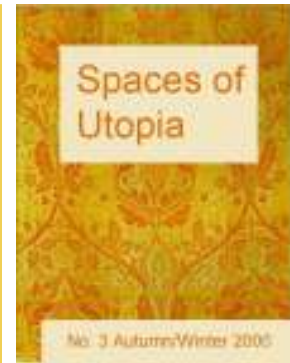


Meditations on the Impossible: A Report from Australia

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There is no equivalent in Australasia to the Society for Utopian Studies in North America or the Utopian Studies Society in Europe. But Australian scholars are clearly interested in utopianism: in December 2001 the University of Tasmania hosted a very successful conference on Antipodean Utopias, with most of its contributors coming from either Australia or New Zealand. Australians have also contributed to the proceedings of the North American and European Societies. Peter Marks gave a paper on utopianism in Terry Gilliam to the 2004 conference of the North American Society in Toronto. He had previously given one on Big Brother and surveillance to the 2002 conference of the European Society in Nottingham – where I also presented a paper on "Utopia and Science Fiction in Raymond Williams". At the 2003 conference, in Madrid, there were papers from five Australians, Amanda Cole, Jacqueline Dutton, Sung-Ae Lee, Kerry Mallan and John Stephens. Cole and Dutton also made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Society to hold its 2006 conference in Australia. As it turned out, in 2006 the conference returned to Spain, to Tarragona, but there were still papers from three Australians, Dutton, myself and Saul Newman.

1. Australian Utopianism: A Short History

Moreover, there is a significant history of Australian utopianism, both textual – albeit mainly literary, rather than philosophical – and practical. There is an old tradition, dating from well before colonisation, of the European use of Australia as a site for its own utopian imaginings. Lyman Tower Sargent's pioneer

bibliography lists Peter Heglin's 1667 *An Appendix To the Former Work* as the earliest of these and, so far as I know, he is right (Sargent 1999). Much more influential, however, was Denis Veiras's *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, first published only a few years later, in part in English in 1675, in whole in French in 1679 (Veiras 2006 and 2001). There is an indigenous aboriginal tradition of retrospective echronia, dreamtimes of one kind or another, where the people belong to the land rather than the land to the people, before history and hence also before the Europeans. There is also a more contemporary aboriginal tradition of dystopian writing about the world the Europeans have made. Perhaps the best example of the latter is Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the End of the World*, which takes as its referent the near-genocidal destruction of the native peoples of the island of Tasmania (Johnson 1983). And, from the late 1840s on, there is 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 utopia written by an Australian (Ikin 1982: 7-27). 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 far more easily than we can today between Melbourne and Europe – is much better known.

The most famous of nineteenth-century Australian utopias were either: utopian-socialist, like William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*, published in 1892 (Miller 1892); or anarchist, like David Andrade's *The Melbourne Riots, or How Harry Holdfast and his Friends Emancipated the Workers*, first published the same year (Andrade 2002-3; Sparrow 2002-3); or feminist, like Catherine Helen Spence's *A Week in the Future*, serialized in *The Centennial Magazine* during 1888 and 1889 (Dugdale 1883; Spence 1987). Utopian themes continued intermittently throughout Australian literary history, from Barnard and Eldershaw's socialistic and feminist *Tomorrow and 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). This is to say nothing of the rich vein of Australian dystopian writing: from late nineteenth-century race-war dystopias like Kenneth Mackay's *The Yellow Wave*, published in 1895 and recently republished by Wesleyan University Press; through to Nevile Shute's *On the Beach*, published in 1957 and proclaimed "The Great Australian Novel of Our Time" in the Mandarin Paperbacks 1990 republication; and on to George Turner's 1987 novel of ecological catastrophe, *The Sea and Summer*, which won the 1988 Arthur C. Clarke prize (Mackay 2003; Shute 1957; Milner 1994; Turner 1987).

