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## The novel, sense-making, and Mao

### **FEATURES**

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There was a in-joke floating around the University of Sydney when I was an arts student in the early 1980s that is telling of the times. It went something like this: Sydney has only one opera house, only one harbour bridge, but its university has two philosophy departments. One discipline, but two departments? Clearly, despite being friends of wisdom, these philosophers couldn't agree. Somewhere in the hushed halls of the university's sandstone towers, well before my time, some kind of schism had occurred, creating the Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy, and the Department of General Philosophy. Looking at the course offerings, even my naïve

undergraduate understanding could grasp the difference. Trad Mod was right-wing and conservative, and General was left-wing and progressive. In my first year, I decided to do subjects in both departments.

One of my tutors in Trad Mod was David Stove. He was nearing retirement, and I had no idea at the time he was one of the crusty warriors of the right who had been part of the raging debates that created the two departments (see James Franklin's 1999 recollection of this time in *Quadrant*). He ruled over us, his young charges, with an authoritative but benevolent eye. I liked him as a tutor. He didn't tolerate low standards, but his marking was reasonable. He wasn't at all objective, but then he didn't pretend to be. He also liked to entertain. One day, apropos of nothing, he produced a volume of Hegel, one of his favourite whipping boys. After reading for a minute or so, he snapped the book shut and gleefully declared it gibberish. Well, so much for German idealist philosophy.

Towards the end of his subject I had to make the final decision about which department I would study in. For some reason, I wanted Stove to know that I was defecting to the left, but couldn't think of a way to tell him. So I did one of those dumb, showy things undergraduate students are prone to do. I had a Mao cap I'd found for a dollar at an army surplus store. It seemed to be the real deal: it was dark green, had a short blunt bill and, above all, sported a nice red star above the forehead. I decided to wear it to Stove's last tute. I felt self-conscious walking across the quadrangle in it, and by the time I sat down in class, I felt like a total idiot. Yet taking it off was not an option: I was determined to make my statement. Stove noticed it immediately. He knew what I was saying. 'Typical,' he muttered in my general direction. Another one lost to the kindergarten left.

For the next two years I threw my lot in with the Marxists, feminists and poststructuralists. As things turned out, it wasn't quite home. I always knew I wanted to be a writer, not a philosopher, and politically engaged philosophers don't often have much time for novelists. But General Philosophy did seem to be the place where the big questions about society were being asked. While I hadn't yet formed any identity as a writer – in fact I had written next to nothing – I did have a sense of the kind of writer I wanted to be. I knew I wanted to be a writer who wrote about the world, and the world writ large.

There was a reason for the Mao cap, and it goes back to my childhood. Floating around our house from before I could remember was an English-language copy of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, or, to use its formal title, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. My father took sporadic interest in my political education from as

young as eight or so. He was never pushy: rather, he encouraged with a knowing air and a smile (here, read this, son, you'll find it interesting). It was the early 1970s, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, and Mao was in the media a lot at this time. John Lennon sang about him in a Beatles song. An American president, Richard Nixon, swam with him in their biggest river. When Gough Whitlam, ahead of other Western leaders, 'recognised' China, my father discussed it with me. 'You see, son, it won't be long,' he'd say optimistically. 'The world is turning socialist!' I didn't have much of an inkling of what he was talking about. I was still puzzling over the notion of how one country could not 'recognise' another.

I did try to read *The Little Red Book*, but couldn't make much sense of it. I was much more interested in it as an object. I loved the fire-engine red of the book's plastic jacket (precursor to the star on my Chairman Mao cap). And the iconic portrait of Mao, protected by a thin film of transparent paper as if he were some precious relic, never failed to impress me. From time to time, on hot summer afternoons when there was nothing better to do, I'd flick through it. There was much talk of the workers, the masses, fighting imperialism. There was something vaguely terrifying about it all. It spoke to a world utterly remote to the suburban sprawl of Brisbane, where I was growing up on a diet of *The Brady Bunch* and pinball. I lived in a capitalist country, my father continually reminded me. This was sheeted home by the fact that we had a fish and chip shop. We were business people. But we were business people reluctantly: a man had to make a living, provide for his family. When in Rome, do as the Romans do, was one of my father's favourite sayings. China, on the other hand, was communist, a world of the masses, of collectives led by a single figure who was the embodiment of the working people. This was the alternate universe my father wanted to establish in my mind, no matter how schematically. Somewhere above Australia, there were a billion people who, for the most part, lived without running water, electricity and, if I was to believe my Grade Seven history teacher, ate boiled eggs that were three months old. Today, some 40 years later, it's still hard for me to grasp this subliminal rupture in space and time the presence of this small red volume created. Tiny, compressed, it was a teeming world within a world, a reminder that not everyone lives the way we live, that the norms of our lives are created, provisional, subject to the vagaries of power and time.

