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Where is the free in freelance?

Existence as a freelance writer in 2017 has been a patchy, stop-start, fragmented affair punctuated by glimmers of hope, crushing defeats and, as ever, the grimly deafening silence that is an inherent part of the pitches-and-submissions world of media and publishing – a "silence with edges" as Omar Sakr put it in an essay on writing culture for *Going Down Swinging*. One ten-day period in August offers a snapshot of this writer's experience. It is by no means representative of the average Australian freelance writer, but it is representative of one Australian freelance writer who is very average.

During this period I was shortlisted for, but ultimately failed to win, a writing fellowship with a major Australian literary journal. I earned an interview for a job as a reporter on a regional newspaper, only to lose out to a better candidate with over a decade at Fairfax on his resume. I had poems accepted and rejected. I sent article pitches to magazines that went unanswered. I wrote and then published a lengthy unpaid feature on a leading Australian artist. I wrote up short music reviews, I received a "regional scholarship" to attend a significant media conference and I plugged away with commercially-minded content-writing work for big companies and corporations in fields ranging from insurance to health to construction. I followed up on an invoice for some writing work that has been outstanding for twelve months. I looked after my six-month-old baby son.

This is certainly not to bemoan any hardship or struggle. One can eventually come to see that there is something liberating in rejection and failure and that being ignored is, mostly, simply the impersonal result of overworked editorial staff. This period is, though, an illustration of the inconsistencies, the uncertainties, the semi-victories, the false starts, the feast or famine, the hit-and-hope ideas, and, perhaps the most fraught issue, the ever-precarious balance between the writing that feels satisfying and purposeful, and that which must be done to keep the proverbial wolf from the door.

This situation can at least partly be put down to living outside the metropolitan centres, where there would be the possibility of regular in-house freelance work or, should I fancy it, even the prospect of a proper job on the payroll. As it is, residing in the semi-rural hinterland of northern New South Wales demands that almost all my work be done from home, with little chance of networking or being in the 'right place at the right time' to capitalise on certain opportunities.

The move out of the city was made with incredible naivety. Sure, my partner had received a job offer in the new location, but for me the move was also partly one

of philosophy and idealism. After several years freelancing in the city working with publishing houses – both print and online – that were enslaved to the idea of brand message and the needs of advertising clients, this felt like an opportunity to cast off the nasty commercial world and escape from the accumulating batterings that journalism was taking as a result of capitalism's ruthless adaptation to new mediums. This was a chance to lead a professional life that wasn't completely subservient to the market-driven world, where I could take the more tedious writing jobs as and when I preferred, always working these in around so-called creative projects, and never the other way around. I would go without anything approaching a reasonable income for the sake of autonomy, flexibility, and, as things turned out, the chance to be heavily involved in caring for my son. Dare I say it, moving away from Sydney was in some ways an attempt at the mythic "alternative lifestyle" – one where my writing and editing wouldn't serve interests and organisations that repelled me.

This was all quite absurd, of course. The hoped-for pastoral reassurance of the countryside does not exist unless you can afford to live there. Furthermore, vanity compels you to seek to maintain your connections with goings-on in the city (FOMO, young people might call it). Social media becomes a vicious barometer of your own inertia. And as your bank account dwindles, you are forced to scabble around for the very work from which you are trying to escape. So soon enough, working from home I was back to sub-editing a garishly vulgar magazine aimed at high-net-worth individuals, writing utterly vacuous SEO copy for digital marketing agencies and churning out clickbait-esque entertainment news (the aforementioned work that remains unpaid).

As this work mounted up I became busy but miserable, as the arts and culture writing I was angling for, along with various personal projects, fell by the wayside. Freelancing became an interminable treadmill of creating meaningless content, with the only thing worse than actually writing it being the necessity to try and source more of it. In my case the freelance writer, instead of enjoying that anticipated freedom from the deeply commodified media world and the metropolitan establishment, crawls back to it and serves it in a way that is perhaps even more demeaning than if I were a copywriter on staff in an office in a Surry Hills agency.

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In his recent book *Grand Hotel Abyss*, British author Stuart Jeffries passionately and occasionally brilliantly drags the legacy of the Frankfurt School thinkers into the present day. Though he is often only pointing out the obvious, it is a bleak read: the culture industry that Adorno, Horkheimer and others deplored so much in America in the 1940s and 1950s is only plumbing new depths today; the parallels between a body politic that gives rise to Hitler and one which produces Donald Trump as president are stark; the idea of progress is an ongoing lie.

But one section in particular stands out as Jeffries critiques the writings of the Frankfurt School's most soulful and enigmatic figure, Walter Benjamin. In the 1920s Benjamin was firmly unconvinced by the Soviet experiment and expressed concern that Bolshevism had "abolished private life" and that, "The bureaucracy, political activity, the press are so powerful that no time remains for interests that

don't coincide with them" (Benjamin 30). Under these conditions, he worried about how the independent writer or intellectual could possibly exist in a way that didn't serve and perpetuate ruling ideas and institutions. Benjamin wrote:

For sooner or later, with the middle classes who are being ground to pieces by the struggle between capital and labour, the 'freelance' writer must also disappear. In Russia the process is complete: the intellectual is above-all a functionary working in the departments of censorship, justice, finance, and if he survives, participating in work – which, however, in Russia means power. He is a member of the ruling class. (38)

He adds that as these freelance writers adapt themselves and their skills to the functioning of the state, "only banal clarity is demanded" (39).

