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Desert Settings and How to See the Apocalypse

Abstract: Deserts have long been treated as apocalyptic spaces in cultural narratives. This is especially true of science fiction (SF), a genre which, throughout its historical development, has both narrated and critiqued colonialism. This article investigates deserts as apocalyptic settings in some American and Australian SF texts within the context of colonial and Indigenous beliefs and knowledges. I read the apocalyptic as a technique of seeing in relation to desert settings. I treat 'setting' as a formal, necessary precondition for narrative development, organising visual fields and producing agential environments.

I then examine literary and filmic examples of SF desert settings with varied dominant perspectives: George Miller's *Mad Max 2* (1981) meditates on settler colonial anxieties in its treatment of the Australian desert as a symbolically rich yet materially empty arid 'wasteland,' eliding Indigenous occupation. A similar perspective emerges via Denis Villeneuve's penchant for using aerial photography to present post-Romantic sublime desert views in *Dune* (2021) and *Dune: Part Two* (2024), since desert aerial photography has a specific colonial history dating back to WWI. Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) (Villeneuve's source text) instead privileges the more postcolonial view *from below* of the "Fremen." Finally, Claire G. Coleman's (2017) *Terra Nullius* is an anticolonial text which shifts between perspectives from above and below. The novel's radical narrative rupture halfway through re-orients the reader's understanding of the text's apocalyptic framework in relation to Indigenous history. Coleman shows how the apocalyptic can be mobilised as a technique of seeing to critique historical injustice in desert SF settings.

Keywords: desert apocalypse, Frank Herbert, Dune, science fiction, settler colonialism, Terra Nullius, historical injustice.

Introduction[1]

Deserts have a history of use as apocalyptic settings dating back to some of the earliest apocalyptic texts, but during the rise of European colonialism this relationship became notably more significant. The secular apocalypses of (post)colonial twentieth and twenty-first century science fiction have therefore built on a long cultural history of treating deserts as objects of visual knowledge when deploying tropes like post-nuclear wastelands, hostile arid planets, and alien wildernesses. In the colonial cultural history of 'seeing' deserts and the material history of colonialism alike, deserts appear and are treated as empty, ruined spaces. This is reinforced in the dominant imagery of accelerating climate change (Koch 2021, 38), in which aridity, parched soil, and desertification serve as metonyms for planetary disaster. As (post)colonial objects of visual knowledge in an era of rapid climate change, how we 'see' desert environments reflects the broader ways in which perspective, orientation, and emotion are involved in shaping aesthetic judgements and our relationships with knowledge.

In this article I argue that in desert SF settings the apocalyptic functions as a technique of seeing, one of importance to both environmental and postcolonial concerns. As a genre intwined with both the history of imperialism and its critique (Csicsery-Ronay 2015, 15; Kerslake 2007), science fiction is exceptionally well placed to reveal the stakes in colonial and Indigenous beliefs about desert environments. In other words, examination of SF desert settings can make visible the contours of some of the central cultural anxieties of late capitalism, relating to both postcolonialism and climate collapse.

I begin by unpacking the relationship between perspective, seeing, and knowing. I position the apocalyptic as a specific spatial and temporal orientation which we can regard as a technique of seeing. I then discuss 'setting' as a literary and filmic concept. In the twentieth century, the cultural reproduction of desert settings as symbolically rich and materially empty surfaces was important to colonial narratives in new popular genres like SF. For example, the film franchise *Mad Max* directed by George Miller employs an apocalyptic futurity in which how a desert is seen is revealing of colonial settler anxieties about Australia, and broader concerns about access to raw materials in Cold War late capitalism. This is most clearly

1 I thank my reviewers for their thorough engagement, critique and helpful suggestions. I completed the first draft of this article during a CAPAS fellowship. I wish to thank all the staff at CAPAS for their help and support.

seen in *Mad Max 2* (1981), in which white, oil-extracting heroes defend the last enclaves of civilisation from barbarian hordes who are visually coded in both Orientalist and Indigenous ways (Robertson 2018, 70–73). Sandwiched between the independently financed low-budget *Mad Max* (1979) and the Hollywood big-budget *Mad Max III: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), *Mad Max 2* places the barbarism of societal breakdown in Australia, with its specific history of racial capitalism, into a global historical context.

I then move to comparative discussion of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* and its recent two-part adaptation by Denis Villeneuve (2021; 2024). Looking at the literary source text alongside the Hollywood film reveals how the idea of landscape is encoded in the shot choices and mise-en-scène of the movies, and in literary descriptions rich in imagery in the novel. In turn, the presentation of desert landscapes is an important means by which colonial/native relations are figured. While the desert sublime is present in both the novel and the films, the novel handles visual knowledge of the desert planet in a more critical manner, distinguishing between the perspectives of key characters that partly reflects its context in the era of postwar decolonisation. The dominant view the desert from above in wide-angled aerial shots in Villeneuve's films echoes the colonial project of aerial domination of the deserts of the Middle East in the interwar period, of which Herbert is more critical.

To provide an anticolonial perspective on how a desert is seen by its inhabitants in apocalyptic SF, I turn to Noongar author Claire G. Coleman's novel *Terra Nullius* (first published 2017), in which a radical shift in narratorial perspective produces the Australian interior as an apocalyptic setting. Formal features of the tropes I have identified, such as camera angles and framing on screen, and imagery in written prose, can teach us much about the power relations and ideological implications of vantage points, orientations and techniques of seeing. I conclude that the apocalyptic functions as a technique of seeing in desert set SF which reveals important differences in colonial and Indigenous beliefs. While colonial approaches foreground aerial domination to treat deserts as symbolically rich and materially empty, texts such as Coleman's show us that as a speculative technique of seeing the apocalyptic also has potential to engender creative ruptures and radical shifts in perspectives.

1. Seeing and Knowing

To read the apocalyptic as a technique of seeing in the context of colonial and Indigenous representations of deserts requires understanding how

perspective, orientation, and subjectivity shape sight as a site of knowledge production. In western thought, against Kant's attempt to conceive judgements of beauty as disinterested, Nietzsche argues both knowledge and aesthetic judgements require emotional engagement and self-reflexive thought: "There is only a seeing from a perspective, only a 'knowing' from a perspective" he declares (Nietzsche 2013, 84). Affective relations condition how we form knowledge and judgements from seeing via interpretation. For Nietzsche, "the *more* emotions we express concerning a thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we train on the same thing" the closer "objectivity" becomes (ibid), suggesting knowledge is above all a matter of social determination.

