

ECOTERRORISM IN RECENT CLIMATE FICTION

Andrew Milner

Monash University

ORCID: 0000-0002-6598-9943

At a seminar held at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, shortly after the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC, I proposed the following essentially Kantian definition of terrorism:

[A]n action may be considered terrorist insofar as it involves the relatively indiscriminate use of violence against civilians for political purposes. It is irrelevant whether the act is committed by governments or by private individuals ... It is irrelevant whether or not one agrees with the terrorists' motives ... It does matter that the victims are civilians because a soldier wills himself into a position where he might be killed in battle and so violence directed against him is ... compatible with the categorical imperative. It does matter that the violence is relatively indiscriminate because one cannot escape from indiscriminate violence, no matter what one chooses to do, and such violence is therefore incompatible with the categorical imperative¹.

I stand by this definition, whilst noting nonetheless that the distinction between civilian and soldier seems less immediately relevant to civil conflicts than to the Second World War bomber offensives discussed then. Extending the definition to the more specific case of ecoterrorism, we can, first, discount so-called 'violence' against property, which involves no obvious harm to persons, whether civilian or soldier. Second, we can define as 'soldiers' all those who consciously and knowingly attempt either to increase or prevent global heating or other

¹ A. Milner, "From Media Imperialism to Semioterrorism", in: *Again, Dangerous Visions: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Leiden, 2018, pp. 354–355.

forms of extreme environmental harm; and as civilians those, such as their families, who might be only unwittingly implicated.

Terrorism has enjoyed a very bad press in the western world in recent years, both in fiction and in non-fiction, thanks largely to the efforts of Islamic State, the Taliban, al-Qaida and its various affiliates. Yet it was not always thus: if one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, then this truism is especially apparent in post-Second World War treatments of the European Resistance movements, which were invariably represented as noble and heroic. Terrorist actions normally function as localised adjuncts to some wider socio-political movement, which normally tends to distance itself from the terrorists. The arguments advanced against terrorism are essentially twofold. First, it is argued that such actions will tend to alienate potential or actual supporters of the wider movement and, no doubt, this is very often the case. But second, it is also argued that terrorism is ineffectual since one assassinated politician or prince will readily be replaced by another. This is less convincing in cases like ours, where the aim of the action is to persuade politicians or princes – or, more pertinently, CEOs of polluting corporations – to change their practice. The point here is that terrorism can have what we might term a 'demonstration effect', acting as a warning to other possible targets that they too will be targeted unless they change their ways. Here, surely, the terrorist argument works, especially against the senior officials of corporate polluters.

Nonetheless, the recent bad press terrorism has enjoyed clearly extends to environmental fiction. So, in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, the radical environmentalists' attempt to destroy logging equipment – violence against property rather than persons – results in the death of Olivia Vandergriff² and the eventual dissolution of the group. So, in Jean-Marc Ligny's *Exodes*, Fernando Sanchez joins 'les Boutefeux', the Firebrands, incendiaries who eventually attack and destroy the Davos dome into which his mother Mercedes is attempting to escape. She and her companions are thus driven to seek refuge in a place we already know, from elsewhere in the novel, to be on the verge of becoming uninhabitable³. Elsewhere in climate fiction terrorism barely rates a mention. In this paper, however, I want to consider three more extensive, and in some respects more 'balanced' treatments of ecoterrorism, one from Finland, one from the United States and one from Australia, respectively Antti Tuomainen's *The Healer* (2013), in Finnish *Parantaja* (2010), Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) and J.R. Burgmann's *Children of Tomorrow* (2023).

Tuomainen's *The Healer* won the 2011 Johtolanka-palkinnon voittaja for Best Finnish Crime Novel and has to date been translated into more than 20 languages, including English, French, German, Polish, Czech, Russian, Chinese and Spanish. At the beginning of the narrative, anthropogenic climate change seems merely to be the novel's *mise en scène*: "Estimated number of climate refugees planet-wide: 650–800 million people. Pandemic warnings: H3N3, malaria, tuberculosis, Ebola, plague"⁴. Ultimately, however, it is transformed into what Darko Suvin would term the novel's 'novum'⁵, when it becomes clear that the ecoterrorist Pasi Tarkiainen, the novel's eponymous *Parantaja*, or Healer, has been prompted to the serial murder of business executives and politicians precisely by the rapidly deteriorating climate situation. As Pasi explains to the protagonist-narrator, Tapani Lehtinen: "Who do you

² R. Powers, *The Overstory*, New York, 2018, p. 352.

³ J.-M. Ligny, *Exodes*, Nantes, 2012, p. 534.

⁴ A. Tuomainen, *The Healer*, trans. L. Rogers, New York, 2013, p. 4.

⁵ D. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: on the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven, 1979, p. 63.

think those murdered people were? ... Even after they knew about the destruction they were causing, they kept doing it. They kept murdering – by lying”⁶.

