TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

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When life imitates art: Watchlist *and the impossible pandemic*

Abstract:
Oscar Wilde (1891/1909) declared that it is not Art that imitates Life but Life that imitates Art. What happens when an artistic work, pitched as "soft sci-fi", predicts something both decidedly unpleasurable and, later, alarmingly prophetic? Such is the case with *Watchlist* (2020), a new Australian theatrical work written prior to COVID-19, which warns of impending environmental catastrophe and ends with the release of a zoonotic pathogen. The debut production in 2021 was performed amid the global reality of the continuing pandemic which rendered the play a prescient cultural artefact and complicated the audience reception of the work. This study expands from Wilde's concept of *counter-mimesis* into the theoretical frameworks of Hans Robert Jauss (1982) and Susan Bennett (1997), who provide an alternative to author-centric, practice-led research while laying the blueprint for a dialectical exchange between Life and Art. The dialectical exchange is then explored in the genre of science fiction more broadly, including both literature and franchise filmmaking. Through this analysis, the authors break down the binary of Life and Art, building from Jauss and Bennett, to demonstrate the advantages of this alternative critical vocabulary.

Biographical note:
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Dr Sean Williams is a multi-award-winning author for readers of all ages. His latest novels *Impossible Music* and *Her Perilous Mansion* were nominated for the Ethel Turner Prize for Young People's Literature and the Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature respectively. Both works are Children's Book Council of Australia Notable Books. He is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Flinders University and recipient of the Australian Antarctica Division's Art Fellowship.

Keywords:
Speculative fiction, climate change, film franchise, science fiction, reception theory

Introduction

Oscar Wilde inverted Aristotle's concept of mimesis by proposing that, contrary to the famous axiom, it is not Art that imitates Life but Life that imitates Art. This is by no means a modest claim; rather, it plays into artistic delusions of grandeur and godliness, however glib, which are familiar to fans of Wilde:

> Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. (Wilde, 1891/1909, p. 7)

Beyond the eyerolls and the swift dismissals this kind of florid thinking has no doubt inspired, and justly earned, among the pragmatically minded, there is some substance to Wilde's observations that we locate aesthetic beauty in the mundane precisely because artists – whether they be painters or poets, novelists or playwrights – have directed our gaze in a specific way. This is why, he argues, we romanticise London fog. It may also be why we associate flowers of different kinds with specific events: roses for our valentines, lilies for our funerals. It is almost certainly why we place unfair expectations on our parents, our colleagues and our romantic partners. Richard Curtis and Walt Disney have a great deal to answer for. So too do established works of science fiction, and emerging works of climate fiction ("cli-fi"), which purposefully exploit this interplay between Life and Art to produce speculative allegories for their audiences. Hamilton (2016) argues that the realm of science fiction "is not only fictional entertainment but invites an encounter between imagined possibilities, historical reality and our future" (p. 303). Repositioned in this genre framework, Wilde's concept of Life imitating Art, or *counter-mimesis*, opens up a series of questions: how can a director and production team employ context and paratext to frame a story written in one historical moment but released, only a year later, in a markedly different socio-cultural landscape? How do authors of all stripes navigate a situation where the speculative shifts into the derivative? What happens when Life really does imitate Art? These questions feed into this study's key focus: an exploration into the dialectic relationship between Life and Art and how such a relationship evolves over time due to paratextual events, irrespective of the author and their inspirations or intentions at the time of creation.

Situated at the heart of this study is the reception of *Watchlist* (2020), a new Australian theatrical work that warns of impeding environmental catastrophe and culminates in the release of a zoonotic pathogen. At the time of writing (2019), a viral plague that could reshape the world was an implausible concept, one that involved consultation with biologists and immunologists but was framed squarely within the realm of science fiction, if not fantasy. At the time of production, however, in mid-2021, the global reality of COVID-19 was foremost in the minds of those who attended. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the devastating Black Summer bushfires, "environmental catastrophe" was far from speculative; these and other events reframed *Watchlist* as a prescient cultural artefact, and evidently complicated the critical reception of the work:

> Alex Vickery-Howe wrote this dark comedic tale after yet another year of terrible bushfires, but before the pandemic – which is prophetic, given where the narrative goes. And its invitation, nay, demand, to do something, is more powerful for being played once the theatres have re-opened. (Wickett, 2021)

It was to have been performed a year ago but, ironically, it was delayed by COVID-19. You'll understand the irony when you see the final moments in the play. (Lenny, 2021)

Wilde's *counter-mimesis*, vainglorious in its conception, mistakenly posits that artists have the power to guide not only the creative process – Art – but the audience response – Life. This study reframes these terms as part of an ever-evolving dialectic relationship. It argues that, particularly for contemporary writers, this relationship is deeply entangled. Perhaps now more than ever, an understanding of the intersection between Art and Life, or Life and Art, must be foregrounded within studies of emergent creative practice. A flaw of conventional, practice-led research is assuming that the world will be the same when a work is finished as it was when a work was started. On the contrary, Life gets in the way.

