

## Demanding the Impossible: The Third Australian Conference on Utopia Dystopia and Science Fiction, including a Comparative Utopias Workshop

held at Monash University (Clayton campus) Melbourne, Australia, over 5–7 December 2007.

Report by Bill Wright

an academically challenged science fiction fan who represented the Australian Science Fiction Foundation, the Melbourne Science Fiction Club and the Nova Mob (SF lit. discussion group).

Overwhelmed by the density of ideas, this reviewer unashamedly squibs any *systematic* attempt at summarising the debate. Instead, a pastiche of Utopian influences discussed at the conference is presented overlaid by his impressions and occasional whimsical observations.



*It was a fact that Thomas More  
Declared that he could not ignore:  
You must be suffering extreme myopia  
If in Europe you could find Utopia.*



Thomas More (1478 - 1535) wrote *Utopia*, a fantasy comparing contemporary Europe to an ideal society governed by reason and tolerance set in the imaginary land of *Utopia*. He posited that the only way England or Europe could find its utopia was to go back in time, whereas the Utopian Socialists in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution saw theirs as something to be achieved in the immediate future.

The three main Utopian Socialists, **Henri de Saint-Simon**, **Charles Fourier** and **Robert Owen**, did their most influential work during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Saint-Simon (1760 - 1825), appalled by the destructive liberalism of the French Revolution, proposed a positive reorganisation of society to replace the feudal and military system that had been strengthened by the Restoration. He advocated an arrangement whereby, under the allegedly benevolent hand of King Louis XVIII, industrial chiefs would control a society in which spiritual direction is taken over by men of science in place of the medieval church.

Charles Fourier (1772 - 1837), unquestionably the most Utopian of the three, rejected industrialism wholesale. He advocated celebration of the instincts over reason and championed the full integration of homosexuals, lesbians, sadomasochists, fetishists and women into collective life. His small following was expanded by a scism among Saint-Simonians in the 1830s leading to establishment of a phalanx (meaning a model Fourierest community - a delightful example of his many neologisms) called the Societary Colony. Fourier also had disciples in Romania but his biggest following was in the United States where, after his death, some forty-odd phalanxes were established between 1843 and 1858.





Robert Owen (1771 - 1858), a Welsh social reformer and founder of the cooperative movement, held that “no one is responsible for his will and his own actions” because “his whole character is formed independently of himself.” He firmly believed that people were the product of their environment, which fueled his support for education and labour reform. His views made Owen a pioneer in the promotion of investment in human capital.

Owen's second pillar was his opposition to religion. He felt that all religions were “based on the same absurd imagination” which he said made mankind “a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite.” His third pillar was his dislike of the factory system and support of cottage industries. Originally a follower of utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham who thought that free markets would protect workers from exploitation by capitalists, Owen became by degrees more and more socialist.



Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 - 1895) co-authored *The Communist Manifesto* (1858). After Marx’s death, Engels edited the second and third editions of *Das Kapital* and made contributions in other areas such as feminist theory. They never thought of themselves as utopians. They reserved that term for visionaries of egalitarian and communalist cultures who don’t explain how those societies might be created or maintained.



The conference having thus summarised the modern origins of Western ideas of Utopia (leaving ancient examples such as Plato’s *Republic* for later consideration) I must say that I listened to that familiar stuff on two levels, i.e. I was grateful for new information and insights whilst, at the same time, drifting into recollection of relevant SF stories. R.A. Lafferty (1914 – 2002), in his SF novel *Past Master*, maintains that More’s Utopia was a satire (that issue was not debated). *Past Master* takes a rejuvenated Thomas More and places him in a future community corresponding to his own Utopia. The novel explains what would happen in a perfect world - a Heaven on Earth, so to speak. People can’t stand it and go to Hell where they feel alive.

My slant on the above, which I shared with the audience in discussion, is that R A Lafferty is a rare example of a humorous SF writer. Importantly for anyone motivated by this review to read Lafferty, his tales are also perceptive, literate, full of interesting ideas and enlivened by intriguing imagery.