In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed shows how "Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy toward" (2006, 3). She stresses that embodied experience (such as racialisation and indigeneity) and orientation (such as in sexuality) shape how some subjects are socially accorded more space and importance, while a queer or racialised subject can be marginalised or else "made socially present as a deviant" (Ahmed 2006, 20). Orientations shape how we inhabit pre-existing social conditions, Ahmed argues, which, in turn, also shape our orientations (for example, the language we use to identify how socially visible or legible we make markers of gender or sexual orientation and, indeed, to whom). As I show below, an orientation in SF which sees through the lens of the apocalyptic is one concerned with how economic, political, and environmental upheavals which are in process can combine to radically alter planetary conditions, whether for specific groups or for (human and non-human) life writ large. For example, the affective nature of orientation shapes political responses to climate breakdown as a material process which we see in both extreme weather events and longer-term trends (such as average sea temperature rise).

Subjectivity is therefore important in organising and orienting lines of sight, affecting how different *places* and types of space are perceived. This is especially relevant to how deserts are viewed and represented in culture. In western colonial history such spaces have been frequently gendered as feminine, and coded as dangerous, exotic, barbaric and 'Other.' Simultaneously, and often in tension with this, deserts have often been (re)presented as ruined, barren, exhausted, and empty. Yet according to Diana Davis (2016, 175), "deserts and drylands cover some 40–45% of our world and support about 38% of our population."[2] As I show below, cultures indigenous to arid lands do not typically view their homes in such negative light. The colonial gaze which has long operated to dominate

2 There is no simple definition of drylands and deserts accepted globally by geologists and meteorologists. The "aridity index (AI)" is one common but not sufficient marker, defined as the "ratio of precipitation (P) to potential evapotranspiration (PET): AI = P/PET." No single metric can capture the astonishingly varied terrains, temperatures, and precipitation rates of drylands (Welland 2015, 23–24).

arid lands is grounded in western ideas about perspective, orientation, aesthetic judgement, and knowledge production.

Tropes and generic frameworks in literature and film are important to the reproduction of this gaze since, as John Berger states in his book and documentary series, *Ways of Seeing,* "a large part of seeing depends upon habit and convention" (1972, 16). There are multiple techniques by which we learn to see, such as following the line of a pointed finger toward a distant object. In this context, Berger notes the use of perspective in the Western art tradition is unique in making "the single [beholder's] eye the centre of the visible world" (1972, 16). This tradition focuses on the individual experience of the art image. Channelling Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Berger argues the camera transformed our understanding of post-Renaissance Western art so that we no longer imagine such a "centre" at all. Where the oil painting captures a moment or state the movie camera can capture movement and process so that the art image becomes transportable, fragmented, and in motion.

While Benjamin is concerned with the ideological consequences of popular consumption of cinema surpassing that of novels, cinema was deeply imbricated with changes in literature too: early twentieth-century modernist literature, like film, was frequently concerned with formal experimentation, new techniques to represent daily life (such as the montage) and drawing attention to the act of representation, by estranging the reader from typical (literary) habits and conventions. Like literature, film captures space as something produced through a durational process. While the written word cannot create atmosphere from light and darkness in quite the same way as the magic lantern of cinema, both mediums are capable of enchantment, bringing the fantastic and speculative to life.

2. Setting

Hannah Freed-Thall and Dora Zhang (2018) describe the literary device of setting as "the condition of possibility for representation, the *schema of perception* that makes it possible for events and actions to emerge as such" (my emphasis). Setting is not mere scenery or stage, nor a passive background or surface on which events occur. It contributes to mood and style. Settings orientate readers. By combining spatial and temporal features, settings are essential to establishing genre and thereby plot and character conventions. Like genre, where and when a story is set can determine narrative structure. Setting, as Freed-Thall and Zhang put it,

appears "at once spatial and temporal, infrastructural and atmospheric." (2018) It is not just 'the seen,' but something of an agential environment.

There is a moment in Berger's documentary where he quotes Dziga Vertov's 1923 written work "WE: variant of a manifesto,"[3] reading it over Vertov's 1927 film *Man with a Movie Camera*:

> I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I'm in constant movement.
> [...]
> Freed from the boundaries of time and space[.] [...] My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.

The camera's "mechanical eye" overcomes human subjectivity by moving rapidly between individual perspectives, creating a perspective irreducible to a single viewpoint. Notably, *Man with a Movie Camera* frequently breaks the fourth wall to demonstrate how a film is spliced together in the cutting room, and how cameras are set up to achieve specific effects, such as by being mounted on a pick-up truck or a railroad track. By making visible the illusions by which film captures movement Vertov highlights the 'setting up' of the urban setting of his exploration of the rhythms of every day urban life. Louise Hornby (2018) argues the medium of film foregrounds and makes visible *air* through the play of light and darkness with which it works as its basic components, and thus "*Man with a Movie Camera* embraces the cinematic landscape of the cloud, smoke, and steam from its opening shots." Particulates both obscure and illuminate the movement of camera and objects. The "fresh perception" of "the world unknown to you" which, for Vertov, the camera-eye offers is one of both movement and its traces: the billows of smoke and wisps of fog, the tracks of tyres and wind-blown sand.

In a physical sense then, setting—and especially the 'setting up' of setting—is important to *how* we see a space in narrative terms. In the western imagination, conditioned by a long cultural history of treating deserts as wastelands and wildernesses (Di Palma 2014; Davis 2016), establishing a desert setting brings with it a set of well-established tropes, images, and ideas. For Michael Welland, "the landscapes of the desert are, in themselves, characters in literature, cinema and the visual arts" (2015, 180). These uncompromising environments are treated as places to test a protagonist's endurance and ability to survive without easy access to water, food, and shelter. David Lean's film *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) can

3 The source of Berger's translation re-produced here is unclear. It differs slightly from Vertov (1984, 17–18).

serve here as an archetypal example, as the desert itself is both antagonist and love interest for Lawrence. Frequent wide-angle shots of lone figures among sand dunes in otherwise empty landscapes attest to the vastness and alien nature of Arabian deserts and, by extension, desert inhabitants. When Lawrence leads a band of fighters in a test of endurance across the Nefud desert, it is described by a local as "the worst place in the world." Lawrence is captivated by the landscape though, as Feisal recognises in their first meeting, telling him:

> I think you are another of these desert-loving Englishmen –
> [he walks away]
> Doughty, Stanhope, Gordon of Khartoum (Bolt 1962, 26).

Feisal links Lawrence's desert obsession to those of nineteenth-century imperial adventurers. Although intended critically, Lawrence understands this as acknowledging his 'civilised' strength of character. Such strength is revealed through his relationship with the barbarous desert setting. The film highlights his inner turmoil about the violence he participates in during WWI and the necessity of killing, including his execution of a Bedu friend to prevent internecine violence spreading among tribes he wants to unite. Lawrence 'endures' his role as much for love of the desert as for the Arabs whose interests he claims to intuit.

