

Changing the climate: The politics of dystopia

Andrew Milner*

Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

This paper aims to test the adequacy of various theoretical approaches to utopian studies and science fiction studies – especially those drawn from the work of Darko Suvin, Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson – to an understanding of the history of Australian science-fictional dystopias. It argues that science fiction (SF) cannot readily be assimilated into either high literature (as utopia) or popular fiction (as genre) and rejects the widespread prejudice against both SF and dystopia in much contemporary academic literary and cultural criticism. It concludes that SF, whether eutopian or dystopian, is as good a place as any for thought experiments about the politics of climate change, a case made with special reference to the late George Turner's 1987 novel *The Sea and Summer*.

Utopian 'ideal states' have been a significant part of the Western literary and philosophical imagination ever since antiquity, but the term itself is more recent, a neologism coined by Thomas More in 1516, as a Greek pun in Latin between 'ou topos', or no place, and 'eu topos', or good place (More 2001, 142n). These simultaneously contradictory and complementary meanings remain encoded in the subsequent history of the genre. Dystopia, from the Greek 'dis topos', or bad place, is a yet more recent coinage, by John Stuart Mill in 1868, in his capacity as Member of Parliament for City and Westminster, to describe a political proposal rather than a literary genre (Mill 1868). The historical delay and the generic displacement are significant: philosophical and literary descriptions of deliberately conceived bad places were extremely rare even as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Thereafter, however, literary dystopias became increasingly common, so much so as eventually to supersede eutopia itself. This development, in turn, bequeathed to academic utopian studies a now conventional set of distinctions between: utopia, referring to the general form and its general conventions (the traveller, the guide, the island, etc.); eutopia, meaning its positive variant; and dystopia meaning its negative (Sargent 1994, 7–10). *Topos* means place, however, rather than time. And the most important recent transformation in the genre, clearly occasioned by the Europeans' successful mapping of the world, is the relocation of plausible good and bad places from geography into history. This gives us the, again increasingly conventional, academic distinction between *uchronia*, *euchronia* and *dyschronia*, from the Greek 'u chronos', 'eu chronos' and 'dis chronos', respectively no time, good time and bad time. In principle, both *euchronias* and *dyschronias* might well have been located in the historical past; in practice, the vast majority were projected into future history, thereby acquiring a distinctly science-fictional character.

*Email: andrew.milner@arts.monash.edu.au

Australian utopias and dystopias

There is a significant history of Australian utopias, both eutopian and dystopian. In Europe, this begins with a tradition, from well before colonization, of the European use of Australia as a site for eutopian imaginings. The latest version (it continues to grow) of Lyman Tower Sargent's pioneer bibliography lists 319 Australian print utopias and dystopias published during the period 1667–2004. The earliest was Peter Heglin's *An Appendix To the Former Work*, which Sargent originally dated to 1667 but now traces to 1656 (Sargent 1999, 2008). More influential, however, was Denis Veiras's *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, first published in part in English in 1675 and in whole in French in 1679 (Veiras 2001, 2006). In Australia itself, this history begins with the indigenous aboriginal tradition of retrospective euchronia, dreamtimes of one kind or another, before history and before the Europeans, when the people belonged to the land rather than the land to the people. There is also, however, a more contemporary aboriginal tradition of dystopian writing about the world the Europeans made. A good example is Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, which takes as its referent the near-genocidal destruction of the peoples of Tasmania (Johnson 1983). From the late 1840s on, we also find a developing tradition of literary utopias written from Australia by the European colonists and their descendants. The anonymous 'Oo-a-deen or, the Mysteries of the Interior Unveiled', serialized during 1847 in the Geelong-based *Corio Chronicle and Western District Advertiser*, is probably the earliest published example written by an Australian (Ikin 1982, 7–27).

Most early eutopian fictions set in Australia took the form of an imaginary voyage narrated by travellers on their return home. Veiras's Captain Siden is en route to Batavia, when he is shipwrecked on the coast of Sevarambia, somewhere in what we would now call Western Australia. He lives amongst the camel-riding Sevarambians for nearly 15 years, studies their language, constitution and religion, takes three wives and fathers 16 children before eventually being given permission to return to Europe (Veiras 2001, 383). Such imaginings became less plausible when European explorers brought back detailed accounts of Australia's climate, topography and people. Utopias were progressively relocated further into the interior, but the realities of inland exploration soon proved equally disappointing. The subgenre of 'lost world' stories of ancient communities hidden in the desert nonetheless attained high popularity in the 1890s (Healy 1978). Thereafter, however, in Australia as elsewhere, utopias and dystopias were increasingly superseded by future-fictional euchronias and dyschronias. Robyn Walton cites Robert Ellis Dudgeon's *Colymbia*, published in 1873, as the first Australian science-fictional utopia (Walton 2003, 7), though Joseph Fraser's 1889 *Melbourne and Mars* (Fraser 1889) – the diaries of a merchant able to travel between Melbourne and Mars more easily than we can today between Melbourne and Europe – is better known.

