



COVER SHEET

Mallan, Kerry M (2005) Trash aesthetics and utopian memory: The Tip at the End of the Street and The Lost Thing. *Bookbird* 43(1):pp. 28-34.

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Trash Aesthetics and Utopian Memory:
The Tip at the End of the Street* and *The Lost Thing
Kerry Mallan

Trash pervades most aspects of contemporary living, and children, as active consumers in a throw-away society, contribute to its production and accumulation. From an early age, children become familiar with trash and its various purposes – Oscar the Grouch from *Sesame Street* lives in a trashcan, the trash bin (recycling) icon on computer desktops swallows up unwanted words, garbage receptacles in homes and community remove and recycle trash. Many children are also avid collectors of 'trash' – wrappers, bottles, toy boxes. For many children, trash is such a familiar part of their daily lives that it is rendered invisible. For other children, trash is highly visible as a vital source of food and survival. This paradoxical view of trash is also realised aesthetically as trash can violate and offend the senses, as well as give pleasure and surprise through artistic reclamation and metamorphosis.

Trash exists as a record of 'time-space compression',¹ an archeological treasure trove of society's secrets and wealth hidden in its discarded commodities. It is a 'heterotopia',² in that it is a juxtaposition in a real place of several incompatible sites. Polysemic in nature, trash can be seen and understood literally as well as read symptomatically as a metaphorical figure for social indictment or negative comment ('talking trash', 'rubbish!'). Trash is the ideal utopian metaphor inviting both critique of current society and transformative possibilities. Its redemptive and transformative qualities are seen in popular culture where marginalised youth have transmogrified waste materials (discarded oil barrels, garbage lids) into musical instruments, and where picture book artists use discarded materials to create stunning collages³: a practice familiar to many art classes in schools. Further, when trash is transformed the human capacity for resourcefulness and

improvisation is mobilised. For example, when Duchamp mounted a bicycle wheel on a wooden stool (*Bicycle Wheel*/circa 1913) he invented a new form of art, which utilised 'found objects' to create playful nonsense or to make social or political comment. This capacity for art to 'make strange' (like the Formalists' 'defamiliarisation') strips away familiarity from the world about us, so that we see things anew and a space for political/aesthetic reflection is opened.

As the above suggests, the motif of trash can serve multiple purposes. It can be a device for commenting on society's rampant consumerism and unequal social formations. It can also offer an alternative aesthetics by revalorising, by inversion, what is often regarded as useless. Here I want to explore this hybrid potential of trash to function as both alternative aesthetics and social critique, by considering two Australian picture books – *The Tip at the End of the Street* by Tohby Riddle (1996) and *The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan (2000). Each of these books incorporates the leitmotif of trash as part of the social condition of (post)capitalist, postindustrial societies.

Picture books can offer children a space for reflection. The genre is characterised generally by a sense of optimism, or utopian desire, as more often than not, its stories provide resolutions to conflicts, and disruptive plans and anxieties are managed in a way that offers reassurance, hope, and comfort for young readers. The focus picture books in this paper do not offer readers an unambiguous path to utopia. Rather, they challenge readers to consider the allegorical nature of their texts, and to discover utopian moments in memory. These forgotten or reconstructed traces of the past can provide projections of a better world – such utopian possibilities are what Ernst Bloch (1986) urges readers to seek out in texts.⁴ For Bloch, all ideological artefacts contain expressions of desire for a better life. Sometimes utopian desire needs to be deciphered as it may lie hidden in allegory or symbol and so is not always obvious or easily apprehended. In my

selection, trash is the emotional and aesthetic means for considering the utopian use of memory.

