

This article was downloaded by: [University of Warwick]

On: 22 October 2014, At: 12:45

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/racr20>

Peak Oil Imagining in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*

Sean Donnelly^a

^a Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, University of Warwick, UK

Published online: 14 Oct 2014.

To cite this article: Sean Donnelly (2014) Peak Oil Imagining in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, *English Academy Review: Southern African Journal of English Studies*, 31:2, 156-169, DOI: [10.1080/10131752.2014.965428](https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2014.965428)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2014.965428>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Peak Oil Imagining in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*

Sean Donnelly

Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies
University of Warwick

UK

Sean.Donnelly@warwick.ac.uk
seandonnely2010@gmail.com

Peak oil discourse has become increasingly prevalent as a trope within contemporary speculative fiction. Cultural and political anxieties regarding the possibility of oil's waning availability as an ur-commodity have been channelled into dystopian visions of the future which present a world without oil as synonymous with catastrophe and apocalypse. Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2012. San Francisco: Night Shade) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2010. London: Picador) convey this burgeoning anxiety while moving beyond it through utopian possibilities. This article will situate both texts as new forms of speculative fiction, which interpolate utopian and dystopian imagining, producing an irresolvable paradox between hope and despair for the future, that registers the fundamental uncertainty of the peak oil predicament. An analysis will be offered of both texts as encapsulating the difficulty of imagining life beyond oil, as bespeaking a more fundamental predicament: the impossibility of imagining beyond capitalism. Oil's importance as a commodity which lubricates and upholds the world-system of capital informs McCarthy's vision of an America bereft of oil as a barren wasteland scarred by the spatial violence which petro-capitalism has performed. In Bacigalupi, capitalism endures in ever more sinister configurations, negating the naïve idealism of eco-apocalyptic discourse which assumes that the end of oil will necessitate social and political change.

Key words: apocalypse; Paolo Bacigalupi; capitalism; dystopia; Cormac McCarthy; peak oil; *The Road*; speculative fiction; utopia; *The Windup Girl*

Oil's cultural forms [have attained] a symbolic pervasiveness that has undermined attempts to conceive and represent alternative forms of social and economic organisation – Barrett and Worden (2012, 272)

It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of capitalism – Fredric Jameson (1994, xii)

When Amitav Ghosh observed that 'the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable' (1992, 29), he initiated a critical awareness of oil culture

as a system which evades literary representation. Various reasons have been proposed for this cultural void, from the insidiousness of petroleum in industrialized lifestyles analysed by Stephanie LeMenager (2012), Peter Hitchcock (2010) and Matthew Huber (2012), to the impenetrability of the financial and geopolitical strategies which underpin petro-capitalism as noted by the Retort collective (2005) and Immanuel Wallerstein (2006). Ghosh's observation requires amendment, however, in the face of contemporary developments, particularly the growing abundance of peak oil as a theme in speculative fiction and the concurrent development of literary scholarship which seeks to utilize petroculture as the basis of textual analysis.

Peak oil discourse demands an engagement with the looming reality of waning oil production first predicted by the petroleum geologist M. King Hubbert, whose research indicated that global oil production would 'crest around 2000, and decline thereafter' (in Greer 2008, 4). Hubbert's peak was wilfully neglected during the rampant neoliberalism of the 1980s, but awareness of his bell-shaped curve re-emerged during the late 1990s. Peak oil has subsequently become an important recurring theme in speculative fiction which seeks to explore 'those twinned calamities of squandered time: oil's receding tides and the advancing tides of climatic change' (Nixon 2011, 102).

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (R) and Paulo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (WG) can be situated as two such texts; both critique the dynamics of petro-capitalism while anticipating what its outcomes might be, registering the cultural inability to think beyond oil as an imaginative failing which they themselves attempt to overcome. *The Road* is set in the post-apocalyptic wasteland once known as the United States of America, and focuses on a father and son attempting to travel south while avoiding marauding bands of cannibalistic survivors. *The Windup Girl* is a dystopian science fiction novel set in twenty-third century Thailand, which has sworn off global trade as a protectionist measure against 'calorie monopolies', megacorporations who control global food production in a world beset by anthropogenic climate change. The novel opens with the American capitalist, Anderson Lake, covertly attempting to discover the location of the Thai seedbank, which his employers wish to seize in order to expand their stockpile of genetic information and further dominate global trade. In the process he falls in love with the Japanese windup girl Emiko, a manufactured humanoid created to meet the gap in Japan's labour force and now residing illegally in Thailand as a prostitute.

