ENTERTEXT

Ageing Culture*:* Senescence, Rejuvenescence and (Im)mortality in Iain M. Banks' *Culture* Series.
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Source: *EnterText*, "Special Issue on Ageing and Fiction," 12 (2014): 115-138.

Abstract

Humankind's desire to overcome the natural ageing process, cope with or prolong the inevitability of death, and even to live forever, have preoccupied writers from the very beginning. Science fiction, which frequently speculates on the social, political and existential possibilities of nascent technology and scientific developments, is the latest mode of engagement with these themes, written in a post-Enlightenment era in which our ability to achieve these long-held desires seems somewhat plausible, or at least not-impossible. Iain M. Banks's 'Culture' series belongs to a firm tradition of writing in the SF sub-genres of space opera and/or cyberpunk that explores the possibilities of enhancing and extending the lives of human beings by adapting their bodies, digitising their consciousnesses, and exerting a degree of control over human nature. Focusing on *Use of Weapons* (1990), 'The State of the Art' (1991), and *Surface Detail* (2010) Joseph Norman explores the way in which life-extension, the implications of making death optional, and the potential continuation of life forever – in both physical and virtual form – are developed in Banks's series, arguing that these themes are integral to his vision of an achieved 'personal utopia' or 'secular heaven'.

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Introduction:

At the time of writing there are many crucial dialogues taking place that relate to the processes of human senescence. Governments struggle to form policies that deal fairly with the consequences of our rapidly ageing population, resulting from an 'ever-increasing life expectancy, low birth rates and the ageing of the baby boom generation.'[1]Academics expound and debate the various effects of this unusual demographic (more older people than younger people) upon our different cultures, revealing the persistence of damaging and stereotypical views towards older people that exist in our societies, and examine the state and effectiveness of social policies. As consumers we are saturated with advertisements that pander to the wants of an increasingly image-obsessed society, which dubiously offer 'anti-ageing' treatments – beauty products that can minimise the visibility, or delay the onset, of wrinkles, and help retain the appearance of youth. In scientific communities, researchers continue to investigate what has been called the 'great mystery' of biological ageing, asking 'how the same process that leads to decline and death can be intrinsic to life.'[2] Some scientists claim to be making progress towards solving this mystery, announcing that through genetics they may be able to exercise control over senescence, such as slowing ageing down, and possibly even reversing its effects.

From the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (circa. 18bc), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), to *Dracula* (1897), the quest for eternal youth is as old as narrative itself. Cyberpunk writers from the 1980s and early '90s, such as William Gibson, Charles Stross, and Pat Cadigan, have thoroughly and persistently engaged with the ways in which speculative/nascent technology, such as Mind-Computer interfacing, biotechnology

and bioengineering, may be used to extend the human lifespan, improve our bodies and gain a deeper understanding of the workings of our minds.

In the 'New' Space Opera of the 90s and 00s, writers such as Iain M. Banks, Ken Macleod, Alastair Reynolds, Neil Asher, Kim Stanley Robinson and Peter F. Hamilton, sought to overturn the widely perceived failings and inadequacies of classic Space Opera from the 1920s and 30s, and re-function the genre's tropes for a contemporary audience.[3] In their fiction, New Space Opera writers frequently extrapolate from nascent technoscientific developments, such as developments in gene-technology and genetic engineering, proposing that the mysteries of ageing and human mortality can and will be overcome in the future. Human life extended far beyond currently accepted norms is a common trope of New Space Opera, often providing several benefits, such as people travelling far out into the solar system, living fundamentally more peaceful lives

One notable exception from 'traditional' Space Opera to deal with related topics is James Blish's *Cities in Flight* series (*They Shall Have Stars [1956], A Life for the Stars* [1962], *Earthman Come Home* [1955], and *The Triumph of Time* [1958]): set in 2018 where an increasingly paranoid U.S government spreads human life throughout the galaxy by the use of 'spindizzy' engines (anti-gravity engines that allow faster-than-light [FTL] travel). The potential issue of problems relating to the effects of relativity when using FTL travel, such as the inevitably radically-differing ages of those who have, and those who have not, travelled FTL, are cleverly overcome by Blish by the introduction of an anti-ageing drug, 'ascomycin', which – through careful and devious control of its dissemination – gives the government political leverage. In Reynolds's novel *Revelation Space* (2000), a space opera firmly grounded in 'hard' science, these dilemmas of relativity are thoroughly worked through: despite being curbed by the effects of 'reefersleep' (a form of suspended animation), the character Ana Khouri is denied reunion with her long-estranged husband by the relative time difference of near-FTL travel: tricked into committing murder on the condition of this reunion by the mysterious dowager, known only as The Mademoiselle, Khouri and her husband can never travel fast enough to be reunited alive

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In Robinson's 'Mars' trilogy (*Red Mars* [1992], *Green Mars* [1994], *Blue Mars* [1999]), described by Arthur C. Clarke as 'the best novel on the colonization of Mars that has even been written,'[4] the scientist/colonist protagonists are able to delay the onset of biological ageing in humans through genetic engineering, dramatically increasing their life span, which is a major factor in their ability to successfully colonize the red planet.