In a science fiction context, Gerald Gaylard notes that Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* ([1965] 2006) and its sequels are directly influenced by Lawrence, betraying "a worrying imperialism that relies on audience ignorance to disguise its sf orientalism" (Gaylard 2010, 25). For example, Herbert relies on an uncritical use of Arabic as Arakkis's Indigenous language. Nevertheless, Gaylard still finds *Dune* "a work of messianic and apocalyptic anti-imperialism" (32). Crucially, the planet Arrakis in the novels is not *just* a backdrop for a fight between good and evil/Atreides and Harkonnen. Herbert engaged extensively with the ambivalent complexities of postwar decolonisation, especially the Algerian struggle for independence, achieved three years prior to *Dune's* publication (Hadadi 2021).[4] Yet, as I discuss below, Denis Villeneuve's two-part filmic adaptation of Herbert's first *Dune* novel (2021; 2024) is less subtle and self-reflexive, suffering from what one journalist termed a "veneer of cultural non-specificity" (Hadadi 2021). In Villeneuve's films the apparent 'emptiness' and 'desolate' nature of the desert setting serves principally as a psycho-geographic purpose for the white western male protagonist, in which the hostile desert environment is principally a means to grapple with inner conflict rather than socio-political issues. Here the colonial gaze extends the male gaze (Mul-

4 Even after independence in 1962, France continued to use two sites in the Algerian Sahara to conduct nuclear explosions until 1966 (Henni 2022, 14–15).

vey 1975, 11) as a culturally distinctive and learned way of seeing, drawing together a way of looking at landscape with a way of looking at certain types of bodies.[5] Both, however, seek to command and dominate space. In this psychoanalytic equation the desert is a blank space demanding to be read and *known*; an empty receptacle for the writer's projections as well as an object brimming with pre-existing tropes and symbolic meaning.

At the nexus of the relationship between perspective and setting, SF and deserts, this Janus-faced view of desert terrains treats them as both symbolically rich and materially empty 'surfaces.' Where the surface view is penetrated it is usually to extract raw materials such as oil. As Nathalie Koch shows, by the 1890s, "American popular culture was densely populated with romantic Biblical and Orientalist narratives linking the deserts of the US and the Middle East" (2022, 70). Such narratives were important in the advance of settler colonisation. Koch tracks how they prepared the way for considerable investment in establishing Arabian crops like dates in Arizona, using agriculture to settle and occupy land, dispossessing and at times waging genocidal war against nations including the Diné, Apache, Zuni and Pima. Symbolically, "colonization was made friendlier by conceiving of it as a pilgrimage, an act of return. By directly linking to the familiar visions of Middle Eastern deserts that fill the Bible, the American deserts could start to feel more familiar too" (Koch 2022, 28). Using Orientalist, Biblical symbolism, this narrative wrote the Indigenous populations out of the landscape, so that it could be treated as materially empty, the backdrop to envision the future development of the American national project.

An important means by which this narrative spread and became a cultural norm was via new reading practices. The late nineteenth century saw "new cheap magazine formats that force[d] formal innovation, and dr[o]ve the invention of modern genre categories like detective or spy fiction as well as SF" (Luckhurst 2005, 16). Deserts, including the Moon and Mars, were frequent settings for early science fictional narratives (sometimes known as 'scientific romances' or 'scientific fiction') along with Westerns and the 'railroad genre' which grew rapidly in popularity via the "pulp" magazine industry, in titles that were "quickly produced, containing fiction about quick and exciting living, quickly written in language meant to be quickly read" (Earle 2009, 129). Cinematic perspectives on deserts in American culture therefore drew on and further filled an expanding and popular reservoir of pre-existing imagery from other cultural forms, conditioning how audiences saw desert settings. During imperialist expansion across the arid southwest the tropes, symbols, and generic conventions of popular genres like SF helped to reproduce the desert as a space intimately connected to imaginative and speculative ways of seeing, becom-

5 Anticipating Mulvey, John Berger writes in his essay on "the nude" as a way of seeing in western art, "*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (1972, 47).

ing what Aiden Tynan, citing Nietzsche, refers to as a "speculative topography" (2020, 1). SF can therefore show us how deserts as specific types of environment or habitat are related to dominant cultural ideas about the apocalyptic.

3. Apocalypse as Technique of Seeing

Definitions of the term 'apocalypse' that reference etymology (e.g. Collins 2004, xiii; James Berger 1999, 26; Walls 2008, 12) tend to point out the revelatory nature of apocalyptic upheaval: apocalypse is distinguished from disaster, catastrophe and cataclysm because it unveils or reveals some new form of understanding about the shape of what has come before, even as it destructively transforms. This is especially important when considering the apocalyptic in historical terms in relation to the experience of colonialism. Nathalie Koch (2022, 173) argues that "defining when and where the apocalypse occurs is an act of power" for desert empire building since such definitions allow western scientists to present themselves as "visionaries" and "colonial hero[es]," to "more easily sell their own solutions to engineer Earth and humanity out of its predicament" (in other words, a science fictional form of imperialism). However, to describe the experience of colonial dispossession as apocalyptic is also rhetorically powerful. Adam Spry (2020, 55) contends "it has become cliché to describe Native people as postapocalyptic" and cites an example of "apocalyptic rhetoric" from Potawatomi orator Simon Pokagon delivered in 1893. Writing in *Apocalyptica,* Bren Ram (2020, 98) cites Martin Munro's *Tropical Apocalypse* (2015) as making a similar argument in the postcolonial context of the Caribbean. The apocalyptic in such cases describes an orientation toward histories: narratives that make some kind of assimilable sense of great upheavals and catastrophic violence. The explanatory power of apocalypse lies in such transfigurations (see Baghdadi, Marno, and Riedl 2018).

Culturally, as a form of generic narrative, "Apocalyptic art may represent an imagined future, but it acts in and upon the present" (Hurley and Sinykin 2018, 451). Historical narrativizing, in other words, is always implicated in the production of such stories. When apocalyptic narratives project forwards to an imagined future or events yet to occur, they typically reveal something about the contemporary moment or era. I suggest that as a technique of seeing the apocalyptic creates an estranging temporal lens. If the secular apocalyptic accords with Darko Suvin's (1972, 375) definitional criterion for science fiction of "cognitive estrangement"

(a making strange of *how* we understand)[6] it does so by allowing a picture to emerge of how one (apocalyptic) event or period fits within a larger prospect of history or the historical.