Cultural flux: The dialectic relationship in contemporary creative practice

Hans Robert Jauss (1978/1982) was among the first to codify the circular relationship between Art and Life vis-à-vis the perspective of the audience. While Roland Barthes (1977) celebrated the author's demise, Jauss resuscitated the author – conditionally – by inviting the audience into a shared creation of meaning:

> Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject – through the interaction of author and public. (Jauss, 1978/1982, p. 15)

According to Jauss, the function of Art is "no longer mimetically defined", in a way traceable to Aristotle's foundational influence, "but rather is viewed dialectically as a medium capable of forming and altering perception" (1978/1982, p. 16). Art is, therefore, less about a single artist capturing Life – or a slice thereof – for passive audience consumption, and more about an artist offering an idea for an audience to respond to. There is little point talking about individual writing process in Jauss's conception of the relationship between creator and audience because the author, the painter, the playwright, is only a provocateur – only one component of the cyclical process wherein meaning is conceived and shared. What Wilde perhaps misses in his upturning of Art and Life is that, while there is no text without the author, there is no subtext without the audience.

Susan Bennett (1997) codifies this process further through the employment of the "horizon of expectations": the subconscious measure by which any given reader or audience member may evaluate a cultural artefact (p. 94). Contemporary writers understand that this horizon is informed, at least in part, by the paratext surrounding a given work – that is, by marketing, by expectations and conventions of genre, and by previous artistic works on the subject at hand.

Simply put, a rom-com in a horror catalogue fails to meet the audience's horizon, even if it is an otherwise excellent piece of work. Likewise, a cabaret show in a Shakespearean festival just doesn't belong. Wilson (2009) applies the same theory to the digital realm:

> Screen content is "read" by audiences as exemplifying one or more formats ranging from the most general categories of "television program" and "web page" to the more specific genres of "soap opera", "talk show", "portal", and so on (probably *ad infinitum*). Consequently, during any given form of viewing, we expect a particular shape of narrative. In this way, media users place the item they are responding to within definitional frameworks or cognitive horizons of understanding which are more or less specifically culturally located. (Wilson, 2009, p. 32)

All of these "definitional frameworks" are easily recognised, particularly to media and genre-savvy emerging audiences. More interestingly, what happens when a cultural moment shifts? When the horizon changes not through any decision the artist has made but through events in the wider world? What happens when Life *reframes* Art? In this sense, time becomes the curator; its passage brings unanticipated global developments and shifting social mores to reposition Life and Art, creator and audience. As Bennett (1997) asserts: "Culture cannot be held as a fixed entity, a set of constant rules, but instead it must be seen as in a position of inevitable flux" (p. 94). It is the unpredictable nature of this cultural flux that further complicates an audience reception of a work and places some readings outside even the creator's horizon. Indeed, how does one navigate the dialectical relationship when an artistic work accidentally predicts something highly unusual and decidedly unpleasurable? What happens when a text pitched as "soft sci-fi" by its writer turns out to be strangely, alarmingly prophetic? Such was clearly the case with the impossible pandemic in *Watchlist*. Some creators, however, especially those contributing to a franchised fictional universe or remaking an existing work for a new audience, consciously respond to the changed and keep abreast of the changing, knowingly incorporating cultural flux as part of the dialectical relationship with their audience. In other words, if a writer develops and cultivates an awareness of cultural flux, they can adapt their practice accordingly.

Between entertainment and attainment: The dialectic relationship in speculative science fiction

In the genre of science fiction, this dialectic relationship between creator and audience is often referred to as "the Conversation", an informal designation most likely coined in fan literature that seeped into critical thinking through a circular process – Life and Art speaking back to each other. The Conversation is elegantly captured by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr (1991) who defines science fiction not so much as a genre of literature but more as a "mode of awareness", identifying two linked gaps or hesitations:

> One gap extends between, on the one hand, belief that certain ideas and images of scientific-technological transformations of the world can be entertained, and, on the other, the rational recognition that they may be realized (along with their ramifications for worldly life). It is a gap that lies between the conceivability of future transformations and the possibility of their actualization. In its other aspect, SF names the gap between,

> on the one hand, belief in the immanent possibility (and perhaps inexorable necessity) of those transformations, and, on the other, reflection about their possible ethical, social, and spiritual interpretations (i.e., about their embeddedness in a web of social-historical relations.). (Csicsery-Ronay Jr, 1991, p. 389)

The gap between speculative entertainment and attainment in reality is one often crossed by tropes in science fiction. Crewed spaceflight is one: first entertained in fiction in 1657 by Cyrano de Bergerac (*L'Autre Monde*) and attained by the Soviet Union in 1961. Another is the internet, aspects of which appeared in Philip K Dick's 1969 novel *Galactic Pot-Healer*, decades before its technological invention and ongoing examination/extrapolation in texts such as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) and films like *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999). Other tropes, such as life as we know it existing indigenously on other worlds in our solar system, are now regarded as impossible, rendering past works that have engaged with this trope as fantastical rather than science fictional or, at best, retro-futuristic, in the sense of these being anticipations of knowledge or technologies that the future might have held, but does not in fact hold.