In his 'Culture' series, Iain M. Banks explores the nature of a utopia where scientific and technological progress has reached its zenith. His novels offer an extensive critique of his fictional, technocratic society, as well as using it as a platform to engage with the aforementioned dialogues surrounding ageing in our world at present.

The Culture

The Culture is a vast network of territories that have joined together to form a galactic 'group civilization.' These territories are linked primarily by Artificial Intelligences, known as the 'Minds', who use their god- or state-like power to maintain the Culture's everyday bureaucracy. The relations between Culture territories and those of other civilizations are maintained by the division known as Contact, who sometimes intervene in the development of these non-Culture civilizations; Contact often uses its military wing, Special Circumstances (SC), in this process, employing outsiders to perform secret, often dubious, missions. Due to the Culture's mastery of science, its environments are entirely post-scarcity; its inhabitants are free to customise every detail of their lifestyle, their surroundings, and their own bodies, as they see fit. In the Culture, where science seems to have solved the 'great mystery' of human senescence, ageing is rendered optional, life controllable, and death avoidable.

Senescence and Rejuvenescense

In the prefatory remarks of the essay collection, *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, the editors posit three key areas of nascent scientific research relating to ageing and immortality: 1) the developments in computer science that 'advance toward the creation of an artificial – and immortal – machine intelligence'; 2) 'Examining the genetic and physiological factors that trigger human aging so that they [scientists] may halt or reverse that process;' and 3) the speculations of 'transhumanists', such as Ray Kurtzweil, about 'techniques for transferring human personalities into theoretically deathless computers.'[5] The successful development of these three areas to an advanced degree, and their widespread integration and accessibility, are integral components of the Culture's existence in its current form.

In *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, Harry R. Moody outlines the key reasons why ageing remains such a mystery, arguing that different parts of the body age in different ways, and at different rates, making it difficult or impossible to identify a single, unifying cause.[6] While the biologist Zhores Medenev has identified that there are over three hundred different theories about the origins of ageing, many scientists agree that it is related, at least in part, to damage in DNA cells, and therefore in genetics:

> Biologists who study how aging takes place have accumulated a large body of knowledge, and experiments with lower organisms have proved that genetic and environmental manipulations can change life expectancy and maximum lifespan. Thus scientists are now beginning to confront the question of whether it is possible to postpone, or even reverse, the process of biological aging.[7]

In his Culture texts, Banks assumes the success of this theory, predicting that scientists will eventually be able to gain full control over biological ageing, potentially prolonging, adapting and reversing its effects, at will.

As a society devoid of religion (frequently referred to by Banks as his 'secular heaven'), the Culture has no moral qualms whatsoever about its people choosing to apply their scientific and technological mastery to themselves, and adapting the

human body; in fact, it is almost their *modus operandi.* As Banks states in his essay 'A Few Notes on the Culture' (1994): 'Virtually everyone in the Culture carries the results of genetic manipulation in every cell of their body; it is arguably the most reliable signifier of Culture status.'[8] For the average Culture individual, then, the morality of genetic engineering goes unquestioned: it is desirable and inevitable. The question is not whether one would wish to customise one's body, but is instead: in what way, and to what extent?

Members of the Culture choose to adapt themselves in many different ways,[9] most of which are focused around improving overall health, longevity and quality of life. Due to their genetic manipulation, Culture citizens are generally born 'whole and healthy and of significantly (though not immensely) greater intelligence than their basic human genetic inheritance might imply'[10]; their immune systems have been improved; they have full control over their nervous systems: in effect, pain can be 'switched off'; illness, disease, birth defects, etc, are no longer a threat.[11]

The cumulative effect of these modifications to the human body results in the extension of the average lifespan way beyond the approximate maximum 120-year limit currently known in 2011[12]: as Banks states, 'humans in the Culture normally live about three-and-a-half to four centuries.'[13] During this greatly extended lifespan, Culture inhabitants are able to fully control and tailor their body's biological ageing process:

> The majority of their lives consist of a three-century plateau which they reach in what we would compare to our mid-twenties, after a relatively normal pace of maturation during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. They age very slowly during those three hundred years, then begin to age more quickly, then they die.[14]

So, usually, after a Culture child is born, their body is allowed to grow older and develop in a natural way; usually in their mid-twenties their ageing is 'genofixed': meaning not quite fully halted, but slowed down substantially. Most individuals choose to remain physically young, but tailor their outward appearance to some

extent. At one stage, Banks describes a Culture woman who is 'well into her second century, but still tall and handsome and striking…her hair was white, as it always had been.'[15] Despite these luxuries, most Culture citizens, it seems, will choose to have these life-extending processes stopped eventually, after several hundreds of years, effectively choosing to end their life.

