Will Self in Conversation with Max Saunders - K6.29 04.11.15 Revised

Speaker Key:

MS: Max Saunders

WS: Will Self

F: Female

M: Male

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MS: Okay, good evening everyone, can I just check that the sound is alright? Can people at the back and the sides hear alright? Okay, thank you. Well, a very warm welcome to you all this evening for this event which is part of the Ego Media project which is a research project funded by the European Research Council looking at the impact of digital and social media on the way people present themselves. And it's a great pleasure to introduce to discuss that topic with me tonight, Will Self who is, I'm sure you'll know is the author of ten novels, five collections of shorter fiction, three novellas and five collections of non-fiction writing. His work has been translated into 22 languages; How the Dead Live was shortlisted for the Whitbread Novel of the Year. The Butt won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic fiction in 2008.

WS: Yes, thank God.

MS: And Umbrella was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Will is currently Professor of Contemporary Thought at Brunel University, though his LRB sort of by-lines says that he does a lot of other things besides. And he lives in South London so we're very glad to welcome him north of the river tonight. He's been turning his attention lately to what he has called the bidirectional digital media and I'd like to ask about that a bit later. And in a number of recent essays he's … and talks and videos as well, I think he's emerged as one of the most incisive commentators on this question of what these media are doing to us, to our creative work, to our social life. So when we were thinking of who we'd most like to ask to come and discuss the subject with us he was the obvious choice, and I'm really pleased to welcome him. So please join me in welcoming Will Self [applause]. I wanted to start off Will by asking you about your current fiction because you've said that you're exploring in the trilogy on still writing, that the relationship between human and psychopathology and human technological progress. And you've spoken elsewhere about the kind of the socio psychological impact of these digital and social media technologies, so I want to start by asking you what sort of impact you thought they were having on your own work?

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WS: Colossal, I mean huge, huge impact, I mean it's a real problem, I simply don't understand how novelists can fail to register the impact. And instead just as a sort of footnote or sidebar before we get going. Why do I call it bidirectional digital media as opposed to what? I mean people say … it's very interesting and kind of people say interweb – interweb, I always say ironically that actually interweb is pretty good. If it hadn't been ironized, I think it's a term we'd use quite happily. Web isn't right because that's a discrete thing, and internet isn't right either because that's a discrete thing. So does interweb cover it all? Not quite and I think that the … let's go back to Marshall McLuhan, Marshall McLuhan talked in terms of something he called the unified electrical field. And he viewed a portfolio of technologies embodied in the unified electrical field, so film, TV, radio, the telegraph, which was still an operable system at that time and he was interested in it, and actually electrical grids he was very interested in as well. And he tended to view the national electricity grids that were coming into being in the immediate post war period before he wrote Understanding Media as really being the sort of matrix within which the other elements of the unified electrical field came into place.

If you read Understanding Media now you would think he's talking about bidirectional digital media or the internet and the web and associated technologies. You simply cannot understand he is not talking about it, he is talking about it, because if you think about it, the only element that the pre-existing technologies left was a high speed recursiveness, so bidirectionality that allowed for a great deal of data to flow in either direction. So I think that by putting bidirectional [0:04:46] of the phrase we emphasise that perhaps the distinction between the pre-existing unified electrical field as defined by McLuhan. And the situation we're in now, is the bidirectionality or the ease of the bidirectionality that makes the real difference, uploading the film to YouTube from your phone as opposed to … which you could have done in 1900, walking along the Strand and going into the Tivoli Picture House and watching a movie. So, you know, that's the real distinction. And I think in terms of the impact as a novelist, one of the big problems is how do we as writers accommodate the new phenomenologies that come with different communications technology?

So just to give you an example, you'll all be familiar with, how do you write about what a character is perceiving if the character has, as part of their visual field, several independent screens with different kinds of information on them? And you know that thing you have when you're looking at screens and they change, you're interacting with the screen. And you become, for example, fixated by a detail of the kind of architecture of the screen design. And sometimes the screen is completely transparent to you in the sense that you're only using it functionally. Sometimes you view it aesthetically, sometimes you personalise it, sometimes you respond to it emotively, sometimes it's playing a large part in your perceptual phenomenological interchange. Sometimes it isn't, it's just to do with tacit understanding. Do you remark upon it and then you have a problem, do you egregiously signpost it because it's a new technology in order to signify that it is a new technology? Is it a new technology for the character or a new technology for the society, or one of these?

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And if you go back and look at say fiction from 1900 and a period you know perfectly well, and the way in which relatively new technologies were being dealt with then, and there is no uniform way of doing it, some kinds of writing pay a great deal of attention to it. And, you know, you would say that the last, as it were, the inception of McLuhan's unified electrical field coincides with the great sort of spasm of science-fictional imagining that comes in the late 19th century and it's a really, really huge field. But those are texts that are specifically concerned with that. And then if you look at the place that technology occupies, if you're thinking about railways or you're thinking about the telegraph or you're thinking about whatever, you know, it often seems to me that writers go to two extremes. They either can't help remarking on it, even if they're not writing specifically about it, they become fixated on it, or they kind of ignore it, it just is background, they want it to be as simulated as quickly as possible to [0:07:47]. So that's a problem, how do we deal with it? But I think the specific problems of screen based technologies, and a lot of, you know, following Stephen Dedalus, the Ineluctable Modality of the Visible. You know, how do you get round it? That's what's in your visual field.

Then we have all of the other problems, we really do have the other problems. And the main problem, if I could state it as simply as possible is as a platform for the conveying of information and aesthetic experience, emotional engagement, the codex is relatively simple, it is ink marks on a white page. All the clever stuff happens with the universal grammar and the human brain, yeah, so the platform itself is relatively simple. And, you know, I've said this at considerable length and I still feel that people aren't listening, so pin back your ears. Because the great thing about a codex is how contained it is, it's contained. Yeah, you can put it in a footnote, you can put it in an index, you can put it in a glossary, you can bootstrap additional information around it. But as writers we've come to maturity as writers, understanding that meaning needs to be conveyed within context, okay. Now, it may work itself out in the long line if they get there eventually. But essentially you don't want to present readers with something arguably that can't in some way be appreciated in itself. Now, if you're reading on a digital platform, why should you do that anymore? There is no need to do it anymore.

