People Get Ready

The Fiction Writer as the Maker of Maps into Uncanny Futures at a Time of Environmental Uncertainty

David Sornig

Preface

Reclaiming Alessandra Domenica's map of the future: the editor's samizdat introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *No Dominion*.

So uncanny was the apparent predictive power of Alessandra Domenica's first novel, *No Dominion*, that in the years immediately after its publication it drew to it a wholly un-ironic subcultural following that read the novel as a literal map of the future. Still today, some twenty years after the era of its forecast has closed, the book inspires a kind of cult whose slavish adherence to its content as truth might, were these different times, be thought comical. It remains one of the few works of literature to have made the leap so entirely from the secular to the sacred.

No Dominion is set thirty years into Domenica's own future, at the very beginning of those decades that saw the Australian continent being gradually abandoned under the stresses of what was then known as global 'warming.' Its traumas are rooted in the signs of civilisational collapse that loomed at the time: the fraying then resurgent grip of government, the rise of vigilante terror and the herding of immigrant groups into protective urban exclusion zones.

In *No Dominion* these traumas are focused on the isolated exurbs of an unnamed conurbation in south-eastern Australia, a city as socially and politically volatile as Paris was in the early 2000s, and an obvious parallel with Melbourne and its rings of ghettoised hatred four decades later.

At the heart of the novel is the remarkable Sunday Sunday (the doubled name recalls *Catch-22*'s Major Major and *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert), the anarchist journalist who stumbles across the story of a long-ago discovery of the decomposing body of a woman in a rubbish tip on the western outskirts of the city. The body is presumed by police to belong to one of the 'invisibles' of the time, an illegal immigrant, possibly a sex worker, who is never DNA-matched

< Shaun Tan, *The Gift*, 2010, acrylic and oils on paper, 45 × 70 cm.

with any missing person or any other individual on the genetic record. Once the remains are cremated the case is more or less forgotten. (The influence of that other uncanny anticipator of apocalypse, Roberto Bolaño, is clear here.) But thirty years later a web of competing and contradictory urban legends has grown around the identity of the body in the tip, especially among those who now live in the largely lawless Outer Ring, parts of which have been built on the site of the dump; and it is to these mythologies that Sunday Sunday, as journalist, is drawn.

The rumours that circulate about the body never seem quite able to define their own substance. Just what is so important about the dead woman shifts with each telling of the legend, and Sunday becomes determined to discover the truth.

Alessandra Domenica's contemporaries responded to the novel with both critical and emotional enthusiasm. One Spanish critic's praise is typical: '*No Dominion*, built as it is on labyrinths, hidden knowledge and circular, self-consuming universes, is both the perfect Borgesian murder mystery and a ghastly parable for our times.'

Of course, at the time of the novel's publication no one, least of all Domenica herself, had any inkling that there would emerge such striking correspondences between the events of the fiction and those of the real world. Each fictional event that seemed to come to pass in the passage of history was met by those involved in the growing sanctification movement with a blend of celebration and awe. The most powerful of these was the identification of an actual Sunday figure, whose life circumstances and close relationship to the author only served to fuel the fervour of those who were intent on wresting the novel from its secular origins.

Naturally I will be challenged by those who point to the correspondence between real and fictional events as a kind of evidence of miracles. I would remind these literary occultists that *No Dominion* was produced by a culture so anxious about its future that its writers created thousands of works which speculated about what the future might bring for a civilisation that faced such enormous environmental threats. It was inevitable that sooner or later this culture would produce at least one work that was more or less narrowly predictive of actual events. In fact, I favour the theory that the novel helped to produce the exact cultural conditions that some believe it only predicted. It became, in effect, a map that defined the future, rather than a document that merely plotted an already existing fate.

Literature emerges from the speculations of minds that are immersed in capacities creative and logical, reasonable and unconscious. The novelist's mind draws on evidence observed from political, social, physical and personal worlds, and infers the possible and the probable from that evidence. It is incumbent upon us, as critical thinkers, to remember that the novelist is not a seer and that the novel is not a divine object. It is the present editor's sincere wish that this new edition of *No Dominon* will serve to encourage a new generation of

readers who might finally turn the tide against the cultists who for so long have claimed it as their own.