Science fiction's awareness of its relationship with cultural moments in time, and the potential for a shift in audience reception, allows it to unpack the dialectical relationship between Art and Life in creatively innovative ways; it is a genre that not only embraces cultural flux and predictive horizons, but manipulates them, as its exploration of the speculative forms the heart of its meaning-making. There remains, nevertheless, contemporaneous pressures placed on storytellers engaged in this genre as they create, imitate and anticipate imagined and very real futures, thus embedding themselves and their works in the "web of social-historical relations". One concrete example from contemporary fiction is Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990). The widely known plot of the novel sees dinosaurs resurrected by DNA and placed in a theme park to delight the public (at least for a while). At the time of writing, this was a fantastic premise, but more recent advances in genetic engineering have led to the very real possibility of "de-extinction", with the Tasmanian tiger as a gentler candidate. Similarly, the dinosaurs depicted in the novel and its film adaptation were featherless; subsequent discoveries challenged this depiction, which was eventually revised in one of the film franchise sequels, *Jurassic World: Dominion* (2022), after audiences commented on the discrepancy.

Working in the creatively innovative space between entertainment and attainment, the science fiction author – and, now, the climate fiction author – travels the bridge linking Art and Life. Borrowing further from Wilde, it is in the visual and performative space that the Conversation flourishes. Contemporary media not only allows us to stage our imagination but continually redraft it.

Humanity's changing fears: The dialectical relationship in franchised media

Films within the science fiction genre visualise the speculative. In line with "seeing is believing", sci-fi cinema gives form to imagined possibilities, both wondrous and terrible. Unlike the ephemeral nature of theatre, where the author's text inevitably evolves each time it is produced and performed, a film – much like a published novel – is a fixed cultural artefact.

Apart from director's cuts and remastered versions, once a film is released, it is that version of the film that remains. Film franchises and remakes, however, offer a unique opportunity for creators to make further contributions as part of an evolving dialectical exchange. In her 2020 book *Why We Remake*, Lauren Rosewarne focuses on "the act of remaking both as an industrial activity and as a creative expression whereby a previously filmed story finds a new life – or new lives – on screen at a later date" (p. 7). She goes on to explain that:

> [In] the Fashionable Remake, the whims of audience appetites are central motivations in remaking … Different happenings in the zeitgeist – for example cultural revolutions like evolving race and gender relations and social issues such as HIV/AIDS, climate change and violence – that are harnessed to update material for a new audience, enabling an old story to seem fresh and cutting-edge. Renewed interest in certain subjects like the military and surveillance emerging after 9/11, for example, saw the remaking of Cold War-era media. Similarly, the era of MeToo and the Trump presidency ushered in a reinvigorated interest in women's stories, thus seeing feminist and female-centric media remade to capitalize on the zeitgeist. (Rosewarne, 2020, p. 6)

Remakes which "capitalise on the zeitgeist", cognisant of the previous works' reception, as well as their place in the genre and specific trope's canon, are consciously responsive. They present familiar stories, characters and worlds in new ways to new and/or changed audiences.

Many science fiction stories franchised on screen focus on humanity's fears: fear of the unknown (such as alien invasions and monsters) and the fear of unchecked scientific advancement and its consequences (such as viruses, artificial intelligence, warfare, natural disasters and social uprisings). The exact manifestation of these fears changes and evolves over time according to contemporary scientific progress, concerns and ideologies. Leaving aside aliens and space travel, speculative science fiction often casts humanity as the culprit responsible for its own downfall. Much like those ravenous dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* (1993), the murderous sentient software in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Blade Runner* (1982), *I,* Robot (2004) and *The Terminator* (1984), and the reawakening and re-empowering of Godzilla (1954), were all created and caused by humans. Sometimes, as with zombie narratives precipitated by a pandemic caused by efforts to cure some disease, humans themselves become the problem as seen in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *World War Z* (2013), *Zombieland* (2009), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *28 Days Later* (2002), among many others.

Planet of the Apes (1968) is another example which speculates life in the aftermath of a global pandemic. Boasting a cultural presence of more than fifty years, the franchise, heralded as a liberal racial allegory, also resonates with our focus on science fiction as a marker of cultural memory, as its fictional reasons for humanity's downfall became more and more grounded in real-life events and truths. In the 1960s, violent fights for/against colonial independence, the shadow of the atomic bomb and the nuclear threat of the Cold War led to a self-destructive human race. H. G. Wells's 1914 portrayal of civilisation destroyed by an atomic bomb, in *The World Set Free*, inspired physicist Leo Szilard to believe that such a bomb was possible; he

later joined the Manhattan Project and helped build one, bringing speculation into reality – entertainment becoming attainment – and ensuring that the trope of nuclear apocalypse would have recurring currency. In the 21st century, the *Planet of the Apes* film series warns against rapacious technological advancement, capitalism and the drive to live beyond our means at the expense/exploitation of natural resources leading to humanity's downfall and the destruction of our planet. Unlike the nuclear bomb, the uplift of animals to human intelligence (and beyond) remains unrealised but has been a feature of literary science fiction since the 1930s (Bly, 2005).