Anybody who's reading on a digital platform can find that their [0:09:44] of a term instantly, can find subsidiary information instantly, can read something that will bolster their theoretic understanding of the text and can look at a visualisation. And a great play is being made on a car, it's an Austin 7, and you've never seen one because you weren't born when they were in production, then a couple of swipes or clicks and you can actually see it. Now, that vitally alters, it seems to me, the problematic of the relationship between the text and the reader. And I think that one of the problems for the existing generation of writers and readers is they daren't accept, daren't really look into that abyss. Well, it is an abyss as far as fiction is concerned. And I'll just state it now at the top of the hour, because I really do believe this quite strongly. Reading as we understand it, you know, we go back to, you know, Augustine of Hippo stumbling on Bishop Ambrose in his garden in Milan and being shocked in the fourth century to see him silently reading. It was a

shocking thing because of course most reading was done by professionals and it was not allowed because literacy was relatively confined.

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So the idea of somebody sitting there reading without speaking, a big deal, that's the paradigm, the solitary psyche and consciousness embedded – embedded in the unitary text is the whole of our literary culture, alright. And that, I honestly believe is coming to an end completely. Here's the test case, if you believe that the majority of texts is going to be read on digital platforms from now on in and actually I would argue it already is. Then the wireless enabled that can connect to the web, then in order to preserve the literary culture is it currently stands, you have to argue that people will voluntarily choose to disconnect themselves from the web, or that they will stick with the pre-existing technology. They're not going to do it, and nor are they going to stick with the codex, it's not going to happen. Not a week or a month goes by, you may have noticed, without an article in the newspaper or on the web saying, kindle sales fall, bookshops. And there was on in Metro today, Amazon are considering opening bookshops. Who do you think is really writing these pieces, you know, whose boosterism for an obsolescent technology is really involved in this? Us, we are involved in it because the alternative, which is to accept that we're at a [0:12:43] point. Where a lot of media, a lot of genres and a lot of artistic forms we've taken for granted are going to irrevocably change, we're going [0:12:55].

MS: Yeah, I know, and that's certainly something I wanted to ask you about because, you know, you've spoken very eloquently about the challenges of the new technologies for publishing. But also elsewhere saying it's not necessarily a bad thing, you know, that these kinds of technological change will produce new kinds of reading, not necessarily stupidity or [0:13:17], you know, inattentive reading.

WS: Well, I think it's too early to tell. I mean I say those things so as not to sound like justice [0:13:31]. But the truth is I don't really believe them. Mind, I have a Gutenberg mind, I was educated entirely on paper. And my education, I should imagine, yours as well, Max and more or less anybody who's much older than 40 in the room, was crucially involved with the creation of nested mnemonic devices. You know, Montane said in our part of the country you call a man who has no memory, stupid. And if you think about it, the whole structure of book learning and the canon itself is a complex system of mnemonics to make it possible for people to create their own personal canonical information. If you carry a device in your pocket that gives you instant access to the world's knowledge, it seems to me that it is of necessity difficult to build that kind of personal canon.

And a lot of sort of research I've been looking at seems to suggest that a lot of the neurological systems that are adapted in the human mind for creating memory, are based around our spatial awareness. Obvious, I mean you don't have to go down the evolutionary psychology route to understand why that might be. As hunting gatherers which we have been for the vast majority of our evolutionary life, we really need to tell you guys where the food is, it's over, and I'm explaining how you're going to find it. And that's

the main thing, and if you think about it, you think Hannibal Lecter and his memory powers. And the most powerful mnemonics are always spatial in that way and we tend to conceive of our memory in spatial terms. So things like global satellite positioning technologies, things that remove the necessity for us to even think in spatial terms in the actual world, let alone the virtual one, I suspect may be quite damaging to the capacity for large scale textual memory formation.

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But what I'm more concerned about is this thing, you know, my books aren't selling much at the moment because whenever they're reviewed, they have a word that puts off all of you, and it's difficult, this is a difficult text, okay. That puts you off, does it? It does, doesn't it? Yeah, you think, well, especially if you're studying or you're involved in a lot of intellectual work, you know, and we look to fiction for entertainment as well as in structure. And, you know, it is very off-putting to people, but have a little think about this, the text more than any other, I would argue, because it's responsible for a particular character of academic English department is James Joyce's, Ulysses. And the thing about James Joyce's, Ulysses is … feel free to correct me if you think I'm wrong, is actually it's a text that you ultimately cannot perform a deep reading of without considerable buttressing of one kind or another. And in a way, you could argue that Ulysses is a text that should have been written for a digital platform. It's quite obvious that it would be … you can imagine it as a hypertext book, you can imagine it as a multimedia kind of thing, quite easily. It doesn't really conform, one of the things that it really lacks that people like in novels, or as R N Adams the critic put it, if you read Joyce or Proust or Cartwright, and he's a great modernist wanting to know what's going to happen next you'll go mad with frustration.

So it's not even the inexistence of a strongly geared linear plotline is part and parcel of a new kind of style of reading that Ulysses in particular seems to suggest, moving forward and going back, a comparison of looking for incidental pledges that are due in a way to serendipitous occurrences throughout the various episodes. They're not to do with the sense of being frogmarched on through a kind of narrative. So how are we to view Ulysses, is it a precursor of the end of the novel? You know, some sort of weird harbinger of the directional digital media to come or is it calling our attention to the fact that we're exhausted in a way with this idea of a literature that's self-defining and confined in that way? But the rule of fact is for a writer is that whether it's Ulysses or bidirectional digital media that's done it and I think it might be a combination of both. When you sit down to write a line, as a conscientious writer, you do think to yourself, is this understandable, can this be understood by the reader? And if it can't be understood, do I want them to not understand it? In other words, the intentionality of the writer has to be there.