The most famous of nineteenth-century Australian utopias were either: utopian-socialist, like William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* (Miller 1892); anarchist, like David Andrade's *The Melbourne Riots, or How Harry Holdfast and his Friends Emancipated the Workers* (Andrade 1892); or feminist, like Catherine Helen Spence's *A Week in the Future*, serialized in *The Centennial Magazine* during 1888 and 1889 (Spence 1987). Eutopian themes continue intermittently throughout Australian literary history, from Barnard and Eldershaw's socialistic and feminist *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, first published in 1947, to the contemporary science-fictional utopias of Terry Dowling and Greg Egan (Barnard Eldershaw 1983; Dowling 1993; Egan 1997). There is also a rich vein of Australian dystopian writing: from late nineteenth-century

race-war dystopias like Kenneth Mackay's *The Yellow Wave*, first published in 1895; through to Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, published in 1957 and proclaimed 'The Great Australian Novel of Our Time' in the Mandarin Paperbacks 1990 republication (Mackay 2003; Shute 1957; Milner 1994). We should add that utopianism is by no means confined to print: it extends to films – Miller's *Mad Max* trilogy, for example, or Proyas's *Dark City* (Miller 1979, 1981, 1985; Proyas 1998; Milner 2004) – and television – the 2000 remake of *On The Beach*, for example, or the Canadian/Australian/American co-produced series *Farscape* (Mulcahy 2000; O'Bannon 1999–2003).

Science fiction as literary utopia and as popular fiction

This significant history of Australian utopian science fiction (SF) writing for print, film and television has remained relatively unexamined and untheorized by Australian literary and cultural studies. The academic institutionalization of science fiction studies itself dates only from the 1970s and, although many of its key figures – Darko Suvin and Marc Angenot, for example (Suvin 1979; Angenot 1975) – were by origin European, it occurred mainly in North America, often in and around Comparative Literature programs. The repeated invocation in those early debates of the utopian tradition in European literature almost certainly owed something to the functional imperatives of academic legitimation: Thomas More and Francis Bacon were more respectable than Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein. It is a recurring motif, nonetheless, in writers as diverse as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Raymond Williams. Much work on 'popular fiction', by contrast, was concerned to assimilate SF to the Western, the thriller and the romance, as different varieties of 'genre fiction'. So SF routinely rates a mention in the standard discussions of popular fiction in the 1980s (Pawling 1984; Humm, Stigant, and Widdowson 1986) and continues to do so, for example, in Bloom's *Bestsellers* (2002), Sutherland's *Reading the Decades* (2002) and Gelder's *Popular Fiction* (2004).

Suvin's attempt to claim SF for literary studies revolved around the argument that utopia was '*the socio-political subgenre of science fiction*' (Suvin 1979, 61). The genre was thereby expanded to accommodate More and Bacon, Rabelais and Campanella, Saint-Simon and Fénelon, Aeschylus and Aristophanes. It was a clearly controversial move, at odds with much contemporary usage amongst SF writers, fans and critics, but one that Jameson's recent *Archaeologies of the Future* continues to cite with approval (Jameson 2005, xiv, 57, 393, 410, 414–15). Suvin and Jameson were thus committed to a definition of SF designed to 'englobe' utopia retrospectively. Both claimed inspiration from Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Bloch 1995), though it seems doubtful the latter would have approved (Münster 1977, 71). Baudrillard used utopia and SF rather differently, as functionally equivalent, but mutually exclusive, periodizing devices. Each of his famous three orders of simulacra was accompanied by a corresponding 'imaginary', so that utopia belongs to the first 'natural' order, SF to the second 'productive' order, and a new kind of 'implosive' fiction, 'something else ... in the process of emerging', to the third order based on simulacra of simulation (Baudrillard 1994, 121). Baudrillard cited Philip K. Dick in the United States and J.G. Ballard in Britain as instances of this 'science fiction that is no longer one' (Baudrillard 1994, 125), but we could now add Michel Houellebecq as their more recent French counterpart.

More plausible than either position is Raymond Williams' more modest insistence on the close kinship, but conceptual separateness, of eutopia, dystopia and SF. They are each centrally concerned with the 'presentation of *otherness*', he argues, and thus depend on an element of discontinuity from 'realism'. But the discontinuity is more radical in

non-eutopian/non-dystopian SF, since the eutopian and dystopian modes require for their political efficacy an ‘implied connection’ with the real: the whole point of utopia or dystopia is to acquire some positive or negative leverage on the present. Other kinds of SF and fantasy enjoy much greater latitude in their relations to the real. What Williams calls ‘the willed transformation’ and ‘the technological transformation’ are the most characteristically eutopian or dystopian modes, because transformation – how the world might be changed, whether for better or worse – will normally be more important to utopia than otherness per se (Williams 1980, 196–9). Science fiction may thus be eutopian or dystopian, and utopias may or may not be science-fictional, but the genres are analytically distinguishable by virtue of the presence or absence of science and technology.

