

Russell in Popular Culture

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In director/screenwriter John Michael McDonagh's 2011 Quentin Tarantino-like comic film The Guard, there is a bizarre scene where three hit men, while driving down an Irish country road, for no apparent reason get into a heated debate over who the world's greatest philosopher might be.

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Hit Man #1: *"Bertrand Russell."*

Hit Man #2: *"Bertrand Russell! You listenin' to him? The fuckin' English. Everything has to be fuckin' English. Name your favourite philosopher, and lo and behold, he's English."*

Hit Man #3: *"He's Welsh."*

Hit Man #2: *"Uh?"*

Hit Man #3: *"Bertrand Russell was Welsh."*

Hit Man #2: *"Bertrand Russell was Welsh?"*

Hit Man #3: *"Yep."*

Hit Man #2, after a pause: *"You know I never knew that. Didn't think anybody interesting was Welsh."*

Hit Man #3: *"Dylan Thomas?"*

Hit Man #2: *"Like I said."*

It is amusing that these chauvinistic characters are willing to reconsider Russell's greatness once they can stop thinking of him as an Englishman, but no doubt Lord Russell himself, given his cosmopolitan leanings as well as his oft-professed love for his Englishness, might

have been doubly offended by their banter, not to say their subsequent actions of gunning down a police officer in cold blood. Still, it's yet another example of Russell's ubiquity.

In addition to being an important public intellectual, for much of his long life Russell was also a noted public figure. Indeed, thanks to the many interviews he did over the years, from newspaper articles to radio debates and all the way up to appearances on television, he was a well-known figure to most people, and became something of a symbol of a philosopher and of rationality itself. So perhaps it's not surprising that references to him—often quite unexpected ones—appear in many areas of popular culture. In yet another celebrated violent film, 1976's *Taxi Driver*, the pacifistic philosopher makes an unlikely “appearance.” The troubled lead character Travis Bickle, played by Robert De Niro, tries to tell his fellow cabbie “The Wizard” (played by Peter Boyle) about the demons that are haunting him. The Wizard launches into the following soliloquy:

“Look at it this way. A man takes a job, you know? And that job - I mean, like that — That becomes what he is. You know, like — You do a thing and that's what you are. Like I've been a cabbie for thirteen years. Ten years at night. I still don't own my own cab. You know why? Because I don't want to. That must be what I want. To be on the night shift drivin' somebody else's cab. You understand? I mean, you become — You get a job, you become the job. One guy lives in Brooklyn. One guy lives in Sutton Place. You got a lawyer. Another guy's a doctor. Another guy dies. Another guy gets well. People are born, y'know? I envy you, your youth. Go on, get laid, get drunk. Do anything. You got no choice, anyway. I mean, we're all fucked. More or less, ya know.”

Bickle, unable to follow the logic of this, says “I don't know. That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard”, to which the Wizard gives the following reply: “It's not *Bertrand Russell*. But what do you want? I'm a cabbie” (*IMDb*). Who could argue with that logic?

But it's not only in the movies that references to Russell may be found. While reading a biography of the cartoonist Al Capp, of “Li'l Abner” fame, I was shocked to find the following unexpected Russell appearance. Capp, noted for his drawings of rather voluptuous women and sly sexual references in what was ostensibly a family strip, created a character named “Adam Lazonga” who was renowned as the world's greatest lover, and who became a mentor to the naïve Abner, teaching him how to woo the ladies “Dogpatch style.” “Capp”, the authors relate,

“modelled Lazonga’s physical appearance after George Bernard Shaw, the playwright and novelist, whose play *Pygmalion* was built on a similar teacher/student theme, but Lazonga’s eccentric views and behaviour were based on English philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell, recently in Boston’s local news because he had accepted a position as a lecturer at Harvard after having been dismissed from the City College of New York. In interviews, Capp refused to connect Russell to his comic strip character, saying only that Shaw had been the model for the way Adam Lazonga looked. In the end, it didn’t matter. Lazonga had become a vehicle for another lighthearted romp” (Schumacher and Kitchen, 100-101).

