

Nice Life

McKenzie Wark muses on Tokyo, the postmodern city.

Tokyo is a strange yet uncannily familiar city. Much of the surface of daily life there seems remarkably familiar, distinguished only by slight oddities of detail or nuance. It is possible to find yourself remarkably at home, there as anywhere. Tokyo is a city exactly like any other because it is a city made in the image of capital.

Money made these highways, subways, department stores, apartments. Money advertises its way of life and its values on the television and the billboards and magazines, just like it does anywhere else.

So much so that if there is one thing any tourist can glean for her or himself in Tokyo, it is some glimmer of insight into the universal feature of this life made by money, 'this nice life', as a Tokyo subway advert so succinctly puts it. Living in Sydney, one doesn't notice too much how the language and style of the commodity saturates and infects every and any pore of everyday life. Here in Tokyo, this omnipresence of commerce strikes a slightly unfamiliar note. The trick is to use this oddness, this peculiarity as the key, not to some bizarre inscrutable Japanese otherness, but to unlock what is so familiar yet so strange about living in any city where the spectacle of the commodity has grown to cover the whole landscape.

The first noticeable thing about everyday life in Tokyo is how much English there is in the advertising. Often the product appears with a name in English lettering. Pocari Sweat is a soft drink. Gyro-Sneaker is a moped. Apa-man is a magazine all about apartment living, with a classified section. Earth is a groovy restaurant which serves everything on paper plates. My personal favourite is

a brand of luggage called Urban non-slip yeti snow net. The oddness of these labels is intentionally unintentional, one suspects. The copywriters and marketing strategists here are not stupid. They are not trying to mimic or ape the West, in that sad and powerless way one finds in the Third World. They know these brands do not make English sense and they don't give a damn. If it evokes the right sounds, if the letters look nice together, then why not? They have broken the bonds which tie English to reservoirs of lived experience in the West, and set it free for other tasks and connections.

This practice extends to whole sentences of copy splashed over products ranging from stationery to soft drinks. Stationery often has some elaborate texts on it, conveying a quite particular range of associations. Rapture: "I have my own favourite things to do I want every day to be full of excitement, totally happy and rewarding." Mint Land: "Country life is simple and uncomplicated." "Mister Summer Time in paradise." "Ghingham Check Village." My personal favourite, Donguri Club: "This is the nature." Although Wood-song: "We are always cheerful shrewd and naughty pleasure. So happy" is hard to beat. Here the old syntax of English appears to be replaced by a new one which disrupts the old order and recombines familiar words in unfamiliar ways around a logic of the commodity.

The images conveyed here are of another space, another time, another life. These texts go on stationery for schoolkids cramming for some of the most competitive exams in the world, so it is not surprising that they conjure up an image of a better life. What is odd is that English is stripped of the usual, everyday associations which a native speaker might find in it. English is purified of its mundane uses and senses, and emerges in the copywriter's hands as the language of a utopian realm, an 'elsewhere', far

away, where one can indeed say "I have my favourite things" and where "we are always cheerful". This language promises shared experience precisely because it is thoroughly privatised. It addresses the individual consumer, but promises friendship. The friendship on offer, however, is the friendly commodity, the nice objects out of which a nice life is accumulated, rather than actually lived.

The spectacle of this other space, promised by these English slogans, is a place of communion, where an unspoilt kind of togetherness is celebrated. A togetherness unspoilt by divisions and differences, where competition is banished. One slogan reduces this to a touchingly knowing kind of naivete: "Boy and Girl are having a picnic. They sit on the grass to eat their lunch and drink their milk. Picnics are fun." In a city where practically everything has been mown down in the name of the expansion and reproduction of capital, crushed underfoot by concrete and glass and cubic miles of garbage, this longing for another world of friendship and picnics is not hard to understand. In an urban space where almost everything has been sacrificed to accumulation, picnics and friendships are among the lost things projected into another realm. Nice life is somewhere over the rainbow.

By participating in the competition, the pointlessly long hours of work, the systematic subordination of desires to the domination of work, these lost things are promised a return. Commodities become the bearers of these lost values and feelings. A cigarette is not just a smoke; in the case of Mild-7 it is "an encounter with tenderness". As the privileged language of the commodity, English becomes the lexicon through which the commodity becomes associated with otherness, with other places, with a perfect realm, elsewhere. There is a blurring of the line here between the pure other space of the perfect commodity and the other place of travel, of an 'overseas' where leisure is plentiful, where life can be fun. The rainbow is a neon one, over



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the threshold of the vast and luxurious department stores, homes of the nice life. The other place mapped out by the nice life is still within the territory of the commodity.