Practical, as distinct from textual, utopianism probably dates from 1852, when Australia's first recorded intentional community, Herrnhut, was established near Peshurst in Western Victoria by Friedrich Krumnow (Metcalf / Huf 2002). In the 1890s widespread socialistic agitation for state-assisted, communal settlement led to the settlement of over 300,000 acres of communal land, funded by governments to the tune of £224,000 across the southern and eastern Australian states. In South Australia, where this movement was especially strong, thirteen settlements were established between February 1894 and January 1895 (Burgmann 1985: 156, 154). But the single most important utopian socialist experiment was that led by William Lane, which, like many textual utopias, despaired of establishing justice in Australia itself. In July 1893 Lane and 219 others sailed from Sydney, aboard the *Royal Tar*, to found a communalist "New Australia" colony in Paraguay. It only survived until 1909, but has retained a considerable hold over subsequent Australian utopian and dystopian imaginings (Burgmann 1985: 19-34; Souter 1991; Wilding 1984; Whitehead 1997 and 2003).

Arguably, an equally activist version of utopian socialism is represented by the Industrial Workers of the World. The Australian IWW, or "Wobblies", were second only to their American original in size and influence, with a national membership running at about 2,000 during the First World War, that is, only slightly smaller in proportion to overall population than in the US (Burgmann 1995: 126). The Wobblies are conventionally depicted as syndicalist in European typologies of labour dissent. But, as Burgmann observes of Father Haggerty's "Wheel of Fortune", which was produced by the American IWW, but also widely

circulated in Australia: “No more elaborate blueprint for the future, no more detailed ‘fanciful picture in the air’ was ever devised” (*idem*, 51). In short, the Wobblies were amongst the more utopian of utopian socialists.

These earlier utopian traditions were progressively displaced on the Left by supposedly more “scientific” understandings of progress, both Fabian and Marxist, in the aftermath of the Great War. But inter-war Australia was nonetheless the site for at least one great utopian experiment, the design and eventual construction of the federal capital at Canberra. When the Australian colonies federated in 1901, they had opted to build an entirely new inland city as their capital, in part so as to circumvent inter-colonial rivalries between New South Wales and Victoria, but in part also as a quasi-utopian gesture, signalling both national unity and a collective resolve to expand beyond the coastline. An international design competition, announced in 1910, was won two years later by the American architect, Walter Burley Griffin (though unrecognised at the time, this was also substantially the work of his wife, Marion Mahony Griffin). The Griffin designs were formally adopted in 1925 and were followed, at least initially, at least in outline, during the slow process of the city’s eventual construction. Though the Parliament House was opened as early as 1927, the main stages in the city’s development post-date the Second World War: work on the artificial lake at the capital’s heart, now known as Lake Burley Griffin, began in 1957. As Proudfoot makes clear, some of this utopianism belonged as much to the Griffins as to the new federal political elite (Proudfoot 1994). According to Pont and Proudfoot, their design involved a visionary scheme for a “cosmic city”, based on the area’s natural topography, but also on Pythagorean geometry and esoteric symbolism (Pont / Proudfoot 2002).

Oppositional, as distinct from elite, utopianism remained scarce, however, during the middle decades of the twentieth century: the dominant political and literary forms were either dystopian or realist in character. But in Australia, as elsewhere, utopian politics re-emerged during the 1960s, both in and around the “new social movements” and in re-radicalised sections of the labour movement. In Western Europe and the United States the new politics found significant intellectual articulation in philosophical and literary texts, but their equivalents are

surprisingly absent from Australia. However, as Walton observes, “Australia’s contribution was at the grass-roots level”, rather than at the textual, “in numerous agrarian communes, back-to-earth gatherings and anti-development protests” (Walton 2003: 13). And it continues thus: an ABC Radio series, *Re-Imagining Utopia*, broadcast on Radio National’s “Life Matters” show, reported on Monday, May 5, 2003 that there were then “hundreds” of intentional communities in regional Australia, including “over a hundred” on the North Coast of New South Wales, which had been the site of the 1973 Aquarius Festival, the largest such counter-cultural event during the long “Sixties”. Walton might well have added that, at least initially, this kind of protest was as likely to come from radical labour as from the new movements themselves. This was especially so for what was arguably the most important instance of new social movement utopianism in Australia, that is, radical environmentalism, which was pioneered, in part, by militants from the building unions (Burgmann / Burgmann 1998).