Now, how is that affected by the awareness that the reader may have instant, they don't even have to get off their arse and cross the room and pull a dictionary out of the shelf. They just sort of get this thing, that they've got instant access to the kind of textual buttressing that, you know, Stewart Gilbert had to kind of talk to Joyce for a year and write a book. And then the explosion of kind of parallel text and [0:19:12] text and information

text and gets going. But my hypothetical reader reading one of my difficult books, so maybe I should make it more difficult for the digital reader, maybe not, you know, sod Ulysses, sod Finnegans Wake, make it really hard. Maybe the only really way to keep people engaged with fiction in a world of bidirectional digital media is to make them even more difficult, you know, or really easy, yeah. So there's nothing in between, because if it's really easy they won't feel the need to break the surface of the page, the electronic page and look for more information.

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You know, I just want to find out whether they have anal sex, you read the 50 Shades of Grey or whatever. I'm just really focused on that, all I want to know about, and that completely fills my head. So I'm not going to bother to get up and get a dictionary because I don't know what ambiguous means. That's the problem, isn't it? And my suspicion is that that's the way it's going to go, that novels or long form prose writing is either going to, you know, I don't think genre fiction has anything to worry about, you still see people reading it, its consolations are obvious and it delivers them effectively. And I don't think it's disruptive by bidirectional digital media but I think there's a lot in between that is a threat, you know.

MS: It's partly a question, isn't it, of when it's going to go that way? And if we shift from your hypothetical readers to your actual readers, I wanted to ask whether you get a sense from, you know, the people who talk to you about your books or write to you about them, that the books are being read in a different kind of way now that reflects these technological changes.

WS: No, I don't think they are. And my impression of the kind of readers' community is that readers are beginning to identify themselves, a bit like kind of hipsters with their Victorian beards and their kind of craft lagers. They're beginning to consciously identify themselves as [0:21:33], love books, I love the smell of books, really. You dirty old thing, you smelly book. Really, do you? I love the smell of books, I love the feel of books, I even purr. But do you not hear that a lot? I hear that a lot. What I hear a lot is people who are already beginning to identify a kind of retro [0:22:00], that's formed around the physicality of the text and the idea of themselves as a reader. And you know what it reminds me of, classical music, that's what classical musical fans are like. I mean I'm not saying they dress up in Perrier wigs and kind of hop about on the parque. But there is a consciously and self-willed anachronism about the classical music community, for want of a better term, which is inevitable given that so few works are added to the canon, proportionately. So necessarily the, as it were, the creative centre of gravity of classical music remains clearly in about 1810, and it's the same with reading. Forever afterwards the kind of creative centre point of reading is going to stay in about … probably about the time that Alan Lane launched a paper about it. It's always going to be sort of the 1940s, [0:23:01], that's my hunch.

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MS: You spoke a bit about the kind of the phenomenology or the new phenomenology, I think of digital culture. And if we move away from the way it's perhaps reading to a kind of broader phenomenological sense, I mean you've spoken about how it might introduce new forms of consciousness. What do you think it's possible to say now about how those changes are beginning now, is it possible to identify [0:23:38] things other than literature that novelists need to write about?

WS: Yeah, I think definitely. I mean John Gray, the philosopher says, you know, we can hypothesise that human consciousness arose as a by-product of language acquisition at some point in our evolution in history. But what if in the future human consciousness is a function of media rather than language, well what would that be like? Okay, that's kind of very difficult to think about, you have to kind of really get outside the box. For a start you have to accept that your consciousness is a function of language, or in any way a particular texture you impart to your consciousness is a function of language. It's more like this, I mean let's try and think about what our consciousness is of it. It's quite eminescent, isn't it? You're trying to go, I can see you there trying to think where is my consciousness, it's just sliding like out like a mercury bubble from under your digital fingers. It's like philosophy, Hume said, you know, when you actually contemplate the nature of your consciousness, it falls apart into a series of disordered ideas, impressions, it seems like a complete flux. But let's think of it in a different way, maybe consciousness, and this is something that I'm very much trying to do in this trilogy of [0:24:55] is to convey this to readers.

Perhaps your inequable individuality is more of a user interface illusion than you might care to suspect. In other words that it is the interoperability of language that enables us to articulate the idea of the unitary consciousness, when really a unitary consciousness isn't really there when we examine it, it actually slightly falls apart. Well, if that's the case then we can start getting closer to thinking about what it might be like if the unitary of … and Coleridge would use a term, esemplastic, if the kind of esemplastic capability of consciousness is defined by bidirectional digital media rather than by language, what's that going to be like? Well, it's going to much more imagey.

I mean some of the things that I think are probably emergent forms that suggest what a mediatised consciousness might be like are things like WhatsApp and Instagram. Where you're communicating a lot with images, you actually are. And I think, and again, I'm not particularly savvy on these things, but observing my canaries and my four children who are all the right ages to do this with. So the oldest is 25, and the youngest is 14, so I've got quite a good little cohort as all of this is going on. And observing particularly the older ones, they already have rudimentary imagistic grammars that are functioning within the posting of images online. So they actually have discourses of images that are getting going. So from that to hypothesise what an image derived consciousness might be like, well, I can begin to see blibberings of modified. But they make me very happy, I have to say, because if you think about it, images are relatively crude compared to words actually. Or anyway, what semantic subtleties they do have aren't the [0:27:07] at the moment. You couldn't restrain yourself there, go on then.

00:27:18

M: Okay. So, well, obviously [0:27:19]?

WS: No, images are about things.

M: Not necessarily, [0:27:30] is a thing.