People get ready: the fiction writer as the maker of maps into uncanny futures at a time of environmental uncertainty

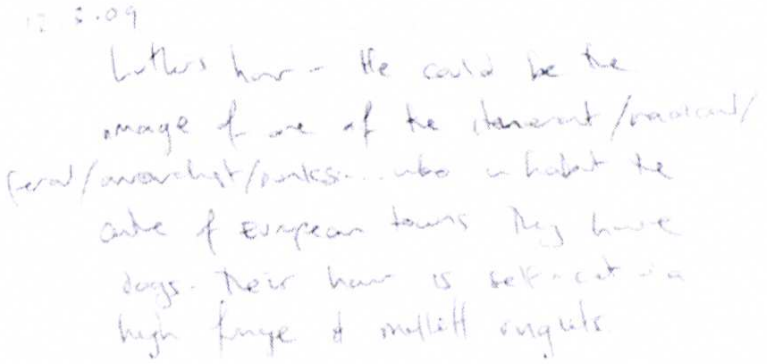
The preceding text is a fiction, an imagined future account of a novel that is itself a fiction, a text that only exists within 'Sunday Sunday,' a novel-in-progress which uses the device of metafictional layering to articulate something about the strangeness of time and the way fiction is able to represent future time in unusual ways. I present it because it begins to manifest a set of thematic concerns that I have returned to obsessively, even unconsciously over a number of years.

It's always interesting to me as a writer to find myself sensitised to a particular subject matter once I have taken the decision to write on it, so that the subject matter seems to appear uninvited at every turn, sometimes so intensely that it becomes overwhelming. This sensitivity is not wholly irrelevant to some of the ideas I would like to discuss here, which are mostly about the way fiction might less predictably approach the problem of future time. At the heart of this thinking is an interest in the coincidental parallels between events that are mapped in fiction, and the unpredicted events of 'real' life that follow in time.

I would like to share two other stories about this that are not fictions, but which are nevertheless intimately tied up with it. One is about writing. The other one is about reading.

Dogs: a story about writing

In March 2009 in Granada, Spain I began composing a story that I gave the shorthand title 'Dogs.' The first reference to it I can find in my journal indicates that I was toying with the physical appearance of Luther, a character who appears in 'Sunday Sunday.' The note reads as follows: 'Luther's hair. He could be the image of one of the itinerant/radical/feral/anarchist punks...who inhabit the centre of European towns. They have dogs. Their hair is self-cut—a high fringe and mullet ringlets.' (12.03.2009)



While the character named Luther does not eventually appear in the story, the dogs certainly do. The story that has emerged more than a year later centres in part on the relationship between humans and dogs and is framed by events that are mildly speculative, with ambitions that lean toward emulating the dystopian novels of Jose Saramago or the mannered nightmares of Ian McEwan. In the story a woman named Virginia, one of the punk travellers, has a relationship with her companion dog which she imagines is so profound that it would only be some monumental act of devastation, a total remaking of human and dog culture that could ever detach them.

It is the monumental act of devastation—the undoing of culture—that the story eventually attempts to imagine. However, this is not an account of the significance of an unfinished and unpublished story; rather, it is the account of a coincidence that characterised its composition. I am being careful for that reason to take note, for the sake of evidence, of the dates of its drafts and the appearance of certain descriptions in the text.

In the very first draft of the story (a file dated 12 February 2010) the woman takes the dog to a beach on the Costa Tropical in Spain where she is covetously observed by Alec Stokes, an English tourist through whose consciousness this part of the story is narrated. This is from the draft:

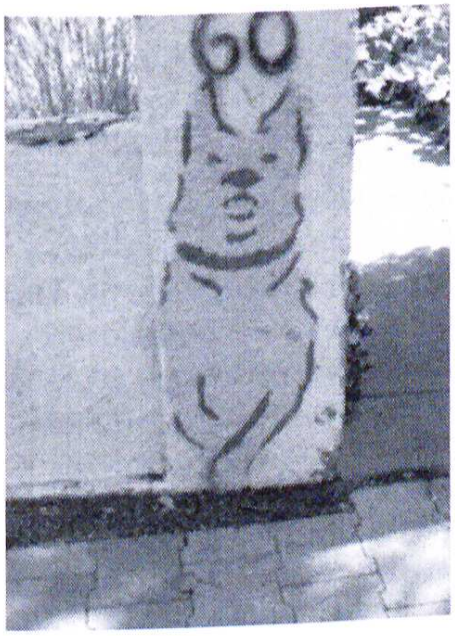
> The bare-breasted punk woman was now untying the roped leash from the wide leather strap that was wound about the dog's throat. It was a desiccated-looking beast with a kind of golden mane that made it look something like a miniature lion. It was scarred on its face and haunches and Alec took this as evidence of the punks' well-known encouragement of the wildness of their dogs. At first the dog was more interested in the new smells of its immediate surrounds in the sand, but once it had urinated, it looked as if it had given itself permission to roam more freely and it left the group's company, first tracking a tangled uncertain path, before leaping with sudden gusto in a direct, impatient line down to the water.