Recent research into the human biological ageing process suggests that, once a person reaches thirty years of age, their body meets a significant milestone. In *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, Harry R. Moody discusses studies that employ a cross-sectional methodology:

> that is, […] look[ing] at physical functions of people at different chronological ages, but at a different point in time. The general conclusion from such studies of human beings suggests that most physiological functions decline after age 30, with some individual variations.[16]

An individual in their mid-twenties has reached full physical maturity, and is capable of a sophisticated level of emotional and social development. It is fair to assume that, by choosing to begin their 'three-century plateau' in their mid-twenties, most Culture citizens (and, presumably, Banks himself) adhere to the notion that at this stage of early adulthood, the human body has reached a biological peak. However, while the physical development of a Culture inhabitant is suspended, the individual's psychological development will continue, shaped by the responsibilities taken on, and the experiences undergone. In this way, Culture citizens can achieve an arguably desirable balance between the vigor of youth and the experience of older age.

Banks' novels fall short of 'hard' science fiction such as the work of Alastair Reynolds or Greg Egan as they do not provide an in-depth scientific basis for the majority of the Culture's developments; regarding the life-extension treatments, little details are given beyond the use of genetic engineering, or the creation of special drugs. However, Banks' speculations *do* correspond with current research that is occurring in real-world scientific communities.

In 2010, Dr. Iain Kill, co-founder of the Progeria Research Group at Brunel University, gave a public lecture about recent research that his team have conducted into ageing-related diseases, stating that the effects of Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria Syndrome and Werner's Syndrome have both been isolated to 'a mutation in a single gene', though a different gene for each; 'it's a single base change in the entire code.'[17] Dr. Kill indicates that such an identification is significant not just for ageing-related illnesses, but also for our understanding of ageing more generally: 'So perhaps ageing isn't so complex; perhaps there are ways in which we can modulate the ways in which we age; perhaps we could even extend our lifespan'; he also reminded his audience tantalisingly that certain cells in the human body, such as tumours, are immortal.[18]

A report from The Academy of Medical Sciences from the previous year supports Dr. Kill's findings: 'The major breakthrough in ageing research has been the discovery of single gene mutations that: increase lifespan; show evolutionary conservation; and increase health during ageing.'[19] The report also presents evidence gathered whilst studying genetic material from animals, stating that 'single gene mutations [which] could increase lifespan came from mutagenesis screens in the nermatode worm *Caenorhabditis elegans*… one strain of *C. elegens* was shown to live five times longer than its wild-type counterparts.'[20] Regarding the prospects for control of ageing via genetics generally, however, the report remains inconclusive:

> Detailed analysis of genetic effects of human longevity has only just begun, it remains to be seen whether genetic variants that affect longevity primarily do so through processes that generate ageing-related damage or processes that protect against it, and to what extent the result are disease specific.[21]

Banks' 1990 novel *Use of Weapons,* the third in his Culture sequence, is the text in which the trope of extended-life is incorporated into its narrative most significantly, and in which the theme of senescence is explored most thoroughly. In the narrative present of the novel, its protagonist, Cheredine Zakalwe, is a retired employee of

SC, who is living a life of luxurious hedonism on a secluded island. Two current employees of SC are trying to track him down, and coerce him into returning to work for SC for one final mission. The novel has a complex and innovative narrative structure: these 'present time' events of finding and persuading Zakalwe, and the subsequent completion of his mission, are told in conventional chapters – arranged in chronological order, marked with corresponding standard arabic numerals running forwards. Alternating with these are episodes from Zakalwe's past – told in reverse chronological order, and marked by Roman numerals running backwards. As the present day events unfold, and events from his past are traced back, unpleasant secrets and a major twist about Zakalwe's life and identity are revealed.

While the secretive and morally-suspect nature of his work requires him to remain an outsider living independently from the Culture, Zakalwe has been rewarded by SC with access to the Culture's 'genofixing' treatment and 'retro-ageing' drugs, in return for doing their 'dirty work'. The full effects of this treatment are revealed during a scene set in the novel's present time, when Zakalwe states that, 'I was born two hundred and twenty years ago… and physically I'm about thirty.'[22] Outsider or not, this renders Zakalwe's life-cycle and biological ageing process similar to that of a typical Culture inhabitant. In *Use of Weapons,* Banks places his two-hundred-and-twenty year-old protagonist alongside other characters whose bodies are older than his, such as the Ethnarch Kerian and Tsoldrin Beychae. Through Zakalwe's relationship and interactions with these characters, Banks provides a thorough analysis of the different representations of ageing in the novel.