At the conclusion of the picture book *The Tip at the End of the Street*, the narrator confides that the two young protagonists, Carl and Minnie, 'are always surprised at what people throw away'.⁵ (**illus 1 here**) This seemingly banal statement provides an ironic closure to a story that tells of the children's surprise find in the local tip – an old man. (In keeping with the book's key motif, it is also a recycled comment as it forms part of the introduction.) The children take the old man home and settle him into an old train carriage (another tip find) in their backyard. The old man is a treasure trove of stories and forgotten songs, which tell of a world now past, yet unknown to the children. The story's privileging of 'the tip' as a site for serendipitous adventure and discovery provides an ideal *mise en scene* for analysing the representations of trash from a utopian perspective. In one sense, the old man's recollection of the past – giant airships, silent movie stars, Ragtime and Dixieland, old dances and songs – exemplifies a postmodern aesthetics of recycling and pastiche. His stories evoke nostalgia for a time past. As romance tales, with their utopian reconstructions of a better way of living, of a different kind of society, they provide an antidote to postmodern cynicism. Storytelling, therefore, operates as a sanctioned form of fantasy-making and the storyteller is the bearer of utopia tales.

The tip in this story is a heteropic space, a place that holds untold treasures for the children to retrieve. Visually, the tip is depicted as a jumbled site of accumulated trash. The children's parents see the tip from an adult perspective: 'The tip! Why do you want to go there? It's all just piles of other people's refuse'. But the children 'loved it'- they find the most amazing things – a penny-farthing, a harpsichord, 'a flying machine', old books, old chairs, old musical instruments, and more. The tip is a plentiful supply of goods for the children. Its abundance and accessibility suggest a kind of communistic utopia where greed is eradicated

and all property becomes public. Yet, ironically, its excesses come from capitalism and the processes of consumption: in carnivalistic spirit, the tip represents the ideal lower-stratum shopping mall with everything you desire at no cost. While the children in the story enjoy the spoils of the tip, their recycling is born of pleasure, not of necessity. Unlike those other literary dump-dwellers, Jack and Guy,⁶ and real-life children who exist on the margins of society, obliged to recycle the material waste of the dominant culture, Carl and Minnie are able to restore the forgotten worth of a cast-off object for recreational purposes. Restoration also serves as an analogy for the process of revealing the hidden worth of the discarded old man and his stories. This function of hidden worth of the past is central to Bloch's recognition of 'the importance of memory as a repository of experience and value in an inauthentic, capitalist world'.⁷ While the idea of 'inauthentic' is open to challenge, memory is valorised in the story and the past achieves a more authentic status than the present, which appears disrespectful and neglectful of achievements and knowledge of the past, at least from the adult perspective.

As the terminus for society's waste, a dumping ground for the unwanted, broken, and used, the tip is the collective memory for all that society produces and represses. Retrieving the old man from the tip is the return of the repressed. His presence and his stories embody a past history which postmodernism has sought to ignore by substituting 'a perpetual present' and eradicating the memory of tradition.⁸ Only the children want to hear his stories, the parents remain on the margins of the children's life and, as such, have no contact with the old man, nor do they appear to want to know him. Rather than be seduced by the electronic contact that is part of a post-McLuhanite global village, the children seek and enjoy the kind of intimacy with the old man that comes with a genuine (authentic?) social relationship between people.

When the children find the old man dead in his chair, he has a 'faint smile on his face' and 'his weathered hands rest(ed) on a map of the world', he appears to be 'in the deepest sleep' and in the background –

A 78 was spinning on the gramophone.

It crackled away...

I'm looking over

a four-leaf clover...

...then went silent.

(illus 2 here)

This quiet romanticised demise of the old man amid old technology, old songs, old optimism is a stark contrast to more dramatic spectacles of death that are presented to children through popular film, computer games, and television. Death occurs in a recycled space – a disused train carriage – and appears as a happy heterotopia, a final resting place where the dead man smiles, and the optimistic lyrics of the 78 record provide a fitting farewell tribute. Perhaps it is significant that the old man appears to be blissfully asleep to the children. Such a perceived euphoric state invites speculation as to the personal satisfaction and social possibilities that utopian *dreaming* offers.

An integral element of the utopian possibility of *The Tip at the End of the Street* is the probability of finding a certain object at a certain location at a certain moment in time. A similar sense of probability underscores Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*. **(illus 3 here)** Here, a boy, who is also a collector of trash (bottle tops), first spies the 'thing' on a beach at the edge of an imposing metropolis. Baffled by its existence, the boy thinks it has 'a sad, lost sort of look': he talks to it, plays with it, and tries to find its owner. Eventually, the boy takes the thing home, but his Mum complains that 'Its feet are filthy!' and his Dad warns, 'It could have all kinds of strange diseases'.⁹ Like the old man in *The Tip at the End of the Street*, the thing is *taken out* (like household trash) to live in the back shed where the boy feeds it old Christmas decorations.