When the dog comes too close to some children on the beach, a confrontation between the mother of one of the children, the Englishman and the dog's punk owner ensues: 'A part of Alec wanted her to set the dog on to them both. She seemed for a moment to rise into the shape of a wild tribal woman. She was suddenly the Boadicea of the Mediterranean, dangerous, as terrifying herself as the dog was, at the birth of the rebellion she had always longed for.'

The dog's later disappearance marks in the story the beginning of a hidden campaign against the animal companions of the punk-squatters who occupy the caves of Granada's Sacromonte district, a campaign that edges toward culmination in the attempt by local authorities to evict them. The punks resist and the standoff attracts the attention of the news media. The Englishman, now back home, watches a video news report of the event on the internet. I'll quote here from my draft of 14 March 2010:

> The camera showed the appalling state of the caves. The reporter was shown wearing a dust mask, for the smell, she said. In one of the caves a large mural had been drawn. It showed a snarling yellow dog somewhere between the style of a Banksy stencil and a stone age cave painting. It was an image of the woman's dog, leaping down the beach.

Almost two months after I wrote this passage I was walking along a street near to where I live in the Adelaide suburb of Forestville when I came across a house which had an image stencilled on each of its driveway pillars. I photographed one of them on 8 May 2010.



I was struck, and continue to be struck, by what to me is a clear resemblance between the fictional image I had imagined and described two months earlier as having been painted in an invented Sacromonte cave-dwelling which commemorated an event that never happened on a Spanish beach in a time that fictionally corresponds only roughly with my own, and the real image in a place literally four hundred metres from my home. Despite being the wrong colour, the image of the dog in Adelaide is somewhere between a Banksy stencil and a stone age cave painting. The dog is leaping with gusto. The detail I was most drawn to, and that to me confirmed the correspondence between the two images, was the snarl, the dog leaping, terrifying, at the birth of a rebellion.

The arrival at Riva: a story about reading

In late June or early July 2005 I was living in Melbourne and found myself at home in the suburb of Glen Waverley, in the middle of the day, with some time on my hands to do some reading. It's important that you know the timing and the place, not only because reading always happens in a time and place but also because the mail in Glen Waverley arrives around midday, and the arrival of the mail plays an important role in this story. I am unable to pinpoint exactly

which day in June this happened but it must have been some days after the 26th and might even have been in early July. The book was W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo*, a prose narrative that traces the 1987 journey of the narrator, a fictional wisp away from Sebald himself, as he follows both his own footsteps from a previous journey seven years earlier, and those of Franz Kafka in 1913. The journey takes him through Italy from Venice to Verona and then almost on to Riva on Lake Garda. The passage I read on that day in 2005, probably very close to midday, describes the narrator's bus journey to Riva and his being overwhelmed by the appearance on the bus of two boys 'who bore the most uncanny resemblance imaginable to pictures of Franz Kafka as an adolescent schoolboy.' The narrator feels the need to speak to the boys' parents about this resemblance:

> The story I told them about a *scrittore ebreo* from the city of *Praga* who took the waters at Riva in the month of September 1913 and as a young man looked exactly—*esatto, esatto*, I hear myself repeating in despair, time after time—like their two sons...When at length, to dispel any suspicions they might have regarding my person, I said that I should be perfectly happy if they would send me, without revealing their name, a photograph of their sons to my English address once they had returned home from their holiday to Sicily, I realised that they were now quite certain that I must be an English pederast travelling Italy for his so-called pleasure. They informed me in no uncertain terms that they would not under any circumstances comply with my improper request and that they would appreciate it if I would return to my own seat right away. I realised that, if I did not, they would have been prepared to stop the bus in the next village and hand over this nuisance of a fellow passenger to the authorities. Grateful for every tunnel we had to pass through on the steep west bank of Lake Garda, I remained motionless on that bus seat from then on, embarrassed to the utmost degree and consumed with an impotent rage at the fact that I would now have no evidence whatsoever to document this most improbable coincidence. Continually I heard the sniggering of the two lads behind me, and in the end it was affecting me so badly that, when the bus stopped in Limone sul Garda, I took my bag down from the luggage net and got out.
>
> It will have been close on four in the afternoon when weary and rather the worse for wear after the long journey from Vienna via Venice to Padua and then on to Limone, during which I had not slept at all, I entered the Hotel Sole on the lakeside, which at that time of day was deserted. One solitary visitor was sitting beneath a sunshade on the terrace...[1]

I was disturbed from my reading more or less at that time by the sound of the postman's motorcycle as it passed by the house. I stepped outside and found

in the mailbox a postcard from my parents-in-law who were at that time on a trip to Italy to visit their respective families in the cities of Bologna and Pistoia.