The Ethnarch Kerian, a former political ally of the Culture, is introduced in chapter XIII of *Use of Weapons*, when Zakalwe breaches his security compound and confronts the Ethnarch at gunpoint about alleged crimes of political corruption and mass-murder. Contact had made the Ethnarch a deal in the past, offering him access to their life-extension technologies if he agrees to end his regime of tyranny and genocide, trying to resolve the situation using bribery instead of further violence. This offering of a very tangible 'fountain of youth' is just one example of Contact's humanitarian role as doer of self-perceived 'good deeds'. As Zakalwe outlines:

> Another thing [the Culture…] do[es…] another way they deal in life rather than death, is they offer leaders of certain societies below a certain technological level the one thing all the wealth and power those leaders command cannot buy them; a cure for death. A return to youth.[23]

These instances of bribery by Contact are calculated acts of political engineering that operate on a very practical level; but they are also symbolic acts that reaffirm the Culture's hegemonic status in the galaxy. The message seems clear: join the Culture, and you could live forever. Zakalwe, however, believes that the Culture's policies are too soft, that the bribe is not incentive enough, and that the Ethnarch has continued committing atrocities: 'You promised to stop the killings in Youricam, remember? […] the death trains.'[24] Operating outside the remit of Contact and the Culture, Zakalwe is indulging in a spree of vigilante justice, procuring violent revenge upon some of the Culture's political contacts, who are corrupt and dangerous individuals in positions of great power.

Zakalwe himself stands as a warning against the dangers of wielding such powerful technological advancements: working independently from SC he murders the Ethnarch and exploits his Culture experience, training and resources for his own selfish ends. He steals and sells the Culture's anti-ageing treatments for financial gain:

> And what is the core of his business empire? Genetechnology…there are five elderly autocrats on this planet, in competing hegemonies. *They are all getting healthier.* They are all getting, in fact, younger. Zakalwe's corporation…is receiving crazy money from each of these five people.[25]

However benign and well-intentioned the methods of SC may be, and how much they achieve with their vast power and influence, the possibilities for misuse if their advanced technologies were to fall into the wrong hands may arguably, if not outweigh the benefits of their intended use, at least raise serious moral concerns. Zakalwe, by choosing to exact revenge upon the corrupt and murderous politicians that SC failed to deal with effectively, is an individual with at least some sense of

morality, even if it is decidedly misplaced; but in carrying out this revenge, he contradicts and undoes all of the Culture's commitment to life rather than death.

While the Ethnarch's age is never made explicit, Zakalwe describes him as an 'old pisshead'; in return, the Ethnarch describes Zakalwe as a 'young man'.[26] These descriptions are ironic because, of course, Zakalwe has lived for at least twice as long as the Ethnarch, but his physical appearance does not make this initially apparent. The Ethnarch's descriptions of Zakalwe highlight the uncanniness of seeing a man who not only looks much younger than he really is, but has lived for an exceptionally long time; the most obvious aspect being Zakalwe's voice: 'The young man's voice was slow and measured. It sounded, somehow, like the voice of someone much older; older enough to make the Ethnarch feel suddenly young in comparison. It chilled him.'[27] This implies is that Zakalwe's tone – calm, confident and measured – is indicative of an older person: one who conveys the relaxed confidence gained from years of experience, rather than the implied arrogance and impetuousness of youth.

It is through the Ethnarch's physical descriptions of Zakalwe, however, once he examines him more closely, that a deeper understanding of Bank's protagonist is revealed: 'The man looked young; he had a broad, tanned face and black hair tied back behind his head, but thoughts of spirits and the dead came into his head not because of that. It was something about the dark, pit-like eyes, and the alien set of that face.'[28] Somehow, Zakalwe's decades of life and experience seem to be revealed through his facial features and expression, even though his appearance otherwise – tanned face, and long black hair – suggests vitality and youth. Banks' choice of language is interesting, as it suggests that more than mere experience and memory are conveyed through Zakalwe's face: the 'dark, pit-like eyes' that inspire 'thoughts of spirits and the dead', suggest a monstrous or supernatural apparition, 'like having a dream, or seeing a ghost.'[29] The implication being that Zakalwe's wealth of lived time – the colossal amount of thoughts, memories, and experiences that he has amassed in his two hundred and twenty years of life – is eating away at him instead of filling him with joy, leaving him hollow: 'a slightly skewed

projection.'[30]In effect, in a manner reminiscent of Wilde's Dorian Gray, the more Zakalwe lives, the more part of him seems to die.

This disturbing reading of the protagonist foreshadows the huge revelation at the novel's conclusion that Zakalwe is not exactly who he says he is. He is merely posing as the calm, poetically-inclined Cheredenine Zakalwe, but is in fact actually his sadistic foster brother, Elethiomel, who murdered Cheredenine, and assumed his identity. Therefore, the young-yet-old man who stands before the Ethnarch is consumed and made hollow, not only by the sheer weight of his experiences, but also through the subconscious guilt that he endures regarding his act of fratricide many years ago. The Zakalwe speaking with the Ethnarch is a man haunted throughout his years by the 'spectre' of his murdered brother, which, in turn, consumes him, leaving him similarly ghostly.

