



The Great Satan

Kalle Brolin

Back in 1999 when I first started putting together my scrapbook of literary coincidences, let's just call them that for now, I cut out parts of articles, interviews, memoirs, essays, diaries, any printed text wherein was recounted various examples of how life imitates art. The cutouts were all collected in a writing pad with a shiny hologram cover, bought in a supermarket in Umeå.

Life imitates art, as proposed by Oscar Wilde, is a philosophical position known as anti-mimesis. Says Oscar: "Anti-mimesis results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through which it may realise that energy." He also claims that art sets the aesthetic guide by which people perceive life, that art gives us a perceptual bias, whereby we see in the world what artists have taught us to find there.

I'd say anti-mimesis is a beautiful template for thinking about societal evolution towards higher ideals, like socialism and beyond, if you can imagine such a thing as beyond, rather than human evolution through the brute force of drives and instincts, as in a capitalist worldview. You may imagine an ideal, then you may imitate the ideal until it becomes a reality, as opposed to simply claiming evolution is brought about by a pragmatic and unfeeling competition.

The examples I collected in my scrapbook were of three different varieties. First, there are those times when an author has dreamed up an invention, a society, a philosophy, or an interesting happening, which readers subsequently have picked up on, thought brilliant, and realised. A recent example I just heard about yesterday, so it's not in my scrapbook, would be of prisoners who read a novel by Stephen King, or maybe watched the dramatization of the novel. In the novel they found portrayed a clever way to escape from prison, through hiding the entrance of the tunnel they were digging behind a pornographic poster on the wall of the cell. It might not even be that the copycats actually read the novel, it could be enough that the idea was out there, circulating, spreading, and taking root; the field of memetics, I guess that's what you'd call it.

Memetics is thought of as an evolutionary model of cultural information transfer. A meme is an idea, which lives in and reproduces itself between minds. A seemingly self-aware example is the song Can't Get You Out Of My Head by Kylie Minogue, which is designed to be catchy, like all factory-made pop, but lets the refrain give the game away. According to memetics, if I sing this song to you and it sticks in your head, we are both just walking and talking hosts for the song. The song is a meme reproducing itself. Memetics claims that a meme's survival, or catchiness, depends upon its contribution to the effectiveness of its host, and this is how an analogy is drawn between memetics and genetics. The better ideas survive because they help the host body survive, contributing to the evolution of the hosting bodies. If you're looking through the bookshop at an airport, know that the science of memetics conforms nicely to the worldview of American management consultants, so check the appropriate shelves for some literature on the subject.

Second category in my scrapbook: there are times when an author has devised some crazy scenario, which later becomes realised, but not through the intervention of an inspired human agent. It's just coincidences, but as such they may be ridiculously detailed. For a well-known example, take a writer of fiction, Morgan Robertson, who publishes a story about the biggest cruise ship ever built by man, named the Titan. The Titan is considered unsinkable, and skimps on the number of lifeboats, but upon its' maiden voyage it collides with an iceberg and goes down. The writer maybe considered the story a warning against human hubris: see, even the unsinkable gets sunk! But a couple of years later - after the story was published, mind you - the story repeats itself in real life, as the Titanic goes under. It seems unlikely that the helmsman of the Titanic should go looking for an iceberg to hit, just because he read a story about the Titan, so it would have to be a coincidence, or maybe a couple of coincidences in a row. To call it precognition is a bit much. There might be a scientific term for this too, if you consider C.G. Jung a scientist, called a synchronicity.

The theoretical concept of synchronicity does not claim that the writing of the story caused the shipwreck to occur. Instead, it maintains that just as events may be grouped by cause, they may also be grouped by their



meaning, what they mean to people interpreting the events. Since meaning is a mental construction, not every correlation in the grouping of events by meaning needs to have an explanation in terms of cause and effect.

You might draw an analogy to the notion of the contemporary artist as a mapmaker in the world of signs, or the artist as DJ. An artwork in this genre need not point out actual, causal relationships between signs; the relations may as well be associative, allegorical, symbolical. The relations may have been created by the artist, rather than having been discovered to exist. Also, examine the truth of any literary statement involving a likeness, for example 'he ran like the wind'. There is no natural science to confirm this statement as true, no way to measure and compare the act of running to the blowing of the wind. But in poetry it holds true anyway, the statement is meaningful, and communicates a sensation to the reader.

Anyway, the poor writer, in this and in other similar cases, does not know about synchronicities, since they weren't invented until the 1920's, and not written about until the 1950's. These older writers were stricken by guilt, thinking that the writing actually caused the event. The feeling of guilt would sometimes be strong enough to cause paranoid delusions and compel some of these people to commit suicide. Morgan Robertson from the above example died of an overdose of protiodide, three years after the sinking of the Titanic.

Third category: there are times when an author reports having bumped into and actually conversing with a character they thought they'd invented for a fictional story. This is similar to the synchronicities mentioned above, but has veered into the territory of ghost stories. Let's put it down to paranoid delusions, and perhaps the absinthe from last night. Or, it could just be explained through selective perception.