WS: No, an image of a thing is an image of a thing, you just said it yourself. The problem is…

M: Authors [0:27:42] be less subtle or having less degrees of [0:27:51].

WS: Give me an example.

M: [0:27:59].

WS: No, I think the problem is that the epistemic value of the image has already become far too high in our culture. So let me just talk you through this. I mean images for a while functioned in our culture. I mean, again, McLuhan would have been only too aware of this, whether it's the young girl running along the road photographed in the Vietnam War, who's had napalm dropped on her, or really since the advent of the camera and systems for transmission of imagery in that way. Images started to have an epistemic value that is greater than their [0:28:57] capabilities. You don't look at an image of a little girl who's had napalm dropped on her and you don't think that's of no significance. The contextualisation in the way it's brought to you, make it incredibly powerful.

Really just to spell this out, when the videos of the ISIS beheadings started to be uploaded to the web last year, Philip Hammond who was Defence Secretary under the Coalition Government. Is now the Defence Secretary under the Tory Government was interviewed on television and asked what his response was, not to the ISIS beheadings, but to the videos, okay. And the British Government's response to the videos was the commitment of a 2.2 billion investment in the naval base in Bahrain, a regime which previously HNG had wanted to wash its hands of. And Hammond said there's a 20 year commitment to military engagement with the region. Now, that's a function of the image, it's not a function of the reality. I mean I'm not belittling the singular evil of hacking a man's head off with a carving knife. But in fact that's not a reason for a political decision on a matter of defence, is it? But what we're increasingly seeing is that images are no longer … they're no longer being used diegectically simply to inform you of things. And they're no longer being used memetically as purely representations of things. They're requiring this kind of epistemic power to actually report them.

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M: [0:30:44].

WS: Well, if you are involved very strongly, I mean in a virtual realm and that virtual realm, it is Borges' fragment on exactitude in science, it's a map exactly the same size as the territory. So if you're involved with it in that way, then it becomes meaningless to question, to view imagery in the old fashioned way. The old fashioned way of viewing an image is as a representation or as informational, like that one that image up above the door is there to tell you something. But these new kinds of imagery that I think do relate to this new emergent consciousness don't function in that way. Now, you may say it's a kind of subtle new kind of language and consciousness that I'm not privy to. But maybe you are, maybe you can tell us what it's like to have a consciousness derived from … connected from a discourse of imagery.

M: I would struggle to define [0:31:52], but I do know how you do that, I mean there is that [0:31:57].

WS: Yeah, I think it is too. I mean I now describe myself as post image because I don't … and I actually feel a kind of revulsion from imagery because really since, yeah, I feel a kind of revulsion from imagery because I suspect it, I suspect it of producing a new kind of consciousness in me.

MS: You've written about … I mean using Coleridge's phrase about the willing suspension of disbelief when people immersive themselves in literature or digital media. And is that a part of it, that you think the sort of imagery changes our sort of willingness to go along with the fiction?

WS: It's much more powerful imagery, because you have to bring so little to it, it seems to me. Go back to the Ineluctable Modality of the Visible, or we're back to basic phenomenology. The world has given to us, you know, the interesting thing about consciousness is you never feel that you … you don't feel the need to interrogate or question actuality much. You wake-up in the morning, there it is, okay. You wake-up in the morning, there it is, and it's the ISIS beheadings and it's a guy who you picked up last night on Grindr, you know, who's lying beside you sort of smelling of…

MS: Books.

WS: Crisco. You know, so that's where this stuff kind of comes into it, it comes into a situation in which it isn't interrogated. You know, I was on some Australian TV show; it was in Australia, for the Melbourne writers first of all. And on this book show they had a graphic

novel and it's been considered among the books. And I said, "Well, yeah, it's very good but it's for kids, right." And everybody got very upset and said, "Oh no." And interestingly, last night in Soho, I mean I understand that, you know, how Moore is regarded as one of the great novelists, I mean not that he actually does the pictures himself. But, you know, blah, blah, blah, he's a friend of a friend and all that. But I noticed some of his stuff of course, but I never really engaged with it. And I picked up The Watchmen which I think is regarded as [0:34:34], last night and in the comic shop and I started reading it. And I thought, my God, this guy actually can write, he's a really good writer. And his ideas are really interesting – really interesting. But why has he got these pathetic little drawings next to it, which completely diminished the experience and make it childlike. I don't need a little picture of Dr Manhattan.

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I think the phrase that really slew me was he stopped at a newsstand outside … 1949, he stops at a newsstand outside Grand Central Station and buys a cup of coffee. And then there's this sort of silly little vignette picture. And I thought the richness of my capacity to imagine what it's like having a coffee at a coffee stall outside Grand Central Station in 1949 has been completely ruined by this stupid little drawing which has diminished the whole experience rather than [0:35:32] get out. And that surely is the distinction between what images can do for you, both communicatively and aesthetically in the context of creating a grammar of communication, right. I'm not just talking about contemplating as a single image but actually a succession of images conveying information, awareness, subtlety in that way, and what we can do with language. Language demands of us that we bring such a lot of our own imaginative work to the engagement. Whereas I suspect that the new imagistic grammars that are emerging, but I don't know, tell me I'm wrong, I'm happy to hear that.

M: [0:36:16] a very straightforward descriptive [0:36:24].

WS: Say that all again.

M: Oh yeah, [0:36:40].

WS: Yeah, and of course you can and we've seen it in art throughout time and we see things like that. But if it aint broke, don't fix it. You can't argue that we need, you know, I loved [0:37:02] metamorphosis, but I loved it much better when it was illustrated. Really, did you? It doesn't really … I mean it's almost a sort of a sentence you can't say, is it? I mean our literature is created to be what it is, that's the point of it. And it's evolved to be what it is and what it is, is an immensely powerful system for conveying experience, ideas, aesthetic impressions, perception of impressions, [0:37:35], you can write about anything you like, we don't need it.