O-O-O

Not knowing what to expect, I was gobsmacked by what I call cultural morphology early in the conference. My very first session on Day One explored Chinese ideas of Utopia.

**Paul Cheung** (University of Sydney) presented his paper, ‘*Of Cats, Coincidence and Continuity: Utopias with Chinese Characteristics?*’ Using a review of ‘*Cat Country*’, Lao She’s satirical novel of China in the 1930s, the paper assesses the life and works of the author as they relate to seemingly different visions of utopia for China in and beyond his lifetime. Lao She’s entire body of work is considered together with a review of the geo-political and socio-economic history of China with particular attention paid to the collapse of the monarchy, conflict with Japan and the Cultural Revolution. In this wide sweep, Cheung discerns a broad correspondence between issues raised by Lao She and those that emerge from the study of literary figures and works from other parts of the world.

Lao She’s vision is nationalistic, dealing with fatalism and lost pride, but is not partisan. There is reflexive awareness, a vision of the impossible as perceptible but unknown (including the impossibility of life after death) and of living with a keen awareness of futility – a dystopic theme intensified by what was to me an unwelcome and disturbing aside during discussion to the effect that Aussie undergraduates now believe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that has sustained the morale of civil society since WWII to be an unattainable utopia.

Ironically the paper concludes that, through his death – by suicide (why are we not surprised?) – Lao She’s continuity of visions across nationalistic and other boundaries becomes more evident and the contemporary relevance of works such as ‘*Cat Country*’ more compelling ; “although,” Cheung says cryptically, “he is wrong about the cat people.” -- enough loose ends there to keep the cat occupied, I thought.

**Kong Xinren** (Nanyang Technological University) followed with her paper titled, “*A Belief lies in Future: Recent Chinese History Science Fiction.*” Not being fluent in English, Kong Xinren relied on overhead projection of the text to get her points across. That she was successful is tribute to her own narrative skills in conjunction with the interest of her subject matter. She points out that, whilst China has few ‘future history’ science fiction writers, after year 2000 some authors have drawn on the myths, legends and tall tales from various royal dynasties to interpret the past, which marks a new archaic style.

Paradoxically, those novels don’t focus on time travel or ontology but on imaginings designed to influence an unforeseeable future. ‘*Providence*’ (Qian Lifang, 2003), according to Kong Xinren, tells of never-defeated

General Han Xin who made a pact with a mandarin to get him the Crown but had to make compromises to fool the omnipotent god who is a cosmic being from outer space. ‘*Spring Swamp. Yunmeng Mountain and Zhong Zun*’ (La La, 2005) ask whether an ancient robot can be the soul of a perfect person. These and similar novels constitute a sub-genre of recent Chinese ‘history science fiction’.

Based on what I know of interpretations of Chinese dynastic texts by Westerners in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I suspect that the plots of stories mentioned in her paper are far more complex than Kong Xinren suggests. Whilst China has a rich tradition of utopian science fiction in the form of contemporary interpretations of myths, legends and tall tales from various royal dynasties its ancient past, I submit that the best of it has been written by Western authors. As Kong Xinren says in her paper, dissemination of ideas implies “*author in the text, text in society and society in discourse*”. If the last two of those parameters are stamped on by authority the few stories that get published are bound to be, well, second echelon.

English author Ernest Bramah (1868-1942) in ‘*Kai Lung’s Golden Hours*’ and ‘*Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat*’ tells of a China that never was in the form of tales by itinerant story teller Kai Lung. The New York Times Book Review calls these books “*Fantastic satire which stands on its own feet and needs neither apology nor explanation.*” To what extent, if any, the author implies criticism of conditions in the real China is anybody’s guess. Part of the charm of the Kai Lung yarns is that they are open to a variety of interpretations or none at all. If you like sly humour and ironic, stately fantasy, buy these books and put them within easy reach on your permanent book shelf. You will, as I do, read them over and over again.