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It's become a truism to say that literature, by telling stories, tells us who we are. Storytelling can do that for sure, by teasing out aspects of our lives we haven't quite explained to ourselves, or by confronting us with the more disagreeable parts of our history we need to be reminded of. But there can be a downside: the tendency, for example, to a parochial self-aggrandisement that a lazy national literature will

content itself with. Also, we shouldn't forget that literature can do things other than 'tell us who we are'. It can also tell us who we can be by exploring the possible, and it can tell us who others are by embracing other subjectivities through leaps of empathy and understanding. In short, literature should not restrict itself to telling us 'who we are', thereby running the risk of lapsing into the grand, reifying gesture of fixed identity, but also tell us about how we are constituted in the dynamic flux that is the world. The images of China I have related do not, of course, demonstrate any great understanding of that country, nor do they aspire to do so. Rather, they are about the kind of ruptures, disturbances and discontinuities that coalesce around such entities, about how such ruptures can become part of your life, and how they can extend your understanding of both your immediate world, and the wider world. Related to this is a notion I'd like to put forward, one that I hope advances a perspective that works against the kind of self-imposed limitations that can paralyse literature: a tendency for literature to over-identify itself with what qualifies as 'literary' at any given time, and in any given context.

I'd like to begin addressing this question of self-limiting approaches to the literary by making some general observations about what most novels try to do. Let's say that standard novelistic methods typically involve the following: there's usually the creation of characters who participate in a story, and arising out of the ensuing action will be a theme that speaks to an aspect of the human condition. These characters and their stories are usually anchored in time and place, and their dilemmas can be either of a personal nature, or a social nature, or some mixture of the two, with a kind of skewing towards either pole. The events will usually unfold in an approximation of chronological time (with some limited use of anachrony) and, in the case of fiction, the hypothetical nature of events will somehow be underwritten by the real.

We could call this entire endeavour not only a desire to tell stories but, more generally, a desire to make meaning. An approach from interdisciplinary narrative studies, for example, is that the act of narrative is a kind of sense-making. To consider this process in a somewhat empirical fashion, with all the reductiveness that the term implies, our lives are combinations of repetitions and random events. As raw experience these events are primary data. To make sense of these events, we need overarching sense-making structures that allow us to make meanings that identify themes, issues, problems, that we can then contemplate, act on, etc. And narrative, or story-making, is one way we can do this.

But literary sense-making, as distinguished from story-making more generally, does not necessarily obey a means-ends rationality, a process whereby we are definitively told 'who we are', or that demands there must be specific responses to particular

worldly problems (although I do think this is possible, if problematic). What literary sense-making predominantly does is create an artefact within a certain form that is rich in significant meanings. Literary sense-making problematises a set of themes or significant issues, and allows them to be critiqued by one another and the reader. Ideally, it allows the reader to make their own judgements and interpretations, ones that are contested, and thus lead to broader understandings of the world. The desire for sense-making is not simply about meaning-making in the sense of ordering the chaos of the world, but also a desire to create rich understandings of the things that trouble us, that inspire us, that move us. The domains of understanding can take various forms: the personal, the social, the cultural, the political, and so on.

As a practising novelist, the writer needs to select the tools and techniques, the language of form, they require to write their book. There are varying modes at their disposal, and these are largely determined by existing traditions, each emerging out of different cultural and national contexts. Within the tradition of the novel, I'd broadly identify two literary modes that are used to capture/imagine/embody the world: the modernist and realist traditions. (I've chosen these terms as a way of identifying core tendencies that have a useful summative power, but which in no way capture the sheer diversity of narrative practices, as indeed no set of categories could.)

In my view, what distinguishes realist and modernist modes is the role subjectivity plays in their epistemological orientation to the world. The tendency of modernism is to foreground the subject, to acknowledge that the apprehension of the world is an act of consciousness, and that consciousness is influenced not only by the vagaries of consciousness itself, but also the cognitive processes of individual subjects (see David Herman, 2009). The realist tradition is different in its orientation. On the formal level its primary goal is mimetic, the creation of illusionistic space and verisimilitude (as explicated by theorist such as Erich Auerbach and Peter Brooks). In realist representation, the balance is shifted away from consciousness, and to foregrounding a concrete world that is independent of mind, and that is somehow ontologically neutral. Now, paradoxically, realism can still use subjectivity to achieve this goal. In fact, it has harnessed subjectivity very effectively to do so. There is no more powerful mode of narration than that of the third-person subjective to create both illusionistic space and, on a more psychological level, the identification effect, the process by which the reader projects themselves into the story via a hero, and by proxy experiences the world of that hero.