2. Utopian Studies: The Personnel

In 2004, the Australian Research Council set aside a grant of \$A 360,000 for the period 2005-2007 to fund a research project entitled *Demanding the Impossible: Utopianism in Philosophy, Literature and Science Fiction*. This project is being conducted by a team of researchers currently led by: Andrew Benjamin, a philosopher who is Professor of Critical Theory at Monash University in Melbourne and the University of Technology, Sydney; Roland Boer, a former Presbyterian minister, now Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at Monash; Ian Buchanan, formerly Professor of Cultural Studies at Charles Darwin University, but now Professor of Critical Theory at Cardiff University; Kate Rigby, a Germanist and currently Director of the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash; and myself, also at Monash, but a sociologist of literature by trade. We come from quite different disciplinary backgrounds, but have all worked together, at one time or another, in comparative literary and cultural studies at Monash, which is where the project was conceived. None of us would have regarded ourselves as specialist utopianists, however defined, but we did come to recognise a certain overlap of interests around the connected

themes of utopia, dystopia and science fiction.

Andrew Benjamin is an internationally recognised authority on “continental philosophy”, especially aesthetics, whose work has been characterised by a sustained engagement with the work of Walter Benjamin, clearly one of the most important twentieth-century utopian thinkers. Two of Andrew’s books, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde* (1991) and *Present Hope* (1997), contain substantial chapters on his famous namesake. *Philosophy’s Literature* (2001) also includes a chapter on Walter Benjamin, but in addition uses the latter’s writings in close readings of Goethe, Lessing and Celan. Andrew has also pursued the question of utopianism in architecture in his book *Architectural Philosophy* (2000) and in two articles published in *Architectural Theory Review* during 2002 (Benjamin 2002a and 2002b).

Where Andrew is a philosopher by training, Roland Boer is a theologian. Since the publication of his book *Jameson and Jeroboam* in 1996, he has become increasingly interested in the Bible’s role as a vast storehouse of utopian and dystopian images, narratives and symbols, with a profound influence on subsequent literature and culture. In *Jameson and Jeroboam* itself, he had identified a shift from determinism to utopian politics in the two books of *Chronicles* (Boer 1996). He explored this question further in his *Novel Histories* (1997), which critically engaged with the work of Louis Marin, Darko Suvin and Georg Lukács on the historical novel, so as to conclude that *Chronicles* is in fact “euchronian” rather than “eutopian” fiction, insofar as it postulates a different past in order to set up a utopian future. He has also written on the interaction between popular culture and Biblical utopianism in *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door* (1999), where he examines the intersections between heavy metal music and the prophetic material of *Ezekiel*. His *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (2003) develops close readings of Adorno, Bloch and Walter Benjamin, all major theorists of utopia, finding the greater promise in Adorno, whose perpetual suspicion, he argues, suggests a way into the analysis of both the Bible and utopia. More recently, his *Criticism of Heaven* (2006) directly addresses the Biblical uses of both utopia and dystopia.

Ian Buchanan, by contrast, was trained in comparative literature, but has

become increasingly involved with cultural studies – he was President of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia between 2002 and 2004 – and contemporary critical theory. His research has been characterised by a longstanding interest in Fredric Jameson, undoubtedly a key figure in contemporary utopian and science fiction studies (Buchanan 1998 and 2002). Ian is currently editing a collection of Jameson's interviews for Duke University Press and a collection of essays on Jameson for the State University of New York Press. He has also worked on Deleuze, whom he is inclined to read as a utopianist. To date, this work has resulted in one major monograph, *Deleuzism: A Metacommentary* (2000), and a continuing series of scholarly articles. His 1997 paper, "Deleuze and Cultural Studies", which was later published in *A Deleuzian Century?*, began to explore the possibilities of a Deleuzian mode of cultural studies (Buchanan 1999), a question pursued further in a series of three subsequent articles (Buchanan 2001a, 2001b and 2002). More recently, he has explored Deleuze's influence on Hardt and Negri's indisputably utopian *Empire* (Buchanan 2003). In combination, these various essays amount to a sustained reading of Deleuze as a utopian thinker.