Like Suvin, Jameson and Baudrillard, Williams remained preoccupied with teasing out the relationships between utopia, dystopia and SF. For Bloom, Sutherland and Gelder, however, the key relationship is that to other kinds of ‘popular fiction’ rather than to any antecedent literary tradition. Gelder goes so far as to argue that popular fiction is ‘essentially, genre fiction’, ‘best conceived as the opposite of Literature’ (Gelder 2004, 4, 11). Genre, in the sense used here, is necessarily formulaic and predictable. But this seems unhelpful, even positively misleading, if only because all cultural forms, from the epic poem and sonnet to the soap opera and jingle, always make use of generic conventions. As John Frow observes, ‘even the most complex and least formulaic of texts is shaped and organised by its relation to generic structures’ (Frow 2006, 1–2). What Gelder means by supposedly non-generic Literature is ‘the literary novel ... in its Modernist incarnations’ (Gelder 2004, 20). But modernism was a historically very specific development, precisely located in the movement from Zola to Proust, George Eliot to Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain to Henry James, which might itself be considered a ‘genre’, if not in Gelder’s sense then in Williams’.

In his general sociology of culture, Williams identifies three distinct levels of cultural form, termed, respectively, ‘modes’, ‘genres’ and ‘types’ (Williams 1981, 193–7). The first refers to the deepest levels of form, as in the distinction between the ‘dramatic mode’ and the ‘narrative mode’; the second to relatively persistent instances of each mode, as in the distinction between comedy and tragedy within the dramatic mode; and the third to ‘radical distributions, redistributions and innovations of interest’, within any particular genre, ‘corresponding to the specific and changed social character of an epoch’ (Williams 1981, 196). Science fiction is clearly, in these terms, a ‘type’, established initially in nineteenth-century Europe through a radical redistribution of interests towards science and technology within the novel and short story genres of the narrative mode. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the same concentration of interests persists within the novel and, more especially, the short story, but is also redeployed into various theatrical, film, radio and television genres of the dramatic mode. If SF is a type, in this sense, then so too is literary modernism. For where SF is the type that takes the social implications of scientific and technological development as its central preoccupation, modernism takes literary form itself. Some SF texts have been canonized by academic literary criticism, albeit not normally in the cause of partisan modernism (Bloom 1994, 542–65), others by film criticism (Schrader 2006). But this is not how SF writers, readers or critics typically understand their texts: for the ‘SF community’ it is all just science fiction.

The prejudice against dystopia

The opening academic encounters with SF in the 1970s often invoked Western Marxist theory as well as utopian literature: this is true of Suvin, Jameson and Williams. But the

pairing of utopia and Marxism clearly cut against the grain of the latter's long-standing pretensions to scientificity. Utopias, Marx and Engels had themselves warned, were merely 'fantastic pictures of future society, painted at a time when the proletariat is still in a very undeveloped state and has but a fantastic conception of its own position' (Marx and Engels 1967, 116). Hence, presumably, the preference for Bloch (and Brecht) as against the more declaredly 'scientific' Marxism of Louis Althusser and the Althusserians. But the Marxist hostility to utopia wasn't so much absent from early academic SF studies as repressed and displaced into a more specific prejudice against dystopia.

This prejudice is at work, for example, in Williams' dismissal of SF dystopias as 'Putropian'. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* all articulate a structure of feeling, he had argued, which counterposes 'the isolated intellectual' to 'the "masses" who are at best brutish, at worst brutal' (Williams 1988, 357–8). The criticism is extended to Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*, Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors* (Williams 1988, 358; 1965, 307–8). But *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remained the target for special hostility: its 'projections of ugliness and hatred', Williams wrote, 'introduce a period of really decadent bourgeois writing' (Williams 1979, 391–2). He acknowledged dystopia to be 'the now dominant mode' of SF, but argued against its substitution of a displaced indicative for the 'true subjunctive' of eutopia. Dystopia's 'naturalized subjunctive', he wrote, expressly citing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'is more profoundly exclusive, more dogmatically repressive of struggle and possibility, than anything within the utopian tradition' (Williams 1980, 208). More committed to the scientificity of both SF and Marxism than Williams would ever be, Suvin also took issue with dystopia. Modern science 'is an open-ended corpus of knowledge', he wrote, and hence 'SF will be the more significant and truly relevant the more clearly it eschews ... the ... fashionable static dystopia of the Huxley–Orwell model' (Suvin 1979, 83). Elsewhere, he would argue that static dystopias are necessarily unable to do justice to 'the immense possibilities of modern SF in an age polarized between the law of large numbers and ethical choice' (Suvin 1988, 106–7).