Perhaps this accounts for the seeming oddness of Japanese tourism. Advertisements for All-Nippon Airlines ski resorts call them hyper-resorts. They promise "hyper-skiing" on perfect slopes, "hyper-fashion" in designer ski-wear, "hyper-staying" in fabulous hotels, with even "hyper-history" thrown in as well. It is as if the advertising tries to make a seven-day package holiday actually live up to this image of the commodity utopia. Stranger still is seeing Sydney advertised in exactly the same terms as a little capsule in time, a tiny perfection

carved out of dominated time. With so much time commanded by capital, with so little free time to oneself, capital takes it upon itself to make that thin slice of free time even more perfect, even more memorable, even nicer than it would be if left merely free.

There is no 'outside' to capital and its culture here, no hint of that romantic strain which one finds in the West which would resist the commodification of everyday life. The art and criticism which we take for granted, based on the premise that areas of life ought to be exempted from the law of capital, is simply not in evidence. This is not to say there isn't fantastic art and culture in Tokyo—there surely is. But it does mean that the sources of cultural dynamism and change are dif-

ferent, and radically so. One never experiences a contradiction between the rule of capital and something outside it, for here there appears to be nothing outside it. Even 'traditional' culture seems mostly a manufactured artefact. One experiences instead an impossible relation within, between the mundane production of things and the consumption of images promising far more than mere things can ever deliver.

Not having spaces 'outside' capital in the way that is familiar in the West, it is as if the culture of capital divided itself and created its own image of the other from within, as a kind of self-balancing spin-off. Thus, one gets the language and the culture of work and domination, on the one hand; and on the other a far more pervasive and extensive language of advertising and promotion which is utopian in a much stronger sense than in the West, be-



cause the nice life bears almost the full burden of promising redemption, purity, peace, contentment. One is encouraged to find all of these things within the commodity realm, not without. English seems to be one of the privileged languages of this other, with its associations with other places. The language of beautiful things and a pure, thin gossamer fabric of English promise a land fit for dreams. The value expelled from everyday life and everyday language reappears in another realm, in a foreign tongue.

A TV ad for a camera shows the magic product descending through fairy-floss clouds, as if from heaven. It alights gracefully on a pillow beside the head of a sleeping beauty. She wakes up as it lands and smiles. One can be sure that the average television viewer in Tokyo is not so unsophisticated as to take all this at face value. The answer to the pretty girl's dreams

is a camera! Yet the mere fact that the ad exists at all is a testament to a quite different relation here between the product and culture, a kind of pornographic intimacy not possible in the puritanical West. The irony of the promise being redeemed in a shiny new product has somehow been normalised to a far greater degree here than anywhere 'else' in the West.

It is possible, however, to imagine that the poetics of Japanese advertising is an image of what English will be like for us too some day. If the commodity realm swallows up and 'privatises' all other forms of culture and experience, then English here too might lose its range of associations, its reservoir of resourcefulness. It might become a pure language of the commodity for us too, with its cheerfully impossible promises, stripped of all discordant ironies and cynicisms. We too might be able to entertain the feeling that nice life really does refer to something nice, if unreal, rather than immediately suspecting the expression of hiding something in its blissfully inane surface. Perhaps language is already like this for us, but our intimacy with the babble of commerce whispering in our ear has us spellbound.

Many television ads feature stunningly beautiful locations, images of an idyllic world, somewhere out beyond the horizon. This idyllic other place is the place of the perfect product. All the brutal and boring industry of Japan, all the tedium and unrelieved greyness of Tokyo has as their object, their symbolic other place, a balmy,

palm-shaded other nice life place. Just as that industry stakes a claim to own those other spaces, buying up prime real estate with the profits of generations of overwork, over-production, surplus labour, relieved only by successful export drives, so too the individual who was a means to that powerful end is persuaded she or he too can have part of it. A small part in the shape of the perfect mass-produced object, exquisitely wrapped. Or a small slice of time in paradise before heading home again, armed with a thousand photographs which prove that this other exists and that yes, I too was there. "The world is full of mysteries indeed" as a child's notepad has it. Not the mysteries of the exotic other culture, somewhere else, but the mysteries of the global culture of the commodity we are all swaddled within.