The postcard was date stamped from Ponte Venturina in Bologna on 24 June 2005 at 11:42.

The flip side shows a scene from the town of Riva del Garda—Sebald's intended but not-arrived-at destination in the passage I had just read. It shows the harbour in still blue-day sunlight, a clocktower on the waterfront and to the right the pale yellow facade of the Bar Hotel Sole.

I was seized by the improbability of this coincidence, even more so given that the section of *Vertigo* I had been reading had itself been concerned with a strange coincidence: the parallel appearance of the twins who look uncannily like a young Kafka. Nevertheless, I was disappointed that the image on the postcard did not match exactly the place Sebald had described; this despite even the close coincidence of the names of the hotels: both in one way or another hotels Sole.

I continued reading through into the afternoon with this feeling of a destination having been missed, disappointed by the imprecision of the coincidence that had fallen short by just ten kilometres.

In Part III of *Vertigo*, 'Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva,' Sebald describes Kafka's attendance at 'Dr von Hartungen's hydropathic establishment,' where Kafka 'arriv[ed] by steamer just before nightfall that day.'[2] During his stay Kafka has regular dinner companions, among them a Genoan girl with whom he falls in love but who departs on a ghostly steamer and a General who commits suicide and is buried at Riva. It is these events, according to Sebald's narrator, that prompt Kafka to arrive upon the story of the Hunter Gracchus:

> Over the years that followed, lengthy shadows fell upon those autumn days at Riva, which, as Dr K. on occasion said to himself, had been so beautiful and so appalling, and from these shadows there gradually emerged the silhouette of a barque with masts of an inconceivable height and sails dark and hanging in folds. Three whole years it takes until the vessel, as if it were being borne across the waters, gently drifts into the little port of Riva. It berths in the early hours of the morning. A man in blue overalls comes ashore and makes fast the ropes.

> Behind the boatmen, two figures in dark tunics with silver buttons carry a bier upon which lies, under a large floral-patterned cover, what was clearly the body of a human being. It is Gracchus the huntsman...
>
> ...We the readers, the sole witnesses of what was said between the huntsman and the deputy of the community of Riva, learn little of the fate of Gracchus, except that many, many years before, in the Black Forest, where he was on guard against the wolves which still prowled the hills at that time, he went in pursuit of a chamois—and is this not one of the strangest items of misinformation in all the tales that have ever been told?—he went in pursuit of a chamois and fell to his death from the face of a mountain; and that because of a wrong turn of the tiller, a moment of inattention on the part of the helmsman, distracted by the beauty of the huntsman's dark green country, the barque which was to have ferried him to the shore beyond failed to make the crossing, so that he, Gracchus, has been voyaging the seas of the world ever since, without respite, as he says, attempting now here and now there to make land.[3]

It was now that the significance of the postcard became clear. The view of the small port at Riva was the very view that would have been had by Kafka himself as he arrived on the steamer, it was the view that the Genoan girl would have had of Kafka as she disappeared from his view. And through the years, according to Sebald's account, it had become distilled into Kafka's story of the Hunter Gracchus as the eerie barque bearing his body drifts into the port at Riva. Sebald's text includes a grainy, unsourced and uncertain image of a barque of the type that it is possible to imagine bears the remains of the Hunter. The postcard was the image that matched Sebald's, that completed the story. It was the perfect counterpart to Sebald's image.

Vertigo pivots on the account of Kafka's story of the Hunter Gracchus, which itself pivots on this moment of strange arrival. It imagines the cultural, historical and psychological background that served to generate Kafka's composition of the story, its hidden roots which emerge into strange fulfilment in Kafka's text. But in my singular and unrepeatable experience of reading it, this fulfilment has an uncanny echo, something *Vertigo* itself plays out in episodes from its narrator's own life and memory. The effect for me is itself also vertiginous.

Synchronicities

These types of coincidences are not isolated for me—I could give an account of a number of other occasions when time and place have overlapped in unlikely ways and always they take place in the context of writing and reading.

In the Jungian sense they are synchronicities, meaningful a priori connections in time and space that are acausally related.[5] As such no causal accounting can be made for the image of the dog appearing independently of the story about a similar image, just as there can be none for the arrival of the Riva postcard at the very time I was reading about the place.

However, as a fiction writer who is working in an age of Wikileaks' 'scientific journalism,'[6] during a time when the realist fiction and its non-fiction counterpart the memoir are in the literary foreground, there is a risk for me in telling stories about synchronicity that claim to be true.

