

Life

The heights of mediocrity



Susie Boyt

Column

I used to wince when people declared the best was the enemy of the good. It seemed a hymn to mediocrity, and we all know where that leads. It's a long narrow tunnel in which ruin stares you in the face or gazes down at your feet and murmurs, "No offence, but I hate your shoes."

I thought for a spell that excellence was the pinnacle, the thing to go for in life, and that anything less was a miscued ball, or a hitting of the nail on the thumb, a joke with an important missing element — humour, say. But regular readers of this column will know that I ditched my natural instinct for perfectionism long ago in favour of the "high end of average". I'd recommend it, actually. Especially if you like survival.

If you are feeling wobbly or frayed, it can be useful to ask how a person of high-end-of-average sensibility might respond to the dilemmas you face, and just aim for that. So instead of asking what would Jesus or Marilyn Monroe do, you might think how would your favourite Blue Peter presenter handle it, or Mildred from *George and Mildred*, or Admiral and Mrs Croft, Jane Austen's unusually happy couple from *Persuasion*.

If you ever play the game "adverbs", also sometimes called "in the manner of the word", you could do worse than use "high end of average" for your behaviour style. People may well not guess for a while — "meticulously" they may cry out, or "slovenly", depending of course on the height of their own standards, but that is all part of the fun.

It is at this axis of respectable rather than remarkable that I have pitched my little tent. If people ask me how I am, I might well say, "Quite reasonable." (I might choose to add "considering".) I am not trying to fly through the air with the greatest of ease just now, I'm being more like the old avuncular fellow doing the circus act with the budgerigars.

Why not? YES. Him. That's me. It's not an unimpressive act — he's a fixture of the Big Top for goodness' sake, and that's showbiz, pal — and yet he is modest, he has a red coat but no sequins or flesh-coloured Lycra panels, and he is, to be frank (but whisper it), a tiny bit boring.

I sometimes secretly wonder if really quite nice people are better than lovely ones. When I meet my most lovely friends, all anyone does is cry. We are all so darned moved, all our nerve

endings fizzing on the wrong side of our skin suddenly. But really, where does that get us?

Sometimes I long for the company of the monosyllabic gruff . . .

In this respectable rather than remarkable tent I am much more comfy. I seem to have acquired a new set of props, chiefly among them the "quite nice" cup and saucer, for who wants to drink from 18th-century blue and white china that's verging on sublime? On my birthday or Mother's Day, sure, but not on a Monday when I'm opening the gas bill.

Another thing I can't get enough of: the "quite nice" dress. The quite nice dress is ever so useful. To wear it when looking your best isn't the plan at all — and could even seem a bit needy and/or hysterical. Of course, you might be ignored in your quite nice dress, apart from by tidiness freaks who may nudge each other and say, "Ooh! She looks nice and neat." Still, the boxes your quite nice dress will tick are:

Serviceable.

Sane.

Discreet.

If the dress were a person it could be described as "personable". I always say if you can pull that off you can do anything . . .

I once thought that excellence was the pinnacle, the thing to go for in life, and anything less was a miscued ball

So there I was in the cinema, in a dress that wouldn't have caused anyone envy pangs but would hold its own in any law court in the land, watching *Eddie the Eagle*.

I remember how we celebrated him when I was a kid. His was a massive achievement, they told us at school. It was all about effort and cheerfulness, the love of taking part. He was so much bigger than anyone concerned with who was best. And that really was winning.

I watched him on screen, attempting a 90ft ski jump, my heart in my bucket of popcorn. It seemed awfully dashing to do something for the very first time at the actual Olympics. He just about made it. He came in last but it was still quite some feat. He had only been ski jumping for a year. He was so happy! The cinema cheered. There were only six of us, but that's nothing new.

Now I don't really hold with skiing. If you live at the top of a snowy mountain and your pal lives at the base, go ahead, be my guest, but otherwise . . . Yet even I was hugely impressed by someone taking high end of average to such dizzying heights.

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Deconstruction: a notoriously hard-to-define mode of textual analysis associated with the philosopher Jacques Derrida, distantly descended (my dictionary of critical theory tells me) from Nietzsche's dictum that there are no facts, only interpretations.