Nevertheless, this feeling of being totally within the space of commodity culture is stronger here in Tokyo than anywhere else. This is not entirely a demoralising experience. Here, as anywhere, people make beautifully different uses of the resources the modern world dumps on their doorstep, drawing the art of living out of hand-me-down tricks and games for getting by. In this respect the games young people play with pop culture are a fabulous spectacle here. All the signs and values of Western pop are all on show, but the limits imposed in the West on this or that totemic icon are missing. Everything from hippy to punk is reduced to beautiful, pure style. In the nightclubs on Saturday night and in Harajuku park on Sunday morning people make their own collective experience within the gap between the signs of commodity culture and their indeterminate meanings.

The spectacle of the nice life can strip language of its reservoir of meanings, leaving language free to be drafted into the service of the banality of the commodity. On the other hand, it also leaves it free for new collectivities, new micro-masses dancing on the folds in the map of the all expansive spectacle. In the shadow of the nice life, they redefine the meaning and experience and sensuality of the surface of the spectacle for themselves.

West Wind

WA doesn't just produce our best Royal Commissions, but also some of our best writing.
Jeremy Eccles reports.

The prospect of a visit to the annual Festival of Perth refined my thinking; once again I would be seeing important Aboriginal theatre (a reading of Sally *My Place* Morgan's first play), and Writers' Week at the Fremantle Arts Centre—entitled *Old Lands New Writings*--would have a strong local Black presence. Does the West really dominate Black Australian writing?—and, if so, how had this come about? For surely NSW Aborigines have had the longest exposure to White writing, Queensland Aborigines had more to be bitter about, and NT Blacks are numerous enough to set their own ground rules. But it was all happening out West.

True, there had been the poetry of Kath Walker (now Oodgeroo Noonuccal) on Moreton Island; and, in theatre, NSW had seen a sort of flowering in the 70s when Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* was followed by Bobby Merritt's *Cakeman* and Gerald Bostock's *Here Comes the Nigger*. But what then? *Cakeman* may have gone on television and to America, but it never made it to Sydney's mainstream theatres. The odd community theatre piece came from Bob Maza, a Black Theatre building existed in Redfern but had virtually no content, and the next play about Black issues in the 80s was written by a White man, Tony Strachan. And even then, with a story set in Queensland and productions in Sydney and Melbourne, they had to get actors from WA to perform it.

Meanwhile, every state capital has enjoyed visits from the plays of Jack Davis (putting him in the Williamson class), sung along with the music to *Bran Nue Dae*, bought and read *My*

Place (making it one of the best selling books in Australian history) and marvelled at the idea of a publishing house like Magabala Books being set up in an apparently God-forsaken place like Broome by Aborigines, for Aboriginal books. What is it in the sunlight over there?

There must be some intangible factor that has created the phenomenon—a factor that's harder to put one's finger on than the more practical factors which have simply made it easier for Black writing to reach the marketplace and be appreciated.

To start with the most obvious. The 15-year-old Fremantle Arts Centre Press was less interested in international or even Australian literature than in stories uniquely from West Australia, which it then saw as having the potential to become international literature. Early on, a woman dismissed as quirky by OE (Over East) publishers came to them to be told that they liked her quiriness. Elizabeth Jolley was discovered. Later on, a pile of scrawled-over tissue paper tested the limits to which a publisher might go even further.

Bert Facey's *Fortunate Life* was not an attractive prospect. It ran as a single sentence from start to finish, it covered every conceivable inch of the tissue paper, and it was twice as long as the published version. Only by accident did the Press's Ray Coffee even dip into it. "Thank God I smelt some interest," he recalls now. "And thank God I realised that here was an instinctive oral story-teller who was, in fact, easy to divide into chapters. But cutting it all back still took time—with all changes checked out with him...latterly, when Facey's eyesight failed, by reading them all to him." Not only did the Press have a hit, but selling the film rights to local script-writer Ken Kelso led him to push over to Ray Coffee two chapters of a book started by an old schoolmate—Sally Morgan.

Morgan, who's only now turned to theatre, had been inspired to start the great literary quest for her Aboriginal origins by the success of former poet, now playwright, Jack Davis. For both, the Nyoongah Aboriginal community of the South West and, indeed, the population of the state as a whole, was small enough for news of anyone's fame to have a quick impact. And Davis, beginning with the local production of *Kullark* in 1979, had quickly climbed to fame with the first of a basically autobiographical quartet of plays, *The Dreamers*, in 1982. This was picked up by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust for a national tour. Subsequent plays began their life at the West Australian Theatre Company, and were often presented initially by the Festival of Perth before going on tour, but were controlled by Jack Davis' own Marli Biyol Company. This is a pattern that has also worked for Broome's Jimmy Chi with the musical *Bran Nue Dae*.

