Introduction
Eco-dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination

Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler (Guest Editors)

When, at the climax of Franklin J. Schaffner's 1968 film *Planet of the Apes*, the astronaut Taylor (Charlton Heston) discovers the torch of the Statue of Liberty poking through the shifting sands of a post-apocalyptic world, his horrified, despairing cry – 'We finally really did it! You maniacs! You blew it up!' – encapsulated the nuclear anxiety of dystopian fiction and film in the 1950s and 1960s. Thirty-five years later, that iconic image of Liberty's torch engulfed by natural forces was knowingly echoed in both Steven Spielberg's *AI* and Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*, but in the first decade of the new millennium, the imagined apocalypse waiting to engulf the human race was not nuclear, but environmental: New York is swallowed by the rising waters of the Atlantic ocean, and frozen solid by the plunging temperatures of a new ice age. As these high-profile cinematic examples indicate, climate change has made its way towards the mainstream in recent years, on both the screen and the page, and has now eclipsed nuclear terror as the prime mover of the apocalyptic and dystopian imagination.

Writing in his 'Common Ground' column in the *Guardian* in 2005, the travel and nature writer Robert MacFarlane observed that the spectre of environmental disaster confronting the Earth had, as yet, provoked relatively little artistic response, certainly in comparison with the extensive corpus of literary work that had helped to shape the politics of the nuclear debate in the late twentieth century. While arguing that 'an imaginative repertoire is urgently needed by which the causes and consequences of climate change can be debated, sensed, and communicated', MacFarlane also suggested that 'any literature of climate change would, for the time being, have to steer determinedly away from apocalyptic scenarios', because of the slow and incremental nature of climate change itself.[1] In the years since,

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ever more writers have answered the first part of MacFarlane's call, seeking to provide an 'imaginative repertoire' through which to understand and influence the climate change debate. And yet, contrary to MacFarlane's hopes, the majority of such artistic responses have chosen an apocalyptic scenario as the appropriate means of doing so. Though we are not yet at the stage of environmental apocalypse – not quite – it is certainly true that climate change is most commonly, and most forcefully, communicated in the language of disaster, which seems to provide the most compelling and persuasive means of persuading its audience, not only of the devastation being wreaked upon global ecosystems, but of the human consequences of that devastation.

MacFarlane's worry – that unrealized prophecies of environmental doom would provide ammunition for climate-change sceptics – has not deterred writers, film-makers and artists from refracting their visions of eco-disaster through a dystopian prism. Perhaps this can best be explained by a rapidly increasing sense of urgency, by the awareness that 'measured and prudent' responses, to use MacFarlane's terms, may not be sufficient to intervene in the course of events. Apocalyptic visions have the power to transfix their audience with horror, to command attention and shock people out of a position of comfortable apathy, in a way that strict adherence to the data cannot, even if the long-term implications of that data are terrifying enough in themselves. Science fiction writing and film-making has embraced the possibilities of apocalyptic soothsaying, from the Victorian era to the present day; freed from the expectations of strict fidelity to scientific fact, and yet tethered to it, it has always been a popular genre within which extravagant speculation sits cheek-by-jowl with flashes of prescience. As such, it has become the primary vehicle for artistic meditation on the progress and impact of climate change.

In the last few years, literary responses to climate change have proliferated, to the extent that a new term – 'cli-fi' – has been coined to identify this new body of work that centrally addresses the issue of climate change and its associated environmental consequences. However, as the articles collected in this issue suggest, the human relationship to the natural world has long been central to the dystopian imagination, and the eco-dystopian 'vocabulary' has been enlarged by more than merely climate change in recent years. John McNeill has observed that 'since 1750, new [technology] clusters have come at 50- to 55-year intervals, and another was "due" in the 1990s'.[2] In

the event, we may well have had at least two. Rapid advances in genetic research, the growth of the internet, and fears of pandemic viruses have each provoked a variety of responses in contemporary dystopian literature and cinema.

In many contemporary eco-dystopias, technological progress means both a movement away from and simultaneously a movement into or towards nature – away from nature-as-wilderness, but towards nature-as-garden, a constructed, mediated, engineered nature that is still essential to our definitions of urban space or technological utopia. Indeed, this reduction in scale is taken to extremes by a whole sub-genre of dystopian narratives in which the contested ground of nature is entirely internalized, and the conflict between untrammelled wilderness and enclosed garden is reimagined as a struggle between 'natural' life and 'artificial' life forms. The plethora of texts and films that express anxiety over artificial intelligence, cybernetics and, more recently, virtual reality and genetic engineering, are closely related to those that express anxiety over the large-scale alteration of ecological processes, which have led to species extinctions and global warming. Sharona Ben-Tov has perceptively observed that, for the most part, 'science fiction is a dream about nature and the control of nature', and as the articles in this special issue of *Critical Survey* will variously suggest, this is truer now than ever before.[3]