One day the boy finds an advertisement in the newspaper that offers a place to take 'trash' off your hands – nameless objects, unclaimed property, leftovers, 'things that just don't belong'. The place is 'The Federal Department of Odds & Ends' (whose motto *Sweepus underum carpetae* evokes both trash and secrecy). The boy's efforts to find a home for the lost thing are frustrated by bureaucratic form filling. After receiving an anonymous clue (a card with an arrow pointing 'somewhere') by a lowly cleaner, the boy eventually finds a Dali-esque space, which is cluttered with 'things' that just don't belong in a world that has lost its capacity to accept difference or to deal with the irrational and the inexplicable. Here Tan appropriates and transforms Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (circa 1504) by depicting a visual space of playful energy. It is a dreamlike space with a multitude of bizarre figures and objects occupying a delightfully implausible, otherworldly landscape, where all the elements appear to exist in a state of harmonious chaos.

According to Peel (2002), setting in utopian fiction is rooted in *topos*.¹⁰ This attention to place or in more general terms, space, is an inherent feature of the modernist tradition to which many utopian narratives adhere. However, place in *The Lost Thing*, takes on a postmodern interpretation in that it is a depersonalised, post-industrial urban space which is far from idyllic. Yet, features of the urban space in *The Lost Thing* reflect in a perverse way Thomas More's (1516)¹¹ utopia, in the uniformity of dress, lack of individuality, and regulation of the citizenry through official forms and permits.

The Lost Thing mocks the grand narratives of modernism and its utopian dreams of progress through its depiction of a rusting and obsolete post-industrial urban space, and by ironically playing with logic (e.g. that something that is alone and different must be lost) and utilising pastiche as the dominant style of artistic expression. The represented urban space and its inhabitants are nameless, and repetition and sameness of both architecture and human form eschew identity,

diversity, and cultural difference. The strangeness of the unnamed society, nevertheless, bears traces of familiarity in its technological and bureaucratic systems and architectural designs.¹² Here past Modern works of art are recycled – Jeffrey Smart's *The Cahill Expressway* (1962), John Brack's *Collins Street 5pm* (1955), Charles Sheeler's black-and-white photographs of American Industrial Scenes, and Edward Hopper's *Chair Car* (1965). However, for the young readers of this book, there would be no memory of the illustrations' original context: a point which reinforces Jameson's notion of the 'perpetual present' of postmodern society.

The book embodies a trash aesthetics in both its setting and format. Litter (squashed cans, scattered papers, a telephone hand set, and an array of cryptic graffiti) provides a familiar urban waste decoration of the streets, and 'found objects' (bottle tops, facsimiles of official documents, snapshots of urban life) comprise the collage-like format pasted over a background of mathematical and scientific formulae, tables, drawings of machines, instruments, and useless data. The serious scientism of the background is juxtaposed and subverted by the unscientific naming of the central subject – 'the lost thing' – and by the end papers of ordered rows of bottle tops, which are similarly inscribed by additional scientific iconography. In the middle of the serried rows of bottle tops, with their various graphic fragments of useless information is one which bears the inscription 'entropy', signifying the book's themes of disorder, decay, degeneration, and a loss of energy.

The book's yellowed wallpaper backdrop of miscellaneous pseudo-scientific bits and pieces suggests that the history of science has led us to the current state of technological excess. The repeated motifs of symbols, equations, and technical drawings reflect the puzzle-solving approach of science to unexplained phenomena. The search for a solution to the puzzle also underpins the central story element of finding a home for the 'lost thing' – an object that comes close

to Haraway's cyborg, a hybrid 'nature-culture' form of the postmodern imagination.¹³ Visibly 'a thing' and not a human, the bulky ugliness of its large, red, industrial-strength shape elicits the reader's gaze: it is a bit of trash yet it is not without its aesthetic appeal. Far from being a thing of beauty, it is nevertheless a curiosity, a thing to be contemplated like a work of art. The thing comprises both human and animal characteristics and attributes – it likes to eat, enjoys company, and has animal-like appendages. Yet, like many other images in the book, 'the lost thing' is a re-worked image with its resemblance to the position of the one-armed observer in Smart's *The Cahill Expressway*. Apart from the transposition of a non-human thing instead of Smart's one-armed man in a suit, the sense of alienation that the lone figure in the original painting suggests as it stands next to the expressway is softened in Tan's book by the figure of a boy who stands next to the thing forming a twosome.