David Shields explores and endorses the cultural turn toward the real in *Reality Hunger*, reproducing Kevin Kelly's claim that 'Science is on a long-term campaign to bring all knowledge in the world into one vast interconnected web of facts. Independent facts, even those that make sense in their own world are of little value to science.'[7] Arthur Koestler bemoaned Jung's version of synchronicity as relying more on the obscurantism of archetypes than on physics, and the biologist Rupert Sheldrake has been criticised as a proponent of a pseudo-science in his theory of morphic resonance which explains the parallel display in unconnected populations of blue-tits the behaviour of piercing milk-bottle tops.[8]

Similarly my accounts might be viewed with suspicion and scepticism. I risk being dismissed as flaky, and, horror of horrors, cosmic. Again Shields turns to Kelly: 'The pseudo sciences are nothing less…than small pools of knowledge that are not connected to the large network of science.'[9]

So while these coincidences suggest to me that I am somewhere on a map, or on a strange calendar that weirdly plots coordinates in time and space and that evidences, without any real evidence of its shape, the existence of a hidden law whose application is arbitrary, unfathomable, absurd, yet delicious, I am nevertheless uncomfortable declaring them.

This tension, this desire to keep hidden and private what I nevertheless know, reminds me that when I happen on these meaningful coincidences they are *always* strange because they are unexpected. I am never conscious of having expected them. In this way the coincidences are something uncanny in the sense that Freud means it,[10] something that normally (or normatively) should remain hidden, impossible, or at least explained away as implausible. Yet it is in this desire to conceal that I find a wider principle to apply to my own writing. The desire develops my understanding of how it is that fiction is able to validly and normally upend the conventionally depicted relationship between time and space.

Normal time

In 2008 English journalist and climate activist George Monbiot wrote that 'Politics is the art of shifting trouble from the living to the unborn.'[11] Monbiot's sentiment, which I've been using around my own fiction, returned to me in June 2010 when newly sworn-in Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard spoke at the Lowy Institute in Sydney to make a highly-anticipated policy announcement on asylum seekers. She began her remarks by repeating the phrase that she used on becoming prime minister on 24 June, saying that she would 'lead a strong and responsible government that will take control of our *future*.'[12]

Part of Gillard's intent here was no doubt to both undermine the reputation of her recently deposed predecessor and in doing so legitimise the authority of her own prime ministership. Gillard's spin participates in the powerful mythology

of the law which is predicated on its projective power to act as Nomos, the Greek deity of laws does, with 'all-encompassing power' to preserve, to connect and to compose.[13]

To hear a politician say that she 'will take control' is common enough and suggests to me a central metaphorical image: the future as an implied vessel, a barque perhaps, that can be physically touched, taken firmly by the tiller so that it might be guided, steered, controlled (by a hand more certain than that on the tiller in Kafka). The phrase as Gillard uses it reflects the desire expressed in lawmaking to shape human behaviour and society from the vantage point of the present through into anticipated future time (or as the manglers of the language would have it 'moving forward') and by doing so to stay the anxiety of uncertainty.

Gillard's statement is also interesting because it rests on the supposition that the vessel of the future is at the time of its utterance not under control, and that to control it is not only possible, but desirable, proper and certain, that the principle domain of lawmaking is to make certain the territory of the future.

Gillard's reassurance is that she 'will lead' and that the government 'will take control.' It's the same kind of certainty about the future that characterises the news cycle. The *Economist's* 'The Week Ahead' section for example was confident enough to claim in June 2010 that 'Improving relations between China and Taiwan will get another boost with the signing of a groundbreaking free-trade pact by the end of June' and that 'A presidential election in Germany on Wednesday June 30th will provide the latest test for the country's chancellor, Angela Merkel.'[14] Calendars, we are reminded by all this, whether definite or more abstract, are objects of reassurance.

An uncertain climate

The main idea I want to get across here is that this vision of future time as a domain both tamable and subject to taming is not unfamiliar from other areas of contemporary public discourse, and in particular the one I am most interested in: the potential changes to Earth's climate and ecosystems under the pressures of predicted global warming, where the textual space that represents 'coming' environmental catastrophe as it may or may not take shape has come to be occupied by largely rational, non-fictional modes of writing or modes which at least purport to be rational and non-fictional (I don't intend any sympathy here for the climate-deniers). *This takes in* the speculations of journalists such as Fred Pearce,[15] Mark Lynas,[16] Stephen Faris,[17] the worried brows of significant figures from the physical and social sciences, among whom we might choose James Hansen,[18] James Lovelock,[19] Tim Flannery,[20] Clive Hamilton,[21] and the stark reporting of commissioned government reporters Nicholas Stern in the UK,[22] Ross Garnaut in Australia,[23] and the IPCC at the global level,[24] not to mention the live streaming of sessions from the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009,[25] and the leaking of the 'Climategate'[26] emails from the University of East Anglia around the same time.