Actually, it *does* matter. All good Russellians know that after losing the City College job Russell most certainly did *not* go to teach at Harvard, or any other US university, so one has to wonder about the veracity of this claim, especially since Capp himself denied the connection. Still, the thought of Lord Russell cavorting with Daisy Mae, Moonbeam McSwine, and Stupefyin’ Jones in Dogpatch, USA is an image one can’t easily remove from one’s mind.

Another cartoonist who made use of Russell’s image is the counterculture hero Robert Crumb (in many ways the anti-Capp, given the latter’s rightwing ideology and the former’s anarchistic attitudes). In 1970, the year of Russell’s death, Crumb drew a short comic called “Meatball”, in which various dignitaries, including Lord Russell, for no apparent reason, are mysteriously hit in the head by a flying meatball. Crumb, an iconoclastic figure who seems to have an affinity for Russell’s excoriating wit, also made use of him in another of his sketches, as recounted by Laura Cumming, reviewing an exhibition of his work at Whitechapel Gallery in London:

“His cartoons often come to proleptic halts – Mr. Sketchum, aka Crumb, thinks he’ll send his cartoons to Mr CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament], aka Bertrand Russell; an H-bomb drops; it’s all over” (Cumming 2005).

Not only was Russell a figure referred to by those, like the Irish hitmen, the Wizard, and Robert Crumb, with no connection to himself, many of his close associates also used him as a character in their fiction. This is perhaps not surprising, given that he was on intimate terms with some of the major writers of the twentieth century, including Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, and Aldous Huxley, and had an influence on all of them (thanks, in no small part, to his sometime-lover

and long-time confidante Lady Ottoline Morrell, who introduced him to many of them and who also often appears, usually unfavourably, in their works).

Of all the above-mentioned writers, Russell seemed fondest of Conrad. He identified strongly with the blistering critique of colonialism found in the latter's classic *Heart of Darkness*, and he named both his sons—John Conrad and Conrad—after him. Conrad was deeply moved to learn of this, writing in 1921, upon hearing that Russell's first-born son was given his name,

“Of all the incredible things that come to pass—that there should be one day a Russell bearing my name for one of his names is surely the most marvellous . . . I am profoundly touched—more than I can express—that I should have been present to your mind in that way and at such a time” (Conrad, 374).

Unlike his relations with some of the other noted authors he knew, Russell and Conrad remained good friends their entire lives, perhaps because they seldom met face to face—theirs was mostly an epistolary relationship. There is no record that Russell was ever a character in any of Conrad's writings, but he most certainly was in other of the Bloomsbury Group's works.

Virginia Woolf often came across Russell at various Bloomsbury events, usually in tow with fellow Cambridge colleague G. E. Moore, who was an inspirational figure to the movement. In a diary entry written in 1924 Woolf notes of Russell that

“He has not much body of character—this luminous vigorous mind seems to be attached to a flimsy little car, like that on a large glinting balloon . . . he has no chin, and he is dapper nevertheless, I should like the run of his headpiece” (Woolf, 295).

Woolf attended his lectures on Social Reconstruction and shared many of his progressive views on women's liberation, sexual liberalism, and education. Some critics see elements of Russell in the character Mr. Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) but Ramsey seems mainly based upon her father, the philosopher Leslie Stephen, like Russell an earnest freethinker. She does, however, make mention of Russell's book *The Scientific Outlook* in her 1938 novel *Three Guineas*.

