

*One day in hell a funny  
thing happened ...*

*Bitumen rose up out of the  
cosmos and covered the  
land ...*

*And we put on shoes to pro-  
tect our feet ...*

## Yes we can

The poor were present in all known societies, but today's poor are perhaps in more trouble than the poor of yesteryear since, for the first time in history, they have no social function to perform and are for that reason cast outside the scheme of affairs falling into the remit of social action, and beyond the limits of social tasks and societal ambitions. In other words, the perpetuation of poverty no longer offends the sentiments of justice ...

(Zygmunt Bauman & Keith Tester,  
*Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*,  
2001, p. 66)

Yes we can! On this day, as I put the finishing touches on *The Ridiculous Madman*, the world has stopped. It has stopped to witness history in the making. Today, 5 November 2008, Barack Obama has just been declared the winner of the Presidential Election, thereby becoming the 44<sup>th</sup> President—and first black President—of the United States of America.

This text has explored Zygmunt Bauman's ideas on 'vagabondage' in a postmodern world. It has imagined the plight of 'flawed' and 'failed' consumers in contemporary capitalist culture while drawing on autobiographical 'chronicles' to feed its journey. It has shown the extremes of neo-liberal ideology at work—admittedly an extreme but nonetheless revealing picture of the absurdity and horror faced by those dumped and exiled by mainstream society for not having the necessary resources to participate in consumer war (people like the younger me). The losers of the neo-liberal game are

literally and figuratively ‘exiled’ to the Wastelands of capitalist society, to the dumps and ghettos of consumer culture, to the fringes of humanity and beyond. They are the ‘others’ – the dreaded ‘bogeymen’ and ‘bagladies’ of the nether world. They are the lunatics that undermine the order and stability upon which our civic madness rests. They are the freaks that turn to ‘abnormal’ and ‘unacceptable’ forms of solidarity and belief to survive the nightmares that plague them. They are the effigies we so passionately yearn to burn.

The ridiculous madman is one such victim. He is a failed consumer erased and exiled from mainstream society and hunted by the winners of the neo-liberal rat-race (the ‘tourists’ of Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’). He is also hunted and haunted by his own ‘govern/mentality’ (in the Foucauldian sense) – the inner demons which stalk the downtrodden and have them blaming themselves for the hardships they endure: a psychological ‘sleight of hand’ deployed by the privileged to absolve themselves of moral and ethical responsibility for those who succumb to the war of ‘all-against-all’ (Bauman calls this floating of moral responsibility ‘adiaphorization’). In a privatised and deregulated *non*-society there are no more safety nets to catch the fallen. What awaits the poor and discarded is *hell on earth*. The invisible hand of the market throttles them to within inches of their lives, or crushes them under a single blow. It is little wonder that the shunned and spurned turn their eyes to the heavens, hoping against hope that the hand of God will reach down from the abyss and lift them from the gutter and carry them away. That the

hand of God will slap away the invisible hand of the market and wrestle the beast to the ground. The beast that daily beats them.

But today, the day I finish this tale of woebegone, the day Barack Obama rallies the American people to rebuild collective hope and social responsibility, the day the world stopped, we may in fact be witnessing the death of neo-liberalism. Reaganism and Thatcherism, in their most brutal and socially divisive forms, may have just been felled in the name of social solidarity. Something akin to the welfare state may appear again on planet earth, to soften the worst excesses of capitalist greed and vulture politics. Or so we can this day hope.

About a year ago I finished the first of my PhD texts on the very day that the Australian public also voted to end neo-liberalism and resurrect something akin to egalitarianism and a 'fair go' for all. It seems as soon as I write and complete a critique the world stops. And so while the universe is listening, I am writing.

For as long as we can articulate and share our hopes and dreams—our fears and nightmares; our tears and blood—there is the possibility that the world will change and a better day will dawn (aka, the modernist dream). A democracy *to come* is not only a Derridean dream, but a potential reality. There need not be forgotten people, forgotten places, and forgotten dreams. There need not be a market ruler and an ethos of savage individualism and social decay. The age of 'numerology' can be brought to an end, not with numbers, but with

love. We can build communities and societies and collective dreams. We can stand together rather than fall alone. We can rebuild the world and save us all.

Yes we can!

Do I think this text has succeeded? Yes and no. As an example of ‘pedagondage’ at work, as a drifting and touring learning journey, it has been a resounding success. New literacies, knowledges, and skills have been learned, and new ideas for the next project have emerged. As a coherent and compelling narrative, as a story, however, I’m not as convinced. I wanted a polyphonic, heteroglossic, hypertextual, and postmodern ‘memoir–dreaming,’ which I got. Has it lived up to my expectations? No. But as far as ‘arts-based’ and ‘practice-led’ research goes this is an adequate outcome: an outcome that recognises that it is *the journey*—not the destination—that matters most. The journey itself has given me a great deal—far more than the final product.