The *Planet of the Apes* film franchise, with its key thematic focus on humanity's fears, has reinvented itself in response to cultural flux. Accordingly, its treatment and articulation of those fears (the "othering" of races/cultures, self-destruction, environmental catastrophe, technology gone mad) has evolved. Loosely based on Pierre Boulle's 1963 novel *La Planète des Singes*, the original *Planet of the Apes* film (Schaffner, 1968) – especially its revelatory ending – left an indelible mark on popular culture. The horror and pain expressed by Charlton Heston's stranded astronaut, George Taylor, as he realises humanity's fate on Earth is an image that "echoes through more than 50 years of cinematic expression" (Chidester, 2015, p. 3). He kneels on the beach before the now tarnished monolith of American culture, the Statue of Liberty. Buried in sand, Lady Liberty, like the civilisation she came to represent, has fallen. Any ideas Taylor had that he was on an alien planet (one humans had visited) are dashed when he discovers he has not in fact travelled far in space but far in time. He concludes: "I'm back. All this time. I'm home" and Dr Zaius's earlier warning that "what is now a desert was once a paradise" (Schaffner, 1968) takes on a new, haunting meaning as he recognises the unrecognisable. In his summary of the film, Barry Grant (2018) highlights the importance of the original's ending in driving home the speculative warnings in Boulle's book:

> The film's twist, which was Serling's [Rod Serling – screenwriter/adaptor] invention, makes the novel's moral warning against war, violence, and racism explicit, as was often the case in his work, both in his *Twilight Zone* episodes (he wrote more than half the scripts for the original series) and other projects. Serling typically combined an exhortatory, if not preachy, personal style with an extrapolative premise to create effective moral fables in the fantastic genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy. (Grant, 2018, p. 303)

Serling's choice here reflects not only his individual artistic preference to be explicit but also speaks to the contemporaneous pressures on cinematic storytellers in Hollywood at the time to invest heavily in the "fantastic genres" on screen (both in the commercial and aesthetic sense), especially in response to the emergence of muted, human dramas coming from post-war European filmmakers and movements such as France's New Wave and Italy's neo-realism. In the original film's ending, one which does traverse horror, sci-fi and fantasy genres, Taylor's pain morphs to anger as he hurls condemnation towards his fellow humans: "You finally, really did it. You maniacs! You blew it up. Damn you. God damn you all to hell!" (Schaffner, 1968). The now iconic images of Taylor shouting into the wind as the waves lap relentlessly at his knees speaks to the fluidity and transience of time – the futility of efforts made to stop nature's cycle of life and death.

Although subsequent outings in the franchise played into the camp adventure romps typical of early 1970s cinema, each featured antagonists – like the first – cognisant of inevitable disasters. Their actions are, therefore, informed by a deep fear of an impending doom at the hands of those they view as a threat (humans or apes). Depicted as a villain, Dr Zaius's concerns are ultimately vindicated when Taylor detonates an atomic bomb wiping out all life on the titular planet in *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970) validating the statement made by Zaius that "man is evil, capable of nothing but destruction" (Post, 1970). Like his predecessors, Taylor, a human, destroyed himself and made a desert of his home and the home of the apes. Beneath the *Planet of the Apes*, although being the second of the five films, is the chronological ending of the entire franchise. As its epilogue's narration concludes: "A green and insignificant planet is dead" (Post, 1970). The ultimate recurring message of the entire film franchise, one that is echoed in *Watchlist*, is that we are not free from the consequences of our own – and previous generations' – actions in contributing to humanity's, and ultimately, Earth's inevitable destruction. In a contemporary context, this self-destructive choice can be viewed through the lens of reckless progress towards the depletion of Earth's natural resources despite the very real warnings about a climate disaster on the horizon. Instead of mitigating the impending global disaster, humans edge closer and closer to detonating the bomb.

For the new prequel Apes series, the relentless technological progress of the 21st century serves as the catalyst for humanity's ultimate downfall, beginning in 2011 with Rise of the *Planet of the Apes*, penned by Rupert Wyatt. Here, technology breaks down barriers in terms of medical breakthroughs but leaves the door open to chaos as the Alzheimer's drug responsible for enhancing the apes' intelligence also results in a pandemic wiping out most of the human population. This first outing of the prequel series not only feeds into a cinematic obsession with origin stories but also places the science fiction of the original *Planet of the Apes* in a contemporary context, one where we consider ourselves on the precipice of a climate disaster, which may indeed bury the Statue of Liberty. The prequel series offers what Chidester (2015) calls a "contemporary comment" on the original series and establishes it as a collective memory (p. 3).

