - but the distinctly human troubles that both 'Self' and the reader are faced with has the effect of drawing the reader in. In addition to this, the development of the woman's illness has some parallels with the narrator's own mental health. As 'Self' realises, 'To begin with, she was giddy with the fall - amused by her own forgetfulness', (*WtH*, p.334) just as the narrator finds himself describing his

psychotic delusions as ‘a form of entertainment’ (*WtH*, p.325) come the reflexive denouement of ‘Walking to Hollywood’. This giddiness is transient, however, as her mental state deteriorates to the point at which she cannot be taken to the Suffolk coast as she desires, ‘for fear that [she] would simply swim out to sea and submerge her own incomprehension in the liquid unknown.’ (*WtH*, p.335) The question that arises from this concern hinges upon whether the submerging of oneself into ‘the liquid unknown’ becomes a conscious, deliberate act for the woman. As such, this passage becomes intriguing in relation to Self’s distinctive views on death, and specifically suicide.

In a 2014 RSA talk, Self espouses that ‘It’s meaningless to talk about death as distinct from life, it’s really one thing. It’s death/life, like space/time, after Einstein’s second paper on General Relativity - death and life are the same phenomenon.’²¹⁵ This assertion that death and life are inter-related components of one larger phenomenon runs throughout Self’s work. It is, for instance, the premise upon which ‘The North London Book of the Dead’ (1991) and *How the Dead Live* (2000) are exclusively predicated. As well as this, Self explores it in a 1993 article on cryogenics and cryonicists, a group whose beliefs, despite being ‘Dagenham - two stops beyond Barking’ (*JM*, p.252) are ‘yet unsettling, because the very form that their delusion takes mirrors the profound spiritual difficulties our culture has in coming to terms with death.’ (*JM*, p.254) Attempting to comprehend death forms another part of Self’s troubling humanism, in that it is a concept society finds collectively impossible to grasp, and the attitude of the cryonicists works as a logical end point to this aversion, as it brings in technology as a means of trying to stave off death. All of these views provide evidence for Self’s belief that the way contemporary, secular society treats death demands re-evaluation.

²¹⁵ Will Self, ‘RSA Replay: Let’s Talk About Death’, *The RSA*, 23.6.2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lE0uT5Kyt4>

His belief in the form this re-evaluation should take is more controversial than that view itself. He speaks with candour on the still relatively taboo topic of assisted suicide, arguing that we should have the bravery to end our own lives once they no longer have 'any utility, value, and that it would be better to die.'²¹⁶ The audible unease from the audience upon hearing this is indicative of how fundamentally difficult it would be for this attitude to become commonplace, and validates Self's acknowledgement of the tremendous amount of courage that such an act would require. Consequently, demonstrating the freedom of choice to end one's own life becomes the most difficult, but most worthwhile, act of self-appraisal, and the prospect of seeing this potentially about to take place in 'Spurn Head' lends the story of the unnamed woman an even greater degree of poignancy.

The reasons why this is still such a controversial and ultimately incomprehensible viewpoint are as difficult and paradoxical as the act of writing a memoir. Ernest Becker examines the psychology behind refusing to contemplate the end of one's life, arguing that humans have an innate narcissism that both leads to and is influenced by social and cultural 'hero-systems... in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning.'²¹⁷ This makes it impossible to consider one's own death - as Claude Evenrude philosophises in *Shark* - 'The odds don't matter, 'cause no matter how bad they may be... *it's always the others who die.*' (S, p.443) Becker adds, 'It is one of the meaner aspects of narcissism that we feel that practically everyone is expendable except ourselves.'²¹⁸ This narcissism leads to what Stanley Cohen calls the 'denial paradox':

Denial is a high-speed cognitive mechanism for processing information, like the computer command to 'delete' rather than 'save'. But this assumes the denial paradox. In order to use the term 'denial' to describe a person's statement 'I didn't know', one has to assume that she knew or knows about what it is that she claims not to know - otherwise the term