Trends in speculative fiction have been consistently aligned to trends in awareness of peak oil. The success of the conservationist movement in the late 1970s which enabled the possibility 'that the industrial world might move forward to a future of sustainable prosperity' (Greer 2008, 7) was contemporaneous with the emergence of the 'critical utopia' genre which 'reclaimed the emancipatory utopian imagination . . . forging visions of better but open futures' (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 2). Similarly, the assault on these advances during the 1980s through a renewed commitment to fossil fuel usage was contemporaneous with a shift towards dystopian imagining which registered the 'economic restructuring, right-wing politics and . . . intensifying fundamentalism and

commodification' (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 2) of the neoliberal era through the nihilistic genre of cyberpunk. *The Road* and *The Windup Girl* can accordingly be situated as differential manifestations of the trend towards dystopian and post-apocalyptic generic modes concurrent with the blossoming peak oil anxiety of the early twenty-first century.

The most recently theorized branch of dystopian imagining is the 'critical dystopia' (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 7) which emerged during the 1990s and which foregrounded generic instability and open-ended narrative possibility as fundamental aspects of their resistance to fixity and anti-utopian pessimism. These markers of the critical dystopia are discernable in both texts despite their generic differences, and by comparing them it is my aim to indicate the contours of peak oil literature as a new mode of speculative fiction which can be defined not by traditional generic markers, but instead by the anxieties which generate them, and the ways in which these anxieties are resolved.

The Windup Girl foregrounds peak oil anxiety in its imagining of a world bereft of oil as an available global resource, while also envisioning a tentative revival of the geopolitical dynamics of petro-capitalism, enacted by corporations which attempt to regain the American hegemony lost during the 'petroleum Contraction' (WG, p. 115). Here oil has been replaced by coal as an industrial and military resource, supplemented by biofuels for heating and light. The precariousness of this shift becomes manifest when Bangkok's methane reserves and coal pumps are detonated and the populace are massacred using military apparatus fuelled by 'liquefied coal' (WG, p. 283). This produces apocalyptic images of 'napalm hissing' (WG, p. 330) and a 'roaring green mushroom' of methane (WG, p. 322), recalling the Vietnam war and the atom bomb as avatars of the destructiveness of science and technology when fused to repressive political power, while transcribing this dangerous historical circularity to fossil fuel usage in the link made between 'the burn of coal exhaust' and the 'orgy of violence' (WG, p. 325) it enables.

Defining *The Road* as a peak oil text is more problematic. Although it is made clear that oil is no longer structurally available to Americans, the circumstances which have produced this post-apocalyptic wasteland are withheld from the reader. The sole hint of a possible apocalyptic event as 'a long shear of light and then a series of low concussions' (p. 54), is deliberately enigmatic; McCarthy himself has stated in a 2009 interview with the *Wall Street Journal* that 'it could be anything – volcanic activity or . . . nuclear war. It is not really important'. Rather than undermining a definition of the text as engaged in peak oil discourse, however, this obfuscation can be read as *contributing* to the novel's delineation of American culture as created, maintained and ultimately destroyed by petro-capitalism. This narrative withholding works alongside a wider indication of the way oil dictates American landscapes and lifestyles while rendering its centrality imperceptible. The text registers and resolves the 'unspeakable' nature of oil's centrality by deploying a complex strategy of symbolism and oblique reference to

implicitly indicate oil as a substance and system embedded in American structures of living, thinking and feeling.

Stephanie LeMenager coined the term ‘petrotopia’ to describe the ‘auto-highway-sprawl complex’ (2012, 64) as a spatially hegemonic inscription of oil onto the American landscape, which represents itself ‘as an ideal end-state, repressing the violence it has performed’ (p. 65), ecologically and socially. It is this complex which the father and son navigate, enabling McCarthy to undermine its utopianism through post-apocalyptic imagery of ‘melted’ buildings (R, p. 291), ‘charred and rusting cars’ (p. 292), and ‘hot black mastic’ roads (p. 50) which reveals the violence it has suppressed while reciprocally exerting it back onto its features. While these images appear to indicate the instability of petrotopia, they in fact consolidate petrotopia’s enduring hegemony of space, as the possibility of renewal through nature is unambiguously negated: this is a ‘wasted country’ (p. 4) in which nothing can ever grow again.