Another 'old' character in the novel with whom Zakalwe is compared is Tsoldrin Beychae, a former political leader of the planet Voerenhutz, which has descended into anarchy. Again, as with the Ethnarch, Beychae's exact age is not stated, but it becomes apparent that he has not been rewarded with access to the Culture's life-extension technologies; Beychae has lived nowhere near as long as Zakalwe, but still appears older. In the present time of the novel, two members of Special Circumstances, a woman named Dizimet Sma and a drone (a highly intelligent AI) named Skaffen-Amtistkaw, are appointed with the task of finding Zakalwe in order to persuade him to locate Beychae: in short, one 'older' man, Zakalwe, must be found and brought out of retirement, so that he may in turn perform a similar task regarding another retired 'old' man, Beychae.

As Skaffen-Amtiskaw explains, Beychae 'became president of the cluster following our [SC's] involvement. While he was in power he held the political system together, but he retired eight years ago, long before he had to, to pursue a life of study and contemplation.'[31] Banks' descriptions of Beychae contrast starkly with his youthful descriptions of Zakalwe:

> The old man – bald, face deeply lined, dressed in robes which hid the modest paunch he'd developed since he'd devoted himself to study – blinked as she tapped at it and opened the door. His eyes were still bright. […] Tsoldrin Beychae put on some glasses – he was old fashioned enough to wear his age rather than try to disguise it – and peered at the man.[32]

Through this traditional, and fairly stereotypical, depiction of an older, male scholar, Beychae becomes instantly familiar; recognisable in him are all of the negative attributes that are often associated with older people: hair-loss, wrinkles and failing eyesight. Here, Beychae is doubly contrasted with Zakalwe, both as scholar and older man: Beychae's 'modest paunch' indicates a lack of physical exercise, while his glasses have associations of excessive reading in dim rooms – both stereotypical attributes of a scholar or academic. Both men may choose to live in relative isolation (Zakalwe is indicated to be living a fairly reclusive existence on an obscure island), but Beychae's quiet dedication to study contrasts sharply with Zakalwe's hedonism and dangerous SC missions. Also, Beychae is not merely just recognizable as biologically 'old' through his aged appearance, but in also terms of attitude and values: he is described as 'old-fashioned' because he refuses to hide his failing eyesight with contact lenses, or have it improved using scientific methods, in order to appear younger. At one stage, Beychae draws himself up because 'he'd noticed that he was stooping more these days, but he was still vain enough to want to greet people straight-backed.'[33] Beychae's concern with his own posture seems suggestive of more than mere vanity: possibly also indicating pride at his own self-perceived morally 'upstanding' social position as an esteemed scholar.

Later in the novel it is revealed that Beychae's female assistant, Ms Shiol, is employed as a spy, feigning friendship with him in order to collect information about his research. When Zakalwe reveals this deceit to him, Beychae's response indicates that he believes her display of friendship to have been truly, and entirely, false, due to his age; stating dejectedly that, 'I hope […] that is not the only way the old can be made happy…through deceit.' Zakalwe tries to console him, saying that 'Maybe it wasn't all deceit […] And anyway, being old isn't what it used to be; I'm *old*,'[34] in order to remind the scholar that perceptions of old age are very subjective,

particularly when the parameters of senescence can be changed freely and readily. This conversation, and that which follows it, acts as a clear exposition of the two positions in the age-related debate explored in *Use of Weapons*: the 'natural' process of ageing without interference from genetics, pharmaceuticals or transplants as represented by Beychae; and the Culture's artificial interventions and extensions as represented by Zakalwe. Natural ageing, although often complete with deeply unfortunate consequences, can be seen as simpler and more honest; however, the example of Ms Shiol's feigned friendship shows how natural ageing has provided a context for deceit. Life-extension by intervention, by comparison, is more controlled and relaxed; the Culture's anti-ageing treatments remove or certainly reduce the need to feign youth, yet they carry with them a whole new range of unique problems.

By 'genofixing' himself at the age of 'about thirty', Zakalwe has prolonged his biological ageing process, but cannot (or perhaps will not) halt his mental development, therefore continuing to age psychologically. While his body will remain fit and healthy – if physical damage does occur the relevant part can be replaced reasonably simply and very effectively – Zakalwe's mind will accumulate memories and experiences at the normal rate. This means that the longer he lives, the more information he will store, amassing far more experiences and memories in his extended lifetime than the average (i.e. human basic) person. The effects of this upon someone's emotional development, amongst other things, could be potentially problematic, even devastating, especially – as indicated above – when combined with particularly traumatic memories.