²¹⁶ Self, 'Let's Talk About Death'

²¹⁷ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), p.5

²¹⁸ Becker, *Denial of Death*, p.2

'denial' is inappropriate. Strictly speaking, this is the only legitimate use of the term 'denial'.²¹⁹

Cohen's idea that there is necessarily an implicit knowledge of what is being denied is helpful when it comes to considering the ways in which society - immaturely, as far as Self is concerned - deals with death. For the knowledge of death exists, it is just so hugely unpleasant to truly comprehend. This also goes back to Self's point on how we experience - or rather choose not to experience - the 'modern sublime'. The idea that we could be so 'frightening' and 'monstrous' towards ourselves by comprehending and even carrying out our own deaths is a thought too difficult and unsettling to engage with. Yet for Self it is significantly less so than the prospect of terminal illness and a slow, painful decline into what is inevitable anyway. The narrative of 'Spurn Head' shares this attitude as 'Self' continues his walk along the East Yorkshire coastline and deeper into memory loss:

Middle age - the fulcrum around which the mind-world turns. In youth the future is murky, while the past has a seeming clarity - but now it's the future that becomes crystal clear: blackberries shining in a hawthorn hedge after sudden autumnal rain. Decline - then death. Meanwhile the past recedes, lapping back from a muddied shore across which it's unsafe to wade - who knows what might have happened there? (*WtH*, p.344)

Death, and its certainty, offer a perverse and even recognisable relief for 'Self', compared to a decline into a degenerative disease that will only further cloud what is real. This thought encapsulates the change in tone of 'Spurn Head', in comparison to the preceding sections of the triptych. In particular, 'Walking to Hollywood' with its depictions of film, celebrity and psychosis, focuses on how technology alters the boundaries between real and false. Here, however, the focus shifts to the deeply personal and unfortunately natural effects of the pathology itself.

The sentiment of death becoming a perverse relief, coupled with the fluidity between past, present and future, permeates the remainder of 'Spurn Head'. This works

²¹⁹ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), pp.5-6

from 'Self' inexplicably 'Having walked for four centuries' (*WtH*, p.406), through to the brief reintroduction of the motos, concluding with 'Self' encountering a Struldbrug, one of the satirically immortal creatures from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The ridiculousness of these immortal creatures marks a departure from the urgency with which the likes of Chateaubriand and Sebald, and even 'Self' at earlier junctions of the triptych, must construct their own monuments to the future, and this is borne out through the final moments of 'Spurn Head'. This moment depicts, with finality, how disconnected 'Self' now is from his past life and memories, and as such the complete disintegration of the contingent aspects that form his identity:

I shared his obsession, and so the two of us moved back and forth in the shallows, crossing and recrossing, intent on the elusive terminus. After some time we had achieved a consensus and stood confronting one another - I naked, he in his rags. I dared to look upon his medieval features. *The next stop here is Victoria, change here for District, Circle and Piccadilly lines and mainline rail services...* I opened the notebook and a scrap of black-and-white photograph fell on to the water... but when I glanced back at the scrap it had been spun away by the wavelets, leaving me behind, paddling in the Now. (*WtH*, p.428)

This final passage of the main body of the triptych is remarkable because of the fleeting images of 'Self's' past - and now almost totally forgotten - London life, that come into consciousness alongside an undesirable embodiment of the future and immortality. This suggests that even if an adequate form of posterity was possible, it would not necessarily be advisable. Moreover, it is the present - the capitalised Now - that engulfs everything else. Here, the inescapable immediacy of this present manages to override all of the cultural, technological and transport-based ideologies that 'Self' has immersed himself in, satirised, and been trapped by over the course of this narrative and these journeys. Ultimately, this moment reinforces Self's tendency to explore these ideologies as a means of articulating how troubling and entrapping his take on humanism is, no matter how difficult doing so may be. The horrendous symptoms of Alzheimer's epitomise how difficult this process is, as 'Self' summarises, 'Amnesia was a belief system - an ideology all its own. I believed, fervently, in my ability to recall anything of significance, and this

functioned as a heuristic, allowing me to operate effectively in a world that to anyone armed with prior knowledge would be frighteningly incomprehensible.’ (*WtH*, p.412)