Now, this needs more than a little tweaking to be applied to the lot of freelancers in Australia in 2017, but the kernel of something important is there. Foremost, as Benjamin suggests, the word "free" in freelance is a misnomer. Even in the best of circumstances freelancers today must rely on and be aligned with something or someone in order to survive. In my case, it is of course not a collective or an idea like Bolshevism, but communications agencies appropriating and distorting certain tenets of traditional journalism (objectivity, veracity, authoritative sources) in order to promote the products of their clients through "content marketing".

In this capacity as a tool of commerce, the freelance writer becomes a member of the present day's ruling class, just as the Russian freelance writer did in the 1920s by applying his skills in the service of the state. This freelance writer living in the countryside who so pathetically wants to be free does not serve a totalitarian society, rather he cannot help being encapsulated by another source of domination – late capitalism's newest currency: clicks. He becomes complicit in the very thing from which he was trying to escape and remains, to use Jeffries' phrase, a "supine functionary" (Jeffries, 106).

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As Jeffries points out, there are certain Kafkaesque implications to all this (Jeffries 106). A picture emerges of a freelance writer feverishly trying to cast off the sludge of vapid rhetoric that he is caked in thanks to his role as propagandist, in order to regain his writerly self for his own projects.

Any freelancer with pretensions to creative writing must suffer through the stylistic and linguistic impact of their income-making writing – the writing of those 600-word, heavily subtitled online articles that adhere to a formulaic structure, often creating a cringingly false sense of jovial familiarity and that must include the all-important call to action. You might say this is the epitome of Benjamin's 'banal clarity'. Perhaps more worryingly, content marketing agencies increasingly position themselves as bastions of "storytelling" – the spurious, limiting fetishisation of which has now made its way across the whole of media and literary culture, from writers' festivals to magazines, anthologies and indeed branding and "thought leadership".

How can the freelancer, who must take such uninspiring writing work to make a living, regroup and divorce himself from those restrictive tropes of commercial writing in order to write poetry or fiction? It's a vexed question, and one that is certainly not new. In 1959, *Paris Review* interviewer Donald Hall broached with TS Eliot what Hall called "the growing dominance of commercial speech" in the wake of Eliot having previously disparaged "standardised BBC English". When asked about the implications of commercial speech on poetry, Eliot said:

...I do think that where you have these modern means of communication and means of imposing the speech and idioms of a small number on the mass of people at large, it does complicate the problem very much. (Hall 68)

If commercial speech affects the common vernacular of the "masses at large", imagine the degree to which it affects the brain of the writer who produces it.

One answer as to how to restore this freedom might again be found in Jeffries' group biography and the Frankfurt School. Jeffries is understandably enthralled by Benjamin's extraordinary 1928 book *One-Way Street*, a work inspired by the author's wanderings in poor but vibrant cities such as Marseilles and Naples. Benjamin's revolutionary style of writing utilised the fragmentary, the impressionistic and the fleeting in order to create meaning. His "inconspicuous forms" (Benjamin, cited in Jeffries 104) – made up of short, improvised aphorisms and sudden insights – he regarded as infinitely more penetrating, universal and democratic than the linear, incontestable, pompous old gesture that is the grandiose "book". Inspired by Dada and surrealist art, Benjamin's writings led a crusade against traditional and academic modes of writing. "His writing seemed decadent, strange, alarming to Nazis and Soviet ideologues alike," writes Jeffries (104).

Is it ridiculous to suggest that today's freelance writer, frazzled by the language that commercial priorities demand, can re-enter the realm of imaginative writing by embracing a similar, avant garde-infused, approach? By rejecting the restrictive structures of the economic imperative that is "storytelling", the catchy and the familiar, the "banal clarity"? Will experimenting with montage and cut-up, on our own time, spiritually compensate us for having to come up with all those listicles and infographics?

Certainly, immersing oneself in dissonance and discombobulation seems to be the thing to do to gain a little relief, to be reassured that language isn't always harnessed in that standardised way in order to perpetuate what Jeffries calls society's "false reconciliations".

Amid the pitch emails, half-written applications and stock rejection messages, there is indeed a certain freedom in taking a cue from Benjamin's broken shards and undeveloped sketches. An ownership, an agency. Poetry becomes a sphere of reclamation.

If it works, it's a small victory. But at least it's something to do in the moments snatched amid scrolling through Gumtree; these days I'm looking for unskilled manual work offered by sympathetic employers. Gardening comes up fairly

regularly. Even that seems a more rewarding engagement than the murkier end of the freelance writing spectrum, where one is drawn back into the churn of propaganda, persuasion and profit.

Like everyone else, the scattered and dispirited freelance writer must find a way to at least sometimes touch base with "creative productive labour", to paraphrase Benjamin. For that particular German freelancer, as Jeffries puts it, "the joyful absorption in work is dialectical, a self-actualising process through which one weaves into being, not just text or textile, but oneself."

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