Another problem that Zakalwe and the Culture inhabitants face is filling such a large amount of 'extra' time generated by life-extension, in a way that is both productive and fulfilling. With fear of illness and disease removed, fear of death greatly reduced, and employment rendered entirely optional, how should one occupy a life that continues for three entire centuries or more? This could arguably leave Culture citizens with no general direction or purpose, leading to a frivolous or futile lifestyle. This is certainly a common trope of utopian fiction where – upon achieving a seemingly perfect environment where all goals are actualised, all struggles are resolved, and all conflicts silenced – life ceases to have meaning, becoming

continual *ennui*. As Arthur C. Clarke authoritatively stated in *Childhood's End* (1953), 'the supreme enemy of all Utopias – boredom.'[35] In this novel, Clarke depicts the invasion of Earth by a peaceful alien race called the Overlords who transform the planet into a kind of utopia. Some human groups feel the need to establish creative, arts-based colonies in order to avoid the perceived stagnation of their lives. Following the emigration of many humans to the 'Overmind' – essentially mass transcendence to a kind of meta-civilisation – many of the remaining humans, denied access to the Overmind, chose to commit suicide as their lives seem to have lost all meaning. In Clarke's utopia, therefore, finding purpose and fulfillment for its citizens is a serious and persistent problem.

Banks, alongside fellow utopian author Kim Stanley Robinson, has recently spoken out against the 'utopia as boring' argument, with both authors agreeing that it is often used as an anti-utopian attack from the political Right.[36] Using the Culture series, Banks directly challenges this argument, offering essentially three general life-course options for the average, non-AI, Culture citizen, which give their lives some kind of meaning and purpose: 1.) Hope to be selected for Contact or Special Circumstances and gain fulfillment knowing that you have contributed to the continuation of the Culture's (allegedly) benign imperialism; 2.) Chose to become employed in a different role – despite the lack of obligation due to the presence of the Minds and drones – often as an academic, teacher or philosopher; 3.) Indulge in a somewhat casual, lackadaisical or hedonistic lifestyle, exploiting the limitless nature of the Culture environments to their full advantage. Despite assertions by critics, such as Christopher Palmer and Bruce Gillespie, that the Culture's 'leisure and pursuit of pleasure' makes it 'an essentially decadent society', it can be argued that this is in fact positive: as Farah Mendlesohn has asserted, 'the headlong flight into hedonism and away from "reality" is the Culture's *raison d'être*, not an indication of its decline.'[37] The sheer breadth of options available in this limitless environment should not be underestimated: in the Culture, virtually any kind of lifestyle can be maintained, from safe, parochial and austere, to wild, adventurous and opulent. For many Culture citizens, life is only limited by the extent of their imagination.

Still, should anyone still feel that their life is becoming dull or purposeless, as mentioned above, Banks has stated that most Culture citizens chose to limit their lives to no more than 400 years, conceding that in the end – despite the freedom and abundance of their habitats – they would 'get bored with it. People will want to have an end.'[38] In effect, most Culture citizens still chose to die, eventually.

Death:

As long-term fans of his work will surely attest to, Banks is not a writer who shies away from depicting death and violence. Far from it in fact: his penchant for killing off characters in strange and innovative ways is well established, even in the Culture series. So, despite its manifold commitments to extending and improving life, the Culture is not against death *per se*, and death is not absent from the Culture. In his essay *A few notes on the Culture*, Banks explains the Culture's general philosophy on death: 'death is regarded as part of life, and nothing, including the universe, lasts forever. It is seen as bad manners to try and pretend that death is somehow not natural; instead death is seen as giving shape to life.'[39] Expressed in this manner, it would seem that the Culture's attitude towards death is sensible, rational and pragmatic; in fact, it is likely to reflect principles that many individuals in our societies on Earth – despite our considerably shorter lifespans and more vulnerable immune systems – would still also uphold, whether consciously or not. There are, probably, few people who would decisively state that they wished to live for*ever*, just for longer, and in better health. This is essentially the view that the Culture takes also, except that its inhabitants have the luxury of controlling their lives, as well as their deaths. When they feel the time is right, they can choose to stop the various life-extension treatments and courses of drugs, effectively ending their 'plateau period', causing their body to then age naturally and to begin the processes of fatal decline. A Culture inhabitant could, of course, still technically die from a violent incident, by unfortunate accident, or murder. Their heightened immune systems, drug-induced ignorance of pain and generally improved and toughened physiques, resulting from genetic engineering, may make this eventuality more difficult, but not impossible. So peaceful are the Culture's internal habitats that this would be very unlikely, unless resulting from an attack by a force from outside. Therefore, deaths that are depicted

in the series generally affect members of SC, who, due to the nature of their work, are more at risk of danger and violence due to their interaction with those from outside of the Culture.