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MS: That's a wonderful argument, isn't it, for saying that literature is a bidirectional media that, you know, that media brings as much or brings a lot to this?

WS: The thing is, back in the 90s when this bidirectional stuff was really getting going I used to say, I used to use it as analogy for describing what the novel is, to say the novel's like a kind of strange [0:28:57]. Because the writer and the reader meet in the novel, shorn of all particularities of identity, shorn of gender, shorn of class, shorn of [0:38:11], you know. And you don't really know who the reader is and the reader really shouldn't have too much of an idea who the writer is, yet there is an intense level of communication there.

MS: Alright, this one, we will open things up to the floor, because obviously lots of people with questions but please speak into the microphone when you're asking.

M: I don't know if this is a question but is that not the same … I'm not a student here, I work in theatre and as a performer and writer. But is that not also like theatre, because I think theatre is equally dying in that respect. And the idea of instant communication seems to me that is anything that exists in the moment, your books incredibly, you know, I'm reading about at the minute, does exactly that. You are reading it for the entire thing, kind of it's like shields from all of the other stuff, you know, away from the distractions. Equally, I think theatre and live performance can have that same, you know, it's just me here and the audience and there's no … you're … you can all, you know, piss off, it's just us. Well, I don't know, what are your thoughts on that kind of thing?

WS: Well, I'm not quite as bad as my colleague and friend, Martyn Amos who thinks the very fact that Shakespeare was a dramatist is some sort of cosmic solecism, so much because he hated theatre. I do think that what you are talking about in relation to our conception of theatre, and I agree, that is how we tend to think of it. We tend to valorise theatre by emphasising its immediacy and its inter-personality. That's how we try and build ourselves, because on the face of it, it's crap, right, it doesn't…

M: [0:39:58], not the shit that's available, so they don't talk to you.

WS: Right, absolutely. But on the face of it, theatre's just not as good as film, and particularly not as good as getting people to spend disbelief, which you might think is the key requirement for dramatic medium. So very difficult if you're sitting in the stalls and thinking, you know, that really isn't Cressida, that, you know, image is just graduated from RADA. You know, that's a real problem, right, whereas you can watch like almost the crappiest soap opera and you really have to force yourself to be aware that just outside the frame is a sort of middle aged man wearing a sleeveless anorak holding a long pole. But he's there all the time, right, so that's a problem for theatre. And I think what you've just talked about is kind of the mystique that theatre's started to wreath itself in as a rear

guard action against film and television. Does it work for me, these ideas of immediacy, the kind of warm bloodedness of a performance, the direct transmission? No, it doesn't actually work for me, but I understand that it works for other people.

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M: No, I agree with you completely. The thing is that certain types of theatre at the moment are obviously, and live performances in general, the stuff I like to make is not doing … is that kind of thing that we're trying to experiment with making stuff that is the new version of theatre that is aside, that can be direct and not be people on stage wearing gloves.

WS: Yeah. And you hear a lot about this at the moment, a lot about it and there's literary festivals and even something like this, this kind of event becomes much more prominent. We become much more concerned with this sort of thing, does seem to be a function of a sense of being driven apart from each other by bidirectional digital media. But also you can view it as … so like the good side of it is we're all going to return to kind of ancient Greek poiesis, we're all going to be sort of almost kind of singing each other into being. It's going to be this very kind of primal literary world, it's going to be astonishing and we're all going to be remade by it. And the alternative and rather more cynical view is that it's a function of market forces which is that the only thing that's [0:42:23] anymore in the world of completely free digital content is this at the present, therefore it's anything that we can sell, therefore we've got to big it up. It's not that we really like going to the theatre it's just that, you know, we can make some money.

MS: Yeah, there's a question down here.

M: So I'll say I think you're awesome, [0:42:55].

WS: Thank you. You can come to my birthday party, it's just going to be you and me and a cupcake.

M: Like do you think that like … do you think that our obsession with the image, and in particular, the screen, in particular maybe the iPhone screen and the laptop screen, do you think that's actually contributing to a decline in our collective mental health? Because you talk, you are obsessed with mental health in your work, aren't you?

WS: Yeah, absolutely, and I mean I don't understand people who aren't obsessed by mental health, frankly. I went for an interview, they asked me, said, "You're really, really interesting in like mental health and issues of mental illness, why?" It's like, really? I mean whereas you're really interested in what, French and knitting? Yeah, I think it is, I think it is making us a bit crazy. And again, following on from what I'm saying about consciousness, I don't think madness exists in a world apart, it exists on a defined

continuum. We all have the capacity to lose our minds, especially once you realise how fragile the kind of ecology of your psyche is. And I think that these kinds of technologies, you really need to just go to engineering and to systems analysis to see what the problem is with bidirectional digital media. It's incredibly high speed recursive feedback loops, very distributed systems that are operating in real time that have many, many, many different noble points and widely extended nets, it's a recipe for forms of hysteria.

00:44:45

And we've already begun to see it and I would argue, the ISIS beheadings videos are an example of that. The quagmire in Syria at the moment arguably might not have happened in a world in which imagery didn't have this inflated epistemic value. Because you look at the grotesque disproportionality between the two million Syrian refugees who are currently living under canvas if they're lucky, in Turkey, and those five guys that had their heads chopped off by Jihadi John, and this isn't just a moral point. It's actually a point about imagery, you don't actually see a lot of imagery of those refugee camps, they're not accorded that kind of epistemic power, they're not involved. And you can start to view the current quagmire in the Middle East in terms of this new kind of dispensation of the way in which politics is operating.