Photography

The all-encompassing Now that ‘Self’ is trapped in at the conclusion of ‘Spurn Head’ is a useful starting point for analysing the effect that photography has in *Walking to Hollywood*, and how Self’s use of photography differs from Sebald’s. The total disconnection from past and future that characterises the end of ‘Spurn Head’ is a quality that photography shares, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggests:

We know the photographer must have been on the scene - indeed, this serves as a further guarantee of the image’s truth - but the photographer is manifestly absent from the field of the image. Instead, we are there, we are seeing what the photographer saw at the moment of exposure. This structural congruence of point of view... confers on the photograph a quality of pure, but delusory, presentness.²²⁰

The final image of ‘Spurn Head’ and *Walking to Hollywood* is the partial photograph of an unknown male that ‘Self’ has picked up at the beginning of his walk, back in Stockwell. When he discovers it, he finds it ‘unsettling’, but also starts to think that ‘it might be a clue of a special kind’, and ultimately settling on the idea that the ‘outsized and hieratic figure was, I concluded, a saint, to be viewed through a hagioscope from the side aisle where I sat, worshipfully typing.’ (*WtH*, p.339) However, it is not until almost one hundred pages later that the reader gets to see the image of ‘Self’s’ worship. Here, ‘Self’ mentions the image again, but only because he sees a fleeting resemblance between the figure in it and the Struldbrug. Its reappearance consequently represents the arbitrary, momentary glimpses of recent memory and the past that characterises the symptoms of Alzheimer’s.

Memory is also important in relation to Sebald’s photography. Primarily this is for purposes of indexing, as Long argues that the ‘most important point... is that Sebald’s

²²⁰ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History and Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.180

texts are intimately concerned with the indexical status of the photograph, the idea that it is a trace of past reality that confirms the existence of a certain thing, person, or event.’²²¹ Indexing therefore implies authenticity, and Sebald’s description and photographs of a former secret military base in Orfordness - a place with an ‘extra-terrestrial’ feel - are a striking example of this design on authenticity. Sebald describes that base as such:

My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas, which seemed quite out of place in these military installations. But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notion of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe. (*TRoS*, pp.236-7)

The images that accompany this description are unmistakably from the same place, and attempt to convey the distinct otherworldliness of Orfordness. This attempt at validation and authenticity links to Sebald’s attempts to define a post-Holocaust identity. However, the self-conscious futility of trying to do this ensures that his photography fulfils the role of ‘pure, but delusory presentness’ that Solomon-Godeau mentions.

The photographed landscapes throughout *Walking to Hollywood* are far less distinctive. Far from leaning towards an inherent truthfulness, Self’s images of nondescript Los Angeles streets or blandly desolate stretches of the Holderness coast are a consciously direct counterpart to the fantastic and terrifying events that are being described in the same pages. Returning to Deleuze’s comparison between the ‘truthful man’ and the ‘sick man’ compounds the differences between ‘Self’ and Sebald. Where Sebald represents the former, ‘Self’ once again consciously becomes the ‘sick man’. The vague and confusing images of his work share qualities with psychosis and Alzheimer’s, and because this sickness is so often caused by the degenerative advances of transport

²²¹ Long, *Sebald*, p.48

and technology they become a warped version of Solomon Godeau's theory - they represent an impure, but still delusory, presentness.