Banks' short story, 'The State of the Art', published in 1991, provides further engagement with many of the issues raised in *Use of Weapons.* This story marks the return of SC employee, Dizimet Sma, this time on a mission to Earth in the 1970s to find her friend, former SC colleague and former-lover, Linter, who is part of a team that clandestinely landed on Earth, in order to perform research. The results of this research will be used to determine if Earth should be '*Contact*ed' by the Culture in the future. Linter once benefitted from the Culture's anti-ageing treatments and life-extension/-enhancement technologies, but has now chosen to have these alterations almost entirely removed or reversed, so that he can pass for an Earth-human – known as a 'human basic' – and live on Earth. Therefore, he has had to come to terms with the return to natural, gradual biological ageing, and a drastically reduced lifespan.

In a similar manner to Zakalwe and Beychae in *Use of Weapons*, Banks uses the opposing views of Sma and Linter to provide a further dialectic on the arguments for and against intervention into senescence; and the debates held operate in a manner similar to that of a Socratic dialogue. In this way, Banks reconfigures the relationship between visitor and guide of classic utopian fiction: traditionally, a 'visitor' from outside stumbles upon a utopia, and is shown around by one of its inhabitants – the 'guide' – who reveals the details of his/her peaceful realm; then the visitor returns to his/her homeland, to share the virtues of the utopia with his/her people. Instead, Sma, a human being from the Culture, can be regarded as an outsider on Earth due to both her physical enhancements far beyond the level of the human-basic people on Earth, as well as her extra-terrestrial origins; Linter is her guide, but as he is also originally an outsider who has adapted to Earth's conventions, he is not a true native of the visited land. The voice and opinions of a true Earth human are not heard, as Contact decides that their presence upon the Earth should not be made known.

Sma views Linter's decision to stay on Earth initially as unusual and, eventually, as out-rightly offensive: to her, the Culture is a symbol of progress and advancement, and Linter's decision to reject, not just the life-extension methods it offers, but the Culture as a whole, is seen as foolish, rebellious and regressive; choosing a human-basic life of comparatively rapid decline is surely madness. Over the course of several years, Sma visits her friend and notices the ways in which Linter's physiology changes: a stooped posture; a wrinkled and lined forehead; shaking and clumsy hands – all sure signs of the natural biological ageing process.

When Linter states that, 'I'm staying here on Earth. Regardless of what else might happen', Sma replies: 'Any particular reason?' Linter's reply is simple:

> Yes. I like the place…I feel alive for a change…I want to live here. I don't know how to explain it. It's alive. I'm alive. If I did die tomorrow it would have been worth it just for these last few months. I know I'm taking a risk in staying, but that's the whole point.[40]

So Linter chooses to stay on Earth as a human-basic, with all the imperfections and uncertainties that this entails; he favors a comparatively short life, with inevitable decline in later years exactly because of these imperfections and uncertainties: his constantly-blissful life in the Culture never changes; it has no urgency, and no importance. Life on Earth has ugliness as well as beauty, and by experiencing this contrast Linter is able to truly appreciate his life. While human existence on Earth is ephemeral, it means more to him, as he knows it will end sooner.

Here Linter raises existential issues concerning the nature of utopian societies themselves: How does extending life affect the *quality* of life? How would a dramatically increased lifespan alter your views on the meaning of life, the nature of humanity and your world? And, what should one *do* with all your newly created spare time? While Culture citizens have no need to work whatsoever, they are free to do so as little or as much as they want. If they do chose to work, then they can chose a job that is interesting, satisfying and creative. In the case of Zakalwe and Sma, this interesting, satisfying work is with SC. As mentioned above, for those who are not

selected for SC, the various environments of the Culture offer a seemingly-limitless range of possibilities, often geared towards hedonistic pursuits: partaking in a variety of extreme sports; playing elaborate games, both in highly-realistic virtual reality environments, or in the material world; inter-planetary 'sightseeing', whilst travelling around the galaxy; indulging in mind-expanding drugs, with no possibility of addiction; or enjoying risk-free sexual freedom.

The transient nature of life on Earth is made apparent when – with a heavy irony that is typical of Banks – during Sma's last day on Earth, several men attempt to mug Linter, fatally wounding him. After stabbing Linter, his attackers flee, leaving him with Sma, who is anxious to persuade Linter to allow her, or some Culture drones who have been monitoring the situation, to intervene to attempt to save his life: 'Linter spun around, letting go of my elbow, I turned quickly. Linter held up one hand and said – did not shout – something I didn't catch."[41] Linter's actions imply that, when he becomes aware that his death is immanent, he accepts his fate stoically. The gesture of raising his hand would seem to indicate a 'stop' motion, signaling that he does not want her or the Culture drones to intervene. Sma indicates that it would be simple for her or the drones to save him by swiftly returning him to a Culture spacecraft; but Linter stands by his decision to live as naturally as possible, choosing to die a final, absolute death, rather than be resuscitated – 'revented' – by the Culture; a process that implicitly could be performed endlessly.