Thus, I would argue, modernist and realist traditions are not necessarily a binary, but reconfigurations of a certain repertoire of techniques whereby different emphases create different effects. But despite these commonalities, there is a crucial epistemological difference. Realist literary discourses, by and large, do not problematise their own modes of representation. This is not necessarily a bad thing: there is no reason why they should do so, and realist discourses can achieve richness of narrative sense-making in their own ways, as recently evidenced in Frederic Jameson's recent *Antinomies of Realism*.

However, I would argue that some realist literary discourses, especially as they figure in contemporary publishing, have a tendency to orient themselves towards one-dimensional renderings of states of being, functioning as a static mirror held up to the world in a near Leninist, reflection-theory tradition, rather than in the more expansive, classical tradition instigated by Stendhal or Flaubert back in realism's nineteenth-century heyday. Certain stylistic aspects of realism – showing over telling, concrete simple sentences, chronological time, characterisation driven by the identification effect, act structures that are driven by conflict and punctuated by plot points, etc. – have now become the definition of what good writing is, rather than simply being recognised as one set of effective tools to create a narrative. In recent times the dominance of such techniques, I would argue, has become so great that it threatens the diversity of the delicate eco-system that constitutes a vibrant literary culture. To a large degree realism has become the only literary language that is allowed to be spoken, silencing all others.

On the other hand, the modernist tendency to subjectivity can also be seen to have its limitations. By tying literary sense-making to processes of consciousness in general and to individual consciousness in particular, it can be argued that interpretations of the world are limited by the narrowness of a particular perspective, accompanied by the misguided solipsism that an emphasis on individual subjectivity can engender. But an argument can also be made for an opposite tendency. By recognising the particularity of individual consciousness, of the biases and limitations of that consciousness, the writer working in the modernist tradition can find themselves trying harder to develop conceptual machinery that grasps that complexity of the world. In contrast, a novelistic consciousness informed by simplistic realist discourses is one that believes there are easy universals ready to be drawn on. According to this approach, the themes and matters that we wish to grasp in our writing are like Plato's perfect forms, pre-established, and our manifestations of them copies that aspire to their perfection. The more accurate the rendering of these universals, the better the writer.

Thus, there is a certain unique value in foregrounding the role of subjectivity in literary representation. By doing so, the possibility is opened up that it is the interpretative power of the narrating subject that will determine how rich the creation of the novelistic world is, and thus provide nuanced and sophisticated renderings of the world informed by a range of interpretative discourses. To take an historical example: when André Breton erected the bridge of Freudian theory between science and literature and created surrealism, he established a method that demonstrated how literary consciousness could be expanded by a discourse external to it – psychoanalysis – in order to grasp aspects of the world that, up until that point, hadn't been considered by literature in particular, or representation in general.

However, I should note that I don't want to give the impression that an aesthetic tradition deriving from modernism (and into current postmodernism), somehow guarantees the new. We can't just simply revive classical modernism, whose moment has passed, any more than we can revive classical realism. And one of the great danger for writers working out of a modernist sensibility is the risk of falling into the trap of producing the kind of retro-modernist works that aspire to innovate, but are steeped in anachronism. The question always remains, how do we make the old new the new new? Writers such as David Foster-Wallace, in their importing of sub-languages into literary forms (e.g. 'The Depressed Person'), find solutions to this problem, as does Australian writer Marion May Campbell in her structurally and thematically inventive novel *Konkretion*. A key example in recent Australian literature is Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap*, which demonstrates that structural forms from classical modernism – monologue and multiple perspectives – can be coupled with contemporary macro and micro-political concerns, and still win a wide readership. In works such as these we can also see how the individual subject, taken as a kind of potentiality, a focal point where multiplicity can occur, becomes a portal to wider understandings.

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Now that I've sketched out this general approach, I'd like to discuss how these considerations have affected my own work as a novelist. A key factor in being a novelist is identifying a theme, issue or problem of significance that will be of interest to an audience. The theme I chose early on in my career is somewhat uncharacteristic for a novelist, and it took the form of a question: what is effect of the ever-increasing penetration of market forces into everyday life? It's a theme that has pretty much dominated my literary activity, from my early fiction to my major work, the *Capital* novels, *Capital*, Volume One, and *Great Western Highway* (*Capital*, Volume One, Part Two).

