

*Locating Science Fiction*. Andrew Milner.

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Readers of *AJE* beware: *Locating Science Fiction* is a determinedly non-ecocritical work of SF scholarship. This is not for any lack of sympathy with such an approach, however, as becomes evident in the crucial final chapter on ‘the uses of science fiction’, where Milner comes clean on his ecosocialist proclivities and Green party membership (as well as locating the writing of this book in the horizon of anthropogenic climate change). Rather, Milner’s eschewal of a narrowly ecocritical angle is a function of the kind of study he has undertaken here: one that aims not to illuminate particular SF texts from any one philosophical perspective, be that ecocritical, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, or queer, but to provide an account of the entire literary-cultural field of SF in all of its diverse material manifestations across a range of historical and geographical contexts. As stated in the Introduction, the book addresses four key questions:

first, what positively was SF? that is, what are its relative dimensions?; second, what negatively wasn’t it? that is, what are its relations to utopia, dystopia, fantasy and other genres?; third, when was it? that is, what was its time?; and fourth, where was it? that is, what was its geographical space? (3)

Milner’s cogent and authoritative examination of these questions, which turn out to be interestingly interrelated, constitutes a major new contribution to the field of SF studies in general, as well as providing ecocritics with an invaluable resource for their own more targeted studies of SF texts in literature, film, television, or radio drama.

In addition to his life-long love-affair with SF, which animates the introduction, Milner is a big fan of Raymond Williams, and his approach is strongly indebted to Williams’s model of ‘cultural materialism’, to which one of his previous monographs is dedicated (Milner 2002). Recognising, with Williams, that all constructions of cultural forms and traditions are selective and slanted towards the critical concerns of the present, Milner

nonetheless provides a far more inclusive account of SF than do any of the other scholars with whom he is in conversation, including Williams himself (whose work on SF Milner has made newly available in an excellent edited collection, which appeared in the Ralahine Utopian Studies Series in 2010). As Milner demonstrates, adapting Pierre Bourdieu's model of the French 'literary field' to map the global 'cultural field' of SF, it has manifested in a wide variety of styles, genres and media across the popular vs. high art divide. In his analysis, SF is variously utopian, dystopian or neither, with a shifting boundary (and a current tendency to overlap) with the distinct but cognate form of fantasy. On the question of the historical parameters of SF, Milner is nonetheless considerably less inclusive than those who attempt to trace its origins back to classical antiquity, arguing—far more plausibly, in my view—that it emerges as a mode of creative engagement, through imaginary narratives of 'resonance and wonder' (19), with the perils and possibilities of modern science and technology from the late eighteenth century. Drawing on Franco Moretti's theory of 'world literature', Milner shows how SF began as a literary genre with an Anglo-French 'core' in the nineteenth century, and was subsequently exported to other media and regions, with Weimar Germany, Soviet Russia, interwar Czechoslovakia and North America, Communist Poland, and post-War Japan emerging as innovative 'semiperipheral' SF cultures, while the US and Japan have since come to constitute a new core. If Milner's thesis regarding the close connection between industrial modernisation and SF is correct, I imagine we will not have to wait long before India and China, for example, have to be factored into this map.

Among his Works Cited, Milner provides a vast list of primary works, which runs for no fewer than sixteen pages and is divided into subsections for novels, short stories and poetry; magazines, comics and graphic novels; theatre; film; radio plays, radio scripts, podcasts and other *Hörspiele*; and television. While this is suggestive of the encyclopedic reach of this study, it should be emphasised that *Locating Science Fiction* also encompasses several nuanced readings of particular works, including reassessments of canonical texts, such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), as well as discussions of less well-known ones, such as the radio plays, to which Milner devotes an entire chapter. True to the method of cultural materialism, these readings pay close attention to social-historical contexts of production and reception and technologies of communication as well as displaying a theoretically-informed hermeneutics that sheds a fresh light on the texts under consideration. Impressively, moreover, all quotations from non-English language texts are provided both in the original and in translation.

Identifying SF as an offspring of industrial modernity, emerging out of the double dialectic of Enlightenment and Romanticism, Milner positions his own take on this phenomenon in a double horizon of concern. On the one hand, as indicated at the outset, there is anthropogenic climate change. This features, not only as context but also as content, in the final chapter of the book, devoted to a consideration as to why George Turner's climate change fiction, *The Sea and Summer* (1987) should have had so much less resonance (thus far, at any rate) than another Australian dystopia, Nevil Shute's nuclear war fiction, *On the Beach* (1957). As is made clear in Peter Christoff's recently published (and seriously scary) edited collection, *Four Degrees of Global Warming*, Australia has the dubious distinction of combining one of the highest per capita rates of

CO<sup>2</sup> emissions with a high level of vulnerability to climate change impacts. Indeed, Milner had a mild foretaste of this in the flood waters that entered his home in the summer of 2011 in Melbourne's bayside suburb of Elwood (which Turner imagines permanently under water by the mid twenty-first century). As he discloses in his Afterword, however, the other, far more searing, personal disaster that accompanied the writing of this book was the deaths of both his childhood sweetheart and his sister to cancer, leading him to ask, once again, 'why is it that you can never find an earth-shattering scientific invention when you really need one?' (196). One of the most interesting theoretical interventions in this book, in my view, is Milner's consideration of how different SF authors handle the problem of the ending in such a way as to enable the reader to discern a utopian horizon within the dystopian future that they envision. Milner himself, it seems to me, has done just that with the double ending that he gives his work of SF scholarship: while modern science and technology might have delivered us a perilously warming planet, they retain the potential to contribute to a more just, compassionate and sustainable future, in which all are vouchsafed a better chance of flourishing. Whether that promise is realised is largely a question of whether scientific enlightenment can be reconciled with the romantic revaluation of (more-than-human) life in the socio-political context of an expanded democracy. Like Milner, I believe this remains a worthwhile project, and one that SF, and other works of the creative imagination, can help us to pursue.

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#### WORKS CITED

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