And in terms of mental health, well, certainly our ideas of what it is to be mentally healthy change with our different kind of communications of technologies, there's no doubt about it. Just as schizophrenics themselves always register new technologies in their fantasy lives, so, I mean no doubt there are already psychotic people this evening who are checking themselves into a hospital and saying that the worldwide web. Or the matrix has implanted a transceiver in their head and that they uploaded to the web or whatever, whereas 50 years ago they would have a telephone exchange in their head or 50 years before that etc. And this is very suggestive to me, there's so many [0:46:43] phenomenon of psychosis, it's much easier to think about it as a kind of failure in the operating system. What do you do, it's like any IT crowd when they always say, you know, first thing turn it off and turn it on again. And that's what electroconvulsive therapy is, just turning off the brain and turning it on again. In fact if you look at the whole panoply of psychiatric therapies for psychosis in the 20th century, they're all basically variations of turning it off and turning it on again. Sleep therapy, malaria therapy, insulin comas, even heavy tranquilisers arguably are just switching the brain off and switching it on again, so yeah.

M: But don't you think there's a way that everyone now talks about themselves in computer terms that have had access in their memories or erasing things.

WS: Yeah, whether that will go on, I don't know, I mean I think that may just be a kind of lexical perversion that's come about because it's new in that way. But you may be right, it may indicate, I mean I think, yeah, I mean you're right, the singularity is nigh. Well, it is actually and in fact it's already started. Who hasn't got a smartphone here? Is that because you left it at home or you just don't own one?

00:48:06

F: I don't own one.

MS: Do you own a computer? You do? Who hasn't got a smartphone also hasn't got a computer?

M: [0:48:18].

WS: Are you going to be like sort of Piggy in the Lord of the Rings, [0:48:34] the lack of a laptop. Yeah, I think it has already started to happen in the sense that the reliance on … we all do it, we all rely on the phone or the computer for an extension of our mental capacities, we just do. And that is the beginnings of a hybridised human machine intelligence, it is.

MS: Okay, next question.

F: Thanks very much. I enjoyed what you're saying about bidirectionality but I'm struggling to kind of understand why we're valuing one form of communication over another. I come from a neurological medical background and I think that, you know, when we think about communication, we know that people take in the most by seeing. And actually most of our brain is sensory diverted to that, secondly, by amusing, and thirdly, by the content of what's spoken. Now, it wouldn't particularly bother me if people [0:49:46] regardless of how highly educated they were, responded to visual stimuli more than to nuanced and verbal ones. For example, we weren't particularly worried by the masses of population that were coming across from Turkey to Europe until we saw a child dead on the shores of Turkey. The response may not be logical but it's nonetheless obviously a very powerful form of communication. It doesn't seem to me … I'm not quite sure why we would try and put them in an order of sort of uniqueness, if you see what I mean, if our brain and population can communicate best for visual [0:50:33], what's the problem with that?

WS: Well, I think that the problem is this, is that the response has become a closed loop. Actually nobody's done anything because of seeing the picture of the Syrian child dead on the beach because the imagistic conversation has taken place in the virtual realm. You know, there might have been a bit of clictavism or people might have clogged up a few message boards. But the primacy of the image is also to do with the decoupling from meaningful interpersonal discourse but we don't yet have. We have [0:51:21], we don't yet have the emergent, we aren't actually at the point where we can conduct complete conversations just using imagery, so that's not what they're doing. So you have to ask yourself what are the images doing? You say these very evocative images, but what have they evoked? They haven't evoked the air strikes that David Cameron's so keen on. And

would they really help those dead children on the beaches, some air strikes? I don't think so. So you know, what's exactly going on with these images you have to ask yourself.

00:51:56

I mean to go back to McLuhan, I think the point isn't so much whether it's the images or words. It's looking at the technology, you know, what McLuhan says, and I think he's absolutely right, is you have to regard the prototypical form of all human technologies is holding and operating at a distance. So, you go right back to a chimpanzee stripping a twig and sticking it onto a termite. They're not going to stop doing that once they've discovered how to do it. And it's the same with any technology that increases the range of things able to act at a distance. And I think that that's the real distinction here is the way in which imagery, it's now possible to project imagery so effectively at a distance into people's minds, pockets, eyes, in that way, I think that is a different thing. And that kind of as you say, because people find imagery, at the neurological level they find it easier to absorb information from the imagery, not words.

And when you talk to it as a writer or the people who are interested, and I see most of you are, in words and literature, you'll often be talking to somebody and they'll go, "Well, I'm not really a words person." Well, actually none of us are in that sense, I mean we all speak as a function of the human and we all understand speak. But we aren't naturally writers, I mean writing takes a long time for technology to come around. Well, rest assured I'm a visual person as well, like looking around me like this. I think we are all visual people and that's why the capacity of bidirectional digital media disseminates such a plethora of imagery in so many exciting and adrenalizing combinations, there is such a colossal shift I think [0:53:52].

MS: So we have a question up there, can you get a mic to him?

M: This idea of visual as new media kind of reflecting the kind of the perceived feeling of living a globalised world, because in the end most nations are built around languages. So it's very hard to use languages to reach around the globe. Well, I guess, images that are appealing which you can take, so the exception. But if you have the image from the beheadings or the boy on the beach, that's something that's understandable through to China when an author or somebody describing that can only describe it to the audience in [0:54:37] language. Isn't that something to be cherished, that we're kind of now developing a skill in communicating through pictures that they can actually understand each other better from one end of the world to the other?

WS: I don't know, I mean it's another [0:54:51], but I did write a long essay on this very subject. And I think that what somewhat counts against that, I mean again, [0:55:00] of the ISIS beheadings. I mean I first saw a man beheaded when I was about 12 on film, in a film called The Oman, where a guy's head is chopped off by a sheet of glass. And it's quite graphic, not nearly as graphic as you can see any time after the watershed or 24/7. So

what's going on here? I think there's something strange going on and I think it's one of the pieces I wrote that you picked up on in the LRB on Cronenberg's novel, on David Cronenberg's novel, and David Cronenberg's filmmaking. What is going on with a film culture that seems obsessed, in my view, and correct if I am wrong, with its ability to reproduce images of human discorporation with incredible levels of [0:55:48]. That's what I see all the time on TV and film at the moment, you can't go to the cinema and see a set of trailers for new films without seeing an arm flying off or a head split in two or a skin torn away. And maybe, you know, what is the universal communication there?