In Jameson, the antipathy to dystopia is yet more extreme than in either Williams or Suvin. Following a line of argument first developed by Sargent (Sargent 1994, 7) and subsequently elaborated by Baccolini and Moylan (Baccolini 2000; Moylan 2000), Jameson distinguishes two kinds of 'dystopian' text: the 'critical dystopia', which functions by way of a warning, through the 'if this goes on' principle; and the 'anti-Utopia' proper, which springs from the quite different conviction that human nature is so inherently corrupt it can never be salvaged by 'heightened consciousness of the impending dangers'. Like Sargent, Baccolini and Moylan, Jameson argues that critical dystopia is essentially eutopian in intent and import, a 'negative cousin' of eutopia (Jameson 2005, 198). The anti-Utopia, however, is a true antonym of Utopia, 'informed by a central passion to denounce and to warn against Utopian programs' (199). Jameson sees *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as uncomplicatedly anti-Utopian, a key instance of the 'classic Cold War dystopia' (200). It provides 'the face of anti-Utopianism in our own time', he continues, and is the mark of a more general 'dystopian awakening', a 'collective response of the bourgeoisie' in 'reaction to the possibility of a workers' state'. Either 'a dispirited reaction to postwar Labor Britain' or 'a depressive symptom of revolutionary discouragement', Orwell's novel bespeaks 'a systemic perspective for which it is obvious that whatever threatens the system as such must be excluded' (200–2, 205).

All of this is evidence of a 'prejudice' against dystopia, in the literal sense of pre-judgement prior to rational analysis. For at the level of rational analysis it makes little sense. No doubt, Williams had good reason to reject the minority culture/mass civilization

topos he had found in T.S. Eliot and the Leavises, but there was no call to project it on to Orwell on totalitarianism or Huxley on consumerism or Bradbury on television and censorship. Bourgeois decadence is a bizarre charge to level at the far from wealthy, comparatively ascetic, *Tribune* journalist who actually wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And there is, in fact, a true subjunctive in the novel, in the space between ‘THE END’ of the main narrative and the *Appendix* on ‘THE PRINCIPLES OF NEWSPEAK’, which fictionally can only have been written after the fall of Big Brother. Indeed, the informing tense of the *Appendix* is almost certainly the subjunctive future perfect (Milner 2008). Suvin’s conflation of science with SF need not detain us: he radically underestimates the discursivity of both. But the notion that Orwell’s and Huxley’s dystopias are closed and static is simply wrong. The opening up of Huxley’s A.F. 632 is in the novel’s satire, which necessarily implies a position outside the reality it satirizes; in Orwell’s 1984 it is in the implied frame narrative provided by the footnote on Newspeak in the first chapter (Orwell 1949, 7n) and the *Appendix*.

Jameson’s argument makes even less sense as rational analysis, since it is a matter of historical record that Orwell’s hostility to fascism and Stalinism was quite decisively formed by the experience of revolutionary Catalonia. As such, it could not possibly be either ‘bourgeois’ in any meaningful sense nor predicated on hostility to the idea of a workers’ state. To the contrary, Orwell had been inspired to support the POUM (Parti Obrero de Unifacación Marxista) and later to join the British ILP (Independent Labour Party) by the lived experience of working-class power in Barcelona (Orwell 1966, 8–9). Nor can *Nineteen Eighty-Four* plausibly be read as a dispirited reaction to post-war Labour Britain, given Orwell’s letter to the American United Auto Workers Union, written shortly before his death, explaining that he was a supporter of both socialism and the Labour Party (Orwell 1970a, 564). Nor does it seem seriously plausible to read the novel as a symptom of revolutionary discouragement, given his insistence, whilst writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that: ‘Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism’ (Orwell 1970b, 28).

The details of the particular arguments matter less, however, than the general prejudice. What these critics had hoped to find in eutopia, in defiance of Marxist orthodoxy, were what Williams would call ‘resources for a journey of hope’ (Williams 1983, 245–69). All of these critics were also to some degree engaged by the new eutopian SF of the 1970s and 1980s – Ursula Le Guin, Samuel R. Delany, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, Kim Stanley Robinson – and often by the account of it as ‘critical utopia’ developed by Tom Moylan (Moylan 1986, 1–12). With all of this I have no quarrel. Dystopias were both less obviously present in the radical SF of the 1970s and less obviously representable as resources of hope. They are, however, much more typical of twentieth-century SF considered as a general type, whatever its politics, whatever its medium.

Classical and critical dystopias

The concept of ‘critical dystopia’ might have provided a way out of this impasse, but not one Williams, Suvin or Jameson ever used very effectively. Sargent originally coined the term to describe the socially critical dystopian SF of the early 1990s, especially Piercy’s 1991 novel *He, She and It*. It was picked up by Baccolini in her reading of feminist dystopias and applied retrospectively to Murray Constantine’s (a pseudonym of Katharine Burdekin) 1937 *Swastika Night* and Margaret Atwood’s 1986 *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Moylan then gave it extensive theoretical elaboration in his account of ‘the dystopian turn’ in SF (Moylan 2000, 183–99). Unlike Baccolini, Moylan insisted that this was an essentially ‘recent development’, a ‘distinctive new intervention’, specific to the late 1980s and early 1990s. So neither *Swastika Night* nor *The Handmaid’s Tale* – still less *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – could count as such (Moylan 2000, 188).