Broadly, the intent of opening up most of this textual space has been to examine and, in some cases through dramatisation, present the strong scientific evidence for anthropogenic climate change and its potential to have large-scale devastating effects on human life, and through this to produce a map, a set of cautionary models for approaching the future. They are texts that seek more or less explicitly to bend both individual human behaviour as well as public policy. Each text lays out its vision of the future in order to claim authority over it. Hansen, for example, writes that 'the continued exploitation of all fossil fuels on Earth threatens not only the other millions of species on the planet but also the survival of humanity itself—and the timetable is shorter than we thought.'[27] Pearce writes about speaking to a climate scientist who 'told me quietly: "If we are right, there are really dire times ahead. Having a daughter who will be about my present age in 2050, and will be in the midst of it, makes the issue more poignant."'[28] These texts, by asserting a defining attitude toward the territory of the future run along the same track as Gillard's political model of 'taking control of our future.' This is the generally accepted model for communicating the rational sciences to a wider general public.

What is interesting to note for me as a fiction writer is how heavily the non-fiction texts, particularly the more imaginative journalistic versions of the consequences of climate change, draw on the genres of science and speculative fiction, as they literalise, characterise and dramatise scientific climate models.

Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, while not strictly a climate change non-fiction, makes imaginative leaps into a future in which humans have suddenly disappeared: 'In a dream, you walk outside to find your familiar landscape swarming with fantastic beings. Depending on where you live, there might be deer with antlers thick as tree boughs, or something resembling a live armored tank.'[29] Mark Lynas' *Six Degrees* attempts to illustrate the impact on human life and earth systems of progressively increased degrees of climate warming. At three degrees he begins a section on Superstorms with the title: *Houston, we have a (hurricane) problem*:

> *Houston, Texas: 5 August 2045, 9pm*: As the evening light fades, an oily swell has begun to rise in the Gulf of Mexico. A few fluffy clouds catch the dying rays of the Sun, but the sky looks almost too tranquil. Only a thickening veil of high-altitude cirrus gives a hint of what is to come...[which we go on to find out is as follows] As the eye of Super-Hurricane Odessa crosses the coast, she is still a Category 6 monster. All of Galveston is under water once more, battered by immense waves tens of metres high...Commercial Houston, headquarters of America's oil industry, is ransacked. Blizzards of paper belonging to some of the most powerful corporations in the world rise into the hurricane's central vortex, scattering high into the troposphere.[30]

Here we are plainly no longer in the territory of journalistic non-fiction, but in the heart of speculative fiction. And it is in this genre of fiction that the most pronounced response to the problem of climate change has emerged. As with

the more imaginative of the non-fictions they mostly focus on the trope of the disaster, and are almost invariably located in a proximate or more distant future world in which the social and physical effects of climate change—or some other environment-related catastrophe—have been visited upon its milieu. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*,[31] which was shanghaied by George Monbiot (perhaps a little hyperbolically) as possibly being 'the most important environmental book ever,'[32] Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*[33] and *The Year of the Flood*,[34] Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Science in the Capital' series,[35] and to some degree Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*[36] all fall more or less into what might be thought of as the genre of speculative environmental disaster, or anticipatory dramatic realism.

Other works of fiction fall outside what we might think of as the 'traditional' mode of speculative future fiction and engage with a historical or present-day contextualisation of the weather sciences and the climate change problem specifically. Giles Foden's *Turbulence*,[37] to take an example, is set during the lead up to D-day in 1944 and concentrates on the nexus between the science of weather prediction and the political and military ears that listen to that science. The unambiguous message the novel delivers to a contemporary audience is that science ought to be heard in determining public policy. Ian McEwan's highly anticipated but critically panned climate change novel *Solar*[38] focuses satirically on a contemporary but still speculative situation involving a physicist who unethically and immorally stumbles upon a way to fight climate change using artificial photosynthesis.

Solar in particular has faced criticism[39] because of the unlikely series of events McEwan foists upon the plot, which then go on to determine the outcome of possibly globally significant events. The poor reception of the novel prompted Australian novelist, critic and blogger James Bradley to ask whether it was even possible to write a good novel about climate change. Bradley puts *Solar*'s ultimate failure down in part to:

> the conventional realist novel's more general limitations, especially when confronted by an issue as large, and as systemic as climate change...The problem is there are no connections in climate change, unless of course you believe there really is a vast conspiracy linking oil companies to governmental inaction (which there is, of course, but it's the sort of messy, mutating, ad hoc conspiracy that crusading journalists can't expose).[40]

In the same blog post Bradley goes on to ask whether for the fiction writer 'writing about climate change demands...[the] dismantlement [of the novel].'