Conclusion

During their conversation at the start of 'Walking to Hollywood', Zack Busner warns 'Self' that his planned trip to Los Angeles 'reeks of Kunstschadenfreude... the art that indulges its creator's sorrow until it completely takes him over.' (*WtH*, p.134) Just as he does in his brief cameo at the end of 'Waiting', Busner spells out the nature of the entrapment and the afflictions that his patients are experiencing. That the patient here is Self himself adds a level of ironic reflexivity to this entrapment, and the memoir as a genre becomes useful for Self to manipulate to his own consciously complex and incomprehensible ends. The best example of this - and Self's self-awareness of it - occurs in the metafictional footnote that he attaches to the above conversation with Busner, which he describes as 'minted lamb':

I cannot recall tasting pre-minted lamb until the early 2000s, when Sainsbury's began to offer it among their selection of barbecue meats. This was over twenty years after the events described, so the phrase 'minted lamb' is interjected here to convey the implausibility of this reconstructive memoir, and indeed of the genre as a whole. (*WtH*, p.114)

This kind of bizarre humour characterises much of the triptych, but in keeping with the inherent complexities of the genre, Self combines it with obsessions and pathologies that are ominous and unsettling. 'Very Little' switches between these two moods at an often bewildering pace. Some of 'Self's' anecdotes about Sherman are genuinely humorous, but ultimately both characters and the author manipulate contemporary transport and technology to mask the true destructive nature of their friendship. In this sense, the ideologies of mass air travel and the mobile phone provide Sherman with a sense of control that keeps him alive for a time, but eventually plays an active role in his downfall. On the other side of this, the clichéd fears and false knowledge associated with air travel have a devastating result on 'Self's' already delicate psyche for most of the story, directly leading to obsessive-compulsive disorder and suicide attempts. The

threateningly vague conclusion to the story demonstrates the powerfully troubling human qualities that nevertheless endure, and that we use technologies like air travel and the mobile phone to try and conceal, in vain.

The middle section of the triptych demonstrates how technology and landscape combine to have unheralded, disturbing, but powerfully imaginative effects on the mind of an individual. These effects are necessarily fluid, and for the most part continue with the idea that existing outside of contemporary ideologies such as the car and cinema prompts a terrifying existential crisis. However, Self's manipulation of the traditional Hollywood dream sequence offers a different interpretation, as his enduring delusions become a form of entertainment to him.

By shifting the location to the barren, eroding East Yorkshire coast in 'Spurn Head', Self shifts the focus away from technology to focus more on the pathology of Alzheimer's itself. In essence, this story becomes the ending of 'Very Little' writ large, as being away from any form of modern technology or mechanised transport leaves the individual trapped with the terrifying realities of their own mind. The destructive symptoms of Alzheimer's develop to leave 'Self' exclusively within the Now, having altered and eradicated any notions of time, past, or future in a deliberately ominous parallel with the degenerative and unresolvable effects that the likes of the internet, and mass car and air travel bring about.

Conclusion

Peter Boxall opens his critical dissection of twenty-first century literature by asking ‘is there such a thing as twenty-first-century fiction? Can we identify a set of thematic or stylistic characteristics that mark a new phase in the development of the novel... Has our century come into sharp enough focus for us to ascribe to its cultural practices a character, a mood, a structure of feeling?’ (*TFCF*, p.1) If these questions are difficult ones to try and figure out, then their apparent answer, and the one defining characteristic Boxall identifies, does nothing to alleviate this present-day complexity. He describes contemporary fiction as having a ‘sense of a profound disjunction between our real, material environments and the new technological, political and aesthetic forms in which our global relations are being conducted that lies at the heart of the developments in the twenty-first-century novel’. (*TFCF*, p.9)

The impossibility of defining this literary period should not be conflated with Self’s view that the novel is in terminal decline, however. In *The Value of the Novel* (2015) Boxall uses Self’s ‘The novel is dead’ article as a foil for elucidating how the novel’s continuous ‘precarity’²²² is what ensures it has remained such a vital form throughout various cultural epochs. Boxall notes that ‘This struggle has always been difficult, and always led the novel to confront its own disappearance, to stage its own becoming as a denial of the zeitgeist.’²²³ He adds that Self sounding the death knell for the novel is in fact a failure to recognise that ‘the novel has always worked at the edge of the culture, in that space between a completely revealed world and a world that is yet to come.’²²⁴ Ultimately, in Boxall’s view, ‘Under contemporary conditions, in which we are all summoned into new forms of community that are as potentially democratising as they are tyrannical, it is the novel we need, more than ever, to help us to understand such