> By variously recalling the original film's storyline and allegorical messages and refusing these established meanings through intentional and significant departures from these conventions, the remakes work together to reshape the 1968 text as a vital repository of visual and ideological memory. (Chidester, 2015, p. 4)

This persistence to present the doomed fate of humanity in the Apes franchise is the core inevitability which fascinates contemporary audiences. Why do we keep coming back for more? Audiences return as active participants, keen to see the latest real-life human fear encapsulated in this fantasy world. The creators of these works have reacted to shifting attitudes, as humanity's changing fears have evolved over the time of Apes' cinematic existence. For the original series, humanity's destruction stems from the uglier aspects of human nature – to hoard resources, to destroy any threat and to distrust, alienate and dehumanise those around us. Subsequent iterations have, in their specific ways, reinforced the

overarching allegorical message: humanity fears that it is doomed to destroy itself. Only the methods of this self-destruction shift through the ages.

When compared to novelists of speculative science fiction, the role of the franchised filmmaker adds a further layer of complexity. The singular "mode of awareness" established by Csicsery-Ronay Jr (1991) may expand into multiple "modes of awareness" by acknowledging differing authorial approaches to the dialectal audience-creator exchange, including one that is revisionist and consciously responsive to its new and evolving audiences. The challenge for a contemporary creator is to meaningfully situate their works within this landscape of cultural flux and to move from a reactive position to a proactive one. Wilde (1891/1909) warns that if "Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness" the result will be "true decadence" and "suffering" (p. 7); his fear that the imagination may be swallowed by the factual – or what he perceives to be the monotony of day-to-day existence – reinforces the seminal Aristotelian Life/Art binary; yet, even so, as an analysis of speculative science fiction and franchised media reveals, this binary is conceptually limiting. Once an author has made the necessary acknowledgement of this vibrant, cyclical dynamic between Art and Life, they may strive for a more socially and culturally conscious form of storytelling; in short, an Art that moves with Life. Rather than being set against each other, the two may turn in concert. But to get there an author must fully accept that they are only part of their own story.

From the author's perspective: The *Watchlist* case study

A young, directionless man, Basil Pepper, is kicked into gear while his best friend, Roger the Knob, and his lover, Delia Dengel, butt heads as to how best to play the role of progressive activist. One talks the talk and the other walks the walk. Combining the genres of film noir, romantic comedy, and thriller, *Watchlist* employs these characters to investigate the political actions of individuals in a contemporary global context. Basil is disconnected from the world around him; the planet's problems pass by as he sits in his room painting orc figurines. His small world opens up when he meets a mysterious and alluring young woman, Delia, at his father's funeral. This (seemingly) chance encounter acts as a catalyst for Basil's departure from ignorance and his journey to enlightenment, self-discovery and, ultimately, confusion and distress as he confronts both Delia's extremism and his own flimsy morality.

At least that was the plan.

This case study will explore how cultural flux can torpedo a playwright's intentions. Before unpacking how the reading of the play changed, it is first worth establishing what those original intentions were. To understand the process of *counter-mimesis*, the creative process itself is worth analysis and dissection. A conventional, practice-led approach would begin thus...

In their analysis of Bertolt Brecht's political approach to theatre, Bernard F. Dukore posed the question: "Does sloganeering and name-calling convert the unconverted? As to the already converted, some might ask, 'What else is new?'" (Dukore, 1980, p. 164). It may be in the education of the ignorant that collective, significant change and action can occur. Delia, aware

of Basil's sheltered existence, understands this and weaponises Basil's political enlightenment. As a progressive activist, she takes practical action in attempting to solve the injustices of the world. Her past largely a mystery, Delia is guarded, explosive and isolated by choice. Her activism is not performative; it is her interpersonal relationships which demand she play a role and adopt a mask. Upon discovering Delia's activist leanings, Basil seeks assistance from his best friend Roger, a self-proclaimed left-wing intellectual. This first foray into political engagement delivers a potted education filled with clichés and tips on how to *appear* active and informed. Roger, appalled by Basil's ignorance, reads voraciously, seeks news from reputable media outlets and recycles responsibly. Unlike Delia, who chooses solitude as protection, Roger is isolated against his will and very lonely as the result of a recent divorce. Perhaps his efforts to project the image of a progressive to signal his politically correct virtues is a call into the void, seeing if anyone, anyone at all, may respond. Beneath the Wildesque exterior, he is disconnected from the world he claims he wants to save.