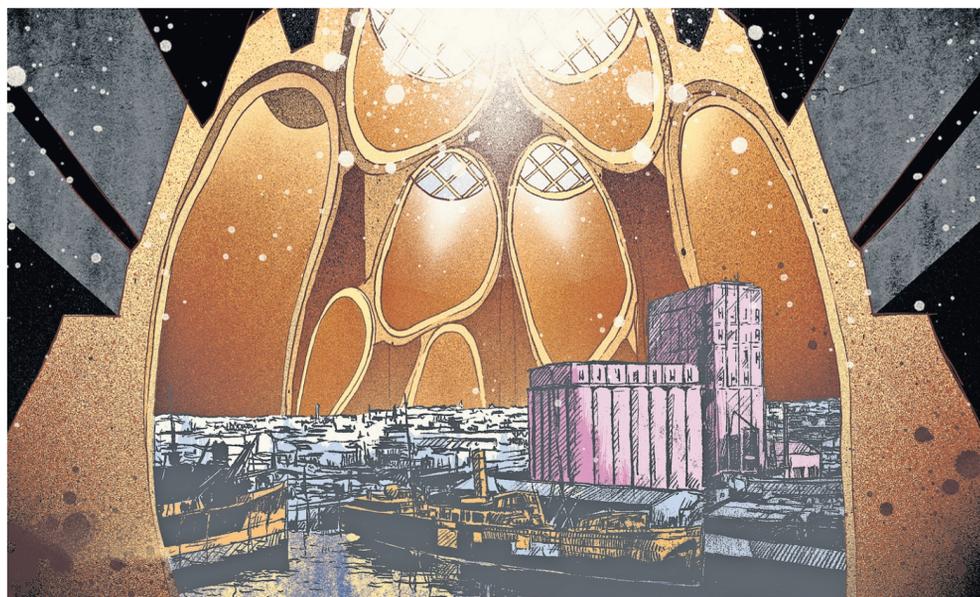
But also, I recently learned, a term in architecture and building. Deconstruction means the selective dismantlement, repurposing and reimagining of existing physical structures. The other day I was shown around a deconstruction site in the docklands of Cape Town, where a 90-year-old grain silo complex is being converted into the biggest museum for modern art on the African continent.

Taking as its centrepiece the collection of businessman Jochen Zeitz, the Zeitz MOCAA (Museum of Contemporary Art Africa) may sound a bit like a German-engineered coffee but this not-for-profit institution, set to open in September next year, is being touted as our answer to the power station that became Tate Modern, or the former Nabisco factory on the Hudson river that is now Dia:Beacon.

The deconstructive ambition here is of another order, though, since the building offered no existing grand spaces, no turbine hall that could easily be repurposed. Imagine instead 42 cardboard toilet rolls stacked vertically next to each other — this is how designer Thomas Heatherwick describes the challenge of working with "the most tubey building in the world". The tubes are the concrete silos in which grain was stored. Now imagine a space being cut out of the centre: a wonky oval shape inspired by the form of a grain kernel itself (the Heatherwick studio often works with biomimicry and organic curves — think of the new Routemaster buses).

When this interpretation has been converted into fact, it will be a seven-storey-high atrium forming the heart of the museum: a cathedral of cross-sections that is slowly being cut with diamond wire through concrete so hard that two metres a day is the most that construction workers can manage. Labouring with drills and cooling hoses amid the silo shafts, one team told me that it felt like mining.

Concrete gets harder as it gets older — "it cures," the project manager explained as we ducked amid ladders and rubble. As some silos are cut away,



Toby Whitebread

DIARY

HEDLEY TWIDLE



others must be re-sleeved in new concrete and polished as the project unfolds. As different tubes are breached or braced, the load path of the building changes: a process tracked by engineers and software in an office nearby, with structural supports shuffled accordingly.

All around us, other enormous building projects are rising: investment banks, hotels, gyms, apartment complexes. They are all going up around this future influx of contemporary art: those kernels of creativity that form the ultimate commodity, or commodity fetish, of global capitalism. It reminded me of a Ted talk that showed how financial institutions hoping to track market fluctuations as quickly as possible cluster around the point in Manhattan

where transatlantic fibre optic cables make landfall hoping to track market fluctuations as quickly as possible.