The Road is inflected by the ‘myth of apocalypse’ (Greer 2008, 37) which underpins much peak oil discourse. Greer situates this myth as antithetical to the ‘myth of progress’ (p. 36) in its view of society as on the brink of catastrophe, having been fundamentally corrupted by materialism. This myth is criticized by Greer as failing to register that ‘gradual disintegration, not sudden catastrophic collapse, is the way civilizations end’ (p. 27), just as he describes peak oil discourse as often failing to register that Hubbert’s peak anticipates a steady decline in petroleum production rather than an immediate crash. Both fallacious assumptions are embedded in *The Road*’s imagining of an American society bereft of oil which has crumbled into chaos within a decade of an apocalyptic event. Reading the text in accordance with Greer’s analysis suggests that its images of ‘rampaging, mindless mob’ perpetuate implausible ‘survivalist fantasies’ (Greer, p. 40), and a simplistic narrative regarding peak oil futurity which elides the complexity of the predicament.

Although the faith invested in the father and son counterpoints the text’s apocalyptic pessimism, the father is in fact the character most associated with the ideologies which underpin petro-capitalism. He is a character who can be read as invested in ‘petro-privatism’, an ideological affect which allows for an appearance of ‘privatized command over space and life’ (Huber 2012, 306) central to the American way of life enabled by petroleum. The journey which provides the narrative impetus of *The Road*, occurs as a result of the father’s attempt to perpetuate ‘the individual (male) breadwinner’s own entrepreneurialism’ as the basis of meaningful existence, evading how ‘perilously dependent’ (Huber 2012, 306) this ideology is on petroleum’s availability. His insistence on navigating highways designed for automobiles is a perpetuation of the structural logic of unending momentum encoded in petrotopia. The quest represents an internalization of the ideologies of petro-capitalism, as suggested by his use of an ‘oilcompany roadmap’ (R, p. 78) to guide their way. The father’s refusal to acknowledge the impracticality and emptiness of such a quest without oil represents a sort of monomania also evident in his insistence on stopping at gas stations to eke out the last remnants of oil despite

the fact that ‘the odor of gas was only a rumor’ (p. 6). A link can be made with his motivational motto of ‘carrying the fire’ (p. 87) which he uses to define his sense of self and the petroleum-fuelled fires which he tends throughout the journey. His inability to relinquish the ideologies of petro-capitalism casts him as a figure tethered to the dead world of oil, unable to think beyond it in a stasis consolidated by the perpetual grip of petrotopia on the landscape. As with the text’s reticence to explicitly situate oil’s centrality to the post-apocalyptic scenario, this inability is produced by the obfuscating dynamics of petro-culture which bar both its cultural self-representation and the positing of imagined alternatives.

The cognitive disconnect between the father’s adherence to the ideologies of petroleum and its manifest absence produces a growing sense of narrative incoherence which can also be read as a coded commentary on the relationship between peak oil reader and post-oil character. The first lapse into incoherence, for example, suggests a fractured recognition that past generations cared little about the consequences of petroleum use: ‘Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? . . . There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground’ (p. 209). Here the text casts an accusatory glance at the ‘father’ reading him in the present moment while also expansively deploying the second person to implicate the reader as similarly inheriting the consequences of this lack of foresight. The second lapse can be read as suggesting that until the irreversible consequences of petroleum usage become unambiguously manifest in the present, those benefiting from its structures will merely turn their gaze away from the possibility of future disaster, embodied by the ‘us’ of the son and father in the narrative: ‘They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back’ (p. 224). In both examples the text tacitly acknowledges its own fictiveness, rending the narrative fabric in a manner which hints at the potential limitations of the pedagogical function of peak oil fiction. This strategy of encoded commentary is, as an element of a wider reticence to engage directly with peak oil discourse, perhaps designed to avoid reiterating overly familiar tropes regarding the ‘shopworn theme of America’s pathological addiction to oil’ (Kaminski, 2008) and thereby inspiring a bathetic response from the reader.

Peter Hitchcock links the silencing ubiquity of petro-culture to the wider difficulty of imagining ‘the concrete demise of the accumulation process predicated in an oil economy’ (2010, 94). This indicates that oil’s slippery evasion of literary crystallization bespeaks a more fundamental problem: envisioning the end of late capitalism. In this sense Hitchcock warns that ‘peak-oil speculative fiction . . . is not beyond the prospect of a missed encounter’ (p. 97) due to the potential failure of grasping capitalism itself as the problem at the heart of petro-culture, as opposed to oil as the fundamental problem of capitalism. It is this missed encounter which *The Windup Girl* warns against while simultaneously attempting to remedy.