The supposed novelty of the critical dystopia absolved Jameson from serious examination of earlier socially critical dystopias: hence his bizarrely truncated treatment of Orwell. But Moylan was too well informed to make the same mistake: he knew that Zamyatin’s *We* takes a ‘utopian stance’; that Orwell wanted *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to be a ‘a utopian attack on what he saw as anti-utopian historical tendencies’; that the ‘outside’ of Atwood’s Gilead provides the novel with ‘a utopian horizon’ (Moylan 2000, 160, 162–3). So where Jameson worked with a simple binary between ‘anti-Utopia’ and ‘critical dystopia’, mistakenly consigning Orwell to the former, Moylan carefully distinguished the ‘classic dystopia’ and ‘critical dystopia’ on the one hand, both of which are socially critical, and the ‘anti-utopia’, ‘pseudo-dystopia’ and ‘anti-critical dystopia’ on the other, none of which are (Moylan 2000, 195). The taxonomy makes better sense, both in general and about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular, than its over-simplified misappropriation in Jameson, but only at the price of a certain theoretical over-elaboration.

For both Baccolini and Moylan, the crucial difference between classical and critical dystopias runs thus:

dystopias maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages ... for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that ... readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future ... the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 7)

Formally, this distinction may be worth making; substantively, it is much less helpful, since eutopian impulses clearly are present within the texts of Zamyatin’s *We*, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Determination to contextualize critical dystopia in relation to a specific historical moment, that of the triumph of Anglo-American neo-liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, thus leads Moylan in particular, but to some extent Baccolini also, into what is probably an unnecessarily elaborate taxonomy. The distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia might well suffice, if not misused after Jameson’s fashion.

Baccolini and Moylan are nonetheless right that eutopianism resides within dystopia primarily in its function as warning. As Huxley had it: ‘This ... was the message of the book – *This is possible: for heaven’s sake be careful*’ (Bedford 1973, 245). And Orwell: ‘totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere’ (Orwell 1970a, 564). But Suvin, Jameson and Williams somehow contrive to miss this fairly obvious point. In his first essay on SF, Williams had acknowledged that dystopian fictions were often defended as cautionary tales. But ‘they are less warnings about the future’, he retorted, ‘than about the adequacy of certain types of contemporary feeling’. ‘I believe, for my own part’, he continued, ‘that to think, feel, or even speak of people in terms of “masses” is to make the burning of the books and the destroying of the cities just that much more possible’ (Williams 1988, 358). In truth, it isn’t at all clear why this should be so: whatever sins of omission or commission are normally counted against Leavis’s *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are rarely amongst them. More to the point, it is even less clear why the examples that Williams gives from Orwell, Huxley and Bradbury should not be read as cautionary tales; nor why Wyndham’s fiction can’t be read

as a warning against the ‘presumption’ of science, in Mary Shelley’s phrase, even if there is little likelihood that the Triffids will ever have their day or the Kraken ever wake.

If the argument from warning seemed obscure to academic literary criticism, it was entirely clear to George Turner, the distinguished Australian SF writer, in 1990, when he wrote that:

We badly need a literature of considered ideas. Humanity is on a collision course with over-population, ecological disaster and meteorological catastrophe on the grand scale ... Science fiction could be a useful tool for serious consideration, on the level of the non-specialist reader, of a future rushing on us at unstoppable speed ... I ... continue to insist, as I have done for the last two decades, that it could gain an honourable reputation with a little expenditure of genuine thought. (Turner 1990a, 209)

Changing the climate

Which takes me to my final point: that SF, whether eutopian or dystopian, whether in print, film or television, is as good a place as any for thought experiments about the social effects of climate change. Writing in the *Melbourne Age* early in 2008, Peter Christoff, the Vice President of the Australian Conservation Foundation, drew a direct parallel between the threat of nuclear war during the 1950s and 1960s and that of climate change in the early twenty-first century. Stanley Kramer’s film adaptation of Shute’s *On the Beach*, Christoff wrote, had ‘helped catalyse the 1960s anti-nuclear movement’. Global warming, he continued, ‘is, in some ways, like nuclear war’s aftermath ... Like the characters in *On the Beach*, we are ... suffering from a radical failure of imagination when it comes to global warming’ (Christoff 2008, 13). He is surely right, provided we add the proviso that, whereas nuclear war seemed possible, even probable, in the late 1950s, the vast majority of natural scientists now regard dramatic climate change as inevitable. We are desperately in need, then, of something like an environmentalist version of the book and the film of *On the Beach*.