Contemporary politics is a politics of fault lines, or fractures, that are arguably at their most acrimonious within party structures, rather than between them. This sense of multiple internal party perspectives is captured in the play through the playwright's identification of red peppers (the traditional left) and green peppers (the contemporary environmental movement). It is a play that dissects both the fractures of the right, through the repressive machinations of government stooge Norman Gould, and the fractures of the left, through Roger and his toothless, conformist approach to "woke" activism. The play displays little sympathy for either perspective but saves its most strident criticism for the "Rogers" of the world and the virtuous masks they – or *we* – wear. It is with a knowing wink that the majority of a contemporary theatre-going audience is likely to identify with Roger: "He is preposterous, but as the play suggests, so, mostly, are we" (Bramwell, 2021). *Watchlist* was therefore written principally to explore our hypocrisy, critical of both the right and the left, but leaning on the trends of the latter where texting or tweeting is regarded as a legitimate mode of "activism". As someone constricted by his social mask, too afraid to walk the walk, Roger is deeply fearful of Delia and her embodiment of unbending commitment to a cause beyond her immediate needs. Roger even warns Basil towards the end of the second act: "she may look like Nana Mouskouri … but, on the inside, she's Charlie Manson" (Vickery-Howe, 2020, 2.7). Within this narrative framework, it was necessary for Delia's actions to go further than Roger's words. In Act 2 Scene 7, Basil has left the two alone, Delia keeping watch over a handcuffed Roger. Basil and Delia's recent attacks on local meat industry farms have sparked condemnation from Roger, which only invites mockery and laughter from Delia.

ROGER: It's just us talking now. You're very far from stupid, so you know it's a system, a chain, and it's not the producers you're waging your war on. Those are the little guys.
DELIA: Spoken like an armchair Marxist.
ROGER: It's the contractors, the corporations…ultimately, the consumers…and unless you want to take down the human race…
DELIA: I want to prove we can change.
Beat.
ROGER: We can. I believe that too. But, violent gestures/won't-

DELIA: Won't they?
ROGER: …
DELIA: *(laughing)* Our planet is terminally ill. Revolutions have been fought for far less.
She leans down to him.
DELIA: I feel sorry for you, Roger. You don't believe in anything. (Vickery-Howe, 2020, 2.7)

The decision was made to deliberately minimise Roger and Delia's direct contact in the play, so this is a rare and revealing exchange. Having called him a "knob" a few lines earlier – his teenage nickname – Delia continues her dismissive judgement of Roger by stating "you don't believe in anything" despite his sincere admission that he, like her, believes that the human race can indeed change. Where the two differ is in their practical demonstration of that belief. The decision to bestow the mantle of "the Knob" to Roger was made after careful deliberation. Is it fair to disparage Roger in this way, to deny his efforts to think about the world around him? Does this negate his endearing qualities such as his clear care for Basil's welfare? This light-hearted name-calling, with serious undertones, lands as a warning against smug faux-enlightenment and false bravado in the face of serious issues. *Watchlist* takes a clear position: talking the talk isn't enough.

The play's tagline "green is the new red" speaks to a breakdown of traditional markers of left and right, allowing its characters to represent a more hard-hearted and pragmatic – though no less ethical – worldview. Here the narrative is not quite prophetic but zeitgeist-conscious, as the global rise of Extinction Rebellion and the anti-vax movement undoubtedly complicated the traditional left/right dichotomy throughout 2020 and 2021, and internal divisions in both the left and the right saw the popularist figures of only a few years earlier marginalised by their own followers. Such was the case when Donald Trump publicly advocated vaccine boosters and was booed at his own rallies, or when "the Squad" publicly opposed President Biden's bipartisan infrastructure bill. In Australia, the anti-vaxxers comprise far-right conspiracy theorists as well as vegan purists on the left, and religious extremists ranging from ultra-conservatives to new age spiritualists. Within this author-centric model of practice-led research, the creative process can be framed quite neatly as a distillation of emergent philosophy and socio-political commentary though the lens of character. Delia, for all her quirks, wants and idiosyncrasies, is simply the embodiment of those key philosophical differences on the left: the voice of what has been building. What then could Delia's practical demonstration of her meaningful activism be? How would she embody her sincere commitment to structural change? It is here that the play slips from the satirical to the prophetic. Delia's plan – revealed in the final scene – is to release a deadly zoonotic virus into the food chain. At the time of writing, the immunologists and biologists consulted made reference to SARS, Melioidosis and Q fever, as well as mosquitoes as a natural reservoir for the transmission of malaria and assorted arboviruses. In *Watchlist*, Delia uses livestock as her reservoir. When the play was submitted for publication in 2019, this was a far-fetched concept, firmly rooted in science fiction, or the emergent genre of cli-fi. In many ways, it was an allegory in the Serling tradition; however, by the time of publication in 2020 the advent of COVID-19 had completely altered the context. Any post-2020 staging of *Watchlist* will be framed within the shadow of

an actual global pandemic and delivered to an audience with a lived understanding of zoonotic pathogens. It will be like watching Taylor scream after the apes have risen, or reading Crichton on a dinosaur safari. Nobody involved in the creation of the work could have predicted that turn of events, but, for the audience, the creators' fantasy is lived history.