Kate Rigby is perhaps the closest amongst us to a genuine utopian: her longstanding Green political commitments have gone hand in hand with developing theoretical interests in ecocriticism, ecofeminism and ecospirituality. She is co-editor of the journal *PAN (Philosophy Activism Nature)* and also currently President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, Australia-New Zealand. She has written on feminism and the feminine (Rigby 1996; Beinssen-Hesse / Rigby 1996). However, her more recent research has increasingly engaged with questions of utopianism and dystopianism and their bearing on humanity's relationship with the natural world (Rigby 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2003a, 2003b). Her latest book, *Topographies of the Sacred*, is the first comparative study of English and German Romanticism written from an ecocritical perspective. It may well turn out to be an important work, a philosophically literate study of the literary and ecological significance of place, which analyses Goethe, Herder, Schelling, Schiller and von Humboldt alongside Blake, Wordsworth and Byron.

If Kate's contemporary political concerns have turned her scholarly interests towards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then mine have been directed towards the science-fictional future. The connection between literature and utopian or quasi-utopian politics has been a recurrent theme in my work. My first book, *John Milton and the English Revolution* (1981), was concerned with the impact of mid-seventeenth century, quasi-millenarian, Protestant political radicalism on Milton's later poetry. In the first edition of my *Literature, Culture and Society* (1996), I began to explore the more specific connections between utopianism, dystopianism and science fiction, especially through readings of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. These thematics became much more central to the second edition, published in 2005, which includes studies of Čapek's *R.U.R.*, Lang's *Metropolis*, *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. During the 1990s I had also become increasingly interested in Raymond Williams's cultural materialist approach to literary and cultural studies. Whilst researching my "Williams book", the misleadingly titled *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies* (2002), I had come to realise how much he had written on utopianism and science fiction and how little regarded this work is by Williams scholars. I made no attempt to rectify this in the monograph itself, but did subsequently publish a scholarly article, which was essentially an expanded version of my Nottingham paper, in *Science Fiction Studies* (Milner 2003). I've also recently published a number of loosely related articles on utopia, dystopia and science fiction (Milner 2004a, 2004b and 2005b). And, I might add, I've been teaching a course on science fiction more or less continuously since 1997.

3. Utopian Studies: The Project

The project is intended as a critical appraisal of utopianism in politics, literature and science fiction, asking whether there is still a place for utopianism in contemporary thought and aiming to situate utopianism in relation to the wider comparative context of theology, philosophy and art. Its special academic significance is in the combination of a wide range of disciplinary approaches with a dual focus on Australian and international (or "overseas", as we say in Australia) materials. We have organised a series of reading groups and research

seminars around the themes of utopia and dystopia. We have established what we hope will be regular and continuing connections with the Utopian Studies Society in Europe, though not as yet with the Society for Utopian Studies in North America. We awarded two postgraduate scholarships for research in utopianism in 2005, five in 2006 and five again in 2007. The first of these were recently awarded their degrees: Mr David Jack for his Masters thesis on “The Political Absolute: Jameson and Utopia”; and Mr Keith Redgen for his on “Dialectic of Enlightenment, Dialectic of Utopia”. We hired Dr Robert Savage as a research assistant to help with the archival work and Dr Matthew Ryan as a contract lecturer (or assistant professor), to help with our teaching. Robert has been working his way through the major English, French and German language literary journals, searching for material on utopia, dystopia, science fiction and ecology; he completed a publishable English translation of Blanchot’s 1959 essay on science fiction (Blanchot 1959); and he has made detailed notes on the Monash science fiction collection.

One of the reasons Monash is peculiarly suitable as a location for this kind of research is its unusually strong library collection. Our Centre has been teaching and researching into utopianism, speculative fiction and SF for more than 20 years and, as a result, the University Library has acquired a very substantial collection of primary and secondary research materials, both philosophical and literary, written in English, French, German and Russian, which is almost certainly unrivalled in Australia. Moreover, the Library’s Rare Books section also houses a large collection of complete or near-complete runs of major American (and some British and Australian) SF pulp magazines, dating from the 1920s through to the 1960s. The American magazines include: *Science and Invention*, 1920-1923; *Amazing Stories* (and *Amazing Stories Annual* and *Amazing Science Fiction*), 1926-58; *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, 1930-1933; *Wonder Stories*, 1930-1936; and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, 1936-1955. Each of these five titles was edited by Hugo Gernsback, the “father of science fiction”, who famously but infelicitously defined the genre as “scientifiction”. The collection also includes *Astounding Stories* (1933-1938), which was edited by John W. Campbell, who adopted and popularised the more manageable term “science

fiction" (Aldiss 1986; Bleiler 1998; Harrison 1974; Clute / Nicholls 1993: 978-980; James 1994: 44-53). The longest run of a British magazine is *Science-Fantasy* (1950-1960), of an Australian magazine *Planet Stories* (1948-1953). This is an important research collection, certainly the best of its kind in Australia and probably one of the best in the world – since, like other popular texts, pulp magazines have generally been very poorly archived. And we are beginning to explore it.