Selective perception is when attitudes, beliefs, habits, and conditioning generate cognitive biases, expectations that affect perception - what you get is what you see. If memetics is mostly used by management consultants as a technology to achieve excellence through self-programming, then selective perception on the other hand is mostly a business for advertising consultants, in determining the effectiveness of advertising in influencing the behaviour of consumers.

Once my mum bought a used car of the Polish brand Simca. It was very cheap, you could get them for about 4000 Swedish crowns at the time, and you drove them for a few years, until they broke down. Then you just had it scrapped and got another one. My dad thought it was a brilliant idea, and soon got a Simca for himself as well. I had never heard of this brand before my mum got one, much less seen one in the street of my town. But after my parents each got one, I started seeing them everywhere. I guess they'd always been around but once I put a name to them, I started noticing them. I even got to recognise the particular sound of the engine of the Simca; I could tell from far away that the car approaching me from behind would be one of these junk heaps. Returning from this to the paranoid writer - I guess once you invent a character, and put a lot of work into imagining her, him, it, you might start recognizing this person in real life too. Like with cars, there aren't an infinite number of personality types, after all.

Examples of this third type of life imitating art seem to occur, or reports of these occurrences seem to get collected and given significance, periodically. There's a wave of reports from authors involved with 50's and 60's counterculture, for example, when "Everything is connected" was a credo for both hippie scientists and outlaw beatniks.

I collected cutouts of instances similar to all of these three types in my scrapbook for about a year. The reason I did was that if you thought about it backwards, it might actually make you quite optimistic about the power of art to affect an influence upon daily affairs. It might help you think that art, or let's narrow it down to so-called political art, was not a useless waste of time, something you did when you rather should have been out doing something more valuable with your day, like actually helping people. The effects are of course hard to predict, and things could happen a long way down the line, and you might never even get to hear about it. Still, it's cause for optimism, and maybe that's all you need, when you're an artist. It looks easy, too. All you have to do is put out a lot of good ideas instead of bad ones, what you would think of as good examples for people to pick up on, get them circulating, and look for feedback loops.

After the first year of scrapbooking, I thought of an obvious experiment. I would start writing a novel, designed from the outset to change the world in accordance with my will. It was quite Satanic, in that way. Maybe you've heard people complain about being too old for hippie, too young for punk, how they'd missed



out on being part of two major subcultural movements? Me, I had the misfortune of being a teenager in the eighties, feeling a bit late for the party, just a kid hanging with the older punks. I guess that could have something to do with my idea to start writing. The novel would portray people I'd like to get to know and make friends with, events I would like to occur, a band I would like to follow on tour, a movement I would like to be part of, a world I would very much enjoy living in, and help bring about.

I went into the whole thing a sceptic, almost absent-mindedly, figuring I would just follow a recipe and see if I came out of it at the other end with a cake in my hands. If it should turn out to work, who cared about the possible explanation for it? All the pseudo-theories I've been going on about here, that's just procrastination on my part, detours into the language worlds of New Age mysticism married to corporate management. I was just trying to delay having to tell you what I experienced as a result of my writing.

I wasn't a writer, I'd never written fiction in my life, and I didn't count on anyone wanting to ever publish the bastard thing, but I figured I could always put it up on a website, one chapter at a time, just so some people could read it. Because I still thought at the time that people had to read the novel for it to have any effect, for the ideas to spread. But I guess the selective perception-thing kicked in early on in the writing process, long before anything had been made public, before anyone apart from me had read it. I would rather not go into the details of the plot, thinking about it today causes acute embarrassment, but to give you a careful example, I'd made up five main characters, and after a couple of months I had met them all, numinous people. That started to freak me out. Sometimes I would watch written events play out in front of me, sometimes I'd read about them in newspapers or see them on TV.

After about a year of my writing this monster into being came the summer of 2001. I was in Gothenburg for the European Union summit and the visit from President Bush, waiting for the riots to start. They were already in my novel, you see. There turned out to be correlations in both the way events played out, and in the aesthetics of the whole thing, the way it looked. The story and the style. The build-up and the aftermath. The Eros effect and the Oceanics. The violence and the repression. Watching that come about in real life proved to be too much for me. I realised I didn't want the self-induced experimental paranoia, or whatever it was; I only ever wanted the sweet feeling of optimism, about the power of art and all that jazz. The fantasy of the riot was attractive, the reality of it less so. You know the saying: careful what you wish for, it might come up as evidence at a trial.

I stopped writing in the midst of all that, and probably made myself erase the whole thing from my mental hard drive. It didn't fit with consensus reality anyway, maybe that's how I managed to forget about my experiment so completely, as if it had never happened. It actually never did happen. World back to normal.

I didn't even think about it until years later, when I was asked to take part in another experiment in writing, a collective novel, whose subject would be the exploration of the collective process itself. I told the instigator of the project, as a caveat, that I'd never written fiction before, only newspaper articles. But then I thought: That's not true. There's an old scrapbook with a hologram cover, at the bottom of a box in my basement storage space. Embarrassment welled up in me. Oh, Hell, I thought. Oh, that's just great.