That might sound like deconstructive criticism. But mostly I am dazed by the shocking ingenuity of our species, our ability to reshape even the hardest, most recalcitrant material into symbolic form. In a country where most major galleries sit behind colonial gables or neoclassical pillars, the industrial dockscape of the V&A Waterfront's Silo district is envisaged by its promoters as a more open, accessible space. What was once a commodity export terminal will become a place where art from Africa and its diasporas will be reimported but free to the public (well, sometimes) and housed in an astonishing building. I hope it works out.

A still more ambitious but very different construction project has just been postponed in South Africa following legal challenges — indefinitely, I hope. Over the past few years, our beleaguered president Jacob Zuma has been pushing for a new nuclear build: one that will add up to nine new reactors to our coastline; that will cost well over a trillion of our steadily depreciating rand; that will most likely be built by one of the autocracies in the Brics alliance: Russia or China. Or perhaps France, which violated international embargoes in the

1970s and 1980s to provide the apartheid government with Koeberg, a facility just outside Cape Town that is (for now) the only nuclear power plant on the African continent. Sheathed in concrete, the twin silos of its two pressurised water reactors are just visible up the coast at the far edge of the metropolis — one that would have to be evacuated for centuries if anything went seriously wrong.

Zuma's "presidential legacy" project will be, if it comes off, the biggest procurement in our history; and yet it is being rushed through with little debate and much secrecy. It would lock South Africa into this energy path at the very moment when most of the "old" nuclear powers are moving away from the technology, realising the astonishing expense and difficulty involved in decommissioning plants and dealing with their waste.

Millions of South Africans are counting the days until Zuma leaves office. But if he or his allies succeed in pushing through the nuclear option, the decision will remain with us for not just 30 years (half-life of Strontium-90 and Cesium-137), but 24,000 years (Plutonium-239), 222,000 years (Technetium-99) and 2,000,000 years (Neptunium-237). At which point we might say: for all eternity.

Hedley Twidle lectures in English at the University of Cape Town

The List

O, brother — the siblings who make films together

Hollywood has long been a family business, awash with dynastic names: the Sheens, the Hustons, the Coppolas, the Douglases. When it comes to directors, an even more specific kinship flourishes: brothers. From Auguste and Louis Lumière, who first drew a crowd to watch their films in a cinema in 1895, to Anthony and Joe Russo, whose *Captain America: Civil War* premiered last week, here's a selection of fraternal film-makers.

1. The Scotts

Ridley (*Blade Runner*, *Alien*) forged a path for his younger brother Tony (*Top Gun*, *True Romance*), introducing him to the world of film when he cast him in his first short *Boy and Bicycle*, and later employed him to direct commercials. Tony, who died in 2012, recalled a meeting at Warner Bros where he was asked, "How did you do the alien coming out of that guy's chest?" "I said, 'Dude. I'm Tony. That's Ridley,'"

2. The Quays

The identical twins from Pennsylvania (left) make surreal stop-motion animations that have inspired Terry Gilliam and Christopher Nolan. The pair have bamboozled interviewers by refusing to reveal who is Stephen and who is Timothy: "We are one," they say.

3. The Coens

Paul Newman reported a similar eerie doubling when filming *The Hudsucker Proxy* with Ethan and Joel Coen. "I was shocked at how it worked like a machine," he said. "The brothers were one voice in two people."

4. The Zuckers

Claiming to be the products of a "normal Midwestern upbringing", David and Jerry Zucker created some of the most anarchic spoofs of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, among them *Airplane!*, *Top Secret!* and *The Naked Gun*.

5. The Wayans

Inspired by the Zuckers' films, Shawn, Marlon and Keenen Wayans created a string of parodies, among them the *Scary Movie* series. Explaining his family's gift for comedy, Shawn said that his parents "must have been watching *Airplane!* when they conceived us".