Companionship provides a counterpoint to the text's sense of obsolescence, lack of interpersonal communication, and uninspired and dispassionate citizens. While this urban tale may indeed offer an allegorical reference to the collapse of modernist visions of a utopia gained through the spoils of progress, it also offers hope in the human capacity to care for one another. Such humanistic sentiments are often missing or lost in a society characterised as having a high degree of social entropy. To return to Harvey's idea of time-space compression, the lost thing and the boy's search for a home for it, not only suggests a poignant nostalgia for a place to belong, but characterises the migratory nature of globalisation. Through time-space compression, place becomes space, and a universal sense of disconnection to a place (home) or 'placelessness' become symptomatic of the postmodern condition. If one takes seriously Bloch's suggestion to seek out the utopian possibility in a text, then such a possibility arises in the final illustration where the lowly cleaner, a cyborg with tail, appendages, and a machine-like body mops with an old fashioned rope mop and a humble tin bucket – a convergence of old and new technologies. (illus 4

here) The cleaner is also the messenger who gave the boy the clue that led him to find a home for the lost thing. The message was delivered by 'a tiny voice' that said: 'If you really care about that thing, you shouldn't leave it here...This is a place for forgetting, leaving behind, smoothing over'. While the final image in the book of the solitary figure mopping in a black void encodes the melancholic experience of estrangement, of *human trash* in post-industrial societies, its earlier entreaty to the boy 'to care', and the boy's concern and compassion for the lost thing are testimony to a lingering humanity in this bleak dystopic space. This theme of the uneasy relationship between scientific rationalism and humanism pervades both the narrative and the illustrations, and is perhaps is further indication that the utopian impulse is not completely abandoned.

As Herbert Marcuse optimistically noted with respect to the potency of the utopian impulse in art: 'art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciences and drives of men and women who change the world'.¹⁴ Both picture books discussed have children as the ones who are able to find something special in trash. The ease at which they make friendship with that which is marginalised and different provides a sense of hope for future. In *The Tip at the End of the Street* the old man's recollections of a golden age are brought to life for the children, but in the end the children only 'sometimes' return to the old train carriage to play the old 78s and to retell the old man's stories. Similarly, the boy in *The Lost Thing* admits that he thinks about the lost thing 'from time to time' but is often 'too busy doing other stuff' to notice if there are more lost things around. The children's desire to stay in the present but revisit their memories offers an optimism that is often denied in the postmodern condition. As Geoghegan notes: 'Sensitivity to personal and social memories can both enrich the resulting utopian imagery, and increase tolerance for the motivating memories of others'¹⁵.

¹ See David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

² See Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, (1986): 22-27.

³ For instance, see Eve Bunting, *Smoky Night*. Illus. David Diaz (New York: Harcourt, 1994).

⁴ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 3 vols.

⁵ Tohby Riddle, *The Tip at the End of the Street* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1996).

⁶ See Maurice Sendak, *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁷ See Vincent Geoghegan, "Remembering the Future" in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* eds. J. O. Daniel and T. Moylan (London: Verso, 1997), p.25.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 1-54.

⁹ Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing* (South Melbourne: Lothian, 2000).

¹⁰ Ellen Peel, *Politics and Persuasion and Pragmatism: A Rhetoric of Feminist Utopian Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), p.xix.

¹¹ See Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans.ed. R. Adams (New York: Norton, 1992).

¹² Not only is the paper trail of bureaucracies humorously realised in the boy's frustrating search for information, but several of the images in the text are based on urban scenes from Australia and the United States.

¹³ See Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p.32.

¹⁵ See Geoghegan, *Remembering the Future*, p.32.