An estranging apocalyptic lens shows how images can conceal as much as they reveal and this is how, as Vertov puts it, they can contain "the world unknown to you." Yet "the world unknown" is not *a new world*; rather, in Evan Calder Williams words, "[w]hat is revealed is what has been hidden in plain sight all along" (2011, 5). As a technique of seeing, the apocalyptic performs a role in setting such things within a field of intelligibility. It is, in Williams' words, "the unseen—but unhidden" (2011, 6). Perhaps Vertov's claim that the "eye" of the camera is "freed from the boundaries of space and time" is imprecise then. The camera reveals the interlinked and co-constituting nature of time and space, each formed in relation to the other: [7] the apocalyptic is thus a technique of seeing in relation to setting. Post-production techniques can additionally reconfigure arrangements of time and space other than would ordinarily be experienced by the individual in everyday life. For example, from early in the history of cinema new narrative techniques like the montage transformed the experience of space-time in non-naturalistic ways.

The montage sequence at the opening of George Miller's *Mad Max 2* (1981) uses a combination of archive footage and sequences from the franchise's first instalment. Miller, a filmmaker whose use of intertextual film references is a hallmark of his work, seemingly pays homage to Vertov here by superimposing rotary machine movements over shots of the fabric of the urban everyday, echoing *Man with a Movie Camera*. But whereas Vertov sings a paean to machines and the proletariat who perform with them the dance of everyday Soviet life, Miller's exposition reads technology as precipitating the Fall: war-machines and images of violence predominate. The sequence thereby reveals a key problem for the whole *Mad Max* series: the films are most famous for their high-Octane extended road chase scenes featuring breathtaking stunts. They are ur-texts for the "Australian road movie [...] defined by masculine fantasy and property destruction" (Wagner 2019, 4), in which speed on the open road and domination of the landscape, contribute to what Chavez and Sriram term a "testosterone-fueled wasteland mythology" (2023, 21). A classic of the 'Ozploitation' genre, *Mad Max 2* was once labelled "the quintessential Australian movie" (Tranter 2003, 68 as cited in in Wagner 2019, 3). Yet the opening montage exhibits awareness of the unsustainability of the world system of late capitalist extractivism too, since its premise is that global imperial ambitions in the age of techno-industrial military complexes make apocalyptic events increasingly likely.

6 For Suvin SF requires the presence and interaction of cognitive estrangement and a *novum*: something qualitatively new which does not exist in the author's empirical environment. Critic and SF author Adam Roberts (2019) has more recently stressed "the novum itself is so often a kind of reified or externalised embodiment of the *formal* logic of the metaphor" (8) and "if I say the point of SF is transport and you think *rapture*, well, conceivably you're closer to seeing the genre the way I do" (9).

7 For Doreen Massey, space is "the product of interrelations" predicated on "contemporaneous plurality" and is "always under construction [...] it is never finished; never closed," suggesting "a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (2005, 9). 'Setting' in my reading shares these features and is distinguished from the broader term 'space' by virtue of being both a formal device and precondition for narrative (as distinct from 'story' in the narratological sense). Setting requires a telling.

This central tension in the *Mad Max* story world became more pronounced as the franchise grew in budget and eventually shifted from Australian production to Hollywood for *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. At a formal level, the tension is reflected in the prevailing camera angles of road scenes: the first movie uses cameras mounted in fixed positions or on tripods by the roadside (especially for stunts) and fixed to the cars themselves. To get close to the road many chase scenes are filmed from a wheel-height camera fixed on a moving vehicle. While an important consideration here is the low production budget, the result is to foreground the thrilling experience of speed. Later, bigger budget productions of the franchise use crane and helicopter aerial shots. These perspectives emphasise domination over the desert terrain. Similarly, the first film uses small town locations and sees the threat of violent attacks against the person begin in classic horror locations such as the junkyard, the woods and a remote farmhouse.[8] In later films, action takes place exclusively in the wilderness of the desert and violence, including intimate forms like rape, have become weaponised in service of wider conflicts around territorialisation and claims to sovereignty. The desert is no longer simply a place to experience the thrill of unencumbered speed; it is now a site of extraction and necropolitical (Mbembe 2019) power.

In *Mad Max 2*, the near-future apocalyptic desert setting requires recouperation of images of historical events. Modern history from within lived memory is re-shaped by seeing it as 'another time,' a different age from the imagined viewer's own. Images of mid-twentieth century turmoil such as catastrophic destruction in World War II, atomic explosions, the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, police violence against protestors, and Vietnam are repurposed for a narrative suggesting apocalypse is 'immanent' rather than 'imminent': as John Hay states of American culture, "[w]e are no longer expecting but actually inhabiting the apocalypse," so that "[r]eality outruns apprehension as we experience and endure rather than await and anticipate the end of the world" (Hay 2020, 9). The voiceover then shifts from (re-)describing the past to describing the story world's future setting using superimposed images from the first *Mad Max* film. In addition to altering the causality and sequence of empirical history, this effectively re-interprets the first film by adding context where there was no "future history" (Stock 2016) presented at all, no mention of the collapse of the global economy or World War III. *Mad Max* is essentially a revenge thriller concerned with masculinity, violence, and law and order, set "in a near future marked by social disorder rather than full breakdown" (Miller 2024). At the start of *Mad Max 2*, to stitch the timelines of the films together requires the first film to be recouped into a new narrative genre.

8 According to Martyn Conterio, in "press interviews at the time, Miller specifically talked up Mad Max as a horror film." Conterio further notes how the film derives "gothic moods from its decayed vision of the world, set amidst haunting landscapes" (Conterio 2019, 10) yet completely unlike other films made during the 1970s Australian New Wave, George Miller's directorial debut is a singular piece of action cinema, one that had a major cultural impact and spawned a movie icon in Max Rockatansky (played by Mel Gibson.

The apocalyptic becomes here a way of re-viewing, a means to provide new interpretation, a way of reframing knowledge via historical rupture.

The desert environment is central to the apocalyptic setting in the *Mad Max* story world, and key to the series' "oil fiction" status (Balkan and Nandi 2021, 6). In *Mad Max 2* this is most obvious, since the story concerns a fortress built around an oil well on a desert plain. The fortress is besieged by bikers wanting fuel. Max is drawn into helping the besieged group escape by driving their tanker (unbeknown to him it is a decoy). They sabotage the well behind themselves. The group finally escape with enough barrels of hidden fuel to get across the continent in search of civilisation, leaving Max behind.

