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Notes from the Cli-Fi Center Social Distancing with Dan Bloom in Taiwan

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The jury is still out on the 2020 release of the Australian film, *2067*, directed and written by Seth Larney, with Kodi Smit-McPhee as lead character, Ethan Whyte (probably an unfortunate surname for a saviour-hero in a "woke" world). The Earth is dying but capitalism is alive and well, selling substitute oxygen in a deforested world. "Well designed but pedestrian" writes Dennis Harvey in *Variety* (2 Oct. 2020) noting that *2067* is science fiction. But is it? Or, with its substitute oxygen and deforestation, is it cli-fi? Or is it both?

The question of what is sci-fi and its relationship to cli-fi was addressed in "Sci-fi and Planetary Healing," *Tamkang Review* (2017). Simon Estok, Professor at Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, made the following distinction: "sci-fi is rooted in the future and produces questionable distancing effects" while "cli-fi is rooted in the present" (Editor's Note). The sci-fi film *2067* operates in a post-apocalyptic future, offering little in the way of "Planetary Healing"; and while we are not yet breathing substitute oxygen, we are uncomfortably familiar with deforestation and its effects. Depending on your coronavirus geography, however, a "Planetary Healing" was to be found during the European lockdown. Like a sci-fi riffing of *Contagion* (2011), the virus was incidentally healing the planet whilst simultaneously claiming the lives of thousands. From behind the curtains of lockdown we connected with lives other than human; we heard birds instead of traffic. We saw vapour-trails fade, and skies containing only clouds. We saw fish returning to the Venetian canals. Many delighted in the novelty of human absence as herds and flocks took advantage of the Great Pause and colonized the streets; and the Llandudno Kashmiri Goats came down from the Great Orme to play. The great unplanned experiment forced a depletion in human activities whilst registering a reduction in global emissions. Attribution sceptics were hard-pressed to deny human impact on climate change. But the quisling virus worked for and against the planet. We witnessed our complicity in unravelling the hard-won anti-plastic campaigns as consumers demanded

food wrapped in plastic to protect against the virus and as the paraphernalia of Covid-19 PPE (personal protection equipment) such as disposable masks, disposable gloves, and bottles of sanitiser, made its way to the landfill.

So climate concerns, both of human health and of planetary health, are very much "rooted in the present" (Estok). As we've seen, this issue of *Tamkang Review* is concerned with a *postcolonial* cli-fi, a concern not only with the earth, but also with indigenous perspectives (past and present, environmental and economic) of the earth, thereby necessitating what Claude Forthomme calls "the moral implications of climate change" (*Impakter* 30 July 2014). It is hard to imagine that anyone who is remotely interested in climate-themed literature has not heard of the little word that made it big as climate issues and concerns intensified. Google Search reveals the richness of the field: Adeline Johns-Putra, *Climate change in literature and literary studies: From cli-fi, climate change theater and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism* (2016); Martin Ryle, *Cli-Fi? Literature, Ecocriticism, History* (2017), and Siobhan Adcock's *Cli-Fi: An Introductory Reading List* (2018). Once shunned, this little word encapsulates a major climate-themed literary revolution in world literature and cinema. For that we have Taiwan resident, Dan Bloom, to thank.

I interviewed Dan at a social distance of some several thousand kilometres. Dan Bloom was born in Massachusetts, attended Tufts University, and Oregon State University. He travelled the world as a journalist but a fear of flying saw him settling down in Taiwan where he and "several friends from Taiwan" set up the Cli-Fi Report Global (www.cli-fi.net) for academics and writers to provide information and to report on cli-fi worldwide. As a climate change advocate who is Jewish, Dan comes from a tradition that honours both *tikkun olam* or "healing the world," and *tu b'shevat*, "the New Year of the trees." In this interview he discusses the Australian books that influenced his thinking, and his hope for the emergence of another *On the Beach*, but with cli-fi, rather than nuclear, concerns. He credits former-President Donald Trump with helping to promote the genre (Marhic 2019).

CA: Taiwan? You've lived here for nearly 30 years. I'd have thought it an unusual cultural fit what with the Israel / China / Taiwan / US complications?