6. The Farrellys

The gag-a-minute style of the Zuckers also influenced Peter and Bobby Farrelly, makers of gross-out comedies such as *Dumb and Dumber*. Their success was followed by that of the *Weitz brothers*, whose *American Pie* included a scene of a teenager masturbating with the titular pudding, but who have since moved into more thoughtful indie fare.

Horatia Harrod

Virtual mortality

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shivery, twilight opening to Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). The young boy Pip is visiting his dead parents and row of dead brothers in the churchyard, a "bleak place overgrown with nettles". The barrenness of the surrounding landscape emphasises the graveyard's eerie position at the forgotten edges of life.

Fast-forward to the intense connectivity of the 21st century, when even tombstones are expected to socialise. For increasing numbers of people, the grave site is yet another node in the network. An industry has even emerged to digitise the cemetery.

One such company in the UK is the Dorset-based QR Memories, which outfits tombstones and memorial plaques with a discreet cache of online data. QR

or Quick Response codes are those little squares of psychedelic black and white that one scans with a smartphone to upload the information they contain, such as website URLs, email addresses, and plain text files.

Elizabeth Normandale, sales and marketing director at QR Memories, tells me that the motivation for QR codes on gravestones is linked to a wish that the deceased be known, beyond merely a name and a set of dates. "A QR code means that so much more information can be included, and a person who has died becomes a person who once lived," she says.

While these codes can be "locked down", restricting access to a selected group, all of Normandale's clients so far have opted for them to be open to the public. "They want anyone who visits the memorial to be able to know more about the person being remembered there," she says. "One client has a code with a video which shows the person who has died singing in a bar." Here we find the primacy of information-sharing — one of the main features of digital life — reshaping our ideas of what it means to mark the lives of the dead.

Young Pip in his analogue churchyard

could be the spokesperson for companies such as QR Memories. He doesn't know what his late mother and father looked like, "for their days were long before the days of photographs". To make do, he imagines their physical appearances from the scant information their graves offer him. The lettering on his father's memorial evokes the image of "a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair", while the style of



Left: Anna Sergeeva's final selfie. Right: 'Camille Monet (1847-79) on her Deathbed' (1879) by Claude Monet — CEN; Bridgeman Art Library

his mother's inscription gives him the impression that she was "freckled and sickly". The aloofness of the dead is destined to diminish as the linked-in cemetery, unimaginable to the Victorian mind, becomes increasingly integrated into the general busyness of digital life.

Evan Carroll notes how social media expands the scope of the memorial site, explaining that "bereavement and memorials are no longer confined to one



place or one time". Virtual grave sites such as Facebook's specialised "memorial profiles", requested by a user before death or by their family afterwards, allow public grieving to occur beyond the geographic and temporal limits of a wake or funeral.

The issue of who inherits access to our online profiles, as well as the password-protected data on our various devices, is of growing legal concern. Many experts, including Carroll, advise that we should specify in our wills how we want to bequeath the data that will outlast us. Increasingly, our digital profiles will, in death, be places of mourning, and so it behoves us to account for them as part of our estates. Carroll raises the idea of "communal bereavement", whereby a social network profile dedicated to the deceased provides an ongoing, dynamic place for commemoration. In this way, he suggests "the role that the deceased plays in the social network continues after they pass away", since they can facilitate online interactions between people who otherwise would not have known one another. As Carroll puts it, "You can introduce them from beyond the grave."

One of the core values of the digital

age is "presence", the connectedness and visibility that comes from active participation in online life. It's understandable, then, that dying no longer necessitates withdrawal from sociability, nor is death tethered securely to the idea of absence. In Tom McCarthy's recent novel *Satin Island*, the narrator muses that one could achieve a kind of afterlife by organising a series of messages to be sent intermittently after one's death: "Key to immortality: text messaging."

This prospect is perhaps not especially far-fetched. A company called Eternime is already offering us "virtual immortality" in the form of an interactive avatar, which can communicate, like an uncanny Sybil, our "memories, stories, and ideas" down the digital generations. The prospect of enduring as data is one of the more spectacular ways in which digital life is reformulating mortality in its own image. Even in death, it seems, we will find it steadily more difficult to go offline.

Laurence Scott's *The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World* is published in paperback by Windmill on May 5