The theme first crystallised for me when I was studying philosophy at Sydney University in the early 1980s. As I've already mentioned, I took a keen interest in Marxism in my early studies. A key intellectual debate that I came across centred on the relationship between the young 'humanist' Marx, and the later 'scientific', economist Marx. Debates in the Marxist humanist tradition revolved around questions of species being, about what it means to be human. Stated briefly, to be human is to have needs and drives, to have passions and desires, to be self-determining, to be creative. As Marx explored species being and its relationship to the economic vehicle that increasingly dominated it – the capitalist mode of production – he developed the theory of alienation. Put simply, the theory of alienation is based on the notion of a subject/object inversion. In capitalism, the human subject is no longer self-determining in their creative acts, they no longer produce the world according to a species rationality. Rather, their acts are objectified, or reified: they become subsumed by the higher rationality of capitalist production, or the bureaucracy of market forces. And one main goal of market forces, once again put very simply, is to make the many create enormous wealth for the few. (Never has this been truer than in our era. A slogan of the recent Occupy movement was 'we are the 99%', a reference to the current balance sheet of global wealth in the not so new millennium.)

In the early 1980s, as a young writer about to make his way in the world, this question of alienation worried me terribly. For a long time, it was all I could see, all I could feel, this massive, inexorable shift at all levels of being towards the dominance of capitalist rationality. (See Hari Kunzru's *My Revolutions* for an example of this sensibility in political activist terms.) And moreover, it was something I would be expected to participate in if I was to prosper or flourish as human being in any way. As a writer, I don't know if I've ever been particularly happy with this theme. It's big. It's heavy. It's oppressive. And it certainly doesn't leave much room for optimism. In my lifetime, as recent events in Greece have shown, not much seems to have improved in terms of the dominance of capital over labour. In the reaction of financial institutions to the successful anti-austerity vote in the recent Greek referendum, the world has been given a sharp reminder about the nature of the relationship between capitalism and democracy. It's banks that run democratic nation states, not elected governments.

This theme also engenders some fairly intractable contradictions on a practical level as a writer. One of the most fundamental is how to make any meaningful statement on reification in a commodified, reified world, which extends to the publishing industry. The conflict, or contradiction, or irony, isn't new, and there have been various artistic responses to it. You can see one successful response in a very famous



1936 film: Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. In *Modern Times* Chaplin, at the height of his fame, makes one of the great artistic renderings of the alienation of labour, of the subject/object inversion. In a famous sequence, a group of factory workers on an assembly line can barely keep up with their repetitive task, and the sight gags of silent comedy are used to show how man [sic] is subjugated to machine.

But times have moved on from the man vs. machine paradigm of exploitation of the 1930s, particularly for 'de-industrialised' countries such as Australia, which have embraced the new knowledge and digital economies. The world of work I was to enter in the early 1980s saw an Australia at a tipping point, steeped in a kind of clanking, mechanical/electrical Fordist modernity, but on the cusp of radical change. It was recognised that, globally, this (late) Fordist model would no longer be able to provide the levels of prosperity it had so far delivered, and Australia set about restructuring itself to enter the postmodern age of globalisation, digitisation, and flexibilised labour. Thus equipped, we set sail on the high seas of 'open' markets.

So, this was the world I was entering, and it was the world I wanted to engage with as a writer. But how could I do this in the form of the novel? One question I wanted to address, or, put a little differently, one phenomenon I wanted to explore, was how capitalism is *subjectively* experienced. I wanted to capture the shift as it was lived and felt, to give a sense of the momentum building, to bear witness to the fact that we were entering a new epoch. The major material and social changes all seemed to be coming from the market. The proliferation of multinational corporations, global travel, shopping malls with designer brands and food courts, the rise of computer technology and the internet, the reshaping of cultural activity into culture industries, the ubiquity of advertising and marketing, the constant reform of the nature of work to make it more industry relevant. Sure, the market had always been there, always been central, dominant, but this felt different. The Berlin Wall had fallen, and much of the communist world was now playing the capitalist game. There was no doubt we were entering into some fraught new world. In academic circles and in the more highbrow media, Ernst Mandel's term 'late capitalism' was bandied about. In the leftist media there was the standard Marxist talk of systemic crises that could never be resolved, of capitalism collapsing under its own greed. And I'd think, late capitalism: *that* sounds optimistic. It's only getting started. The transnational companies burgeoning all around us didn't seem to be suffering from any self-doubt at all. Rather, they were zealously getting on with the job of transforming the world to suit their own ends.