We also planned for – and persuaded the ARC to fund – two conferences around the themes of utopia, dystopia and science fiction. Neither of these is quite the conference Cole and Dutton were hoping for, but they might provide for the beginnings of an Australasian Utopian Studies Society. In our original grant application, we proposed to hold the first conference in 2006, with a big-name North American keynote speaker, the second in 2007 with a big-name European. But, when we learnt that Jameson's much-anticipated *Archaeologies of the Future* was to be published in 2005 and, moreover, that he was interested in a trip to Australia, we brought the first conference forward to December of that year. Organised around the theme *Imagining the Future: Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction*, with Jameson as the keynote speaker, it was held at Monash University in Melbourne on 6-7 December, in the southern hemisphere summer. Other speakers included each of the project team members and also Maria Elisa Cevalco, Jacqueline Dutton, Gregory Claeys, Peter Fitting, Eugene Holland, Lyman Tower Sargent and Robyn Walton. In all, there were something like 90 papers presented to the conference, with contributors from every inhabited continent other than Africa. An initial collection of conference papers was edited by myself, Robert Savage and Matthew Ryan and published both in book form and as a double issue of *Arena Journal* in June 2006 (Milner / Savage / Ryan, 2006). Further collections will follow in the journal *Colloquy* during 2007. Our second conference is scheduled for December 2007, with Professor Tom Moylan, author of *Demand the Impossible* (1986) and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) and Director of the Ralahine Center for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick, as the keynote speaker.

As academics our interest in this field is primarily scholarly. But, as

citizens, it is also necessarily political. For, as Jameson rightly insists, what is “most crippling” in our time is

the universal belief (...) that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. (Jameson 2005: xii)

Utopia, he suggestively argues, “now better expresses our relationship to a genuinely political future than any current program of action”. It does so, he continues, “by forcing us to think the break itself (...) not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break”. Hence, his memorable conclusion that utopia is “a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right” (*idem*, 232). Hopefully, we too will be able to play some small part in prompting such meditations on the impossible.

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Meditations on First Philosophy, in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated (Latin: Meditationes de Prima Philosophia, in qua Dei existentia et animae immortalitas demonstratur) is a philosophical treatise by René Descartes first published in Latin in 1641. The French translation (by the Duke of Luynes with Descartes' supervision) was published in 1647 as Méditations Métaphysiques. The title may contain a misreading by the printer, mistaking animae immortalitas for... I see the impossible meditation as a giant "reset" button on a particular topic. Giving yourself the time and space to just "be" in imagination is very useful, especially if you bounce back-and-forth between what you are seeing vs. what you'd rather be seeing. But if you can stay non-reactive to the 3D stuff, treat your imagination as fact, and keep track of your thoughts throughout the day and "prune" them via whatever technique of your choice, then it's not necessary. If I am too sleepy, I have to either focus on the feeling more intensely or move slightly so I wake up a bit (but not too much). [permalink](#). [embed](#). [save](#). [parent](#). [report](#). [give award](#). [reply](#).

"Bitwise: A Life in Code," David Auerbach's thoughtful meditation on technology and its place in society, is a welcome effort to reclaim the middle ground. Auerbach, a former professional programmer, now a journalist and writer, is "cautiously positive toward technology." He recognizes the very real damage it is causing to our political, cultural and emotional lives. Auerbach is in a good position to conduct this survey. He has spent much of his life on the front lines, playing around as a kid with Turtle graphics, working on Microsoft's Messenger Service after college, and then reveling in Google's oceans of data. (Among his lasting contributions, for which he does not express adequate contrition, is being the first, while at Microsoft, to introduce smiley face emoticons to America.)