On another tack, Dr. Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913-1966), whose father was a legal adviser to the Republic of China and a close personal friend of Dr Sun Yat Sen, the founder of modern China, saw active service in the US Army as a Second Lieutenant in WWII. In 1943 he was sent to China to coordinate military intelligence operations where he befriended Chiang Kai-shek. At war’s end he had risen to the rank of major. In 1947 Linebarger moved to the Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC where he served as Professor of Asiatic Studies. He used his wartime experience to write the book *Psychological Warfare* (1948), which is regarded by many in the field as a classic text. He was recalled to advise the British forces in the Malayan Emergency and the US Eighth Army in the Korean War. While he was known to call himself a ‘visitor to small wars’, he refrained from becoming involved in Vietnam but is known to have done undocumented work for the CIA. He travelled extensively, became a member of the Foreign Policy Association and was called upon to advise US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

In 1966, most of his science fiction that had previously appeared in SF magazines under the pseudonym Cordwainer Smith was published in book form for the first time. All but five of the stories are about the Instrumentality of Mankind, which a small number of discerning critics think was meant to represent the US military industrial complex. As utopias go, the Instrumentality of Mankind is hard to beat for ambiguity. In spite of its manifold dystopic elements the Instrumentality stories have a seductive appeal especially to Australians, considering that wealth is concentrated on the planet Norstrilia (strine for Old North Australia). What else can you expect from a series in which the elite select themselves in relation to their survival skills in mental telepathy? One has to suspend more than disbelief to identify with that.

It surprised me how few academics at the conference had even heard of Cordwainer Smith.

o-o-o

Jaroslav Kusnir (University of Presov) read his paper on ‘*Game, Fantasy and Sci-Fiction in Damien Broderick’s novel Godplayers*’, indicating a sharp change of focus - an ontological odyssey, so to speak.

In ‘*Godplayers*’, Damien uses a gaming metaphor to outline a future of relationships between opposites, ie. the possible and the impossible, history and its future, fact and fiction. The novel deals with human perceptions of reality shaped by technology and the media. The game board is a simulated post-modern reality that pretends to be real but is itself part of a game played by unknown protagonists.

Kusnir’s paper analyses Broderick’s depiction of the game and relationships between different ontological levels in the context of ‘possible world’ theories propounded by Ben Harshaw and Lubomir Dolezel. His aim was to point out Broderick’s concept of the individual trapped in a number of conflicting realities-shaping scenarios where he manipulates and distorts a contemporary and future vision of the world which, in Damien’s eye, has become a massive simulacrum. An appalling insight. I’ll have to take his word for it.

**Chris Palmer** (La Trobe Uni, celebrated - by literati and SF fans - author of ‘*Philip K Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*’) read his paper on “*Unsettled and Unconvincing Dystopias in Recent Fiction*”.

By briefly discussing recent genre-straddling texts (literary fiction, SF and fantasy), the paper tests the possibilities of the dystopian or post-apocalyptic novel in the contemporary world using four examples, viz. Kazuo Ishiguro’s ‘*Never Let Me Go*’ (2003), Margaret Atwood’s ‘*Oryx and Crake*’ (2005), J G Ballard’s ‘*Super Cannes*’ (2000) and Jeff Noon’s ‘*Falling Out of Cars*’ (2002).

The form of each of these novels suggests that contemporary dystopia is no longer able to be sheeted home to a system of domination. Instead we appear to have a kind of psychologisation of dystopia. If so, what is the significance of this? What are the implications of the reliance on point of view writing (most of these novels are centred on a focal character whose knowledge is limited or hampered)? What are the implications of the sense of loss or poignant retrospect which is strong in several of these novels? To what degree does a social and political analysis of the miserable state of each novel's world emerge from the intense focus on individual experience and perception? To what degree are these novels consumed by the schizophrenia that underlies the dystopian condition they are depicting?