Max first spies the fortress through binoculars from a nearby rocky outcrop. Unseen from below, he witnesses the crew of The Humongous—black leather-clad barbarians who oppose the re-establishment of national order (at one point The Humongous is even given the Orientalist moniker "the Ayatollah of Rock n Rolla")—violently attack scouts from the fortress (all dressed in white and light colours, none-too-subtly recalling popular depictions of Medieval Crusader Christians). What Chavez and Sriram term the "popular exotification of indigeneity" in the film thus sees "surviving wastelanders of 'Maxtralia' exist within a newly constructed indigenous culture" (2023, 23). In other words, the long cultural history of Orientalism is overlaid onto a different desert setting, in which white oil-extracting Australians become the newly Indigenous population of the Australian Outback, and as Paul Robertson notes, the film thus presents "racially indistinct yet Indian-coded 'savages' as a violent threat to attempts at reforming a devastated western civilization" (2018, 69). The mapping of Orientalist ideas of the desert onto Australia has a long literary history, since as Robyn Weaver (2011, 46) points out, some nineteenth-century Europeans arriving in Australia based their ideas of the desert interior on their understanding of the deserts of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA). This is complicated by the fact that the shift from Orient to Outback occurs via the American Western genre, to which the film belongs in addition to being an example of apocalyptic SF (Robertson 2018, 68–69). The layering of geographies and genres serves to romanticise distinct histories of imperialism.

Max, a former cop, surveys the landscape from his outcrop, and with Max (when he raises a telescope to his eye the shot cuts to a view through its lens) the audience comes to understand his power derives in significant part from what he knows from sitting unseen in an elevated position. From on high he sees and he knows, and, by extension, so does the audience. Having been introduced by voiceover as "the road warrior," the

audience already understands Max's intervention will be decisive in tipping the balance of power between these groups. The battle ostensibly between 'good' and 'evil' (west and east, imperium and barbarian) here is merely one for control and distribution of resources however: all agree on the fundamental view that the desert is a wasteland, just an empty surface and a site of extraction. Focalised through Max, the desert is depicted as neither beautiful nor sublime. Indeed, unlike some adversaries later in the film series, Max, a character it is difficult to accuse of three-dimensionality, lacks any faculty for aesthetic judgement or romantic imagination.

4. Desert Vistas

A very different perspective on the desert vista is presented in Denis Villeneuve's two-part adaptation of Frank Herbert's novel *Dune*. In its labyrinthine plot, Duke Leito Atreides, his consort Jessica (a Bene Gesserit witch) and their son Paul are commanded by the galactic Emperor to assume control of desert planet Arrakis. House Harkonnen, secretly in league with the Emperor, attack them. Leito is killed, while Paul and Jessica escape into the desert, where native Fremen take them in. Paul eventually becomes their messianic leader, Jessica their Reverend Mother. They overthrow the Harkonnens and Paul forces the visiting Emperor to cede to him the throne. Villeneuve's films mostly follow this basic plot arc but do not develop a sense of depth in Fremen culture.

There is a straight line from the history of landscape painting to Villeneuve's presentation of the desert planet of Arrakis. In Martin Lefebrve's words, "the birth of landscape [painting] should really be understood as the birth of a way of seeing, the birth of a gaze (that of the painter, the collector, or the critic) by which what was once in the margin has now come to take its place at the centre" (2006, 27). In Romantic images such as Casper David Friedrich's famous *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (1818) the lone white male spectator commands the view of an awe-inspiring nature from which he stands apart. 'Nature' is here positioned as absolute Other. The viewer, who is at the centre of the visible world in Berger's terms, is placed behind the wanderer (a position known in German as a *Rückenfigur*), whose job is to orient and direct their sight. Such painted figures are part of a chain of viewing in which the expression of the subjective feelings of the painter are elevated. This is not a painting of a view but a painting about *how an individual feels*, alone, in front of such a view. As David W. Jackson notes, such images not only represent the sublime spatially, as a confrontation with a "rather frightening and otherworldly" land-

scape, but as a window onto the distant past, in which the "untouched wilderness" can be imaginatively construed as unchanged since the original Creation (2020, 243–44 passim).

We encounter a similar perspective through Paul's (Timothée Chalamet's) experiences on Arrakis in *Dune*, and especially *Dune: Part Two*. Through the tight focalisation on Chalamet via frequent close-ups we are invited to identify with his view of Arrakis. Paul's emotional journey, his inner turmoil at knowing the violence his leadership will cause and his love for Chani (Zendaya), are far more important than Arrakean geo-politics in these films. Despite the centrality of spice as an analogue for oil in the narrative (highlighted when arch-villain Vladimir Harkonnen bathes in thick black oil), these movies offer little critical reflection on the political implication of spice extraction as analogue for our own fossil fuel energy dependencies. Moreover, Paul is depicted as a white saviour who feels guilty for his use of the Fremen, but a saviour nonetheless without whom the Fremen would be doomed. The sight of Paul riding the Shai-Halud (a 400-meter-long sandworm) in the second film becomes a spectacular visual centre point of the movie, a thrilling CGI desert ride not so different after all from the impossible feats of Miller's Mad Max, clambering around fast-moving oil rigs on the desert highway.

By contrast, in Frank Herbert's original 1965 novel there is a clear sense that perspective matters in relation to the desert *and its inhabitants*, as evident in the different ways Duke Leto Atreides and his son Paul see Arrakis as desert. Not long after arriving as its new colonial ruler, the duke looks out from the parapet of the landing control tower and the view is focalised through his eyes: "The central wastelands beyond those moon-frosted cliffs were desert—barren rock, dunes, and blowing dust, an uncharted dry wilderness with here and there along its rim and perhaps scattered through it, knots of Fremen" (Herbert 2006, 97–98). Like Max in Miller's film, the duke encounters the desert from an elevated position, as a landscape which is barren, arid and timeless. The view represents something unknown, judged presumptively as a 'wilderness' which is nearly empty except for 'knots' of mysterious and primitive Natives. The duke experiences the desert vista as undifferentiated, insensible, and majestic; in short, as a sublime object.

When Paul and Jessica are cast into the desert, however (echoing Hagar and her illegitimate son Ishmael in Genesis 21:14), they find beauty there:

> Paul stepped out into the rim of the basin, whispered: 'what a beautiful place.'

> Jessica could only stare in silent agreement from her position a step behind him[.] [...]
> This basin's beauty filled her senses, forcing her to stop and admire it.
> 'Like a fairyland,' Paul whispered.
> Jessica nodded.
> Spreading away in front of her stretched desert growth—bushes, cacti, tiny clumps of leaves—all trembling in the moonlight. The ringwalls were dark to her left, moonfrosted on her right.
> 'This must be a Freman place,' Paul said (Herbert 2006, 311).