Proto-ecological thematics are clearly present in SF: Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* developed a sustained critique of anthropocentric science as early as 1961; and Arthur Herzog’s *Heat* explored the fictional possibilities of a runaway greenhouse effect in 1977. Some very prominent contemporary SF writers have quite explicitly environmentalist politics: Ursula Le Guin, for example, especially in *The Dispossessed*; Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake*; Kim Stanley Robinson, both in *Antarctica* (1997) and in the *Science in the Capital* trilogy; Karen Traviss in her *Wess’har Wars* series. Lem was Polish, of course, Herzog, Le Guin and Robinson American, Atwood is Canadian, Traviss English. Such explicit environmentalism is also present, however, in George Turner, the Melbourne writer quoted above, who at the time of his death in 1997 had become something like the elder statesmen of Australian SF.

Turner’s early literary ambitions were quite unrelated to SF: he had won the 1962 Miles Franklin Award for *The Cupboard Under the Stairs*, a realist novel set in a fictionalized Wangaratta, the hero of which is recovering from years spent in a mental hospital. Turner first became involved with the genre as a book reviewer, for the *Melbourne Age* and elsewhere. His first SF novel, *Beloved Son*, was published in 1978. His most acclaimed work of SF, however, is clearly *The Sea and Summer*, published in 1987 (in the United States as *The Drowning Towers*). In 1988 it won both the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the British Arthur C. Clarke Award (the previous year’s Clarke Award had gone to Atwood for *The Handmaid’s Tale*) and was also shortlisted for the American Nebula Award. Turner’s novel is much more ‘literary’ in effect than Shute’s *On the Beach*:

it was published by Faber and Faber, clearly a 'quality' publisher; its main narrative, which traces the development of the 'Greenhouse Culture' of the mid-twenty-first century, is structurally polyphonic in character, a set of memoirs and diary extracts from each of the main protagonists; and, as in many critical dystopias, the force of dystopian inevitability is blunted by the frame narrative set in a more distant, eutopian future, amongst the 'Autumn People', from the 'New City' in the Dandenongs, who use the techniques of submarine archaeology to explore the fate of their predecessors. *On the Beach* is nonetheless clearly a key intertext. Like Shute's novel, *The Sea and Summer* is set mainly in Melbourne, a vividly described, particular place, producing what Stephen Greenblatt means by 'resonance' – that is, an object's power 'to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world' so as to evoke 'the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which ... it may be taken ... to stand' – but terrifyingly transformed into the utterly unfamiliar, in a negative variant of what he means by 'wonder' – that is, an object's power 'to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention' (Greenblatt 1990, 170).

The Sea and Summer is surely a 'critical dystopia' in exactly the sense intended by Baccolini and Moylan. It describes a world of mass unemployment and social polarization, in which global warming has produced rising sea levels and a consequent inundation of the Bayside suburbs. The poor 'Swill' live in high-rise tower blocks, the lower floors of which are progressively submerged; the wealthier 'Sweet' in suburbia on higher ground. On his sixth birthday in 2041, Francis Conway and his nine-year-old brother, Teddy, are taken by their parents, Alison and Fred, to see the sea:

What I saw was a street of houses like our own, save that one side ... was simply a concrete wall stretching out of sight in both directions ... Mum surprised me by saying, 'This is Elwood and there was a beach here once. I used to paddle here. Then the water came up and there were the storm years and the pollution, and the water became too filthy ...' ... Dad recovered briskly. 'One day ... Most of Melbourne will go under sixty metres of water' ... It was left for Mum to say, 'It must be terrible over there in Newport when the river floods.' Dad grimaced because the Swill Enclaves were not much mentioned in polite society ... But Mum went on, 'A high tide covers the ground levels of the tenements.' (Turner 1987, 23–4)

In 2033 a third of Australia was set aside for Asian population relocation; by 2041 the global population had reached ten billion and the cost of iceberg tows and desalinization projects had brought the economy close to bankruptcy; and in 2044 Fred is laid off and commits suicide, leaving Allie and the boys to move to Newport (Turner 1987, 29–32, 34). There they meet Billy Kovacs, the Tower Boss, who will become Alison's lover, Francis's mentor and the reader's guide to the social geography of dystopia.

When Shute first discussed the cover design for *On the Beach* with Heinemann, he suggested 'a scene of the main four or five characters standing together quite cheerfully highlighted on a shadowy beach of a shadowy river – the Styx' (Smith 1976, 129). This juxtaposition of light and shade, cheerfulness and death, provides a nicely economical representation of what I have argued is the organizing principle of this novel: its 'apocalyptic hedonism', a textual erotics deriving from the simultaneous juxtaposition of the terrors of imminent extinction and the delights of yet more immediate hedonistic affluence (Milner 1994). I fear this is still crucial to our contemporary structure of feeling. But Turner's novel helps to explain why this might be so: because the way we live now represents a deliberate sacrifice of our long-term opportunities to avoid extinction to our short-term hedonisms. As Turner observes in the 'Postscript' to *The Sea and Summer*:

We talk of leaving a better world to our children but in fact do little more than rub along with day-to-day problems and hope that the long-range catastrophes will never happen.