²²² Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), p.140

²²³ *ibid*

²²⁴ Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, p.143

communities and to live within them.’²²⁵ Self is a writer who has claimed that, with his writing, he is ‘not trying to convert people to anything but thinking seriously’,²²⁶ but the huge problem he faces is that technologies have rendered the capacities needed for this serious thinking - such as privacy and imagination - impossible. Nevertheless, there is the suggestion of some agreement with Boxall’s outlook at some level, that works towards explaining the rationale behind his own ongoing writing. As far back as 2003, Self argued that ‘if literature doesn’t have a capacity for awkwardness, then it cannot convey anything of the unreality of what it is like to be in the world.’²²⁷ Self’s interest in these strange new ways of being seemingly overcome his belief in the decline of the novel, in a mirroring of one of the dominant attitudes of his travel writing - ‘I went on: isn’t this what we do: go on, no matter how depersonalized and useless we feel, no matter how lost in our own lives and confused about our role in the universal - if any?’ Or as Zack Busner puts it, ‘All there is... is the here and now. That’s all we have and we must make of it what we will.’ (*DM*, p.61)

Laurence Scott sums up the challenges faced by writers and readers by the technological ‘profound disjunction’ that characterises the contemporary when he states that ‘Novelists concerned with the present will have to tackle the exceedingly complex buzz of our times.’ (*TFDH*, p.58) Scott’s point crystallises Self’s fears, as so many people both want to and have the means of shirking the ‘exceedingly complex’ aspects of their lives. Scott frames this idea in terms of escapism, arguing that ‘To absorb fully your attention in smartphone perusing, as the astrophysicist of the psyche will tell you, requires a much lower escape velocity than does reading, which in comparison is a rocket-straining endeavour.’ (*TFDH*, p.16) Herein lies the ideological nature of technological innovations like smartphones, for far from offering any kind of escape route, Self argues that their influence over art forms and pursuits such as reading and writing serious

²²⁵ Boxall, *Value of the Novel*, p.144

²²⁶ Will Self, ‘The Luxury of Doubt: An interview by Laurie Taylor’, *New Humanist*, Sept.2003: 14

²²⁷ Will Self, ‘Introduction’, in Alasdair Grey, 1982, *Janine* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p.xi

literature instead brings about a reductive and ironic entrapment. Allenby and Sarewitz acknowledge what they call the 'radical contingency' of these profound technological ideologies by relating them to the idea that - as Scott and, less directly, Self have also done - 'All things solid melt into air, and the usual response is to don disciplinary blinkers and define the problem away'. (*THC*, pp.65-6) The reason that their dynamic resists any easy, 'yea-or-nay' definition comes down to the difficulties inherent in humanism, as 'Humans are not bundles of traits, nor are they isolated Cartesian individuals, nor are they merely hubs in social networks; they are all these things - but much more.' (*THC*, p.83) This is why the unavoidably expressive and emotional fallout of this - for both Scott and Self - is incredibly important, even if it regularly manifests itself as 'a genuine cultural weariness over the difficulty of being an individual in a networked world.' (*TFDH*, pp.90-1) A fairly grim irony of this quotation is that it comes in the context of a Gap advertisement, the same company that William Burroughs - icon of the Beat generation and counterculture in general, and one of Self's literary idols - ended up featuring in commercials for.

