

WITH (withyou.co.uk)

Anouchka Grose

From Greek theatre to modern cinema people have invested in the actions of fictional characters, whether it's the satisfaction we get from watching other people extricate themselves from impossible situations, or the schadenfreude we experience on seeing them screw up. While we sit in the dark and do nothing, the actors fight, cry, fall in love, die — acting out extreme experiences so we don't have to.

WITH are a quasi-fictional organisation who offer 'experiential offsetting'. For a fee, a WITH agent can be hired to suffer a trauma on your behalf, exercise regularly or have an affair for you behind your partner's back, scattering shreds of evidence as they go about it. All it takes is a visit to their website (www.withyou.co.uk) — a soothingly slick space where the obscenity of what's on offer is impeccably counterbalanced by anodyne graphics, cool, corporate phrasing and a general aura of calm capability. Like an experienced, expensive euthanasia service, WITH manage to present their wares as if they are not only acceptable but desirable. Why anyone should require such a service is a question that barely seems worth asking. It's self-evident. WITH offer a series of 'solutions' to the serious problems of time, enjoyment and mortality. If you'd like to be the victim of a brutal murder, but would also like to be around for your next birthday, there's no need to admit defeat. With a WITH solution, even the limits of one's own body can be transcended. If a single lifetime isn't capacious enough to undergo the enormous set of possibilities the world has to offer, WITH promises to open up extra experiential space. For the time-starved, adventure-hungry citizens of high capitalist societies this can hardly fail to look appealing.

But how satisfying could these vicarious exploits *really* be? It's tempting to say not at all. Commonsense tells us that this sort of transaction could never work, that it would always fall short, simply alerting us further to our own shortcomings. While the characters in more conventionally posited fictions — plays, films, novels — promise to entertain us, it seems that a WITH agent could only ever offer us the empty husk of his or her various escapades; the exhilarating kernel of a lived event would always be tragically lacking.

The Greeks had the idea that fictions produced tangible effects on their audiences, although there was some disagreement as to whether these effects were beneficial or

detrimental. For Plato, poetry threatened to make men more hysterical by pointing them towards extremes of feeling, while for Aristotle it promised opportunities for catharsis. According to this latter theory, by identifying with fictions one could purge oneself of extreme passion and return to a state of emotional equilibrium. In either case, representations were thought to have very real consequences; they could actually make your life better or worse.

Freud, in *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*, comes back to the question of why we should care about writing, or reading, stories. What are the mechanisms by which they captivate us? He found the beginnings of an answer in children's play: 'Might we not say,' he asks, 'that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?'

Children's play is extremely serious because it forms part of an attempt to bring the world under control through gesture and language. And, according to Freud, the pleasure we feel as children on causing things to behave as we dictate proves impossible to give up. Why relinquish such a great source of satisfaction? As adults we may cease to play in the ways that we used to, but we substitute our games with daydreams and phantasies in which people and events operate as we would wish them to. Maybe we imagine getting a great job and marrying the boss's daughter. But, equally, perhaps we envision being beaten and enslaved by a cruel tyrant. Psychoanalysis teaches us that what pleases us may not be what society broadly designates as 'pleasurable'. And fiction, like child's play, offers us an experimental space in which any manner of experience can be organised, improved on or tried out.

In an amazing logical reversal Freud points out that having played at being an adult as a child, longing all the while for a time when one's actions would have consequences in the 'real' world, one might then find oneself looking back at childhood games and seeing their comical similarity with 'genuine' adult activities. 'By equating his ostensibly serious occupations of to-day with his childhood games,' says Freud, '[man] can throw off the too heavy burden imposed on him by life and win the high yield of pleasure afforded by *humour*.' In saying this, Freud collapses any rigid distinction between reality and representation. When 'real life' appears as the facsimile of a childish game it suddenly becomes funny. Freud, like Aristotle, was inclined to emphasise the curative possibilities of fiction. Representations can be used to provide relief.