Sooner or later some of them will ...

The Sea and Summer is about the possible cost of complacency. (Turner 1987, 318)

In the 1985 short story from which *The Sea and Summer* was developed, Francis's sixth birthday had been as early as 2023 and his father's unemployment and suicide in 2025. This might actually turn out to be more futurologically realistic. In the short story, the Swill area into which the family remove isn't Newport, but rather Elwood (Turner 1990b, 175–6), which, incidentally, is where I live. And this too might turn out to be more futurologically realistic. By way of conclusion, I do no more than offer Turner's novel as one possible answer to Christoff's problem. Sadly, it has been out of print for over a decade and never once made into either a film or TV program. Even Patrick Murphy's entry on 'Environmentalism' in the recently published *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* makes no mention of it (Murphy 2009). Cultural critics might not be able to do much to stave off the consequences of environmental catastrophe. But we can perhaps try to persuade someone, somewhere, to republish Turner's novel, maybe turn it into a film, even a television series. In the meantime, I will settle for the argument that there are indeed suitably apposite tales of resonance and wonder, intelligence and warning to be found in Australian dystopian SF. We just haven't learnt to value them. Not yet anyway.

Notes on contributor

Andrew Milner is Professor of Cultural Studies at Monash University. His recent publications include *Re-imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism* (Sage, 2002), *Contemporary Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 2002) and *Literature, Culture and Society* (Routledge, 2005). His *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia* is in press with Peter Lang.

References

- Andrade, D.A. 1892. *The Melbourne riots and how Harry Holdfast and his friends emancipated the workers. A realistic novel*. Melbourne: Andrade.
- Angenot, M. 1975. *Le Roman populaire. Recherches en paralittérature*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
- Atwood, M. 1986. *The handmaid's tale*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- . 2003. *Oryx and Crake*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Baccolini, R. 2000. Gender and genre in the feminist critical dystopias of Katherine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler. In *Future females, the next generation: New voices and velocities in feminist science fiction*, ed. M. Barr. Boston: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Baccolini, R., and T. Moylan. 2003. Introduction: Dystopias and histories. In *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*, ed. R. Baccolini and T. Moylan. New York and London: Routledge.
- Barnard Eldershaw, M. 1983. *Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow*. With a new introduction by A. Chisholm, 1st uncensored ed. London: Virago.
- Baudrillard, J. 1994. *Simulacra and simulation*. Trans. S.F. Glaser Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Bedford, S. 1973. *Aldous Huxley: A biography, 1894–1939*. Vol. I. London: Chatto & Windus in association with William Collins.
- Bloch, E. 1995. *The principle of hope*. Trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice, and P. Knight. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Bloom, C. 2002. *Bestsellers: Popular fiction since 1900*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bloom, H. 1994. *The Western canon: The books and school of the ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Christoff, P. 2008. The end of the world as we know it. *The Age*, 15 January: 13.
- Constantine, M. 1937. *Swastika night*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Dowling, T. 1993. *Twilight beach*. Adelaide: Aphelion.