The interplay between the weary individual and the collective, global and commercialised network is reflected in how Self broadly deals with ideologies within his work. Specifically, he inverts the traditional Marxist definitions of them - in which capitalism equated to a staunch individualism, and collectiveness was synonymous with feudalism - by persisting in the belief that the consumerism that underpins so many modern day forms of transport and technology creates an unknowing, collective acquiescence. Conversely and consequently, serious literature, creativity and critical thinking have become the preserve of the solitary. One of Self's real problems with this new kind of ideology is the nature of the institutions that deceptively perpetuate them. As Zack Busner acknowledges in *Umbrella*, 'coercive institutions, he knows, only aggravate their inmates' sickness.' (*U*, p.190) This sickness reads as a wider cultural metaphor, and takes the specific form of a standardisation of knowledge and

imagination. In the same novel, the young Audrey Death cannot help but wonder ‘How can anything be beautiful or noble or romantic when it’s the same?’ (*U*, 50) This is, in essence, the question that Self challenges his readers with through his consciously different and difficult writing. The difficulty arises through a collective, and extremely hard to shake, mindset that difference and difficulty only prompt fear, in the manner that Peter Ackroyd encapsulates when he considers ways of experiencing the urban sprawl of London in ways that do not align with his own penchant for urban legends.

Of course, Self’s attempts to explore, satirise and undermine such contemporary outlooks must not be equated to any form of easy idealism. If it were, perhaps his work could be accurately described as ‘beautiful or noble or romantic’. Instead, he has consistently retained a blatant awareness of the difficulties, even impossibilities, of both getting beyond these ideologies and defining anything resembling a core humanity. This underlying sense of futility is, again, most succinctly dramatised after Self has allowed the reader into the consciousness of Busner, as it is matched by the psychiatrist’s knowingly doomed attempts to bring his encephalitic patients back into lucidity, as ‘Busner knows *what he’s driving at... that none of this can last... because in my heart of hearts I know: there are no such things as miracle drugs.*’ (*U*, p.302) Busner’s experiment fails because of the vast costs of the drug L-DOPA, which in turn reveals the entrapping effect that market forces have on both his and Self’s senses of futility. The same forces have also long been directly linked to the kind of decline of serious literature that Self has expressed concern over, and this is bluntly explained by Martin Amis’s protagonist John Self as far back as 1981, who explains that ‘There used to be a bookshop here, with the merchandise ranked in alphabetical order and subject sections. No longer. The place didn’t have what it took: market forces.’²²⁸

²²⁸ Amis, *Money*, p.71

'I can't figure it. I hate it when I can't *figure* things.'²²⁹ Again, this line comes from *Money*, on this occasion from John Self's financier Fielding Goodney (the irony of this is that Goodney is a complete fraud and John turns out to be his own financier, thus offering up another form of capitalist and self-consuming entrapment). In many ways, Goodney's complaint is similar to a lot of the criticism that - at least in Will Self's belief - is levelled at his writing, and that he subsequently plays up to. It therefore also answers the justifiable question of what Self aims to achieve through his writing given his awareness of the virtual impossibility of subverting the ironic entrapment that defines our culture. Essentially, he can at least hold up a kind of mirror to the difficult factors that he believes comprise present-day humanism, even if they are more often than not - far from being 'beautiful or noble or romantic' - distinctly unpleasant and troubling.

Possibly the most effective way that Self achieves this is through his conscious and characteristic distortions of scale. If, as Self feels, there is a collective cultural demand for the comprehensible, then altering known scales in often startling and sinister ways becomes the best way to subvert such a demand. This is because, as Timothy Clark notes, 'that to read at scales that used, familiarly, to "make sense" may now also be a form of intellectual and ethical containment'²³⁰. Scales should form an important part of the realm of the definable and the understandable, but as Clark argues this now merely represents a form of entrapment. Significantly, technology and especially transport play a far more active role in these distortions than many people who rely on them often - consciously or not - realise. Both this denial and this ignorance of the ideological and commercial factors that underpin contemporary forms of transport and technological innovations feed into Self's deliberately troubled humanism.