From modes of awareness to modes of engagement

To process how a radically changed set of circumstances – a sudden global upheaval – Life getting in Art's way – impacted the work, one must now expand to a methodology beyond the scope of conventional practice-led research. The author, while not dead, is now subordinate to cultural flux. Performed in the context of COVID-19, the play is automatically reconfigured and reframed as "a frustrated tale of the state of the world that signals virtue but actions nothing important" (Wickett, 2021), from allegory to "agitprop… a work of passionate, acerbic, satiric prose" (Harris, 2021). In many ways, it was constructed as an uncompromising play, one that – this part could have been predicted – would grow more urgent with the passing of time. The playwright's philosophical influences, including Peter Singer (1946–), Naomi Wolf (1962–), Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), are evident in the text through quotation and allusion. It is easy, for example, to see Delia devouring Hitchens's *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (2001), wherein he advocates savagery in the face of politeness, and advises his readers that:

> one should strive to combine the maximum of impatience with the maximum of skepticism, the maximum of hatred of injustice and irrationality with the maximum of ironic self-criticism. This would mean really deciding to learn from history rather than invoking or sloganising it. (Hitchens, 2001, p. 138)

Delia is not interested in approval, in personal or financial security, in compromise, or even in consensus. She has taken Hitchens, citing Dante, to heart when he reminds his reader that neutrality still leaves you burning in hell, or worse ... in the scorched world that remains after climate change has turned Mother Earth against her most arrogant and destructive tenants. Russell's influence is gentler, but his writings – like Singer's – encourage a global approach to social ills, while being critical of nation states, portrayed in the play as hypervigilant, unjust, reductive in their thinking and lagging behind the urgent problems of our time. There is also, in all of the above, an importance placed on individual responsibility and individual autonomy. Our choices define our world.

Similar narrative concerns can be found in Dennis Kelly's *Utopia* (2013–2014), which confronts climate change and impending ecological disaster through the lens of population control; however, by foregrounding the factory farming industry specifically, *Watchlist* builds from *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014) to critique the various ways in which livestock farming impacts the environment, be it via deforestation, water use and/or methane production. Given that COVID-19 is widely considered to have originated either from a laboratory or (far more likely) a wet market, the real-world link between Delia's fictitious zoonotic virus and the actual events of the past two years is clear and uncanny. It is becoming very difficult to plausibly deny the direct connection between human exposure to zoonotic

pathogens and our exploitation of our fellow animals – for profit, for sport and for convenience – at the expense of our future. Throughout the play, these philosophical resonances are softened by the pop cultural, including synthpop bands New Order and Alphaville, Tae Bo superstar Billy Blanks, the Clintons, Fred Basset, Tori Amos, David Hodo of the Village People, Bowie, Björk and many others. The thematic ambition that situates this play as prophetic, confrontational and explicitly *critical* of human behaviour – at the level of individual responsibility, irrespective of the political divide – is juxtaposed by an affinity with the popular. The text is as playful as it is dark, often in the same scene, or the same moment:

> MARIE: You know I love you too, Basil.
> *He has never been more thankful. Nods. Blushes, even.*
> *She heads out.*
> *Turns back.*
> I just don't want to live with you. (Vickery-Howe, 2020, 1.5)

No matter how moving, distressing or inspiring the content, a contemporary audience is able to disengage from stories delivered to them when processed through technology. Theatre remains a visceral *experience*, demanding a face-to-face encounter between a work embodied by performers and viewed by a spectator who must play a role in bringing any performance to life. Peggy Phelan (2004) links this encounter with Levinasian philosophy (which argues that it is through the recognition of the "other" which establishes a sense of responsibility – both personal and collective – in the self). "If Levinas is right, and the face-to-face encounter is the most crucial arena in which the ethical bond we share becomes manifest, then live theatre and performance might speak to philosophy with renewed vigor" (Phelan, 2004, p. 577). Bennett deconstructs this process by placing meaning-making in the hands of the audience: "A performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product" (Bennett, 1997, p. 156).

The prophetic nature of *Watchlist* is only partly located in the real-world connection with COVID-19, which is merely illustrative of a wider crisis. Deeper, sharper critical resonances were found in the identification of a political shift from red to green, in the emergence of younger activists with a new kind of ethical pragmatism, and in the necessity for these activists to walk the walk, where time is an urgent factor:

> a sharp reminder that the changes we know we need to make as global citizens will not be easy, even if we agree to them. This production eases us in with its comedy, but leaves us staring at a plateful of unpalatable options. (Bramwell, 2021)

> This is a call to arms: to be captivated by the planet as much as Basil is by Delia, indeed, as much as Delia is by Basil, for us to say her words: "I wasn't supposed to like you this much". (Wickett, 2021)

> principally this is a play of thoughts – big, disturbing, important thoughts, thoughts for a world destroying itself with greed and short-sighted priorities, with perversity and blithe hypocrisy. (Harris, 2021)