This text imagines how the capitalist world-system might survive oil’s depletion, undermining any notion that the end of oil will end capitalism by pointing towards

the lack of imaginable alternatives. In this sense it is intimately engaged with what Imre Szeman has described as the three most prominent schools of peak-oil discourse: 'strategic realism, techno-utopianism and eco-apocalypse' (2007, 808). *The Windup Girl* incorporates each of these discourses into its narrative structure while undermining each of their assumptions in order to indicate the inadequacy of their engagement. Techno-utopianism is rooted in the assumption that the predicament of oil depletion will be met through technological innovation, while strategic realism is a *realpolitik* approach which considers only the management of a nation state's geopolitical position as a relevant concern. Both discourses 'remain committed to capitalism' (Szeman 2007, 815) in their shared assumption that it will remain in place indefinitely and that its maintenance is a desirable goal. Conversely, Szeman sees the eco-apocalyptic approach as recognizing that 'social and political change is fundamental to genuinely addressing the disaster of the end of oil' (p. 815), and that these changes are impossible 'while we retain the present consumer-capital economic system' (p. 816).

These tropes are interrogated in *The Windup Girl* through its imagining of a dystopian future in which strategic realism and techno-utopianism have become synthesized through the deployment of science and technology to enhance geopolitical manoeuvring and the flow of capital. The text simultaneously negates the blind optimism of techno-utopianism, the wilful short-sightedness of strategic realism and the eco-apocalyptic assumption that 'disaster is all but welcome . . . since without oil, current configurations of capital are impossible' (Szeman, 2008 817). Here capitalism remains intact through the doctrine of 'free trade' (WG, p. 58), supporting Szeman's observation that 'the disaster of oil is already prefigured in the temporal shift . . . of neoliberalism' and its emphasis on immediate profiteering over long-term consequences (2007, 817–818). *The Windup Girl* indicates how neoliberalism might intensify rather than dissipate once oil is lost to the global economy, thereby maintaining both political corruption and American hegemony. The shift from petroleum to 'calories' as a leading world trade commodity is shown to consolidate the power of corporations rather than undermine them, as is implicit in the lexical shift from 'corporations' to 'monopolies' (WG, p. 68) as a unit of measurement. The absence of any reference to the United States suggests that the monopolies have either supplanted or become indistinguishable from the American state itself in a logical conclusion of neoliberalism's creed of shrinking the state and expanding corporate power. If petro-capitalism has been founded on 'corporate/state collusion, regulation of surplus and manufactured scarcity' (Retort 2005, 56), then the text both reproduces and amplifies this system in order to think beyond the limitations of peak oil discourse.

Both texts position the post-oil future as a 'brute return of the past' (Retort 2005, Preface n.p.) mediated through the process of 'primitive accumulation', supporting Retort's definition of the latter as an '*incomplete* and *recurring* process, essential to capitalism's continuing life' (p. 75). Retort's analysis of primitive accumulation as feeding capitalism's drive outwards to sites of potential plunder and inwards in the

drive for resources evident in the ‘patenting of life forms’ (p. 76) is of direct relevance to *The Windup Girl*’s critique of the capitalist endeavour. The aggressive attempts of the monopolies to plunder foreign resources in the text exemplifies the outward drive, while the genetically engineered grains the monopolies sell, including ‘AgriGen Soy PRO’ (WG, p. 73) and ‘TotalNutrient wheat’ (p. 114), represent an intensification of the inward drive to commodify living matter. In *The Road*, human bodies have become commodities to be consumed by the masculinized appetites of other human bodies. The looming threat that ‘they are going to rape us and kill us and eat us’ (p. 58) is what leads the boy’s mother to suicide as an act of resistance against her own commodification. The desire to accumulate and consume resources as commodities is, therefore, essentialized within both texts as a fundamental dynamic of human organization. This essentialism perpetuates the cynicism of naturalism which lies at the core of classical dystopian fiction; these dystopian texts tend to locate ‘catastrophe in human nature itself [derailing] any project of radical transformation’ (Wegner 2003, 172).