It's a fascinating prompt and makes explicit for me as a writer the discomfort I have felt for a couple of years as I have grappled with the problem of how to write a 'climate change' novel in the face of Bradley's wall of the conventional realist novel, or at least a novel that treats time conventionally.

The challenge for me is really to think about how future time in fiction, or more broadly imaginative prose, can escape the largely rational, and certainly colonial (in the sense that it seeks to definitionally imprint itself on the future) approach to the problem of time, and agency in that time. The feeling I share with Bradley on reading the conventional realist novel (and its links into rational non-fiction and journalism) is that it is unsatisfactory: it does not adequately acknowledge the repression of our uncertain relationship with future time.

Exceeding the certainty of future time

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is an interesting entry point into illustrating the limitations of the rational realist novel. While it can be read largely as a realist novel, contemporary for the late 19th century as it depicts the social and economic conditions that proscribe the circumstances of Tess Durbeyfield's tragedy, from it emerges something of the colour of the escape from rational time I am interested in, as Tess contemplates how the events from her past have led her into her present:

> She suddenly thought one afternoon, when looking in the glass at her fairness, that there was yet another date, of greater importance to her than those; that of her own death, when all these charms would have disappeared; a day which lay sly and unseen among all the other days of the year, giving no sign or sound when she annually passed over it; but not the less surely there. When was it? Why did she not feel the chill of each yearly encounter with such a cold relation? She had Jeremy Taylor's thought that some time in the future those who had known her would say: 'It is the—th, the day that poor Tess Durbeyfield died;' and there would be nothing singular to their minds in the statement. Of that day, doomed to be her terminus in time through all the ages, she did not know the place in month, week, season or year.[41]

To read this passage naively (and only in the naive first reading) is to be in the same position as Tess. We know no more about Tess' fate, the 'day doomed to be her terminus' than she does. Of course once the reading is no longer naive it produces a kind of meta-knowledge that Hardy has been playing towards all along: the entire architecture of the novel is constructed on the premise that Tess was 'destined' to die on the particular day of her execution. It is this meta-knowledge that informs the re-reading, or the assimilation of the facts of the story. Tess' reflections become continuous with her fulfilled fate, and this speaks to the reader's own nervousness. To read and to re-read is to be alive, is to one day die.

This nervous uncertainty presents itself again in W.G. Sebald's triptych of poems *After Nature*. Here his 18th century colonial explorer Steller arrives in the strangely ad hoc new Russian capital St. Petersburg to join the expedition of Vitus Bering. The speaker notes the city's

> jetty walls and bridges,
> alignments, facades and rows of windows—
> these only slowly coming towards us
> out of the future's resounding emptiness[42]

This 'resounding emptiness' further develops for me into an approach to time in fiction that exceeds certainty. J.M. Coetzee notes in an essay of Sebald's poetry that for the eponymous character in Sebald's last work of fiction, *Austerlitz*,

> Time has no real existence...Instead of the continuous medium of time, says Austerlitz, there exist interconnected pockets of space-time whose topology we may never understand, but between which the so-called living and the so-called dead can travel and thus meet one another.'[43]

It is this thinking of time as a landscape of uncanny, synchronicitous 'pockets' that has informed my own novel *Spiel*. *Spiel* takes its title in part from a line in 'O Fortuna' from the *Carmina Burana* which is addressed to the goddess Fortune and the image of the ludic wheel of chance, its villanous whims (nunc per ludum/ dorsum nudum/fero tui sceleris).[44]

The narrator of *Spiel* comes upon an uncanny moment in time and space, a foreshadowed moment of crisis which has escaped the laws of time, which for the narrator happens as any other continuous moment in time and space. That moment, when a bomb explodes in a theatre, is not only foreshadowed for him as a vision; instead, he *lives* it twenty-four hours before the time it happens for everyone else. In this literalisation of Austerlitz's pockets of time the narrator is potentially placed in a position to take control over this fatal future moment; it is made thoroughly predictable to him. One of the ways the novel functions is to remind the reader that such certain control of future time and space and the events that happen in them are the stuff of fictions. Future time eludes order; it is a profoundly indeterminate place.