²²⁹ Amis, *Money*, p.94

²³⁰ Timothy Clark, 'Scale', in Tom Cohen (ed.), *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, Vol. 1 (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp.158-9

This shows how Self is capable of focusing on the idea of serious, difficult literature, while combining these characteristics and the intricacies of his troubling humanism with an idiosyncratic sense of humour. Simon Critchley's theories on the purposes of humour highlight how this combination works, when he argues that 'humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would rather not be.'²³¹ More than this, this unwanted glimpse into our own troubling personae is brought on by technology:

At its humourous edges, the human begins to blur with the machine, becoming an inhuman thing that stands over against the human being. This is why the feeling that often accompanies laughter is not simply pleasure, but rather uncanniness. We often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us.²³²

Critchley's points on humour highlighting the unattractive human qualities that we all harbour, and on the active and seemingly malevolent influence of technology blurring what it means to be human shed an interesting light on the implications of J. G. Ballard's automotive writing. This holds the likes of *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash* up as an extreme joke, and moreover one that, given the controversy surrounding the publication and reception of both works both in Britain and America, a joke that the public at large did not take well at all.

Nevertheless, the unique and rapidly changing culture of the sixties ensured that such jokes needed to be told and such experiments needed to be carried out. Speaking to Self in 1994, Ballard talks about the alterations in:

The way we see the world, thanks to movies and TV, the car, the presentation of a commodified landscape through thousands of mini-film dramas - I mean, so many advertisements in magazines look like stills from films. It has changed the way we see the world, and the world of the imagination as well. (*JM*, p.396)

New modes of transport like the car, in conjunction with other cultural conduits such as television and cinema, began playing a starring role in the performative and simulative Western cultures and landscapes of the late-twentieth-century and beyond. This role is

²³¹ Critchley, *On Humour*, p.15.

²³² Critchley, *On Humour*, pp.56-7

even more prominent because of the mass-marketed nature of travel and transport, starting with Henry Ford and the Model T, continuing through to incorporate the mass commercial air transit of the present-day. Self even wryly foreshadows this kind of world in the 1904 sections of *Umbrella* that recollect Audrey's childhood. Here, the London omnibus is the '*Finest penny to be spent on the London stage*, her father has said often enough, and he also says, *A wide window on a widening world.*' (U, p.55)

The irony of this sentiment is of course that London is far from being part of a 'widening world'. Self argues as much when he suggests that the city reached the peak of its powers during the days of empire, and has been in decline ever since the high watermark of modernism - the first two decades of the twentieth-century - that much of *Umbrella* depicts. Bill Bywater's claustrophobic and 'terrifyingly tiny' urban world is just one example of how Self subverts any kind of belief in progress within the city as the century continued. Even when the widespread perception has been that the cultural condition is improving, such as during the 1990s and Self's own rise to literary prominence - as his *Dorian Gray* giddily suggests - it is wise not to buy into the ideology. Writing in 1999, Ian Jack dismantles the ideologies of the Cool Britannia era with clinical ease:

There are reasons to be sceptical. British culture has become addicted to branding and marketing, and the eagerness with which British politicians seized and touted a phrase coined on a newsdesk in New York did not inspire trust. And what, exactly, did it describe? A few conceptual artists, a young prime minister, a rock musician or two, some nightclubs, shoals of restaurants: is that what it amounted to? London is a city of unreliable tube trains and impoverished schools. Charles Saatchi's art collection and Terence Conran's restaurants can easily seem irrelevant.²³³

Jack's point reveals how culture itself is susceptible to the consuming nature of commercialism, paradoxically even more so when it appears to be doing well. In the same 1994 interview with Ballard, Self ruminates on transport and film again to try and explain

²³³ Ian Jack, 'Introduction', in *Granta No.65: London* (Cambridge: Granta, 1999), p.6.

how this kind of culture and the technologies that define it alter the way we think within it, arguing that it has a fatal quality to it:

The way in which we have interiorized the cinematic view has something to do with our dramatic rehearsal of our death, doesn't it? Having internalized the cameraman's perspective, we are then free notionally to annihilate figures on our screen. People of my generation are afflicted with this as if it were a virus; they are not aware of the extent to which their view of their own identity has been compromised by film and the car windscreen. (JM, p.396)