The Windup Girl presents a future invested with the ‘perplexing doubleness . . . of atavism and new-fangledness’ which Retort defines as emblematic of neoliberal capitalism (2005, Preface n.p.). The text envisions how this contradiction between hi-tech innovation and historical regression might remain in place beyond the availability of petroleum through the invented technology of kink springs which the American capitalist Yates enthusiastically describes as a ‘revolution in energy storage . . . We haven’t had power this portable since gasoline’ (WG, p. 5). Manufacturing kink springs demands industrialized labour, which is deployed in factories using a combination of exploitative practices. One is the importation of ‘coolie labourers’ (p. 7) forced to use amphetamines ‘to keep working, to burn calories they do not have’ (p. 106). The Oxford English Dictionary Online defines the term coolie as a chiefly historical description of ‘a hired labourer (esp. one employed by a European)’ on plantations, as well as a derogatory name for ‘a person of low (social) status’; its use in the text indicates a revival of an earlier and more nakedly repressive stage of capitalism. Working alongside coolies are Thai workers, associated with child labour through the peasant girl Mai, who is first described as performing the dangerous task of resetting a spindle with an LED light which is ‘worth more than she is’ (p. 21). This conveys the dehumanizing lack of value attached to labour in this future. Also important to kink spring manufacturing are the megadonts, genetically engineered mammoth-like creatures which unite ‘nearly human’ intelligence with ‘Pleistocene rage’ (p. 19). The description of a megadont as ‘a mountain of genetically engineered muscle, fighting against . . . its bonds’ (p. 18), signifies it as the embodiment of a unity between scientific advances and a revival of slavery. The text anticipates that beyond oil’s availability, labour and nature will remain in ready supply as resources to exploit alongside bio-synthetic labour substitutes and genetically engineered bio-commodities, which will ensure capitalism’s unending march onwards. The total effect of this ad hoc combination of resources is to undermine the assumption

that the loss of oil will necessitate systemic change: in the novel industrial practice simply reverts to repressive historical models of resource and labour acquisition.

Conversely, in *The Road* technological innovation has been abandoned alongside ‘What used to be called the states’ (p. 43), undermining blind faith in unending human progress and the permanence of contemporary political structures. Here atavism supplants technology entirely in a return to pre-modern brutality dictated by violent masculinity. Beneath this apparent chaos are hints of a proto-systemic social order, however, as suggested in the description of a procession of armed men followed by ‘wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women . . . some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites . . . fitted in dogcollars’ (p. 96). Embedded in this procession is a nascent system of commodity value in which enslavement has become a means of ownership over labour, reproduction and sexuality dictated by a militant patriarchy. Slavery is also indicated as a site of historical circularity in the moment when the protagonists enter a large house in which people are captured and stored in a cellar to be eaten. Here a narrative link is drawn between this proto-systemic acquisition of human bodies and the ‘chattel slaves [who] once trod those boards bearing food and drink on silver trays’ (p. 112). That this is the only specific historical reference made in the text heightens the sense of a link between historical plantation slavery and the cannibalistic harvesting which emerges in response to the absence of oil and the consumerism it enabled. Both texts, therefore, share the anxiety that dehumanizing systems of forced labour and commodification of bodies will predominate in post-oil scenarios.

A further problematic aspect of capitalism as registered in *The Windup Girl* is the investment of commodities with ‘magic power’ and ‘talismanic qualities . . . that occlude their true character [as the] motors of production, the ultimate hard currency of exchange’ (Retort 2005, 39). Recognition of this occlusion enables Retort to divorce oil from the economically motivated ideologies which pervade its discourse and situate it as one of many commodities of value to the system, as opposed to one which determines its workings. *The Windup Girl* similarly indicates commodity fetishism as a mechanism of capitalism through the symbolic resonances invested in the ‘ngaw’ fruit by Lake, who replicates the mystical reverence invested in oil in his description of the fruit as a ‘return from extinction’ which makes ‘all things seem possible . . . [a work of] magic with the genetic material of generations lost’ (p. 3). This miraculous gift is imbued with the utopian potential of ‘Eden’s return’ and a religiosity which equates ‘miracles’ with ‘profits skyrocketing’ (p. 3). This initial flush of lyricism regarding the ngaw is gradually transferred to the ‘seedbank’ which enabled its revival, and which is described as an invaluable ‘treasure trove’ and ‘gold mine’ which the American monopolies attempt to acquire forcibly in order to ‘stay alive a little longer’ (p. 86), thereby reconfiguring contemporary American reliance on imported oil and conveying geopolitical exploitation as a dynamic beyond any single commodity.

The link between the *ngaw* and oil is affirmed by the photograph found by Lake of ‘a huge pyramidal pile of *ngaw*’ juxtaposed against a backdrop of ‘petroleum burning taxis’, which allows the text to situate both as embodying ‘the waste, the arrogance, the absurd wealth [and] astonishing abundance . . . taken entirely for granted’ by petro-capitalism (p. 64). This image parallels the final image in *The Road* of trout in a mountain stream as a symbol of lost natural fecundity which will ‘not be made right again’ (p. 307) if ecological disaster is not addressed in the reader’s present. The difference between these images, however, is that in *The Windup Girl*, the *ngaw* has been resurrected through biotechnology, thereby extending the textual warning against ecological irresponsibility by inflecting it with a more fundamental warning against unchecked capitalist acquisitiveness.