Tapani is a poet living in a near-future, climate-ruined Helsinki, whose journalist wife Johanna disappears two days before Christmas, and the novel tells of his three-day search for her. The city itself is near continuously rain-sodden, its Metro and seaside suburbs flooded, its railway station packed with climate refugees from the south. As Tapani wryly observes, “I passed whole countries and continents, crossed languages and dialects. Helsinki had finally become an international city”⁷. Tapani discovers that Johanna had been investigating a serial killer who styles himself ‘the Healer’, a killer who murders business executives and politicians he deems in some way responsible for climate change. DNA evidence suggests that Parantaja is in fact Pasi Tarkiainen, a one-time medical student who supposedly died five years previously in a flu epidemic. Tapani’s computer searches reveal that Johanna and Pasi had once lived together and her old friend Elina Kallio explains that she, Johanna and Pasi had all as students been radical environmental activists. The crime narrative follows Tapani in his search for Johanna, for Tarkiainen and the latter’s ruthless criminal accomplice Max Vántinen, a search that eventually leads to the railway station where the killers had planned to catch a train north. In the denouement Tapani and Police Chief Inspector Harri Jaatinen succeed in rescuing Johanna, but Tarkiainen nonetheless escapes. And in the climactic encounter between Tapani and Pasi, the poet and the terrorist, the latter insists that: “I’m on the side of good, Tapani. There was a time when I strove for nothing less than saving the world. Now that the world can’t be saved, I have to make sure that good continues to live for as long as evil and selfishness”⁸.

The key phrase here is “now that the world can’t be saved”. For, it is precisely this view of the planet as already inevitably and irreparably damaged, as much the stance of the novel itself as of Tarkiainen in particular, that turns it into a radically fatalistic classical dystopia. So, for example, Tapani ruefully observes of his and Johanna’s apartment that “[t]hey weren’t designed for continuous high winds and rain for half the year, and by the time people realized that the wind and rain were here to stay it was too late”⁹. So, the house in Kivinokka which Johanna had once shared with Pasi, generating its own energy, entirely recyclable, sustainable and non-polluting, was nonetheless “twenty years too late” because “the environment was already so changed by then that the innovations were meaningless”¹⁰. So, Tapani’s old flame Professor Laura Vuola, reflecting on the failure of her own youthful activism, observes that “[t]he return to the old ways was echoed by the desire of a populace tired of monetary scarcity, of consuming less, to live like they had before: self-absorbed, greedy, and irresponsible – the way they’d always been taught to live”¹¹. So, even the hope that oil supplies might run out had proven illusory: “The oil hadn’t run out yet, although they’d been predicting it would for decades ... When the world ended one day we would still have tankers full of oil, ports full of it, billions of barrels of black gold, ample fuel for a trip to eternity”¹².

⁶ Tuomainen, *The Healer...*, p. 203.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 124.

There is, nonetheless, evidence of would-be resistance throughout *Parantaja*. Pasi, Johanna, Elina and Laura have all been involved with environmental activism “when information about the severity of climate change temporarily united people and laid the framework for many fine and well-meaning organizations, associations, and political parties”¹³. But this has proven almost entirely futile, leaving only Tarkiainen’s bloody search for ‘Justice’¹⁴, which even he admits is too late to change anything. Bereft of social hope, the reader is left with individual sexual love as the only outstanding positive value in *The Healer*, as it is in many dystopias. For Tuomainen’s Tapani and Johanna the one remaining consolation lies in their own romantic-erotic relationship. As Tapani reflects after reading an unrepentant email from Tarkianen the following Good Friday:

Something happens when I touch Johanna. Something in my heart stirs, something says this is right – this is good.
And it is good. I’m part of her, and she’s part of me. We’re as happy as two people can be in this world. Whatever happens, I will love Johanna¹⁵.

What will happen, we know, is that sooner rather than later their world will end.

Kim Stanley Robinson is famously both a declared socialist and a committed environmentalist. Unsurprisingly, then, his SF has become increasingly focussed on the promise of radical social change and the threat of runaway climate change. Indeed, there is a sense in which his fiction can be read as a kind of extended comparative sociology of climate and social change. Just as Max Weber, the famous German sociologist, sought to compare the implications for economic activity of different world religions, so Robinson’s novels compare the implications for climate change of different political strategies for social change. The *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004–2007) and its omnibus edition *Green Earth* (2015) depict the political career of the radically environmentalist Californian Senator and later US President Phil Chase; *New York 2140* (2017) shows how popular political demonstrations in New York propel the Democrat Congresswoman Charlotte Armstrong and her allies into a reforming majority in Congress; *Red Moon* (2018) imagines simultaneous street demonstrations in the People’s Republic of China and the United States securing victory for the reforming New Left faction at the Twenty-Fifth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2048. Whatever the strategy, whether reformist or revolutionary, the outcome is invariably successful; but then this is fiction after all.

Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* is perhaps his most impressive climate fiction to date and, once again, it depicts positive outcomes from climate crisis. But where *New York 2140* had pursued a fundamentally constitutionalist political resolution and *Red Moon* a quasi-revolutionary option, *The Ministry for the Future* attempts an interesting combination of both. The constitutional option revolves around the eponymous Ministry located in Zurich, which is established in 2025 as a Subsidiary Body for Implementation of the Paris Agreement in conjunction with the IPCC and the UN. The Ministry’s role is “to advocate for the world’s future generations of citizens ... all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves”¹⁶. And its Irish head, Mary Murphy, is the nearest the novel has to a protagonist. The revolutionary terrorist option is represented by the Indian ‘Children of

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

¹⁶ K.S. Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*, London, 2020, p. 16.

Kali', who use drones to bring down sixty passenger jets in a matter of hours and, later, to infect millions of cattle with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease¹⁷. The novel is organised into 106 chapters, which move backwards and forwards between personal narratives, factual summaries of climate science, and 'objective' slices of future history. It opens with an unprecedented heat wave in India which kills twenty million people, viscerally described from the point of view of an American aid worker, Frank May, who becomes the sole survivor of a mass death, subsequently suffers post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and later becomes a comparatively ineffectual ecoterrorist. Robinson's use of the word 'poached' in this chapter, to describe the deaths of people fleeing the heat to shelter in a nearby lake, is powerfully disturbing¹⁸. Subliminally, however, the catastrophe changes everything: "Civilization had been killed but it kept walking the Earth ... The culture of the time was rife with fear and anger, denial and guilt, shame and regret, repression and the return of the repressed ... the Indian heat wave stayed a big part of it"¹⁹.

By comparison with Robinson's earlier fictions, *The Ministry for the Future* is much more sympathetic both to ecoterrorism and also, incidentally, to vegetarianism: "Of course many people were quick to point out that these Children of Kali were hypocrites and monsters, that Indians didn't eat cows and ... that coal-fired power plants in India had burned a significant proportion of the last decade's carbon burn ... Then again those same Indian power plants were being attacked on a regular basis"²⁰. Robinson is clear, however, that ecoterrorism really works: "in the forties and ever after, less beef got eaten. Less milk was drunk. And fewer jet flights were made"²¹. As Robinson has May observe: "some things were just too dangerous to continue doing. When your veggie burger tasted just as good, while your beef package proclaimed *Guaranteed Safe!* with a liability waiver in small print at the bottom, you knew a different time had come"²². More significantly, Robinson also strongly implies that these Children of Kali might actually be an offshoot of the Ministry itself. Murphy's Indian chief of staff, Badim Bahadur, admits to having secretly established a 'black wing' and warns her that "there might be some people who deserve to be killed"²³. Later an anonymous narrator, who might well be Bahadur himself, tells of an encounter with the Children, in which he announces: "I understand you. I've helped you, I've helped work like yours all over the world ... I've done more to stop the next heat wave than anyone you have ever met. You've done your part, I've done mine ... I am Kali"²⁴. This combination of constitutionalism and terrorism leads directly to the novel's essentially positive outcome. But, as with *New York 2140* and *Red Moon*, the price of success is bought too cheaply to be entirely credible: "Aircraft carriers? Sunk. Bombers? Blown out of the sky. An oil tanker, boom, sunk in ten minutes. One of America's eight hundred military bases around the world, shattered ... The war on terror? It lost"²⁵.

It is difficult not to sympathise with Robinson's determined insistence that there must be positive ways forward for our species and our planet. As he argued in an article published

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 227.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 229–230.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 369.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 390–391.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 347.

in the journal *Utopian Studies*: “It has become a case of utopia or catastrophe, and utopia has gone from being a somewhat minor literary problem to a necessary survival strategy”²⁶. But utopianism is nonetheless always open to the criticism that it is utopian in the pejorative sense of being hopelessly impractical. Does anyone really believe that American military might be so easily dispensed with in any imaginable reality as in *The Ministry for the Future*? But then this is fiction after all, isn’t it? For Robinson, however, the antithesis between utopia and catastrophe operates in the real world as well as in his novels. Which leaves us with a deeply impressive novel and a less than persuasive political strategy.