Normalised time, as we find it in public discourse about climate change, represses this disorder, its resounding emptiness. The repression is revealed by literature as being bound into the uncanny. In fictions, time and experience—as they return, as they are repeated, doubled, made synchronous—become strange. As Freud has it, the fiction writer is able to 'bring about events which never or very rarely happen in fact. In doing this he is in a sense betraying us to the superstitiousness which we have ostensibly surmounted.'[45] The result is an intellectual uncertainty of the kind that Nicholas Royle writes of in his own (re-) reading of Freud: 'Intellectual uncertainty is not necessarily or simply a negative experience, a dead-end sense of not knowing or of indeterminacy. It is just as well an experience of something open, generative, exhilarating (the trembling of what remains undecidable). I wish to suggest that "intellectual uncertainty" is in part what Freud's essay has to teach.'[46] It is in this celebratory attitude toward doubt and uncertainty that I read Richard Horton, editor of the medical journal the *Lancet* who wrote in anticipation of the release of the Muir Russell 'Climategate'

report on the leaked UEA Climate Research Unit emails that 'scientists need to get over their fear of uncertainty. The orthodox scientific view is that policymakers abhor a vacuum of facts. They want certainty, not probability. Scientists, trying to be helpful, may too often pander to that wish. Instead, they should resist it.'[47]

If at the heart of the political talk and the non-fictions about climate change rests a resounding and repressed fear that is in part generated by *the uncanniness of future time, by the radical doubt that it presents*, then my encouragement as a writer of uncanny fictions, as a node of synchronicitous returns in time and place, is in the knowledge that if science could do with being reminded that its own roots lie in uncertainty, then it could do worse than to relearn how to revel in it from fiction, from the type of fictions that do not simply mimic those patterns of repression. ■

Notes

1 W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Vintage, 2002), 88–91.
2 Ibid., 155.
3 Ibid., 163–65.
4 Ibid., 163.
5 C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 118.
6 Julian Assange, 'Don't shoot messenger for revealing uncomfortable truths,' *The Australian* (December 8, 2010), http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/wikileaks/dont-shoot-messenger-for-revealing-uncomfortable-truths/story-fn775xjq-1225967241332.
7 David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), 29–30.
8 Jane Piirto, 'Synchronicity,' in *Encyclopaedia of Creativity Vol. 2*, eds. Steven R. Pritzker and Mark A. Runco (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), 594.
9 Shields, *Reality Hunger*, 30.
10 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), 132.
11 George Monbiot, 'Free the unborn!' *monbiot.com* (October 21, 2008), http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2008/10/21/free-the-unborn/.
12 Emma Rodgers, 'Gillard sworn in as first female PM,' *ABC News* (June 24, 2010), http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/06/24/2935900.htm.
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14 'The week ahead,' *The Economist* (June 27, 2010), http://www.economist.com/node/16441543?story_id=16441543&fsrc=scn/tw/te/rss/na.
15 Fred Pearce, *The Last Generation* (London: Eden Project Books, 2006).
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25 The United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, December 7–19, 2009, http://unfccc.int/meetings/cop_15/items/5257.php.
26 Climategate, http://www.climate-gate.org.
27 Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren*, ix.
28 Pearce, *The Last Generation*, 29.
29 Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (London: Virgin Books, 2007), 53.
30 Lynas, *Six Degrees*, 136–37.
31 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Picador, 2007).
32 Monbiat, quoted in John Vidal, '50 people who could save the planet,' *The Guardian* (January 5, 2008), http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/jan/05/activists.ethicalliving.
33 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2003).
34 Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2009).
35 Kim Stanley Robinson, *Forty Signs of Rain* (New York: Bantam Books, 2004); *50 Degrees Below* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007); *Sixty Days and Counting* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007).
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37 Giles Foden, *Turbulence* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).
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39 Thomas Jones, 'Oh, the Irony,' *London Review of Books* 32(6) (March 25, 2010), 19–20, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n06/thomas-jones/oh-the-irony; John Crace, '*Solar* by Ian McEwan: Digested Read,' *The Guardian* (March 9, 2010), http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/mar/09/solar-by-ian-mcewan; and James Bradley, 'Is it possible to write good fiction about climate change?' *City of Tongues* (March 22, 2010), http://cityoftongues.com/2010/03/22/is-it-possible-to-write-good-fiction-about-climate-change.
40 Bradley, 'Is it possible…' The potential for this ad-hoc conspiracy to now be exposed, or at least undermined, might be realisable in the Wikileaks age. The web of connections is something here properly exposed by Assange's 'scientific journalism' rather than fiction.
41 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891; Penguin: London, 2003), 98–99.
42 W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. Michael Hamburger, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 48.
43 J.M. Coetzee, *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000–2005* (Sydney: Knopf, 2007), 148.
44 'O Fortuna,' *Carmina Burana*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Fortuna. Translation: 'now through the game/my bare back/I bring to your villainy.'
45 Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132.
46 Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 52.
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