This article’s reading of both texts as pessimistic critiques of contemporary capitalism is potentially undermined by the optimism of their endings. In *The Road*, the Christ-like child, consistently equated with ‘god’ (pp. 78, 173, 183), is saved by the *deus ex machina* of kindly strangers, enabling him to live on beyond the narrative scope of the text. In *The Windup Girl*, Kanya seizes the seedbank from the calorie monopolies in a successful gesture of nationalist revolt against American hegemony. The ruthless capitalist, Hock Seng, has a change of heart and decides to rescue Mai rather than ensure his own survival, motivated by ‘a new absurd flicker of hope’ which is also invested in the détente reached between the American, Lake, the Chinese, Hock Seng, and the Japanese windup Emiko: ‘We all benefit, every one of us, if we come to agreement . . . Everyone wins, for once’ (p. 340). These final notes of successful resistance to exploitation and productive international collaboration embed utopian hope within the text in order to move forward from the preceding dystopian critique.

The Road’s ending is similarly seen by Rune Graulund (2010) as bearing ‘the seeds for a new beginning’ (R, p. 71) which expands the hope invested in the father-son relationship outwards, so that the wider world is ‘still invested with meaning, purpose and future’ (R, p. 71). The Christ-like resonances of the boy’s delineation provides a means of recovering the failed religiosity invested in petromodernity by the text. The boy is situated as representative of a nascent restoration of meaning beyond petromodernity, a figure ‘from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle’ (R, p. 293). This notion of the child as an instigator of societal renewal is endorsed by Ashley Kunsu, who reads him as conveying ‘a search for meaning . . . in a seemingly meaningless world . . . that, astonishingly, succeeds’ (2009, 1).

This reinvestment of meaning through the child implicitly revives R. W. B. Lewis’s concept of the ‘American Adam’, which Gail McDonald describes as a founding fantasy of the ‘American male as namer (and thus claimer)’ of the ‘limitless possibility’ (2007, 8) of the virginal American landscape. Yet such resonances are undermined by the fact that the landscape which the American Adam was able to name and claim is forever lost; there is no natural world left for the boy to inherit and within which to restage this renewal of American identity. This contradiction between destroyed world and survived

child is irresolvable, an open-ended paradox encoded in the earlier description of the boy's flute playing as either the 'formless music of the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth' (p. 81).

A more productive interpretation of the ending is potentially offered by Kunsu's reading of the text as an 'argument for a new kind of fiction [beyond] the current paradigm of excess [returning] to the essential elements of narrative' (2009, 1). This analysis can be extrapolated to the text's wider systemic envisioning of a less excessive and destructive way of living as the only viable solution to the peak oil predicament. This understanding of the text enables a reading of McCarthy's invocation of the American Adam trope as suggestive of a symbolic return to the lost idealism of the past, positioned as ultimately prevailing against the antithetical return of past systems of violence and oppression. This rehabilitation of a historical moment imbued with lost potential to convey utopian hope for the future is also evident in Kanya's relocation of Bangkok to Ayutthaya in *The Windup Girl*, as this has previously been situated in the text as a symbolic site of nationalist resistance against oppressive external forces. The endings of both texts meet the difficulty of envisioning something beyond capitalism by returning to past historical moments of resistance, and reinterpreting them as utopian enclaves which indicate an alternative historical narrative of systemic destabilization and revolt.

This revival of the utopian potential of the past is potentially undermined, however, by the prior insurances of the hopelessness of resistance evident in both texts. Not only do the systems challenged by Kanya and the boy remain unchanged by the narrative endings, but the very symbols deployed in the novels to convey their resistance are suggestive of an underlying ironic futility. Kanya's revolt is explicitly conveyed as a repetition of an ultimately ineffectual insurrection which 'fought when all was lost, and held the Burmese at bay for a little while', but could never hope to stop the kingdom being 'sacrificed' (WG, p. 351). Similarly, her seizure of the seedbanks is an identical repetition of the resistance previously described in Finland, which temporarily hindered the monopolies, only to intensify their efforts elsewhere. Indeed, Kanya's mentor Jaidee, the figure most associated with nationalist resistance to capital in the text struggles to imagine a future which is not dominated by the monopolies, recognizing that while in nature 'all is transient', this is not the case for the permanence of capital: 'In a thousand years . . . Will they know that there were many many trees . . . Not just a Gates teak, and a generipped PurCal banana, but many, many others as well?' (p. 168). This incongruity means that both texts remain fundamentally ambiguous in their balancing of utopian hope with dystopian despair, and while the former is ensconced in their endings, this hope fails to convincingly negate the prior insistence on the impossibility of systemic transformation.