Russell had a more tempestuous relationship with D.H. Lawrence, and directly influenced the character Sir Joshua Malleson in Lawrence's 1917

novel *Women in Love*. Sir Joshua is a comic and repulsive figure, described as having an eighteenth century appearance, with a propensity for showing up at the most awkward moments in order to pontificate on matters that bore everyone silly. He is described as follows: “A learned, dry baronet of 50, who was always making witticisms and laughing at them heartily in a harsh, horse laugh,” talking in his “rather mincing voice, endlessly, endlessly, always with a strong mentality working, always interesting, and yet always known, everything he said known beforehand” (Lawrence, 50). In one scene, looking ludicrous in an old-fashioned bathing suit, Malleson splashes about the lead characters, who react to him in the following manner:

Gerald had dived in, after Sir Joshua, and had swum to the end of the pond. There he climbed out and sat on the wall. There was a dive, and the little Countess was swimming like a rat, to join him. They both sat in the sun, laughing and crossing their arms on their breasts. Sir Joshua swam up to them, and stood near them, up to his armpits in the water. Then Hermione and Miss Bradley swam over, and they sat in a row on the embankment. “Aren’t they terrifying? Aren’t they really terrifying?” said Gudrun. “Don’t they look saurian? They are just like great lizards. Did you ever see anything like Sir Joshua? But really, Ursula, he belongs to the primeval world, when great lizards crawled about” (Lawrence, 93).

This is, to put it mildly, a harsh representation, and Sir Joshua is a desiccated figure throughout the novel—rather sinister, constantly talking and annoying all the other characters. Lawrence and Russell had once been close allies, but had had a bitter falling out by the time that Lawrence wrote the novel. It should be noted that Russell gave as good as he got, referring to Lawrence’s views as fascistic and Lawrence himself as a hater of mankind.

Other Bloomsbury writers were a mite less cruel but still saw Russell as a figure of fun – earnest, loquacious, somewhat ridiculous but above all satyr-like in his approach to women. In T.S. Eliot’s 1918 poem “Mr. Apollinax”, for instance, we read:

When Mr. Apollinax visited the United States
 His laughter tinkled among the teacups.
 I thought of Fragilion, that shy figure among the birch-trees,
 And of Priapus in the shrubbery
 Gaping at the lady in the swing. (Eliot, 24).

This was written, it should be noted, around the time that Russell began a flirtation (and reputedly an affair) with Eliot's wife, Vivienne, as depicted in the 1994 film *Tom and Viv*, starring the actor Nickolas Grace as a rather predatory Russell – Priapus indeed. Yet Eliot and Russell (unlike Lawrence and Russell) seemed to have remained on good terms, and both would eventually receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Speaking of movies, Russell is also depicted in Derek Jarman's 1993 *Wittgenstein* by the actor Michael Gough and in Matthew Brown's 2016 film *The Man Who Knew Infinity* (about the Indian mathematician Ramanujan's difficult time at Cambridge during the First World War) by the actor Jeremy Northam. And Russell appears, as himself, in the Indian movie *Aman*, made in 1967, in which a young Indian doctor visits him in his London home for advice about dealing with nuclear weapons. It's hard to say how well Russell acquits himself as an actor, since his words are drowned out by Hindi-language narration, but it is fascinating to see him, holding forth in his living room, at age 95.

Perhaps the most amusing of all the literary versions of Russell may be found in Aldous Huxley's 1912 book *Crome Yellow*, where he appears as the character Mr. Scogan. Set during a weekend frolic among people very like the Bloomsbury set, the novel introduces the character thusly:

Next to Mary a small gaunt man was sitting, rigid and erect in his chair. In appearance Mr. Scogan was like one of those extinct bird-lizards of the Tertiary. His nose was beaked, his dark eye had the shining quickness of a robin's. But there was nothing soft or gracious or feathery about him. The skin of his wrinkled brown face had a dry and scaly look; his hands were the hands of a crocodile. His movements were marked by the lizard's disconcertingly abrupt clockwork speed; his speech was thin, fluty, and dry. Henry Wimbush's school-fellow and exact contemporary, Mr. Scogan looked far older and, at the same time, far more youthfully alive than did that gentle aristocrat with the face like a grey bowler. Mr. Scogan might look like an extinct saurian (Huxley, 10).