I wondered how Chris was going to navigate this dense forest of hardwood. His methodology was interesting. Instead of plodding through the questions he proceeded to cherry pick among them. My poor brain gave up on pacing it with his intellectual gymnastics. All you get from me are a few impressions.

'*Never Let Me Go*' is a cautionary tale of science outpacing ethics in efforts to regulate the future through genetic engineering - a generalised and dull portrayal of technology vs power with exaggerated boarding school-style human relationships without the hockey where it is the destiny of both 'carers' and 'donors' to endure surveillance without privacy and then die. The novel is directionless. It seizes your emotions then leaves you beached. Any sensitivity you feel doesn't get you anywhere in that, having drawn all that out of the reader, the author doesn't do anything with it.

'*Oryx and Crake*' is a prescient novel about the future of humanity, and its present. In this novel humanity equals Snowman, and in Snowman's recollections the author re-creates a time much like our own when a boy named Jimmy loved an elusive, damaged girl called Oryx and a sardonic genius called Crake. But now Snowman is alone and, as we learn why, we also learn about a world that might be ours one day. Examples of dystopia are afforded by the contrast between Snowman and the other characters.

'*Super Cannes*' is a techno-dystopic detective story in a workaholic business park near Cannes. A lady doctor starts work as physician to the executive staff when she wonders what caused her apparently sane predecessor to murder ten people in a shooting spree? The setting would be Paradise if it weren't for the residents' tendency to let off steam with a little light psychopathy. Grim stuff, but a pale shadow of what Roger Zelazny made of Alfred Bester's scandalously sexy and fabulously strange novel '*Psychoshop*'.

'*Falling Out of Cars*' is an idiosyncratic novel set in the near future where information-based civilisation is falling apart. Technology is infected with 'noise', which makes it break down. A drug called Lucidity affords temporary relief (shades of Orwell). The story is of a bleak and fortunately unfeasible dystopia that explores what happens to identity when the symbols that define it cease to make sense.

o-o-o

Oleksandr Golozubov (Kharkiv University) presented his paper titled, '*From Abbey Telem to Animal Farm: Specimen of the comic forms in the European Utopia*'. Cultural morphology from Eastern Europe.

This paper explores manifestations of the comic in Eutopian (European Utopian) fiction. Utopian thinking and the nature of utopia itself have changed with the perceptions of writers over the centuries. Though each of them were original in their novels they reflected the priorities and preoccupations - the spiritual, social and political realities - of their own times.

In that context the comic category is a discrepancy, a departure from the norm. As a result, comic has acquired some features of tragic and utopia has been transformed into dystopia. Examples from Ukrainian fiction were included with others in a wider context. Ties between socio-political fiction and utopian thinking, the carnival and the play were explored. Some snippets from my notes...

"If comic illusion is similar to dream illusion, then the logic of dreams is similar to the logic of madness."

"...sarcasm to the point of totally destroying the character ... embodying doubts of human progress" (possibly referring to a recent American movie inspired by H G Wells '*The Time Machine*').

o-o-o

Dimitris Vardoulakis (Monash) discussed his paper on '*Utopia and Suicide in Aris Alexandrou's The Mission Box*'. Dimitris is writing a book on prison writing. This paper is part of his research.

Alexandrou's only novel, '*The Mission Box*', was published in 1974 immediately after the Greek military dictatorship, and was immediately hailed as a masterpiece. However, nothing has been heard about the novel since, firstly because its description of the traumatic civil war years was disowned by both sides and secondly because there is no point of entry that can do the novel justice.

The writer spent 20 years in prison then became a toilet cleaner in Paris, which (as one might imagine) is not at all conducive to optimism. . The novel is about the Greek civil war in September 1949. However the locations mentioned are fictitious. A team of soldiers on the communist side had to carry out an all-important

operation: to transport a mission box from one city to another. The mission goes haywire, and at the end the narrator is arrested, not knowing by whom, but initially assuming that it was by 'his' side. The book is made up of the apologia that he writes out on a daily basis on the sheets of paper that his captors provide him with.