- Egan, G. 1997. *Diaspora*. London: Millennium.
- Fraser, J. 1889. *Melbourne and Mars: My mysterious life on two planets. Extracts from the diary of a Melbourne merchant*. Melbourne: E.W. Cole.
- Frow, J. 2006. *Genre*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gelder, K. 2004. *Popular fiction: The logics and practices of a literary field*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Greenblatt, S. 1990. *Learning to curse: Essays in early modern culture*. London: Routledge.
- Healy, J.J. 1978. The Lemurian nineties. *Australian Literary Studies* 8, no. 3: 307–16.
- Herzog, A. 1977. *Heat*. New York: Signet.
- Humm, P., P. Stigant, and P. Widdowson, eds. 1986. *Popular fiction: Essays in literature and history*. London: Methuen.
- Ikin, V., ed. 1982. *Australian science fiction*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.
- Jameson, F. 2005. *Archaeologies of the future: The desire called utopia and other science fictions*. London: Verso.
- Johnson, C. (Mudrooroo Narogin). 1983. *Doctor Wooreddy's prescription for enduring the ending of the world*. Melbourne: Hyland House.
- Kramer, S., dir. *On the Beach*. Hollywood, CA: United Artists, 1959.
- Le Guin, U.K. 1974. *The dispossessed: A novel*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Lem, S. 1961. *Solaris*. Warsaw: MON.
- Mackay, K. 2003. *The yellow wave: A romance of the Asian invasion of Australia*, ed. A. Enstice and J. Webb. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Marx, K., and F. Engels. 1967. *The communist manifesto*. Trans. S. Moore Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Mill, J.S. 1868. *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*. Third series, vol. 190, no. 1517, Cornelius Buck, Paternoster Row, London, 12 March.
- Miller, G., dir. *Mad Max*. Burbank, CA: Village Roadshow Pictures, 1979.
- , dir. *Mad Max 2*. Hollywood, CA: Warner Brothers, 1981.
- , dir. *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome*. Hollywood, CA: Warner Brothers, 1985.
- Miller, J. (William Lane). 1892. *The workingman's paradise: An Australian labour novel*. Brisbane: Edwards, Dunlop & Co. and the Worker Board of Trustees.
- Milner, A. 1994. *On the Beach*: Apocalyptic hedonism and the origins of postmodernism. In *Australian Popular Culture*, ed. I. Craven. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2004. Darker cities: Urban dystopia and science fiction cinema. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 3: 259–79.
- . 2008. Mis/reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: A comparatist critique of Williams on Orwell. *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, no. 6: 31–45.
- More, T. 2001. *Utopia*. Trans. C. Miller. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Miller, G. 1986. *Demand the impossible: Science fiction and the utopian imagination*. London and New York: Methuen.
- . 2000. *Scraps of the untainted sky: Science fiction, utopia, dystopia*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Mulcahy, R. 2000. *On the Beach*. Pyrmont, NSW: Showtime/Seven Network.
- Münster, A., ed. 1977. *Tagträume vom Aufrechten Gang. Sechs Interviews mit Ernst Bloch*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Murphy, P.D. 2009. Environmentalism. In *The Routledge companion to science fiction*, ed. M. Bould, A.M. Butler, A. Roberts, and S. Vint. London and New York: Routledge.
- O'Bannon, R. 1999–2003. *Farscape*. Willoughby, NSW: Jim Henson Company/Nine Network.
- Orwell, G. 1949. *Nineteen eighty-four: A novel*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- . 1966. *Homage to Catalonia and looking back on the Spanish War*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1970a. Letter to Francis A. Henson (extract). In *Collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell*. Vol. 4, *In front of your nose*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1970b. Why I write. In *Collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell*. Vol. 1, *An age like this*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Pawling, C., ed. 1984. *Popular fiction and social change*. London: Macmillan.
- Piercy, M. 1991. *He, she and it*. New York: Knopf.
- Proyas, A. 1998. *Dark City*. New York: New Line Cinema.
- Robinson, K.S. 1997. *Antarctica*. London: HarperCollins.

- . 2004. *Forty signs of rain*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2005. *Fifty degrees below*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2007. *Sixty days and counting*. London: HarperCollins.
- Sargent, L.T. 1994. The three faces of utopianism revisited. *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1: 1–37.
- . 1999. Australian utopian literature: An annotated, chronological bibliography 1667–1999. *Utopian Studies* 10, no. 2: 138–73.
- . 2008. Australia as eutopia and dystopia. In *Demanding the impossible: Utopia and dystopia*, ed. A. Milner, M. Ryan, and S. Sellars. Melbourne: Arena.
- Schrader, P. 2006. Canon fodder: As the sun finally sets on the century of cinema, by what criteria do we determine its masterworks? *Film Comment*, September/October: 33–49.
- Shute, N. 1957. *On the beach*. Melbourne: Heinemann.
- Smith, J. 1976. *Nevil Shute*. Boston: Twayne.
- Spence, C.H. 1987. *A week in the future*. Introduction and Notes by L. Durrell Ljungdahl Sydney: Hale & Iremonger.
- Sutherland, J. 2002. *Reading the decades: Fifty years of the nation's bestselling books*. London: BBC Publications.
- Suvin, D. 1979. *Metamorphoses of science fiction: On the poetics and history of a literary genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1988. *Positions and presuppositions in science fiction*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Traviss, K. 2004a. *City of pearl*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2004b. *Crossing the line*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2005. *The world before*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2006. *Matriarch*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2007. *Ally*. London: HarperCollins.
- . 2008. *Judge*. London: HarperCollins.
- Turner, G. 1987. *The sea and summer*. London: Faber.
- . 1990a. Envoi. In *A pursuit of miracles: Eight stories*. Adelaide: Aphelion.
- . 1990b. The fittest. In *A pursuit of miracles: Eight stories*. Adelaide: Originally published in D. King and R. Blackford, eds., *Urban fantasies* (Melbourne: Ebony Books, 1985) Aphelion.
- Veiras, D. 2001. In *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, ed. A. Rosenberg. Paris: Champion.
- . 2006. In *The history of the Sevarambians: A utopian novel*, ed. J.C. Laursen and C. Masroori. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Walton, R. 2003. Utopian and dystopian impulses in Australia. *Overland*, no. 173: 5–20.
- Williams, R. 1965. *The long revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1979. *Politics and letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: New Left Books.
- . 1980. Utopia and science fiction. In *Problems in materialism and culture*. London: Verso.
- . 1981. *Culture*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- . 1983. *Towards 2000*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- . 1988. Science fiction. *Science Fiction Studies* 15, no. 3: 357–8.

Copyright of Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.