DAN: Yes, Taiwan. The whole messy politics story here. I love it. I will die here. I no longer fly. Not since 1996. Flying phobia.

CA: Jewish teachings speak of *tikkun olam* or repairing the world. Is cli-fi your way of doing this? Talk us through the origin of the term "cli-fi."

DAN: I became depressed after reading the IPCC report in 2006. I was in a deep funk about climate change.

CA: Is that why, two years later, Reuters reported an environmental activist (you) "poised to lodge a $1 billion damages class action lawsuit at the International Criminal Court for 'intent to commit manslaughter against future generations of human beings by allowing murderous amounts of fossil fuels to be harvested, burned and sent into the atmosphere as CO2"'? (Reuters, Aaron Gray-Block 28 Nov. 2008).

DAN: Yes, but not being a scientist, I began to think about how to sound the alarm to the public, through novelists and movie directors. I'd come across science reporter Andrew Revkin's sustainability blog where he mentions using the arts to communicate climate issues. As a "climate activist of the literary kind" I was noodling around one day with a pen and paper at a sidewalk noodle shop in Chiayi, a rural town in the south of the island where the climate is subtropical and balmy. Great place to get too comfortable. Forget the problems of the world. Instead Cli-fi.net was launched, a platform for writers and climate change activists. "Sci-fi" is such a familiar term, so I nicknamed climate fiction, calling it "cli-fi." As a veteran journalist, I felt cli-fi was short and pithy and apt for headlines (William A. Liggett 11 Dec. 2018). And as an internet warrior with a yen to make a difference and to step up to the world's fight against climate indifference, this was my way of doing it. Cli-fi was created to warn against climate apathy. I agree with Robert Macfarlane's comment that writers are crucial in helping us imagine the impact and knock-on effects of climate change (*The Guardian* 23 Sept. 2005).

CA: Your journalism background made you a great promoter of the term, cli-fi. I remember getting an email from you in December 2007 saying you couldn't get the term "cli-fi" past the gatekeepers at *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* although the *Macquarie Dictionary* took it on in 2008 as "important." Even as recently as July 2017, you kept "getting knock-backs mostly from frosty people in Australia." All of which, looking back, is ironic. Because it was an Australian novel that catalysed your apocalyptic nightmares, as a teenager.

DAN: Right. Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) was a dime novel paperback based in Australia about nuclear war and nuclear winter back in the

1950s, and which had a huge impact on world leaders in the 1960s and 1970s. So I am looking for, and hoping for, an *On the Beach* style of cli-fi novel about climate change. Who will write it and when? I stay awake at night thinking about this sometimes. Me, and Helen Caldicott.

CA: And many others, judging from a recent article titled "Scarier than fiction: climate worry driving 'cli-fi' boom" (16 Nov. 2019).

DAN: That was Riwan Marhic, a French journalist. He also interviewed Andrew Milner at Monash University, in Melbourne, who'd published an essay in *AJE* [now *Swamphen*] on one of my top cli-fi novels, which happens also to be Australian: *The Sea and Summer* (1987) by futurist George Turner (1916-1997). Milner said that cli-fi was "yet to break out from sci-fi's yoke." His son, J. R. Burgmann, co-author of *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach* noted in that interview that cli-fi films and novels are "a logical expression of an increasingly knowledgeable and concerned society, a response to real-world concerns." He acknowledged that literature had been slow to respond to climate change, but "it certainly appears to be making up for lost time."

CA: Too right. The online response is phenomenal, especially since 2017. And now there are cli-fi book clubs, and cli-fi anthologies such as the Sydney University Student Anthology *The Rise of 'Cli-fi'* which cites Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* as a prominent example of Australian cli-fi. There are Op-Ed pieces, like Alice Robinson's "Can cli-fi save us from ourselves?' (ArtsHub), and *The Conversation* ran a piece titled "'Cli-fi': could a literary genre help save the planet?" (David Homes 20 Feb. 2014). It goes on. The titles suggest a lot is resting on such a small buzz word! And I notice *The Sydney Morning Herald* recently used the once-rejected term in "Dystopian fiction rings eerily familiar." where you chose Australian writer Alice Robinson's *Anchor Point* (2015) as one of your top five cli-fi novels for 2020. You've even been called, rather endearingly, "the father of Climate Fiction as a new literary genre" (Forthomme, *Impakter* 2014). I think you've well and truly pressed that 'public alarm' button.

