

TERRA NULLIUS

By Richard Hall



Sometime in the very recent past, a man steps out from a side street onto Times Square in the centre of Midtown Manhattan at the end of a journey on a well-trodden trail to this popular haunt as advertised in all the tourist

brochures, his desired intention being to bathe in the feeling of either having arrived, or at the very least of having received a definitive sign that will in some way be a significant marker to him in his transition through life. Travelling all the way from a Mid-Western state, he bears the hallmarks of a man from out of town. His somewhat disorientated demeanour in not being accustomed to the frenetic pace of the metropolis, along with his homespun dress - his Stetson hat, showy white boots with matching trousers and gloves, marks him as someone displaced. He is in a similar way like many of the others here who are dressed in the typical international tourist attire of casual college style sweat shirt, jeans and sneakers, topped by a peaked cap complete with a logo or slogan, or, like the other congregants made up in outlandish costumes meant to simulate their favourite celebrities.

All are not from this city, but have been drawn here because of the publicity about it such that it has become a place of pilgrimage, though notably one which is a terra nullius. That despite the fanfare afforded by skyscrapers such as the Time Building emblazoned with huge animated screens and flashing neon signs, it ultimately just points to itself, and at its centre there is really nothing to see. Having arrived as it were, at the place where the dream of possession, belonging, or pretending to be like a wished for persona connects with the reality, there is this moment of realisation that these two conditions, the mediated desire and its longed for object can never meet, yet many go on to pretend as if they have actually achieved this impossible goal. This misleading insubstance is common to the modern condition of fantasy ideation leading to repeated disappointments because fantasy consists of nothing more than itself, and to think otherwise is folly.

Yet the continuation of these delusions is seemingly what has made the world we live in. The very physical foundations are in effect hedonistic daydreams that have extended outwards into the very fabric of this world we engage in. The concrete bones of this mythic monster have been utilised to support illusions through glass, light and reflection. And with the layering and over-layering of these many distorting illuminations and lenses, the original material of life has been lost somewhere under all this imaginary simulation. Alienation therefore makes the modern person always someone who is

searching for something they will never find. Like the ancestors of the man in the Stetson hat who had, despite the many dangers they encountered travelling West across the wilderness in primitive wagons in the pursuit of a Heaven on Earth akin to John Bunyan's Christian in Pilgrim's Progress who, unlike the novel ultimately found only sand and dust at their destination, in reverse order this man returns back East as if on L Frank Baum's yellow brick road to the Emerald City, to a place of glass and concrete which in reality is constituted of the very same material - sand and dust. However, through a will to believe, these places exist, diaphanously suspended by all their dreaming adherents wishing them to be manifestly true.

We have thus ceased to know what is real from that which is a mere projection on the screens of our minds, and with our senses cleaved from their root - the substance on which we stand or that which we touch, we have become susceptible to the whims of our feelings that are harnessed to nothing more than how these feelings make our bodies feel, despite their possibly being a contrary reality occurring beyond our skins. Belief is thus an overrated virtue, though one that is enshrined in our societies to the extent that its representations appear to be set on solid foundations. And because of this the powerful engines of public relations of our media landscapes that steer this craft of civilisation have domination over our vista of reality. Though we think we are free agents on this journey to where we think we should be going, the opposite is often true. L Frank Baum's Emerald City was only so because all who entered into it were obliged to wear green tinted spectacles, for without these they were informed, they would be blinded by its brilliance. Like the falsity through which these spectacles were sold to their wearers, the truth is far more prosaic, though our strength of belief would have us believing in the impossible even after our mediated spectacles were removed.

When I write about projections, it could be mistaken that I am writing metaphorically. But look again at the picture. The man in the Stetson hat appears to be prompted by a large neon arrow that directs his eyes upwards to a place where magic, so the arrow indicates, can be found, and the accompanying composition adds to the overall effect to focus our attention, perhaps to an electric paradise that can only be located in animated childhood

movies where life and its promised outcome is described in full reassuring Technicolor. This however is not what is happening in the picture because although it is a straightforward capture without the use of any post production trickery, it is misguided to assume that what one is seeing is either an actually thing in front of the camera, or a virtual representation, a spectre if you like. In truth though, it is both of these things. Taken through a Disney store window, the neon arrow and the backlit depiction of Mickey Mouse is in front of the camera lens, as it were, but the rest of the street with its skyscrapers and sightseers, as well as our Stetson wearing protagonist are reflections of light on the store front glass, and in actual fact they reside not in front of, but behind the camera lens, behind the person who has taken the shot. What is real from that which is virtual therefore have become indistinguishable, with the intersecting glass acting as a mediating instrument through which our perception of what is going on being utterly distorted. Yet even despite gaining knowledge of this fact, we are still disposed to wishing that our original perception was true as it fits in so conveniently with the story we have constructed.

We live in interesting times in that we often really don't know what is real from what is fake, as the former is often subordinated to serve the latter. And because we have witnessed a proliferation of representations in recent years through being subjected to the omnipresence of these on social media platforms, we are more susceptible to beliefs whose veracity in relation to fact is tenuous at the very least, yet nonetheless appear to be compelling. Such conditions therefore have become the battlegrounds for the hearts and minds of all who peer into this maelstrom pool of information, and power that once seemed to rest with institutions which offered a degree of reassurance is now being sliced and diced by players whose intentions are driven by insane designs, and who seem to care little for the world except for what they can personally gain from it. Driven by these reckless joyriders who utilise the tools of deception afforded them by our modern information systems, human civilisation like never before is at a point at which it is staring windblown into the abyss of total annihilation.