'Nature', of course, is a fluid and contested term, both in common usage and in a tradition of utopian and dystopian thought. As Kate Soper has pointed out, in its 'commonest and most fundamental sense, the term "nature" refers to everything which is not human and distinguished from the work of humanity'; it is 'the idea through which we conceptualize what is "other" to ourselves'.[4] At the same time, however, it is also used 'in reference to that totality of being of which we in some sense conceive ourselves of forming a part … both that which we are not *and* that which we are within'.[5] More confusingly still, it can also refer to 'the structures, processes and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world … the nature to whose laws we are always subject, even as we harness them to human purposes, and whose processes we can neither escape nor destroy'. And there is still another sense, according to which 'nature' is 'a domain of observable phenomena and directly tangible forms … an empirical domain or "surface" environment (nature as landscape, wilderness, plant and animal life)'.[6]

Soper's definitions provide a useful jumping-off point for reading the articles collected here. Though diverse in subject matter and approach, they bring sharply into focus the problematic nature of dualistic thinking when dealing with twenty-first-century environmental challenges. With the exception of J.G. Ballard's proto-climate fiction, discussed by Jim Clarke, all of the texts and films under discussion make clear that human beings are responsible for ecological disaster; and all of them, including Ballard, accentuate the fact that we are profoundly affected and changed by such catastrophe. As a species, that is, we are not aloof from our biosphere, however great our power to alter it; we are enmeshed within it. The decimation of plant and animal life entails the potential destruction of humanity.

The collection opens with Jim Clarke's analysis of J.G. Ballard's early novels, *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Crystal World* (1966), in which he evaluates Ballard's status as a forerunner of later climate fiction. He notes that Ballard's works, which predate the awareness of anthropogenic climate change and the existence of climate science as a discipline, do not apportion blame for the environmental catastrophe they imagine. In refusing to do so, they are characteristic of Ballard's broader antipathy towards science; while the climate change they depict – inexplicable and unavoidable – provides a means of probing how human character is altered, and even improved, by extreme experience.

In his article on the role and representation of nature in dystopian film, Rowland Hughes traces a shift in attitude and perspective from the early years of environmental consciousness in the 1970s to the late twentieth century. In particular, he analyses how anthropocentric understandings of the relationship of human beings to nature have been problematized by the conditions of postmodernity, through which the privileged authority of the individual self as the root of identity has been challenged. He argues, however, that even narratives that radically destabilize our sense of what is natural – and which leave us in a state of uncertainty about what is real – nevertheless remind us of our own embodied natures; they bring us to a consciousness that we cannot exist outside or beyond the material world, even if that world is itself heavily mediated by technological interference and control.

Soraya Copley's ecofeminist analysis of the work of Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood, like Hughes's article, draws our attention to the way in which these texts use technology to complicate our notion

of the natural. For Piercy and Atwood, Copley argues, the 'posthuman' condition, in which human bodies are fused with machines to create cyborgs, offers a way of escaping the essentialism of traditional gender roles. As ecofeminists have argued, the imposition of patriarchal logic on to a gendered nature has facilitated the despoliation of the natural world in the service of commodity capitalism. Copley's article thus advances a reading of these texts in which the ecological and the political are almost inseparable, and issues of gender and social organization are interpreted through an environmental lens.

Copley shares with Pat Wheeler an interest in the generic fusion that often takes place in environmentally focused dystopian writing. Wheeler offers a rereading of a range of apocalyptic science fiction novels published between 1998 and 2010, analysing in detail how these works appropriate and update the tropes and conventions of eschatological apocalyptic writing. The end result, as with Atwood and Piercy, is a politicized vision of climate change that sees it as a potential new beginning as well as a cataclysmic ending – a call to action that confronts us with ethical and political choices.

Hannah Stark's article turns to a text that has been hailed as the 'first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation': Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Although the nature of the catastrophe that has devastated the Earth in this novel is never specified, Stark argues persuasively that McCarthy's pronounced emphasis on the literal and metaphorical importance of sight and blindness, which permeates the text, prompts the reader to consider the role of human beings as witnesses to, if not agents in, the end of the world as we know it. Stark makes the important point that the anthropocentrism of the text steers us towards the realization that humans now wield a power over the environment that is unique amongst species – a status that is recognized by the increasingly widespread usage of the descriptor 'Anthropocene' for the geological era in which we are living. However, McCarthy's vision of the human relationship to nature is not uncomplicatedly dualistic, as Stark notes. *The Road* makes clear that our power as a species is limited, if not illusory, and that we are not immune to the damage we inflict.

The collection concludes with Sidneyeve Matrix's analysis of Andrew Niccol's recent movie *In Time*, read in conjunction with Michael Anderson's SF classic *Logan's Run*. Like several other contributors to this special issue, Matrix is interested in the operation of nature at the micro as well as the macro level – specifically, the

intersection of technology with the human body resulting in what she terms the 'quantifiable self'. She reads *In Time* as a warning against the voluntary embrace of the biopolitical monitoring of everyday life, and a concomitant surrender of independence and selfhood. In the age of smartphones and smartwatches, these films seem particularly apposite, and like so many eco-dystopias, they function both as a warning and a call to eco-political action.

Notes

1. Robert MacFarlane, 'The Burning Question', *Guardian*, 24 September 2005. Retrieved 9 September 2013 from: www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/24/featuresreviews.guardianreview29.
2. John Robert McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: Norton, 2000), 313.
3. Sharona Ben-Tov, *The Artificial Paradise: Science Fiction and American Reality* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 2.
4. Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 15–16.
5. Ibid., 21.
6. Ibid., 180.