DAN: Margaret Atwood and Naomi Klein helped spread the word, too. I found solace in Naomi Klein's acceptance of it. Since then, the term has caught on, with novelists and literary critics in dozens of countries latching and placing it front and center in newspaper articles and aca-

demic papers published in English and other languages. I told Marhic during the phone interview from my kitchen, that "There's a lot of people who say that climate change is not real. These people are making the rest of us very angry and as a result 'cli-fi' is getting more and more power."

CA: It's also introducing a raft of new words around the debate. For instance, Greg Garrard's (et. al.) *Climate Change Scepticism: A Transnational Ecocritical Analysis* (2019) looks at writings by the "response sceptics," those who don't doubt the climate science but do doubt that human nature is capable of responding to climate change with anything but unconcern . . .

DAN: I fear there might be quite a few of those floating around.

CA: . . . and then there's the "attribution sceptic" who questions the attributed source of climate change. It does illustrate the increasing nuances of climate fiction terminology, and language sensitivity in general. For instance, climate change "believers" have appropriated the term "warmists" from the sceptics as a way of defusing the scorn, and possibly to remove the term "believers" from any association with the Christian Right. On the other hand, there are no "deniers" in climate change, this being changed to "sceptics" to avoid a term too closely associated with the WW2 holocaust. It's a linguistic morass.

DAN: In general, I think cli-fi novels will take the position that climate change and global warming are real and are happening, but I am also open to the fact that some cli-fi novelists or screenwriters might take a sceptical view of global warming and climate change. As I mentioned to David Holmes, at Monash, in "Changing Climates" (2014) that kind of scepticism is what Michael Crichton pushed in his 1994 novel *State of Fear*.

CA: Perfect example. George Handley takes the novel to task in *Climate Change Scepticism*. He also notes that "conservative Christians show the highest rates of climate scepticism in the United States" (137). How's this for a word of our times, "agnotology," coined by Robert Proctor and Iain Boal. It means "the study of culturally induced ignorance or doubt, particularly the publication of inaccurate or misleading scientific data" (1995).

DAN: Like I said, Donald Trump is helping to promote the cli-fi genre.

CA: As an inveterate blogger, let me ask about the last line frequently used in your blogs, "long live cli-fi." Isn't the irony that we should be looking forward to the demise of the (sub) genre as it stands, as a reflection of negative anthropogenic impact?

DAN: Yes, ironic. (Sighs).

CA: Do you think cli-fi as a genre will survive a positive turn in environmental politics and environmental behaviour?

DAN: Yes, if things move in a more positive way, sure. Cli-fi can go there too. Just as Margaret Atwood said, when she coined the term "ustopia" for a novel that is both dystopian *and* utopian – U for Utopia and STOPIA for dystopia. Interesting, but it never caught on, but it deserves to. As for the impact of cli-fi on readers, I recommend reading *Environmental Literature as Persuasion: An Experimental Test of the Effects of Reading Climate Fiction* (Matthew Schneider-Mayerson et al. 2020). It shows a significant positive impact to begin with, which unfortunately fades away as the same old beliefs creep back into place.

CA: So, we're back to the "response sceptics"? Those who don't doubt the climate science but do doubt that human nature is capable of responding to climate change with anything but unconcern? That, unsettlingly, reminds me of the final scene in the novel that started this off – I hear you are thinking of setting up the international "Nevil Shute Climate-Themed Novel Award" for the best cli-fi novel in the previous ten years. How is that going?

DAN: Literature matters. Words matter. Novels and movies made from novels can wake people up. Perhaps a future Nevil Shute or Nancy Shute will help? As long as it reaches millions! But the world is still asleep. We are facing the potential end of the human race. Wake up, world! [Dan echoes his closing lines from an interview with Forthomme, "A Chat with the Man Who Dreamt Up Cli fi" 30 July 2014.]

Works Cited

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