As part of the current WITH exhibition at Rokeby, Beth and Ed Greenacre, the gallery directors, have each commissioned an agent to act on their behalf. Ed's agent exercises for a fixed period each morning, sending evidence of his exertions each day in the form of a sweaty t-shirt and DVD. Beth's agent is employed to do nothing for the duration of the show, emailing a photograph of herself to the gallery on the hour every hour. Presumably running a West End Gallery makes either activity extremely difficult, and it's easy to see the attraction of both services. Exercise is good for you, therefore promising to make you live longer, creating the time and space for the consumption of yet more goods and experiences. Doing nothing is the rarest of luxuries in a culture where even leisure activities form part of one's moral duty to 'realise' one's existence. Relaxed, contemplative boredom is the one state it's increasingly difficult to achieve.

In his essay, *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin speaks about the vital place of boredom in the production and dissemination of stories. As he puts it, 'Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience'. In order to formulate, re-tell and listen to stories one needs time. In fact one needs too much time, time that gapes and demands to be filled. Listening becomes an event in itself, an experience which may, in turn, become part of one's own re-telling of the story: Where did you hear it? Who told it to you? How did they know about it? In this way, experiences are transferred between one person and the next, being polished and altered as they travel. According to Benjamin, as boredom becomes scarce, this sense of experience as something communicable and exchangeable is lost. The newer forms of storytelling —the endlessly reprintable novel or film, or, lately, the endless television broadcasts of 'real' people's lives — aren't embedded in experience in the same way, but are somehow cut loose from their referents, relying on tired and tiring representational tropes to persuade us that something, somewhere happened...and that we ought to give a damn about it.

While the Rokeby exhibition documents the enactment of two WITH solutions (alongside artefacts from other of their services, including a gory dismemberment) it apparently does so without any strong wish to persuade you of the veracity of the set-up. If you look carefully at the portraits of the sedentary agent you soon see duplicates, or images that are so similar that they can only have been taken split seconds apart. The light appears to be exactly the same in each portrait of the disconcertingly bright chroma key green face (ostensibly painted so that Beth's features can be superimposed at a later date). There is no woman doing nothing in real time; there was once a woman

being photographed with a fast, efficient camera in order to provide material for the exhibition. Maybe she sat there for half an hour. This performance isn't actually happening. The rumpled t-shirts on the rack aren't relics of a living person's deeds, but theatre props. There is no man with an exercise bike working up a sweat on Ed's behalf. It's no secret. Ask a member of the WITH collective and they won't tell you otherwise. Quite the opposite — they will be amazingly frank about the mechanics of the work. They aren't interested in tricking you, they seem far more interested in the logic of the representations they put forward, in how they work, or fail to, and what ontological value they can possibly have once the rug of authenticity has been pulled out from underneath them. Far from being disappointing, it's a relief. What could be more boring than someone trying to make you believe in some stupid made-up scenario, yet again?

But *why* should this overt fictionality be so enjoyable? Is it because it exposes the emptiness of so many of the contemporary 'solutions' to the problems of existence? Therapies that 'cure' us so we can carry on doing jobs we hate? Holidays that relax us so we can return to the unbearable stresses of our everyday lives? Cosmetic treatments that temporarily hold off the visible signs of our approaching deaths? Medical interventions that enable us to live longer, but for what? Or is the brilliance of WITH's services that they don't try to persuade us of *anything* but are content to function in the realm of phantasy and play? Like in a cartoon where a body can be crushed by a bulldozer and immediately spring back to life, WITH propose a series of utterly consequence-free but peculiarly exciting scenarios — journeys, deaths, fights, betrayals, all the stuff of classic fiction. And, like the man in Freud's example, we are invited to find comedy in the swing between the intolerable weight of existence and the utter inconsequentiality of it all.

Anouchka Grose has published two novels and is currently working on a non-fiction book about romantic love. She has recently written catalogue essays for Alice Anderson (Yvon Lambert), Teresita Dennis, Super Cilia (Deutsche Bank building, Liverpool), and published articles in Portfolio Magazine, The London Magazine and The Independent amongst others. She also lectures on psychoanalysis at the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research.