00:56:07

And I agree with you, there is a level of universal communication going on with these very, very precise beautifully rendered images of human bodily, you know the body being destroyed in various ways. What do we think we're communicating to each other? I mean in terms of kind of aesthetics and even this kind of epistemic value, the ISIS beheadings were rubbish. They didn't even show you the heads being chopped off, it was all done by match cuts, very basic film editing grammar to convince that you that the head been chopped off. Whereas I can watch an HBO series and actually see a head chopped off or I maybe won't actually see it, it only looks convincingly like a head really being chopped off. So I think the universal language of imagery at the moment is very primal, if it exists at all. It has no subtlety; it induces an impulsiveness and a kind of febrility of response or a kind of apathy of response. And it kind of, you know, language, to be fair to language, you cannot be confused as long as you speak my language as to when I'm telling you something and when I'm showing you something. It's not possible for me to confuse others in language.

I mean I can't be alone in this, I mean I just don't even bother to watch films anymore. Well, I somewhat question what it's there for. I'm trying to think of a film I saw most recently, and I just don't look at the screen when somebody is showing me somebody's eye being gouged out or the head, skull being crushed, I don't find that particularly entertaining. And I slightly question that anybody past adolescence does or should.

M: So do you feel the same thing about gaming? I mean you've also written about that in that London Review Gallery piece?

WS: Yeah. I can't do gaming; I just can't do it, my gaming stopped in the King's Arms in Oxford in 1979 when I found that I couldn't play Pacman. That's when it really all fell apart, you know, it's kind of … maybe you could throw some light on this.

M: Well, I don't know, I was thinking, you were talking about earlier it comes down to [0:58:45] screen and something like does the sort of beheading on the child appealed to some sort of psychotic urge that people have, to see limbs being cut off, to see. Is it something like a deep seeded psychosis that people don't have to do these things because they're getting to see them first hand?

01:07:35

WS: I'm absolutely convinced with it, it sounds so banal you can't believe it, but I'm sure it's true. There hasn't been a major war in this society for some time; we lost 464 servicemen in a 14 year engagement in Afghanistan, as many as were lost in three minutes in the Somme. So, yeah, there is not this, you know, and we're coming up to the 11th hour of the 11th day, we notice the egregiousness with which Remembrance Day is celebrated now, which is the fundamental ceremony of the state's monopoly on violence. And it has to be hammered home to us that the state has the monopoly on violence because lest we forget with these long, long wars with people in numbers of casualties on our side. Yeah, I'm absolutely convinced that young men who kill loads of Nazi zombies are being satisfied, their bloodlust is being satisfied, I'm absolutely convinced of it. I think it's probably quite safe, killing. It was like when I said to my son, you know, "This is actually does slightly discuss me." He said, "But dad, they're Nazis and they're zombies, what's the problem?"

M: [1:00:32]?

WS: Well, no, I rather like the way you come inside and you get a freeform discourse.

M: Sorry, I thought there was a lady behind me. So the packaging of the images, I've noticed that when I was on Facebook I saw a video of a 17 year old girl be stoned to death among my daily trawl of the mediocrity that is my friends and their lives. And I saw that, I just kind of stumbled upon it and that what I'm interested in is the context of these things. I agree with what you said, mate, and about when these subconscious ideas coming to the surface and this bidirectionality allows these subconscious things to rise. And then to manifest themselves in such an absurd thing as having that video placed in front of me on a morning on my social media feed.

WS: Yeah, but I mean you could reflect that if you had been living even a 100 years ago, you could have walked out of here and walked, you know, one of the most notorious [1:01:45], Little Dublin in central London is 50 yards from here, would have been 50 yards from the [1:01:49] development [1:01:51] to knock it down in 1902. So you could have been right there and you would have seen people, you know, having violence rigged on them, emaciated, starving, it would have been right in your face. So arguably this is just a readjustment of a situation that is, you know, that is actually relatively speaking in terms of human affairs, very odd where, you know, for certainly large periods of the late 20th century people could grow up, grow old and die witnessing hardly anything not nice in their kind of visual field if they wanted to. So you get this incredible kind of gentility of culture oddly in the late 20th century, where you've got generations of middle class people who act as if they've never had a bowel movement. I mean it's a phenomenal culture growth after, disembodiedness in that way.

01:02:48

But to get back to games because I didn't feel I addressed gaming properly. Gaming does interest me and I think it is highly creative and I can see it's, you know, it is clearly where a lot of people's desire that used to be satisfied by narrative is being satisfied. But I would argue, in a profoundly different way, just consider what some of the consolations of narrative in a conventional novel are, right. And this is my hypothesis, I float this idea, and I think it's become a bit whacky but I'm convinced of it. [1:03:25] Anna Karenina, right, it's a very, very moving novel, I mean interesting of course that the key novels in German, French and Russian in the 19th century were all about adultery, women's adultery. But suppose you read Anna Karenina once, you can read it again, right, you can read it again and you will still be urging Anna not to have the affair with Bronski, even though you know fine well it's going to happen, alright.

And I would argue that at least part of our sympathy, and we do feel a profound sympathy towards fictional characters, is a function of our awareness that they are free. It's exactly the predetermined course of their behaviour within the book that makes us sympathetic to them, because of course, we suspect that may be true of our own lives. That it makes us my sympathetic to Anna Karenina and urge her more not to embark on the disastrous affair with Bronski knowing that there's no way it could be changed, except to write a kind of bogus sequel in which we kind of change. But I don't think we can change it anyway. Okay, so let's get to gaming. The problem with gaming is you can stop Anna Karenina having the affair with Bronski. And, you know, I suspect that that actually paradoxically makes this more difficult to sympathise with avatars in computer game scenarios than it is for us to identify, and that is the very appearance of freewill in avatars and computer games that makes them less easy vehicles for [1:05:16] human sympathy.