Importantly, this passage is focalised through Jessica, who follows Paul's sightline from behind as if he were a *Rückenfigur* in a painting. But the view is not sublime or ancient. The features of the basin are garden-like, suggesting form and intent in the nurturing of desert plant growth. Although otherworldly, it has a strong sense of meaningful inhabitation, somewhere of "felt value" (Tuan 2001, 4). In contrast to his father's colonising perspective, for Paul the desert opens to reveal nesting places, villages, subtly varied sand types and wide-ranging topographical features. Significantly, Paul takes as his battle name *Maud'dib*—the desert mouse—an animal whose perspective is from *below* rather than *above* the dunes.[9]

5. Deserts from Above

The difference between the dominant desert perspectives in Herbert and Villeneuve's texts fundamentally marks the attitude in each toward both colonial/Indigenous relations and the apocalyptic. Villeneuve naturalises the Harkonnen perspective (from above) to critique their domination of the planet using military methods. In one telling shot in *Dune: Part Two,* "ornithopters" fly against the dawn light, referencing the famous "Ride of the Valkyries" scene in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), in which the US Air Force massacres a seaside village using helicopter gunships (Coppola 2019). This intertextual reference clearly labels the attack as imperialist violence. But across the two films, the overwhelming use of wide-angled aerial shots of the desert privileges the imperialist perspective over the voice of the native on the receiving end of such "unsound methods", much like *Apocalypse Now* (and indeed its own literary source text, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902)).

Herbert's novel is also largely focalised through Paul, but free indirect discourse adds layers of ambiguity to the character, while the perspective from below is more central than in the films. Moreover, Paul has a differ-

9 Significant to Herbert's decolonial context, as outlined above, the first French atomic bomb detonated in Algeria in 1960 was "codenamed Gerboise Bleue (Blue Jerboa) after a tiny jumping desert rodent" (Henni 2022, 15).

ent dialectical critique of the balance of power on the planet. He tells his old combat teacher Gurney that thanks to the guerilla campaign he and the Fremen have waged, Vladimir Harkonnen now has "little enough air cover left that he can waste it looking for a few specks in the sand" (Herbert 2006, 478). The Harkonnens are limited by *only* being able to see the desert from above, from "ornithopters" in the skies or huge spice harvesting machines. They dominate the skies but cannot use this to their full advantage against guerrillas adept at camouflaging themselves and their *sietches* (underground communities). In Paul's conversation with Gurney his comment pointedly contrasts the Harkonnen's perspective with that of the Fremen who have just ridden away on a sandworm. The Fremen possess what Paul terms "desert power... The surface of this planet is ours. No storm nor creature nor condition can stop us" (2006, 478).[10] The difference between how Villeneuve visually presents the desert of Arrakis and the way Herbert describes this terrain in his novel thus reveals a fundamental difference in *how* each text sees the desert with regards colonial/Indigenous relations and the apocalyptic.

The battle between air power and "desert power" is one of both perspective and knowledge. It has a long colonial history, beginning with the first use of aeroplanes in warfare during and immediately after World War I. Here the British experience in Mesopotamia is instructive. After an embarrassing setback at Kuk in 1916, the British Indian army forced the Ottoman Empire out of the country in 1918. The turnaround required considerable investment in Iraqi infrastructure to aid supply lines and the movement of troops, in what Priya Satia describes as "an effort to stake out the land of two rivers as a material object" (2007, 213). The eventual success of the campaign led to a shift away from the view of "Arabia" as "a kind of extraterrestrial utopia happily impervious to modern technology and government" toward a desire to "make [...] a new kind of utopia, a resurrected Babylonia" (Satia 2011, 24). The great cradle of civilisation became a "proving ground for industry and empire" (Satia 2007, 225) to conduct modern nation building and development. At the centre of this mission was the airplane, "the linchpin of British efforts to at once develop and police Iraq" (Satia 2011, 24). The airplane produced an aerial view of the landscape, requiring it to be read and understood in a qualitatively new manner.

Writing about the post-Revolutionary Russian experience, Julia Chan describes how "the invention of vertical aerial photography in 1909 [...] seriously disrupted the ways in which an area could be surveyed, measured, or governed. Often, with its radical abstraction, foreshortening, and elimination of human figures, the vertical aerial photograph was simply

10 In *Dune* (2021) Villeneuve gives Duke Leito the line "that's desert power," losing this difference in perspective between father and son.

illegible" (Chan 2022). Far from being an 'objective' record of the ground's 'condition,' the aerial photograph taken at a specific moment required skill and comparison with existing maps to reveal "an event", proving "that we always see from some *when*" (Saint-Amour 2014, 121). For the Soviets, the airplane promised to collapse distances between modern cities and undeveloped villages, but it also revealed just how uneven development in Russia was. In Iraq, air power seemed to allow the British to step back from the Orientalist fantasy they were living: "Only by abstracting themselves from the sandstorms and mysterious Arab cultures and landscape could the British truly make sense of things and begin to understand how to go about exercising control over the territory even if, in their hearts, many never left the embrace of the ground" (Adey, Whitehead, and Williams 2014, 14). Here too, just as in Chan's description of a flight in Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopian novel *We* (1924) "The temporal linear form of historical progress turns out to be a three-dimensional plane where multiple temporalities coexist and interact" (Chan). In emphasising how Mesopotamia was othered as an otherworldly space outside of time for the British ("a biblical space [...] of elemental clashes between good and evil out of the realm of ordinary, mortal law" (Satia 2006, 40), and "an environmental imaginary, [which] was positively *extraterrestrial*" (Satia 2011, 26–27 emphasis added)), Satia reveals how, bedazzled by an Orientalist view of Arabia which tied it to a distant past and fantastic genres like fantasy and the 'scientific romance', the British turned to a new perspective from the air to attempt to control the native population using surveillance and military violence. "Entire villages were bombed for "general recalcitrance"—refusal to submit to government—and for harbouring wanted rebel leaders, providing the lessons of an emerging science of bombing" (Satia 2006, 35). So it was that "[a]ircraft [...] provided the security of imagined omniscience to an empire in the throes of rebellion" (Satia 2006, 32), demonstrating, in Adey, Whitehead and Williams (2014, 3) words, "[a]s an interface of science, ways of seeing and militarism, there are few perspectives more culpable in their enlistment into practices of war, violence and security than the aerial one."

6. Deserts from Below

There is something always-already apocalyptic about 'death from above' via aerial, colonial dominance, since part of the point of such dominance is that the imagined omniscience of the aircraft is apparent to both killer and victim. Such death is intended to require of its victims an acceptance

of helplessness against an overwhelming and unreachable necropolitical power which derives from the aircraft's panoptical logic. Yet the development of the militarised view from the air also led to an emerging body of knowledge about how to resist such ways of seeing, since the very distance that the aerial view imposes obliterates detail. This makes it hard to discern the orientation of those below toward their own positive political goals rather than simply being intransigently against colonial rule.