Another way of recuperating the optimistic potential of *The Road*'s approach to peak oil imaginings is offered by Frederick Buell's analysis of the text as resisting the 'cultural regime' (2012, 291) of oil-capitalism as an 'age of exuberance . . . haunted

by catastrophe' (p. 276). Buell reads the novel as resisting 'the oily cultural work of injecting exuberance into catastrophe in postapocalyptic settings' by emphasizing that the predicament of peak oil demands 'painful, slow, on-foot struggle' towards an alternative system of human organization (p. 292). Reading *The Windup Girl* in accordance with Buell's analysis of the intersection of generic mode with politicized content produces a less positive reading, however, as this suggests that there is a disconnection between the text's critique of capitalism and the narrative strategies deployed to convey this critique. This is particularly evident in the novel's perpetuation of 'fantasies of post-physical acceleration and quicktime metamorphosis' (Buell 2012, 292), and its fascination with 'the breaching of boundaries between the human and the technological' (p. 291). Both themes are dually embedded in the delineation of the windup girl Emiko as 'startlingly fluid' (WG, p. 254), 'shockingly fast' (p. 269) and 'at speed, terrifyingly beautiful' (p. 273).

Buell criticizes such tropes as sustaining rather than challenging the cultural ideologies which underpin petro-capitalism. This analysis is undermined, however, by the critique of capitalist ideology embedded in Emiko's delineation. Emiko is invested with frustrated revolutionary potential, crippled by in-built genetic defects and cultural indoctrination designed to force her into accepting her subordinate role as a commodity created to fill Japan's labour gap. Her capabilities only become apparent when she begins to question human insistence on her inferiority, and this dawning sense of self is expressed in murderous rebellion synonymous with 'supreme confidence' (p. 305). Her character development bears a wider pedagogical significance, encouraging readers to question received ideas about both their own potential as individuals and their ability to fight against seemingly insurmountable hegemonic oppression. Furthermore, the textual fascination with Emiko's speed is countered by the horror invested in the efficiency of the 'well-oiled military machine' (p. 310) which decimates Bangkok using technology 'too fast for any human being's eyes' (p. 314), and this undermines the simplicity of Buell's terminology. That Emiko has been defectively designed due to the short-sighted and culturally specific context of her production, casts her as a symbol of the capitalist world-system as a similarly defective model with myopia at the core of its design. She is ultimately positioned by the novel's epilogue as the potential instigator of a post-human world, which represents a realization of her utopian dream for a space of her own. The text complicates any interpretation of this future as utopian, however, through the positioning of the scientist Gibbons as the architect of this age.

Gibbons is a self-ordained 'God' (p. 358), seen by other characters as a 'demon' (p. 242), and he offers a dark mirror to the unambiguously Christ-like boy in *The Road*, as both are situated as instigators of the post-oil new world orders. Having engineered the plagues which have devastated global agriculture in order to contrive a post-human evolutionary shift, Gibbons's prediction that 'all people will be New People' (p. 358) becomes the final prophetic statement of *The Windup Girl*. He offers the text's most fundamental solution to the problem of capital: the destruction of humans brought on

by their own meddling with ecological systems: ‘Nature has become something new. It is ours now, truly. And if our creation devours us, how poetic will that be?’ (p. 246). This prediction resonates with the eco-apocalyptic trope of the ecological consequences of petro-capitalism as providing punishment for human hubris, but moves beyond such moralizing to indicate how even environmental catastrophe might become welded to unchecked scientific innovation in order to preserve capitalist hegemony.

The tentative optimism of *The Road*’s ending, and the multiplicity of potential outcomes hinted at in the climax of *The Windup Girl*, mean that both texts register a fundamental uncertainty regarding the post-oil future even as they attempt to move beyond it. The inability of either text to posit solutions to the problems of the future constitutes a recognition that peak oil futurity represents ‘a predicament, not a problem’ (Greer 2008, 22), and therefore demands a multiplicity of responses, qualified by uncertainty. Like capitalism itself, the peak oil predicament represents a dilemma of social organization beyond any ready solution. Both texts move beyond the limited scope of peak oil discourse by indicating a wider sense of systemic catastrophe, an expansive fictive scope which can be contextualized as registering what Immanuel Wallerstein sees as the crisis of the contemporary world-system of capitalism, ‘one of [the] central characteristics [of which] is the total uncertainty of its outcome’ (2006, 88). In the midst of such fundamental uncertainty, it is perhaps unsurprising that both texts choose narrative ambiguity as the keynote of their approaches to imagining the post-oil future.