The mode of delivery – as a romance, a thriller, a pop cultural pastiche – is a means of connection as well as contextualisation. There is a temptation to isolate an event like COVID-19 as an anomaly, or as something created by nefarious means, but zoonotic viruses are a consequence of human activity as we "could substantially reduce the risk of future pandemics such as COVID-19 by investing in efforts to curb deforestation and the wildlife trade, as well as in efforts to monitor, prevent and control new virus outbreaks from wildlife and livestock" (Dasnak, as cited in Tollefson, 2020). As a narrative, *Watchlist* provides this context in a way that is accessible, as acknowledged by Phelan and others, and able to distil complex events – normally conveyed by competing party political news outlets – down to essential scientific, ethical and practical concerns through the embodiment of these concerns in the character of Delia and her contrast with Roger. Awareness, particularly among the young, that there is link between how humanity treats the natural world and our own "wellbeing" (Nava, as cited in Watts, 2020) is neither psychic prophecy nor wild speculation, but simply a reflection of empirical reality. Roger hides from this reality; Delia confronts it. While Delia's final actions are frightening, and far from laudable, they stem from a logical position. That *Watchlist* preceded the rise of the recent global pandemic is not so much the point. What resonates more strongly is that Delia and the people she represents *knew* we had this coming. The play is not so much accidentally prophetic as it is culturally reflective, taking a similar approach to *The Good Fight* (2017–2022), almost spooky in its prescience, by taking note of the path we're on and extrapolating. Thus, not only does Life imitate Art, but fiction – paradoxically – distils fact:

> In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees. (Jauss, 1978/1982, p. 19)

The author lives, but the author lives as part of the Conversation. There is enduring value in the intentions of the person at the keyboard, especially when there are things to be genuinely scared about. Sometimes, there is only a blurry line between prediction and simple awareness.

As a provocation *Watchlist* is, therefore, incomplete if divorced from its philosophical influences, its depiction of emerging activists and its specific socio-political context. But it is also incomplete without its audience and it is the reception of the audience that makes all the difference. Cultural flux does not have to be heralded by a dramatic event like COVID-19: it is evident in the cancelling of public figures; it is evident in the sway from the political left to right and back again; it is evident in changing approaches to comedy and satire. Yet by embracing "modes of awareness", from the creatively innovative genres of sci/cli-fi to the consciously responsive form of the franchised storyteller and, finally, the culturally reflective artefact that emerges when one deep dives into the socio-political zeitgeist, creative teams can engage proactively and exchange productively with their audiences. They may even expand into "modes of engagement" whereby inviting the audience into a meaningful dialectic exchange may allow artists to transcend an introspective, exclusive frame and open their work

to the real world. Rather than extoling the virtues of practice-led research, the frameworks provided in this study lead toward research-led practice as a means of telling stories that meet the cultural moment, even catching that moment as it shifts. The day-to-day that Wilde feared is where resonant stories are born. One might well ask: what is Art if it cannot speak to Life?

Conclusion

Works of fiction necessarily respond to the present and imagined issues faced by their creators. These works – whether for the page, stage or screen – can take on new meanings in fresh contexts as time goes on and implausible prophecies are eliminated, or come to (sometimes unfortunate) fruition. The latter eerie phenomenon marries the zeitgeist with the simulated and speculative, turning emergent ideas into characters and narratives, which in turn influence emergent ideas. In this way, Art continues to respond to Life's stimulus and Life to Art's distillation.

In a Barthesian sense, if one empowers the reader to extract meaning from an existing text or image, then one must accept the fluidity and evolution of that messaging over time. This complex exchange of power and meaning between storyteller and audience can be a heavy burden but can also be liberating as creators use the mediums of theatre, film and popular fiction to capture complex and often urgent ideas through narrative, conflict and character. Storytellers and "story readers" can be united by this reciprocal act of communication and meaning-making, turning the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* into a Jaussian vison of a cyclical dialectical exchange wherein urgent philosophical questions and debates become popular stories which inspire urgent philosophical questions and debates.

> The closed circle of production and of representation within which the methodology of literary studies has mainly moved in the past must therefore be opened to an aesthetics of reception and influence if the problem of comprehending the historical sequence of literary works as the coherence of literary history is to find a new solution. (Jauss, 1978/1982, p. 19)

The core of this analysis is to keep the author alive but move beyond the prevailing theoretical focus in literary studies around process and intention, positioning author as authority, to expand into author as architect, where even the best laid plans are subject to the interpretation of others. In this way, the audience, the wider world – the Life – cannot be placed in value judgement against the skill, the flow – the Art – of a particular work; rather, the two are in constant dialogue. An implicit irony in the citation of Jauss in this critical context is, of course, that Jauss himself is now read as problematic, due to disturbing revelations about his wartime past. His own writing is, consequently, reframed by cultural flux as part of what he calls "the horizon of a dialogue between work and audience" (Jauss, 1978/1982, p. 19). Jauss serves as the illustrative example of his own theory.

All stories are cultural artefacts and, as such, they are subject to the flux of social mores, global political events, and an ever-shifting zeitgeist. They keep speaking to us long after their time and into the now, and the tomorrow. That is why they resonate. By engaging actively and

enthusiastically with the cultural moment, researching socio-political trends, looking closely at the world and expressing that research in practice, storytellers can make surprisingly apt predictions as well as socially relevant and resonant connections. Wilde's "charmed circle" need not be closed at all and certainly need not be a highfalutin site of exclusivity and status, wherein the artist is elevated and Art is rarefied, but instead a democratic mode of shared speculation between creator and audience about what the future may hold … and how we may shape it together.

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