An important question for me as an artist was *how* I would render all of this. I knew I didn't want to use traditional novelistic methods to express my theme. They simply didn't seem up to the job. The task I had set myself was to express how the penetration of market forces into everyday life affected *subjective* experience. And as an artist, I was conscious that ultimately I was creating an aesthetic object, not one of discursive reason. I do believe that artistic works can, do, and should, make arguments. But as I've said, they do so in their own way. I've written extensively in other places about the kinds of techniques I used to create my *Capital* novels, in particular my use of rhizomatic structures, and the development of a compositional trope I call the Generative *mise en abyme*. But to state it briefly here, the tools I thought most suitable for my particular project, the ones that I thought I could best use to extend what the novel can do, derived from modernist and postmodernist understandings of individual subjectivity and society, as well as from diverse formalist traditions of the novel (including realism). In my own *Capital* novels, what I tried to do is take the kind of centrality of consciousness I have been discussing as the mediating point between the subject and wider world, and to introduce modes of understanding that derived from, amongst other bodies of thought, politics, economics and poststructuralist philosophy, in order to enrich the scope of what the novel can do.

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I'd like to conclude with a final image of, and reflection on, Chairman Mao, that speaks to the notion of sense-making in narrative, about how complex and conflicted it can be. I'm going to use an example not from literature but from the visual arts, because it shows how narrative, understood in its broader sense, is much larger than literature.

It's London, the late 1980s. I'm in a major museum, gazing up at one of Andy Warhol's Mao portraits. It's enormous. The tiny sepia photograph from *The Little Red Book*, so personal, so intimate, has been blown up to gargantuan proportions and been subjected to the full Warhol treatment: there's the crude black outline of the face, plastered over with Warhol's usual palette, one that revels in both the garish and banal. Hung high up on the gallery wall, Mao stares into the distance, serene, monumental. Adding to the cognitive dissonance are the images of other famous people the portrait's style evokes: the heavy-lidded Marilyns, the pouting Mick Jagger, the brooding Elvises. Yes, the image's surface meaning is clear enough: Mao is just another piece of celebrity grist for the Western media mill. (DeLillo alludes to this aspect in his usually elliptical way in his 1991 novel *Mao II*).

But something about the portrait annoys me. It's annoying because I am so stunned by it. It's forcing me to rethink my opinion of Warhol. I've always been intrigued by him, but also found myself strangely ambivalent. Warhol's cool irony defined an aesthetic well before postmodernism was theorised in literature: it's a shadow that falls over nearly half a century (the half that coincides with nearly my whole life), and nowhere is his aesthetic better summed up than in this famous quote: "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art." But I've never been able to decide if this self-conscious mocking of avarice really was a masterstroke of post-Duchampian wit well suited to an emergent rampant consumerist culture, or a misfire that revealed Warhol as simply greedy poseur, a featherweight whose real talent fell way short of his ambition to be on the same level as contemporaries like Roy Lichtenstein or Jasper Johns.

But this Mao portrait, on this particular day, at this particular point in my life, is making me rethink it all. It takes me a while to figure out what I find so arresting about it. Finally it comes to me. I'd never been quite aware of the element of ridicule that lurks in Warhol's irony, like some potent biological strain. It doesn't quite chime with a cool, blank, Jamesonian irony that Warhol is usually identified with. I suddenly realise that part of Warhol's project is a sustained essay in ridicule. There's a sense in which he pretends to elevate his subjects, only to body slam them onto some lower level, where they are kicked in the head and laughed at. In this instance, it's all too clear: Warhol, celebrator of capitalism, is clearly laughing at communism. This pope of pop art, who boasts of buying his underwear at Macy's, is ridiculing the all-wise, all-knowing leader who has plunged his country into the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. This is what astonishes me about the portrait, I realise, the insouciance with which Warhol conjures up two massive narratives, and the cruelty with which he combines them. It's an uneasy play of forces, a game where no player wins, and it's a ferociously brilliant move. Yet, despite it all, the portrait leaves me more confused, more ambivalent about Warhol, about capitalism, about literature, about the world, than ever before. It makes me think: sometimes stories don't even tell us who we can be, much less who we are. With a single, savage blow, they can reveal a moment of chaos that unmakes the world we thought we knew, a world that, ultimately, whenever we look at it very closely, is always a mystery to us.

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