M: That's absolutely [1:05:24], is actually trying to escape what you're saying doesn't exist. So a major thing people have noticed now is that games [1:05:31], and they have linear narratives, we cannot change things happen. And players are picking up on the fact that they want to have more control and they're realising the control isn't really there. And so newer forms of game are exploring what you kind of say is already there which I don't think it's actually there at all. [1:05:46] games where you can make what you want happen because at the moment they're almost … they're not their own form, they're like a version of the novel written with different medium like a translation [1:05:57].

WS: Okay, well, let's try and refine it. Is it not the case, because I know that that's true, because there's not an infinite play area so how could anybody be completely free in a virtual environment? And I suspect when you do a lot of gaming what you begin to do is intuitively grasp where their dens are and how the action is being funnelled back. There are apparently outward branching decision trees but they loop back and take you back to the same thing, yeah, that's probably very frustrating. And also that might be a bit like your life as well, mightn't it, all these apparent opportunities to present themselves to you. You think you're free to choose between them but in your heart of hearts you know you're

just going to end up in the same dull job, having sex with somebody who no longer appeals to you.

01:06:48

M: And the sex would be nice to be honest.

WS: So maybe that's a constraint to do with … maybe the beauty of the [1:06:56], is that the very condition of the codex with one page succeeding another inflexibly means that you know you can't run from it so you're forced into a different pattern of engagement with the representation of the psyche that is called a character. You're called upon to adapt a more flexible and adapted relationship with the idea of it because the actuality is what you play, so maybe there's something. But I don't know, presumably you're a gamer so you can tell me. I mean are there characters or avatars in gaming that you have formed a profound emotional connection with, the way [1:07:35]?

M: Yeah, absolutely, there are games I've played where at the end of it I've had to replay a few times and I've interpreted the choices that were made, not that I made but they were made [1:07:45] differently, on a second [1:07:47], just as they would with a novel or with a book.

WS: Right, but I'm not asking that, I'm asking you about the character?

M: Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

WS: You feel very strongly connected to all those little pixies and elves pottering around?

M: So some of the characters that I've played. I would argue actually you can have more of a connection because you're inhabiting the character, aren't you? So in a sense you're not just sort of observing them, but you're actually engaging with what they're doing, you're going through the steps that they're going through.

WS: Right, so they're not really characters, are they? They're more kind of odd extensions of you and that's what it looks like to me. One of the most striking things, and again, as somebody that has a lot of gamers in the house with me, and fanatic gamers, I have to say. And I'll just make this point and you may think that he's completely lost it now. But if you stand back from somebody who's playing a game where they have an avatar and, you know, whether it's first person [1:08:40] as they're conducing an avatar through an environment. And how like, you know, characters, [1:08:48] that is, I mean that's exactly the position you have in relation to Gregor Samson in Metamorphosis is the relationship

that you have with an avatar in a game like that. You're yoked to them, you can't move away from them, but you aren't there, there is a slight disjunction.

01:09:07

Okay, if you stand a little bit away back in the room and look at somebody gaming like that the first thing you notice is that the character is static in the centre of the screen and the environment actually turns around it. Yeah, that's what you're doing, but the user illusion is that the character is moving through the environment. And I only teased that out because I think it indicates what's going on psychically as well. You haven't got a relationship with any characters in these games, they're all you. They're all projections of you, you can't tell me any character in a video game [1:09:48] has the kind of elegant sadism of the [1:09:54] or the kind of insufferable [1:09:57] of man and [1:09:57], or indeed, the kind of burning sexuality of [1:10:05] or whatever she's called. You know, that's not going to happen to you, man, sorry.

M: I understand you disagree. I mean I think one of the important things is that gamers develop their own forms of narrative and their own language and critical language, and way of doing things aren't just [1:10:19]. So I agree they are insensitive inferior versions of that form of narrative.

WS: But what you see, I mean I've got a friend who's doing a PhD at the moment on the end phase of, is it World of Warcraft? I mean what's the big multiplayer online?

M: Yeah, World of Warcraft.

WS: Yeah, World of Warcraft, apparently there's this end phase game, it's all about … World of Warcraft is all about building alliances. And in a sense you can see that that kind of gaming is much more a kind of virtual social realm, where that's what you're enjoying is, you know, kind of you have to build clans or something and you have to participate in clans. If you look at all the kind of language that surrounds gaming like that, it seems much more to do with social attributes, social exclusion, I think is a special term for kind of committed gamers. There's games for lightweights, purists, there's games people will buy their advantage in the game and all of this kind of thinking, that doesn't sit on my literature to me at all, it doesn't. And a lot of things that have been brought into literary discourse at the moment are about bidirectionality. So there's a lot of talk about, you know, forums, you know, really you see the evolving book clubs in the late 80s and early 90s, with the forerunner of this idea that reading is no longer a solitary activity, it's something that should be socialised in some way. And we'll get the whole town reading a book or we'll form a reading group or we'll tweet our favourite passages.

01:12:03

And so there'll be this kind of twittering kind of music surrounding it. That's very different, isn't it? It's very different, it's difficult to see how the novel, and when I talk about the novel, I unashamedly am talking about the serious novel, not just any old shit. The novel evolves with Bishop Ambrose in his garden in Milan, it involves in the solitary unitary act of reading confined within the paragraph. It's not a social activity, reading, and the novel didn't arise in that context at all. It arose because people stopped only being able to listen to the fucking Bible being read to them while they ate. Well, not the Bible is not a cracking book and I wish somebody would read it to me while I ate, but, you know, a bit of variety on occasion.

MS: I think that talk about end phases and inevitability means that we have got to the end of the discussion tonight here. But we can carry it on in the form of a reception next door just through here. So please join me in thanking Will for some fantastic thoughts about [1:13:20] [applause].