This 'internalized' perspective on our own identities that are inspired by the camera, the cinema screen and the car windscreen is what Self dramatises - using his own identity as the canvas for this - in *Walking to Hollywood*. His point that this perspective allows us to imagine both the annihilation of others and our own death justifies M. John Harrison's claim that 'All along the book has been about death.'²³⁴ The metafictional and literary implications of this are poignantly clear by the walk depicted at the end of the triptych, and a quotation from the American writer David Foster Wallace manages to unknowingly sum up the innate difficulties of writing that *Walking to Hollywood* grapples with:

You don't have to think very hard to realize that our dread of both relationships and loneliness, both of which are like sub-dreads of our dread of being trapped inside a self (a psychic self, not just a physical self), has to do with angst about death, the recognition that I'm going to die, and die very much alone, and the rest of the world is going to go merrily on without me... I strongly suspect a big part of real art-fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny.²³⁵

Foster Wallace's point gets to the heart of the intrinsically troubling nature of humanism, and in this sense Self has taken on the job of aggravating these senses of entrapment and loneliness, and forcing his readers to confront them. Yet 'any possible human redemption' seems to remain dispiritingly far away within his work. This is

²³⁴ M. John Harrison, 'Walking to Hollywood by Will Self', *The Guardian*, 18.9.2010
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/18/walking-hollywood-will-self>

²³⁵ David Foster Wallace, 'A Conversation with David Foster Wallace by Larry McCaffery', *Dalkey Archive Press*, <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/>

because Self adds to the feelings of ‘entrapment and loneliness and death’ with an awareness of how difficult they are to actually recognise, because of how much contemporary ideologies, technologies and modes of transport instill their users with senses of freedom and agency. As Zack Busner meanders dolefully across North London in the 2010 passages of *Umbrella*, unstoppably towards the site of the old Friern Barnet mental hospital and his experiments with the encephalitic patients, he perfectly captures the ideological qualities of transport:

He feels the talismanic shape of his Freedom Pass through the soft stuff of his tracksuit bottoms - *Freedom in what sense?* Only a monetary one, for, far from allowing him to *do whatever the hell I want, it's sharp corner spurs me on...* to train, tube or bus, where he must sit: conscious but completely powerless to influence the route taken by the vehicle - *as powerless as... its driver.* (U, p.244)

Busner's thoughts detail the predetermined ways that the city will be experienced while on public transport, but as Self argues, this loss of control and awareness over the realities of physical geography is still a preferable situation to the greater freedom that other forms of transport tempt their users with. Self explains that ‘I dislike cars more than trains - they con their autopilots with the illusion of freedom.’ (PG, p.70) This is a blunt example of the ironic entrapments within transport. Not only is transport supposed to represent this freedom - an illusory freedom no less - it goes further than this in that it is so regularly and closely associated with notions of escape. Take the image of the car speeding down the motorway to an unknown destination, for instance. Or alternatively, turn your eyes skyward at the sight of a distant plane flying away and briefly fantasise about what exotic location it might be headed to. These are commonplace images that are fundamentally synonymous with escaping the banal aspects of our modern lives, our work and our routines. Unfortunately, they are modes of transport that are involved in much larger, even global, commercial and ideological systems that are extremely difficult to fully define and comprehend, much less actually escape from. Self's thoughts on and depictions of air travel, car travel, travelling through various urban and rural landscapes - from London to Los Angeles, and the Dubai desert to the desolate East

Yorkshire coast - and even relying on nothing other than his own two feet highlight this difficulty. His writing demonstrates the self-consuming nature of these systems, and how they deceptively manipulate all of us into relying on them. As well as this, Self undertakes the challenge of conveying the changes that these transports and the technologies involved with them and with similar global networks are having on our personalities and imaginations, and exposing the troubling yet necessary parts of our humanity that they seek to obliterate. This is an especially complex thing to do because these changes are part of an ongoing process. So just as our literature and culture can only be viewed as if it were from a car speeding past, Self will still do his utmost to simultaneously confront us with, poke fun at, but above all force us to think about the nature of the blurred image we see from the metaphorical car windscreen.

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