Like Sir Joshua, there is yet another comparison to a lizard (one wonders how many of Russell's other contemporaries thought of him in saurian terms). And like Mr. Apollinax, Mr. Scogan is also a priapic figure, as he tries to seduce the innocent (or so she seems) young Mary:

"It has become customary for serious young women, like Mary, to discuss, with philosophic calm, matters of which the merest hint would have sufficed to

throw the youth of the sixties into a delirium of amorous excitement. It is all very estimable, no doubt. But still”—Mr. Scogan sighed.—“I for one should like to see, mingled with this scientific ardour, a little more of the jovial spirit of Rabelais and Chaucer.”

“I entirely disagree with you,” said Mary. “Sex isn’t a laughing matter; it’s serious.”

“Perhaps,” answered Mr. Scogan, “perhaps I’m an obscene old man. For I must confess that I cannot always regard it as wholly serious.”

“But I tell you...” began Mary furiously. Her face had flushed with excitement. Her cheeks were the cheeks of a great ripe peach.

“Indeed,” Mr. Scogan continued, “it seems to me one of few permanently and everlastingly amusing subjects that exist. Amour is the one human activity of any importance in which laughter and pleasure preponderate, if ever so slightly, over misery and pain” (Huxley, 72).

While in many ways just as off-putting as Sir Joshua or Mr. Apollinax, Mr. Scogan is a more good-natured caricature who is genuinely amusing, and the reader looks forward to his various intrusions into the text. Scogan provides a great deal of fun whenever he appears. For instance, at the end of the novel, in order to debunk the craze of spiritualism that has swept over the partygoers, Scogan dresses up as a gypsy woman and manages to fool everyone with sly prognostications about the future.

As with Eliot, Russell stayed on good terms with Huxley, although the two did seem to enjoy needling each other. (Russell once remarked that one could predict Huxley’s subject of conversation by knowing which volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* he’d been reading.)

One final rather unexpected Russellian connection with popular culture—which readers of *The Spokesman* will appreciate—has had much more long-lasting relevance than the above examples: Russell’s involvement with the peace symbol. As was mentioned in the allusion to Robert Crumb earlier, Russell was an active participant in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The logo for CND was designed in 1958 by Gerald Holtom (1914-1985), a well-known British artist. Using the semaphore symbols for N and D (“Nuclear Disarmament”), the logo soon became the international symbol for peace itself. Russell was an admirer of Holtom’s work and a strong supporter of the use of his symbol, so while he didn’t create it (as some have mistakenly believed) he certainly played an important role in popularizing it. In 1961, for instance, Russell broke with CND after finding it too non-confrontational. Some members

“proposed a Gandhian method of protest—non-violent civil disobedience. Bertrand Russell agreed, resigned from the CND, and became president of the newly formed Committee of 100 against Nuclear War” (Kolsbun, 46).

On February 18, 1961 Russell and his wife Edith, along with a group of prominent peace activists including the actress Vanessa Redgrave, staged a sit-in at London’s Ministry of Defence. They were photographed under a giant banner stating “Committee of 100 Action for Life” which was proudly festooned with four large peace symbols. The photo—as we would put it today—went viral, and the rest is history. How interesting that Bertrand Russell, himself a symbol of rationality, should have also been instrumental in popularizing one of the world’s most iconic symbols. All he was saying was give peace a chance.

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For further examples of Russell in Popular Culture please see Rick Stapleton’s 2018 article “100 Years of Bertrand Russell in Literature and Film” in the *Hamilton Arts and Letters 10th Anniversary Issue*, Issue 11, No. 1, online at: https://samizdatpress.typepad.com/hal_magazine_issue_eleven/bertrand-russell-in-literature-and-film-by-rick-stapleton-2.html.

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