An excellent example of the importance of such orientations to perspectives on the apocalyptic experience of colonial invasion can be found in Noongar author Claire G. Coleman's novel *Terra Nullius*. In it, characters hide from alien "fliers" which traverse the skies above the Australian interior, putting under surveillance the Natives below. Coleman's novel presents an apparently historical fiction in which Indigenous character Jacky Jerramungup escapes from forced servitude and returns to the abusive residential convent school where he grew up to search for documents that will reveal his family roots. He is pursued by colonial police toward the "deep desert" country where he was born. In a separate narrative strand, colonial trooper Johnny Starr runs away from his unit to join Native bandits after his troop massacres a camp of Native people. They die together fighting colonial troopers during a massacre of Indigenous refugees.

Colonial settlers like Starr experience an "alien landscape" (22) which is "too hot and too dry" (3), with "alien trees [...] the wrong colour" (72) dotting the "alien, Native bush" (100). Starr is "trying, always trying to see" his surroundings as his Native friends do, because "if he could appreciate the beauty" of "this hot dry desert," then "his life would be more pleasant" (85). As Iva Polak (2022, 5) notes, this image of "Australia's relentless and unforgiving landscape and climate in comparison to the "mother country" [...] is one of the clichés of the nineteenth-century Australian literary canon." Weaver describes how the "European imagination delineated an apocalyptic map of the country before explorers and settlers even arrived" (2011, 24) and through its material history as a British convict transportation colony, the *land* of Australia came to be associated with disorder, punishment, and culturally unassimilable conditions. Hence Starr cannot get past a deep, sensate experience in which "[e]verything was alien: the people around him, the trees, the prickling grasses, even the soil and rock itself" (101). Just as the British, in Satia's view, experienced the Iraqi desert as "extraterrestrial" (2011, 24; 27), Starr is repeatedly described as seeing the land *and its people* in alien terms. For other colonisers, Natives are seen as "merely part of the inhospitable environment they are trying to tame" (Coleman 2019, 140; cf. Mitchell 2002a, 265) and are treated with the same visceral disgust. It is therefore a transformational moment

when Starr refers to, "this creature, this Native, this person—he surprised himself with the word" (62). But while Starr becomes an anti-colonial ally (which has its historical analogue in several, albeit rare, collaborations between "Indigenous and European opponents of the colonial regime" (Sparrow 2022)), he continues to experience the land as otherworldly.

Subjectivity, orientation, and perspective shape how the Australian desert is seen and known in the text, and the perspective of the colonised, grounded in an Indigenous cosmology, is distinct from Starr's own here. As a settler, Starr must distinguish Natives from their homelands to perceive them as 'people' in the sense of human subjects. However, by assimilating Natives within the universalising framework of western liberal humanism, he re-produces colonial logic. As Indigenous legal scholar Irene Watson argues, sovereign individual rights arrive at the expense of collective frameworks such as "laws, knowledges and philosophies" (2014, 513). The individual person has rights only insofar as she gives up her non-western subjectivity as part of a collective, whose cosmology and knowledges are deemed illegitimate by ocular-centric positivism. At the heart of this schism are the "[d]istinct differences [which] exist between an Aboriginal relationship to land where the natural world is loved and treated as a close relative and that found in European philosophy which views nature as being there for man to use" (Watson 2014, 510). This relationship—which has its specific local iterations—is often referred to as *Country*. "This relational system is more than human, including plants, animals, rocks, and Ancestral Spiritual entities. Relationships of care between people and *Country* are reciprocal" involving "environmental care practices" and "[s]piritual care," with "*Story*-telling" a key part (McGaw et al. 2024, 27). Country thus helps produce people as subjects and is integral to personhood, an aspect of Native cosmogeny Coleman's colonial character cannot grasp. Starr relates to the novel's desert setting in a fundamentally different way to Indigenous characters like Jacky: Starr has no emotional connection to the desert, which he sees as an environment to be endured and to struggle through. By contrast, despite being torn from his family and placed in a residential school early in life, Jacky has an implicit understanding of Country as fundamental to 'being.' He evades trackers and is alert to the agency of his non-sensate world.

Coleman's novel is about how a shift in perspective can fundamentally alter our way of seeing history and human/other-than-human relations. It demonstrates Berger's point that seeing is dependent "upon habit and convention," affecting the relative importance of foreground and background alike. In Coleman's novel, Australia is textually produced as a postapocalyptic colonial space. As the perspective through which the narrative

is focalised shifts back and forth between colonised and coloniser characters, Coleman plays on our expectations: *Terra Nullius* appears to tell "a story of Australia's colonial crime that could fit into a genre broadly identified as historical crime fiction" (Polak 2022, 4). With what Polak terms "a sudden ontological shift in chapter 10," nearly halfway through the novel, the setting is revealed to be the year 2041. This revelation of a speculative future requires the reader to immediately reassess the genre and the apocalyptic nature of the text due to the radical shift in the temporal perspective of the narrative. By radically unsettling the genre, readers are forced to re-view the past from the perspective of the colonised, since the colonisers or "Toads" literally *are* aliens from a swampy planet. They view all humans in the historical attitudes Europeans held toward Indigenous Australians, denying their full humanity. In this speculative future, the European/settler reader is invited to identify with the colonised, since the "arrival of the Toads had eliminated all racism and hate within the human species [...] the colonisation by the Settlers simply ended all discrimination within the human race by taking away all the imbalance" (Coleman 2019, 159). This simple apocalyptic revelation has deceptively complex results. The Australian interior is heralded elegiacally as one of the last places on Earth that resisted the advance of European colonisation. World-ending at a local level is thereby identified with planetary upheaval, and as Laura Singeot shows, "the narration is permeated with changes of scale from the local to the global" (2021, 5), destabilising the sense of perspective in this desert setting, since the humans in the desert are both Indigenous and European, but Indigenous culture has proved far more resilient than European culture in the face of alien invasion.

Like *Dune*, Coleman's novel is an inter-planetary invasion narrative that focuses on the experiences and cultural and political goals of the Native population. These goals are specific to both geography and the forms of colonialism they are resisting. The humans in *Terra Nullius* seek to drive out the Toads who have settled on their land and return to a pre-invasion status. Like the real-life analogues to which many Aboriginal children were sent in twentieth-century Australia, the residential school in *Terra Nullius* is perpetrating epistemicide, preventing the handing down of cultural knowledge and practices including Indigenous languages. In Herbert's *Dune*, the Harkonnen also have genocidal designs on Fremen culture but much of the population is beyond their reach, and the former are occupying forces who came to extract resources, rather than settlers.