The director for all of these shows has been Andrew Ross—who is white and not local to WA but is clearly appreciated for his "collaboration and friendship", just as Jack Davis describes it in his dedication to the published text of *Kullark*. Ross raises the question of whether Aboriginal writers are best fostered by having a separate industry structure (like the Black Theatre of Redfern) or not. "In WA, they've gone in with mainstream companies, which I feel are more flexible and less affected by ideology than the fringe. And then, they've developed organisations like Marli Biyol and the *Bran Nue Dae* Company which don't need the resources to actually produce the shows, but specifically look after the interests of the Black artists in making arrangements with presenters all over the country—even abroad."

Magabala Books, on the other hand, may be the exception that reveals the future. It has an entirely Aboriginal management committee, and an increasing number of Black staff. But, as its White editor, Peter Bibby, points out: "We are there to work for Black culture—encouraging oral historians by bringing their stories faithfully to

print and helping to keep languages alive by bilingual publishing. If there's a spin-off in terms of helping White Australia understand Aboriginal Australia, so much the better. Personally, I think that Black oral story-telling is as important as the explosion of campfire stories that occurred in the 1880s with Henry Lawson, Tom Collins and Banjo Paterson. I compare it in my own mind to hearing the voice of the miller or the pardoner still when reading Chaucer. And I think it will be important to the development of language in Australia. But that's not primarily what Magabala is about."

Magabala has been around since 1987 and it's already attracting manuscripts from the rest of Australia. But in WA there's still a sense that both the history and geography of Aboriginality are much closer than in the rest of the country. As Ray Coffee explains it: "the history of exploitation runs into the present time. Until Alan Bond and the entrepreneurs came along, the squatocracy still dominated WA life—right into the heart of Perth. And of course the pastoralists were in touch directly with the subject matter of *My Place*

and Jack Davis' plays. Older women who jumped up to cheer the opening of *Bran Nue Dae* a year ago probably grew up on stations, and were just enjoying a sense of justice being achieved at last."

"Not that they see history repeating itself among the fringe dwellers of Middle Swan or at the Black Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. Only distancing through history is actually manageable. But some of the old pastoralists are now trying to claim exotic backgrounds like the Drake-Brockmans in *My Place*. They all want their Sally Morgans!" For all these people—Black and White alike—Perth was and is just a big country town; a place to visit, rather than a cultural beacon dragging them in and keeping them. "There's a regional embrace...a sense of country rather than city," is how Coffee defines it. "And I think that's made it easier for Aborigines to identify."

Certainly Mudrooroo Nyoongah (formerly Colin Johnson) would seem to agree. He even claims that Perth is the ultimate post-modern city: "just look at Forrest Place!". As he also claims post-modernity for his recently

published novel, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Mudrooroo will surely feel at home when he returns to the West soon. Having founded the Aboriginal Writers, Oral Literature and Dramatists Association with Jack Davis, and pioneered Aboriginal literature courses at Murdoch University, Mudrooroo is definitely part of the Black writing scene in WA, even though he's not lived there for years. "I think we Nyoongah in the South West always had the advantage of the influence of traditional culture coming in from the North West and Kalgoorlie. That myriad of influences simply made our contemporary culture more dynamic."

Significantly, it was the North West and the goldfields that inspired earlier white literature in the state. The Duracks, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, even Ion Idriess and Ton Ronin—all were inspired by rural and often Black Western Australia to write their best work. Now the compliment is being returned with interest.

JEREMY ECCLES is a Sydney film and theatre critic.

Reason and Imagination in Modern Culture

The early modern period fragmented the world of experience - and ways of conceptualising this experience - in three directions: the aesthetic, the rational and the ethical. But underlying this fragmentation is a broader and deeper division between reason and imagination. The aim of this conference is to present competing contemporary perspectives that explore this division and its impact on modern culture.

Speakers include:

Cornelius Castoriadis, Ferenc Feher, Agnes Heller, Axel Honneth, Peter Hohendahl, Martin Jay, Niklas Luhman.



Thesis Eleven

Dates:

Tuesday 6th - Friday 9th August, 1991

Place:

Sir John Monash Business Centre,
5th Floor, 253 Flinders Lane
Melbourne.

Registration:

\$90, \$45 (students, unemployed)
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