J.R. Burgmann’s *Children of Tomorrow* is a debut novel,²⁷ which traces the progress of a group of Australian university-based friends from the real 2016 Tasmanian bushfires through to widespread global climate collapse later in the century. The main protagonists, Arne Bakke and Evie Weatherall, meet in a Melbourne doctoral programme and are subsequently located at the centre of a network of affected and concerned individuals. Centrally, the narrative is driven by the contradiction between precise and accurate scientific understandings of climate collapse, on the one hand, and the complete incapacity of wider social structures to respond to that knowledge, on the other. Arne, Evie, their colleagues, friends and relatives, live through this contradiction, pursuing a series of politico-social alternatives, ecoterrorism included. Arne’s elder brother Freddie is an activist rather than an academic, “a shredded poster boy for global environmental activism”, who “mobilised people, garnered funding and support, and delivered far-reaching messages to media and government”, but ultimately achieved nothing other than media notoriety²⁸. A generation later Evie and Arne’s son Raph repeats a very different version of this journey, moving to New York, abandoning the ‘green grief’ of his youth and finding safety, “nestled in the backrooms and man caves of the reactionary, typing into oblivion”²⁹. Years later, Freddie and Raph find themselves in the seahood of Stanley, deep within the Pacific zone of the United Nations of Seasteads, “where millions of the dislanded struggle to stay afloat”, and where Freddie himself contemplates “one final, explosive hurrah”³⁰. Freddie is scathing about Raph’s job delivering to ‘the towers’ inhabited by the rich: “He would gladly rise up the towers and take a place amongst the exalted. I’m sure of it ... The ones who destroyed this planet! ... The ones who took everything!”³¹

So, Freddie uses Raph’s delivery job as a means to attack the towers. He warns his partner Kim, and she in turn warns Raph, but with little time to escape the effects of their unwitting ecoterrorism:

Then a distant series of low concussions brings them to a standstill, rattling through their skulls, ringing in their ears ...
He takes his place beside her, the hammering still ringing out across the dark, quaking through the earth and ocean, tingling the soles of their tired feet. Together in terror, in step with one another, they move out slowly along a disused jetty—a walking plank, now.
Out of that horrifying sound, drumming like war, comes a blinding light that sears the horizon. They turn away instinctively. Shielding their eyes, they look

²⁶ K.S. Robinson, *Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change*, “Utopian Studies”, 27, 1 (2016), p. 9.

²⁷ Let me confess immediately that J.R. Burgmann is the name under which my son James writes.

²⁸ J.R. Burgmann, *Children of Tomorrow*, Perth, 2023, p. 45.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 188.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

back to see the towers, one after the other, firing like distant torches, semaphoring the end of the world as they know it³².

Living with Evie in one of the rewilding edens that grow out of the end of that world, Arne will later agree with his ex-military friend Virgil never to discuss the ‘internal happenings’ of that time “when the towers came down in such symbolic and meticulously coordinated terror”³³.

All three of these novels deal squarely with the possible costs and benefits of ecoterrorism, including terrorism directed at persons as well as property. Tuomainen’s *The Healer* is written overwhelmingly from Tapani’s point of view and thus seems to invite us to share in his repudiation of Tarkiainen’s terroristic justice. But Tarkiainen’s Good Friday email reminds us of the latter’s earlier claim to be ‘on the side of good’, as surely as Tapani’s invocation of romantic love fails to convince as a serious solution to social collapse. The reader is left with a choice between two options neither of which appears entirely persuasive. Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* invites us to have our cake and eat it, as it were, opting as it does both for Murphy’s Ministry and for Bahadur’s Children of Kali. The focus falls overwhelmingly on Murphy, but the terrible opening scenes of the Indian heat wave – which could be read as a fictional prefiguration of the 2022 Pakistani floods – echo throughout the text as prior justification for the Children’s ecoterrorism. Burgmann’s *Children of Tomorrow* has its Freddie Bakke willingly put at risk the lives of thousands of people, not least those of his lover and his nephew. But the eventual edenic outcome secures a sustainable home, not only for Arne and Evie, but also for their daughter Jasmine and granddaughter Aloy. Both Tuomainen and Burgmann envision an essentially catastrophist future, even if the latter imagines it leading to ultimately positive results. Only Robinson retains some residual hope in such pre-catastrophic institutions as the IPCC and the UN. This might finally render it the more rhetorically persuasive of the three novels. To return briefly to our opening remarks about anti-Nazi Resistance fictions, we might suggest that those terrorists were rendered heroic and noble precisely through their endorsement, both prospective and retrospective, by the Allied governments: it was their accusers who were arraigned at Nuremburg, not the terrorists themselves. This is a difficult trick to pull off, both in reality and in fiction; but Robinson, who is an old pro at the cli-fi game, nonetheless manages it.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 226.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

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SUMMARY:

Ecoterrorism is widely discussed – and sometimes practised – by environmental activists, but rarely represented in climate fiction. This essay explores three recent ‘cli-fi’ novels which do in fact address the issue, one from Finland, one from the US, and one from Australia: Antti Tuomainen’s *The Healer* (2013), in Finnish *Parantaja* (2010), Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) and J.R. Burgmann’s *Children of Tomorrow* (2023).

KEYWORDS:

cli-fi, terrorism, Finland, US, Australia