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The new millennium: Facades and duplicities

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Abstract
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The New Millennium

Facades and duplicities

Its second year not even finished, the third millennium has already revealed one of its greatest fracture points in the form of a spectacular catastrophe: the destruction of one of capitalism’s most powerful architectural symbols, the World Trade Centre in New York.

For me, if 1 January 2000 represented anything, it was capitalism’s global ascendancy. From an Anglo-American perspective, the origins of the new millennium’s market renaissance have their roots in 1979, when the British people turned their backs on socialism and voted in the radical conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. Across the Atlantic the US electorate, following its own political momentum, voted in the Reagan administration, creating a welfare state for corporations on a scale never before seen. In the Australia of the 1980s the Labor Party, the traditional defenders of the workers, turned sharply Right, and embraced the brave new world of free trade. By the year 2000, the stage was set for the new capitalist millennium. Labour markets had been ‘flexibilised’, tariff barriers had been brought down, the global market had been welded into shape by the IMF, the WTO and NAFTA. The transnational corporations were now free to roam the globe at will, and roam they did, becoming major economies in their own right and dwarfing all but the largest nation states. The future seemed fairly settled, with companies such as Monsanto, NewsCorp and Nike now firmly at the helm of spaceship earth.

On the morning of 12 September my partner woke me at 5.30 a.m. She had been up feeding our three-month-old son and listening to the radio. He played with his favourite toy octopus as she stood in the bedroom doorway and said: “The World Trade Centre in New York has been blown up.” Her words seemed completely unbelievable. I was taken aback, annoyed to have been woken up out of deep sleep, and grizzled: “What did you wake me up to tell me that for?” A minute later I was glued to the TV screen, where I more or less remained for the next two days. I watched over and over again the hijacked jets puncture the side of the buildings like parodies of Hollywood special effects. I watched the balls of flame roll up the glass and steel facades. I watched the collapse of the towers as each floor fell on the next with unbelievable precision. In 1997, I had been up to the observation deck of one of those towers. I tried to imagine what it must have been like to stand on the top floor and plunge to my death on a cloud of vaporised steel and concrete. It was impossible.

For the past ten years I have been working on a series of novels titled *Capital*. The first, *Capital, Volume One* was published in Sydney in 1997, and in London the year after. The second part, *Capital, Volume One, Part Two*, is nearing completion. In these novels I am trying to depict the effect of the increasing penetration of market forces into everyday life. My two main sources of inspiration are Marx’s *Capital*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. What interests me about Marx is how he tries to create a system that captures the very movement of capitalism itself by using the most banal examples imaginable: bushels of corn, bolts of cloth, lengths of steel. What interests me about Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the paradigmatic novel of the everyday, and perhaps the ultimate example of literary modernism at its most apolitical, is that Leopold Bloom is not only the cuckolded husband of Molly Bloom, but also a seller of local advertising. Following on in this literary tradition, it is out of the fabric of everyday life, its humdrum settings and anxieties, that I am constructing my own rendering of contemporary capitalism.

The destruction of the World Trade Centre is not an everyday event: quite the opposite. But thanks to...
the mass media, thanks to our increasing addiction to it, its destruction has penetrated into the fabric of everyday life and will be part of our thoughts for a long time to come. And, having taken up its unique place there, it makes us think about the everyday in new ways. The main events in my novel are usually what I would call acts of minor repression, the small betrayals and compromises we are forced to make to get by. These acts of compromise seem to become ever more frequent the more we allow market practices to dictate how we live. In the chapter of my novel titled ‘Penny at JobClub’, my heroine has to humour her unemployed clients, who desperately want to believe they may be eligible for jobs they have no hope of getting. She has to teach them to use a form of computer technology, a Job Access Terminal, whose main function is to get them in and out of scraps of poorly paid work as quickly as possible. She has to undergo an evaluation conducted by her boss so that she can continue her casualised employment; the answers she is forced to give the antithesis of her personal beliefs. In short, she has to do the two things that contemporary capitalism seems to force everyone to do a little more everyday: lie and smile at the same time. And lie and smile not only to others, but to herself as well.

It would be naive to think that this kind of duplicity is unique to the world of free enterprise. When, in Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Tomas’s colleagues beg him to sign his confession, they are simply advising him to do what they did when faced with the demands of a despotic regime: to sacrifice appearances in the hope that the inner core goes untouched. In Gogol’s Dead Souls, a somewhat earlier example, we see that the Russian serf-based society of the nineteenth century also had its own brand of duplicity, beautifully illustrated by the novel’s anti-hero, Chichikov, who uses a blend of unserviceable charm and fawning deference to lie his way to prosperity. Thus the novel clearly shows us that not only is duplicity a common feature of human nature, but that it can be employed for any number of ethically complex reasons.

But what perhaps is unique to the duplicity of contemporary capitalism is the kind of irony required to maintain a facade of weightless optimism. It is a curious form of irony, one that can be summed up in the slogan ‘service with a smile’. Full allegiance to this creed creates a cynicism without rancour, a virulently positive team spirit based, paradoxically, on personal self-advancement. Frederic Jameson sums it up well in his seminal essay on postmodernism where he describes contemporary irony as blank, as characterised by a dry, soundless laughter, although I would have such laughter emerging from a dazzling, perfectly vacant smile.

What also perhaps is unique to contemporary capitalism is the triumph of the facade. It is no longer simply a matter of living in a society where what you think doesn’t matter as long as you toe the line. Things have gone much further than that. In the free market you can have all the inner life you want. Inner lives are good, they’re great for business, as long as they can be externalised and turned into products. And, as the increased commodification of everyday life has shown, there isn’t much that can’t be. All that contemporary capitalism asks is that you find a way of transforming the inner into the outer, of transforming drives and desires into flows of profit. Therein lies the path to prosperity, the way to maximum material comfort. If you can do this, you will be at one with a culture that is all surface, all facade, where the greatest feeling of belonging comes from meshing yourself, your entire self, within the circuits of commodity turnover.

Since the World Trade Centre – the very epitome of the triumphalist capitalist facade – has been reduced to rubble, its occupants murdered by unknown assassins, a shock wave has gone through this endlessly extended surface, and through the circuits of turnover that course through it. This shock wave is represented by the biggest stock-market loss since the Great Depression. The fixed grins born of ‘service with a smile’ have become forced and strained, and the unbounded optimism of ‘have a nice day’ now resounds with something sinister, something dissonant and atonal. Since the towers came crashing down to earth we once again have been reminded that the everyday acts we involve ourselves in – as producers in the workplace, as consumers in the shopping malls – stopped being innocent a long time ago, and are caught up in social processes that may deliver the material comfort we in the West demand, but at a personal cost we stubbornly refuse to acknowledge.

Anthony Macris teaches at the University of Wollongong. In 2001 he represented Australia at the 38th Belgrade International Meeting of Writers. This piece is from his Plenary Presentation.