The Fremen, meanwhile, have their own highly developed, planetary ideas about Arrakis which entail a transformation of the physical environment at the expense of imperial designs on it as a site of primary resource

extraction. Fremen culture, meanwhile, already bears the influences of outsiders including the Bene Gesserit. The Fremen are prepared for Paul's arrival thanks to "the protective legends implanted in these people against the day of a Bene Gesserit's need" (71). This turn of phrase is pointedly invasive, suggesting intrusive thoughts, and yet a certain openness remains in Fremen ideals: they believe with religious intensity in the scientific programme of the Emperor's planetary ecologist, whose father "Native," having "calculated with precision" how much water needed to be stored in underground reservoirs to "change the face of Arrakis" to create a "homeworld" for the Fremen, "with lakes in the temperate zones" (368). In Jessica's view, "*this is the scientist's dream…and these simple people, these peasants, are filled with it*" (368). But if the Fremen have been prepared by the seeding of myths, then Jessica, too, has been prepared by her training to read the Fremen through this condescending lens. She believes the planet's arid state is an aberration that can be corrected via terraforming, a mindset as dismissive of Native agency as that of the Toads in *Terra Nullius*. Only much later when she undergoes the initiation to become Reverand Mother does she gain a better perspective by experiencing the shared knowledge of past Reverand Mothers. By contrast, Paul is accepted as a tribal member, having learned the language, cultural values, and undergone initiation rites of the Fremen. He does not remain an outsider ally like Johnny Starr.

Conclusion

This article has interrogated the relationship of desert settings to apocalyptic imaginaries in SF. I have used the term 'setting' to designate a formal (aesthetic) property and a precondition for the development of narrative. Setting thereby brings together the ocular-centrality of SF knowledge production and aesthetic judgement. As an agential component of narrative, settings are an ideological formation. They operate in relation to perspective, orientation, and emotional connections to space and place.

I have sought to balance the tension between treating deserts as a type of literary science fictional setting and avoid reproducing colonial categories of 'empty' or 'ruined' 'wasteland,' which flatten the relations of desert inhabitants to their geographically specific homelands. This is important, since in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's words, "science fiction has been the main carrier of techno-imperial dreaming, as well as a main vehicle for its critique" (2015, 15). In the apocalyptic imagination of *Mad Max 2*, which offers superficial critiques of elements of environmental destruc-

tion such as oil dependency and consumer waste, the desert setting follows a colonial logic in which the arid 'wasteland' becomes a metonym for the collapse of civilisation. Such desert spaces are positioned as morally and aesthetically ruined, empty and antithetical to civilised life. They are thereby made available for colonial appropriation (see Welland 2015, 15–16). From a colonial view, which locates the (western, white male) beholder at the centre of the image, the symbolically rich, materially empty desert represents a valuable opportunity to develop imperial dreams. Hence, in interwar Mesopotamia the British built dams and roads while dropping bombs as two sides of the same 'civilising' mission.

In Villeneuve's two-part *Dune*, elevated views of the vast desert planet of Arrakis position it as a sublime object: incomprehensibly majestic, terrifyingly alien in its hostile conditions, and overwhelming in scope. But, as W. J. T. Mitchell writes of landscape painting, "landscape" here "naturalizes a cultural and social construction," thereby "representing an artificial world" (and created in the VFX studio as much as by the cinematographer) "as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site" (Mitchell 2002b, 2). Thus, this presentation of a fictional desert planet rests upon and reproduces dominant western ideas about 'deserts' as a broad and undifferentiated category. This is reinforced by the filmmakers' decision to engage so little with Arab culture and casting (Hadadi 2021) despite significant portions of both films being shot in Abu Dhabi and Jordan.

Frank Herbert's novel derives significant inspiration from SWANA cultures, and, while it sometimes slips into Orientalist thinking, Herbert also interrogates western viewpoints. The patient, planet shaping desires of the Fremen work with rather than against geological forces, using native plant life as well as water precipitated from moisture already in the atmosphere. The Fremen, whose culture is grounded in the aridity of their environment, commit to leaving a significant portion of Arrakis untouched to enable a sustainable relationship with spice as a replenishable resource, respecting the original state of Arrakis as a 'desert planet.' However, both the terraforming plan and the revolutionary overthrow of the colonising powers are apocalyptic in the millenarian sense. This is ultimately why Paul rises to be their leader. His prophetic trajectory fits with a presentation of a desert setting that relies on a technique of seeing I have identified with the apocalyptic. In setting up the desert setting of the novel Herbert defamiliarizes both cognition of our own planet and our understanding of the machinations of global politics and economic models. The novel thus uses the apocalyptic to explore cultural anxieties and future-oriented

fears including nuclear weapons, the world's reliance on 'big oil' and political tensions in the Middle East during the Cold War.

Claire Coleman's novel *Terra Nullius* continues this trend, going further than Herbert's novel by positioning itself as explicitly *anticolonial* rather than merely *postcolonial*. Robyn Weaver suggests "there is an inherent relationship between "apocalypse and nation [...] in Australian fictions" (2011, 52). The arid interior is an important setting for this connection, its apparent quiet echoing what W. E. H. Stanner famously termed "the Great Australian Silence" (Stanner 1979, 203; 208–16) about Aboriginal history, occupation, and rights in Australia's specific history of settler colonialism. As in Herbert's *Dune*, the deep desert of Coleman's Australia becomes a refuge from colonial dominance and a site of resistance by virtue of its hostility to European standards of temperate comfort, which require a different way of seeing to survive. Here there are sufficient margins for life in the reciprocal relationship of Indigenous people and Country, but insufficient resources for wasteful colonial living.

The invaders identify the Indigenous characters with the flora and fauna of a hostile environment. This accords with the historically dominant European imaginaries of arid lands, which treats deserts as a distant sublime object of the Romantic imagination, the 'lone and level sands' to be crossed and thus conquered by the male explorer, Miller's "road warrior" or the Laurentian religious saviour. Via a radical narratological rupture, shifting to a postapocalyptic Indigenous perspective halfway through her novel, Coleman re-orients the reader, pointing them along an alternate view of past and present cultural anxieties and future-oriented fears. This functions as a way of seeing and reading alternative futurities, and of raising questions of historical injustice. By shifting perspective, the apocalyptic becomes not just a matter of 'world ending' but of asking about what narrative functions and possibilities 'the world' and 'the end' present, and for whom.

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