Perhaps the most productive way to resolve these inconsistencies is to situate both texts as engaging in a new stage in generic tradition. If *The Road* and *The Windup Girl* are both texts which participate in the reinvigoration of peak oil awareness in the early twenty-first century, then they suggest that this renewed awareness will be mediated through a complex intermingling of utopian and dystopian imagining, one which recognizes the dystopian nature of the present, while funnelling uncertainty regarding the future into the possibility of utopia. Both texts move between the classical dystopian function of warning, and the more recent development of critical dystopias, which embed utopian hope within the fabric of the text. The classical mode of dystopian fiction utilizes pessimistic endings to situate utopian hope in the figure of the reader, who is expected to understand the warning it conveys as didactically galvanizing social and political change in the present. The critical dystopian mode amends this strategy in its use of ambiguous open endings in order to reject ‘the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel [thereby opening] a space of contestation and opposition for those collective “ex-centric” subjects . . . not empowered by hegemonic rule’ (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 7).

The Windup Girl and *The Road* enact this process of critical dystopia in their investment of revolutionary power in female subalterns and in a vulnerable child, respectively. Both texts also revive the fundamental pessimism of earlier dystopian fiction in their insistence that the contestation of hegemony is futile, however, thereby producing a

fundamental paradox between the main thrust of the narrative and its resolution. This paradox is extended even further in *The Windup Girl's* epilogue through its offering of a space of contestation for a figure previously oppressed through intersecting xenophobia, misogyny, and fear of technology, which is nonetheless predicated on the continued abuse of power by a white American male directly aligned to hegemonic rule. The irresolvable interplay of utopia and dystopia in these fictions suggests that a new form of speculative fiction has been produced by the irresolvable conundrum posed by the peak oil predicament.

References

- Baccolini, Raffaella and Tom Moylan. 2003. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Bacigalupi, Paulo. [2009] 2012. *The Windup Girl*. San Francisco: Night Shade.
- Barrett, Ross and Daniel Worden. 2012. Oil Culture: Guest Editor's Introduction. Special Issue of *Journal of American Studies* 46 (2): 269–272.
- Buell, Frederick. 2012. A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance. Special Issue of *Journal of American Studies* 46 (2): 273–293.
- Ghosh, Amitav. 1992. Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel. *The New Republic*: 29–33.
- Graulund, Rune. 2010. Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *Orbis Litterarum* 65 (1): 57–78.
- Greer, John Michael. 2008. *The Long Descent: A User's Guide to the End of the Industrial Age*. Gabriola Island: New Society.
- Hitchcock, Peter. 2010. Oil in an American Imaginary. *New Formations* 69 (4): 81–97.
- Huber, Matthew. 2012. Refined Politics: Petroleum Products, Neoliberalism, and the Ecology of Entrepreneurial Life. Special Issue of *Journal of American Studies* 46 (2): 295–312.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kaminski, Frank. 2008. The post-oil novel: a celebration! <http://www.resilience.org/stories/2008-05-12/post-oil-novel-celebration> (accessed 12 May 2008).
- Kunsa, Ashley. 2009. 'Maps of the World in Its Becoming': Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. *Journal of Modern Literature* 33 (1): 57–73.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. 2012. The Aesthetics of Petroleum, After Oil. *American Literary History* 24 (1): 59–86.
- McCarthy, Cormac. 2009. Interview. *The Wall Street Journal* 20 November. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572>
- McCarthy, Cormac. [2006] 2010. *The Road*. London: Picador.
- McDonald, Gail. 2007. *American Literature and Culture 1900–1960*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Retort collective. 2005. *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. London: Verso.
- Szeman, Imre. 2007. System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 (4): 805–823.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2006. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Wegner, Phillip E. 2003. Where the Prospective Horizon is Omitted: Naturalism and Dystopia in *Fight Club* and *Ghost Dog*. In *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. ed. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, 167–185. London: Taylor and Francis.

SEAN DONNELLY is completing a Master's degree in English Literature at Warwick University, having undertaken his initial studies through the Open University. His work focuses on 'petrofiction' as well as the writing of Junot Díaz and Monica Ali. His dissertation interrogates the intersection of convergence culture and Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction, arguing that this gives rise to a new generic modality – a 'dystopian paracosm'. This work has been presented at the Warwick Postgraduate Symposium Conference. His broader research interests include speculative fiction, contemporary British literature, feminist literary theory, and children's literature.