There are only two explicit literary references. The first, at the start of the prisoner's report dated 10<sup>th</sup> November 1949 and not composed until the book's penultimate chapter, is the recollection of a play that Alekos (the narrator's friend and a thinly disguised portrait of Alis Alexandrou himself) read to his friends, titled '*Silence*'. The other is a meditation on Oedipus by Fantaros, the leader of the resistance group in Athens. Dimitris' paper examines these two references in order to highlight a possible connection between the act of writing from a prison cell and a utopian, Marxist vision of history. References are made to Marx's paper on suicide.

Written from the point of view of an interrogator who doesn't exist - open the box and there is nothing in there - the style is discursive interruption where notions of utopia and dystopia drift through the text. To avoid dissent the prisoner takes refuge in silence and the language of unorganised and impromptu gesture. Believing in the decision making power of the sovereign elite the prisoner envisages power being transferred from the ultimate decision maker (the sovereign elite, whoever they may be) to the unknown interrogator, but this transference of power doesn't touch the core of '*The Mission Box*'.

In Utopia the human decision is relevant. There is a connection with Oedipus' measurement of time. Soldiers supply cyanide for suicide. The countdown to death begins.

'*The Mission Box*' is notable for its elaborate prose. The last chapter is a 45-page long sentence ending with a question mark and reminiscent of the final chapter of Ulysses. This last observation has cemented my resolve never to attempt to read the novel. Apart from the travail of having to sift through the last 45 pages to find the verb, I'm sure it would be all Greek to me.

O-O-O

It is significant that, whereas daytime sessions at the conference were devoted to exploring Utopian and Dystopian themes in a world-ranging exploration of cultures, the evenings were devoted to applying the same parameters to the Australian Aboriginal 'Dreamtime'. Those sessions might influence the themes of SF conventions in Australia in the lead up to Australia's next worldcon and beyond.

O-O-O

Professor Andrew Milner's vision of an academic stream in Australian SF conventions has been realised since the first Ausiecon / 33<sup>rd</sup> Worldcon in 1975. It is similar to that already well established in North American SF conventions - in particular, WisCon, the feminist SF convention based in Madison Wisconsin that is held during in May each year on Memorial Day Weekend.

The Conference dealt with progression from Socialist Utopians (socialism) to Marx & Engels (communism) but ignored an early 20<sup>th</sup> century intervention by Catholic intellectual G K Chesterton in collaboration with the brilliant French émigré, essayist, poet and humourist Hillaire Belloc known as Distributism. Melbourne is home to the world's foremost exponent of Distributism, a sort of half way house between socialism and capitalism. The Hon. Race Mathews was Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's principal private secretary and later became Minister for Police and the Arts in the Victorian State Parliament. While still at school in 1952 he founded the Melbourne Science Fiction Club. In retirement he has pursued an academic career, achieving the difficult feat of earning a mature age Ph D in what I still refer to as Political Economy. He has headed the Fabian Socialist movement in Australia and is the author of the definitive account of Distributism '*Jobs of our Own*'. For that he was awarded the prestigious *Outline of Sanity Award* by the New York based G K Chesterton Society of America in 2002. He opened Australia's first world science fiction convention in Melbourne in 1975 (in connection with which Ursula Le Guin conducted a workshop for budding Australian speculative fiction authors) and also opened Melbourne's second Worldcon in 1985.

My attendance at evening sessions of the conference was truncated on the last day by my having to leave early to get to Race Mathews' film soiree. On the first Friday of each month Race invites a select group of SF fans to his place for a convivial buffet meal followed by a movie show. For me this is a commanding officer's parade. This time, I presented Race with a copy of the Utopia Conference's programme booklet and was startled by his reaction. He was chagrined to have been overlooked on the invitation list and I don't blame him. There are not too many Australians who have made a greater contribution to public life. His lonely championship of the universally ignored and almost totally forgotten topic of Distributism, whilst it might not have electrified the conference, should at least have been acknowledged..

**Bill Wright**  
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