So: *What is it to research, teach, learn, live, and create using postmodern theories and practices in an otherwise back-to-basics neo-liberal age – within a system of education torn between the order-building certainties of modernity and the order-destroying uncertainties of post-modernity?* It is, if nothing else, a moral, ethical, and political challenge, a challenge that offers no final solutions or easy answers. It is, rather, an ongoing project and an ongoing question that never arrives or truly finishes. It is a challenge always already to

*come* and always already *to follow*. The day that we think we have finished, or think the question can be adequately asked or answered, is the day that we stop looking: the day that we give up trying to improve the *life-worlds* of those we share the world with and those we offer the world to. This text is NOT an answer to the impossible question; it is, instead, a series of meditations and reflections on the joys, horrors, and uncertainties of living and dreaming in a 'liquid modern' world using a range of theories and practices indicative of my age (both historically and biographically). There are no answers here – just more questions. *And why not?*

Andrew Miller  
(aka, the ridiculous madman)  
5 November 2008

Some of the dominant features of ... postmodern fiction include: temporal disorder; the erosion of the sense of time; a pervasive and pointless use of pastiche; a foregrounding of words as fragmenting material signs: the loose association of ideas; paranoia; and vicious circles, or a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse.

Barry Lewis, 'Postmodernism and Fiction,' in Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 2006, p. 113

... instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest. This distrust of totalising mechanisms extends even to the author; thus postmodern writers often celebrate chance over craft and employ metafiction to undermine the author's 'univocal' control (the control of only one voice). The distinction between high and low culture is also attacked with the employment of pastiche, the combination of multiple elements including subjects and genres not previously deemed fit for literature.

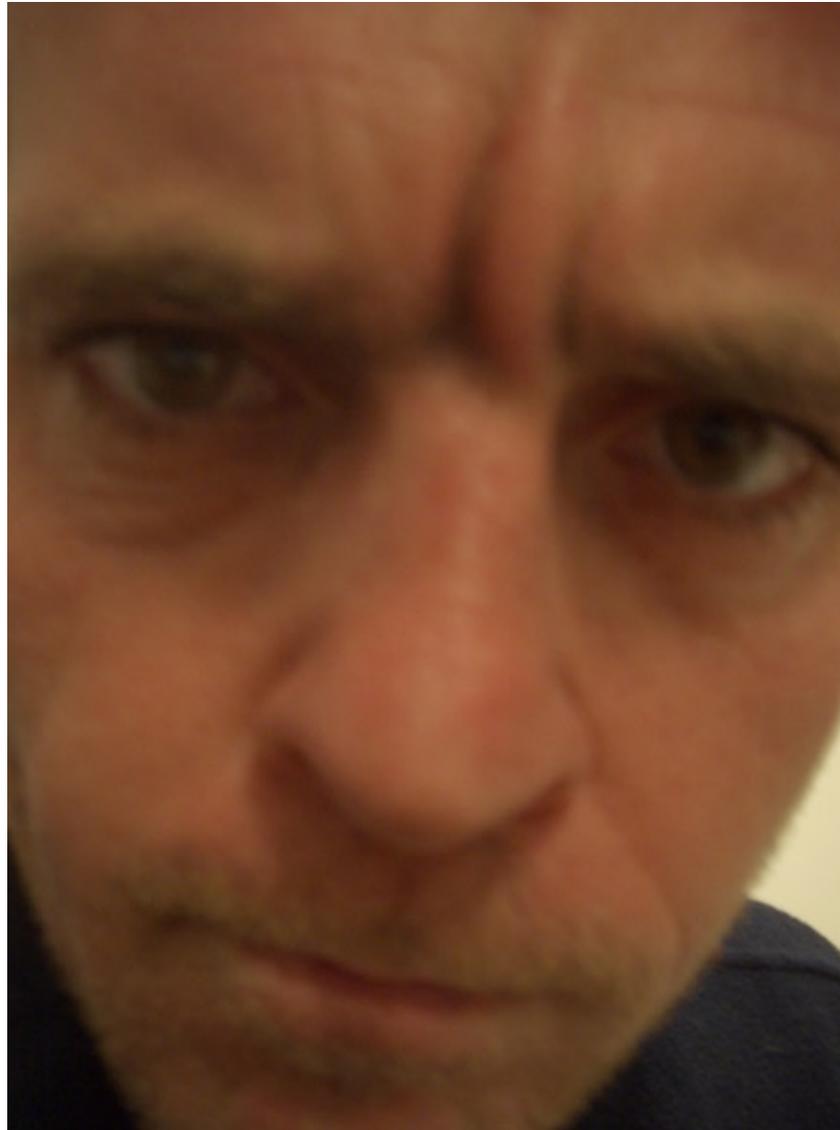
Wikipedia, 'Postmodern literature,' accessed 23 January 2008

*And Polo said: 'The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehensions: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.'*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972/1979, pp. 126-127

I have always believed that you do not measure the health of a society by GNP but by the condition of its worst off.

Zygmunt Bauman, *The Guardian*, November 12 2005



Andrew Miller, on one of his better days, 2006 (approx)