

MILLENNIAL NUDITY

By Michael Ventura

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Everyone in America is preparing for New Year's Eve 1999 as an act of the imagination. We are doing that through the question everyone is having to deal with: "Where do I want to be, and with whom do I want to be, as the century and the Millennium turns? With whom do I choose to walk through that gate?" Because, whether we want to or not, most of us can't help but feel New Year's Eve 1999 as emblematic, symbolic -- a verdict on where we've been and a portent of where we're going. A night that, through no choice of your own, but simply by the press of history, you will never forget. So on that night you will be forced to know yourself by how you feel about the eyes into which you look at the moment the Millennium turns. And who will not approach such a moment of self-knowledge without at least a little anxiety? Time zone by time zone, midnight by midnight, there will be more celebratory noise than there has ever been on any night in our noisy history -- music and explosions, fights and embraces, kisses and dances, songs and speeches, hoopla and brouhaha; but, within it all, there will also be a tremendous and all-enveloping silence. A silence into which all that noise and song and sex and prayer and talk and violence and dance will disappear. There will be a hole, an abyss, in our joy. For every last one of us will feel some sense of failure, some fragment of the collective sadness of humanity: the longing for things to be other than they are.

And we will try to fill that hole with words (as I am trying to do now). Y2K will distract many. Instead of waking to the first morning of the new Millennium wondering, "Who and what am I now? What should I be doing and why?" many will go straight to their machines to see if they still work. Y2K will be the "story," but it is only a symptom of the reality.

The reality will be that on the first morning of the year 2000 we will be naked. Whether we know or admit that or not. For the 20th century has stripped us bare -- stripped us of every raiment of certainty we ever wore, or ever imagined we wore. Once, only the Emperor had no clothes; now, everyone in the procession and all the spectators will be equally naked.

Surf the Net and see how naked we are. Here, we have a unique human invention -- cyberspace -- that both includes and envelops every other human invention, while dwarfing all previous inventions in scope; yet a massive amount of this technological marvel is devoted to one of the most primitive of human preoccupations: pornography. But this immense market for pornography has less to do with lust than with the compulsion of naked psyches to stare at the bodies of naked strangers. It is an inner nakedness compulsively seeking images of external nakedness in order to stare at itself. People who need to fantasize such contact, on such a vast scale, must feel profoundly and terrifyingly untouched. People who need to stare so hard and long at the bodies and acts of others (not only with porn, but with movies and television), must feel unseen -- or why is the behavior required for today's "entertainment" no more than a constant mass stare?

At the heart of that stare, with its lust for the predictable, is the nakedness of our uncertainty.

We began the 20th Century in Victorian clothing, layered from head to foot, and the exposure of a woman's ankle was thought lewd. We end the century wearing next to nothing, with nakedness broadcast from every other ad, billboard, and screen. *That* is the true progression of the 20th Century, and make no mistake, it's a progression of the psyche: a progression of how the illusion of certainty has been stripped down mercilessly to a state in which everything can be imagined but not much can be known -- nothing, that is, but the fact that our vulnerability has been relentlessly exposed.

The Millennium is a computer network that offers a direct connection to the entire world as long as you sit isolated in your room with a machine; but step out in the street among your fellow-sharers in life, and you feel separate and anxious and exposed, a stranger among strangers in the year 2000.

We have met the Millennium and it is us. It is what we have created and what has created us. It is what we are -- and what we no longer are. It is what we are afraid of and what we nevertheless want: a "progress" that intimidates yet enthralls us. The Millennium is made of equal parts audacity and spinelessness, liberty and bondage. It is the always doomed but inevitable attempt to serve two masters, God and Mammon. It is greed and good intentions tripping over each other to pave the way to Hell or Oz or both. The Millennium is a mirror. *Your* mirror. In the bathroom. Where things happen that still can't be spoken of in polite company, if you can find any polite company. (Though you *can* watch such doings on the Internet: "See Teens Pee!" is the ad for one recent Web site on America Online.) Look for a long time at your face in the mirror, then take a good old-fashioned hammer and smash a clean blow to the center of your mirror. Lines of breakage splinter out unpredictably, your reflection fragments and multiplies, while a few pieces of the glass fall, leaving holes in your face. Look in *that* mirror to find out who you are, and then go to a therapist who has just looked into a very similar mirror; or read a book, which is itself a cracked mirror; or see a film, which is a distorted fun-house mirror. Then try to make sense of where you've been and where you're going -- while where you *are* is right here, right now, hanging on for dear life, naked. Multiply this by millions and you have the Millennium.

Lie about how complex it is -- pretend that a book or a law or a shrink or a computer or a gun or a Bible or a drug or a relationship or a stock portfolio can rescue you from the era's turmoil -- and you *really* have the Millennium.

Reduce your lie to a sound bite and sandwich it between ads that are also lies, and you have the media's coverage of the Millennium.

"Am I going too fast for you?" is now a common phrase. People and nanoseconds going too fast for you -- that's the Millennium. Trying to keep up with people going too fast for you is also the Millennium. The inability to slow down is the Millennium. The inability to keep up, combined with the inability to slow down, and feeling inadequate either way -- that's the Millennium, baby.

The Millennium is a compromise that's uncompromising: It says, Compromise or else.

The corporatization of the world is how we both manifest and cover our collective compromises: it's nobody's fault, nobody's responsibility, we *must* do business in this new bland, soulless way because of corporatization -- the market -- while we refuse to acknowledge that a corporate vision is merely one individual compromise after another in which everything is judged by its value in money.

And all the while we writhe in the throes of a massive contradiction:

We want the depths and consequent rigors of self-knowledge, while also expecting, as our due, the previously unheard-of luxuries that the corporatized Western world now confers. In self-knowledge one cannot compromise -- you must live in your knowledge, by yourself, at all costs, or sacrifice the self you've struggled both to discover and to forge. At the same time, to live in a state of technological luxury you must accede, in a thousand ways, to the conditions and demands that create your affluence. *How much of your self can you express without endangering your affluence?* This is an essential now question in all spheres of life -- business, psychology, education, art, religion, science. The fact that this question is rarely asked -- or is asked with so many qualifications as to make the question meaningless -- is symptomatic not only of ambivalence but of cowardice. The more you try to fit in the less you own yourself, and that also is the Millennium. And if you can't find a way to fit in, you face ruin, and *that's* the Millennium.

Your name and your life are filed on thousands of databases, not so you can be known but so you can be "targeted" -- for marketing. To be targeted endlessly, by strangers, is the Millennium. To be stuck with your kids in traffic driving them to this or that activity; or, if you're 16% of the world's population, to be in a little village, somewhere humid, watching your kids endure "chronic hunger" (a U.N. phrase and statistic) -- these two interlocking conditions are the Millennium. Our affluence stares into the eyes of their hunger -- for our luxury now depends upon their cheap labor -- but we don't like to admit it, and that, too, is the Millennium.

Imagine the beeps of all our beepers beeping at the same time; then we all reach for our cell phones, pressing the buttons at the same time, and every last one of us gets a circuits-busy signal. That busy signal is the Millennium.

(to be continued)

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