Immortality:

In the preface to the comprehensive critical volume, *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction,* Eric S. Rabkin discusses the prevalence of the theme of immortality in various narratives throughout human history; and he remarks upon the ways in which scientific progress and technological development have changed our conceptions of immortality:

> The need has emerged, therefore, to recontextualize the subject of immortality, continuing to examine its influence as an ancient aspiration

> while at the same time considering new scientific advances and their impact on life and literature.[42]

As well as the potentials for life-extension and life-enhancement offered by the Culture, and the various options available to control bodily death, their mastery of technoscientific advances provide Culture inhabitants with the means to continue living eternally (theoretically), in one of two basic forms. Firstly, a Culture citizen may chose simply never to allow their body to die: by replacing cells, tissues, organs and other physical components vital for life as necessary; continually halting the biological ageing process; and avoiding fatal conflicts of any kind.

Alongside these methods of rejuvenescence, Banks incorporates a further piece of related, speculative technology into his texts, which has a profound effect on the lives (and deaths) of the Culture inhabitants, and other civilizations in their galaxy: Soulkeepers. [43]An individual can have their personality and memories – what Bank calls their 'soul', in a non-religious sense – up until that moment, captured and saved as digital information, known as 'backing up'; this information is so accurate that, after death, the individual's soul can be reconstituted (or 'revented') back into the individual's body, or into another body altogether: effectively resurrected. The process of backing up is often performed automatically at regular intervals using a device called a 'neural lace': 'it [a neural lace] looked like a small bunch of very fine wires, their color a sort of dull matt silver with a hint of blue',[44] which 'started as a seed' that grows 'all around and into'[45] its user's brain; it 'beds in over the years, gets very adept at mirroring every detail of the mind it interpenetrates and coexists with'[46] – a kind of Cyborg enhancement that can effectively save the soul like a computer file. Soulkeeper technology, therefore, renders the prospect of immortality via constant revention possible.

As well as this potential for physical immortality offered by Soulkeeper technology, there are other options available for the individual's soul, one of which is revention into an entirely virtual reality (VR). As Banks outlines, the development of VR environments almost indistinguishable from the (corpo)real world is an important component of the Culture:

> The dozen or so civilizations which would eventually go on to form the Culture had […] spent vast fortunes to make virtual reality as palpably real […] as possible. […] the level of accuracy and believability exhibited as a matter of course by the virtual environments available on demand to any Culture citizen had been raised to such a pitch of perfection that it had long been necessary – at the most profoundly saturative level of manufactured-environment manipulation – to introduce synthetic cues into the experience just to remind the subject that what appeared to be real really wasn't.[47]

These VR environments are often used in similar circumstances to the less-sophisticated versions in our own world – elaborate games and immersive fantasy scenarios for purposes of entertainment; recreations of wars, and combat/reconnaissance missions used in military training; and simulations of difficult/emergency scenarios used for training pilots, drivers, etc. – albeit with a distinctly higher level of verisimilitude. In the texts *Look to Windward* and *Surface Detail*, however, VR is put to a much more interesting and controversial use.

The Chelgrian race, with whom much of *Look to Windward* is concerned, have created – or *re*created – a version of their religion's afterlife in a virtual space, literally building their own heaven: 'They made matter of fact what had until then required an act of faith to believe in,' and 'when a Chelgrian died, their Soulkeeper device was the bridge that carried them across the afterlife.'[48]In his later Culture novel, *Surface Detail,* Banks develops the idea of virtual afterlives further: in this novel, the Culture is involved in a war with several civilisations over the existence of 'hells' in virtual reality: a vast network of realms that (re)create a kind of postmodern bricolage of depictions of infernal realms from various sources. Also, by reflecting a similar kind of network or web-like logic to that of the Culture but inverting its utopian nature to become distinctly *dys*topian, Banks allows these virtual hells to form a mirror image of the Culture itself.

These virtual hells provide a very real threat of eternal pain and suffering after death. The Culture regards this as no different from torture or cruelty in any other

manner, and is committed to destroying the 'substrates' – computer hardware – that enables the computer-simulated hells to exist. This war is occurring in the Real world, and inside the computer simulations themselves, simultaneously.

One of *Surface Detail*'s protagonists, Vatueil, is an SC operative who is killed many times and reincarnated into various different virtual realms, whilst on reconnaissance for the Culture. Once his mission is finally completed, as a reward his Virtual soul is released from SC command, and 'revented' into a fresh body in the Real world. The very last word of the novel reveals that Vatueil is actually a manifestation of *Use of Weapons*' protagonist, Zakalwe, all along, who has been continuing his work for SC. (Exactly which manifestation of this character is left ambiguous: is it a version of the militant but ultimately kind Cheradenine Zakalwe from prior to his murder, or it his sadistic brother Elethiomel?[49] Maybe it could even be a version of Cheradenine from *before* his own murder, resurrected into virtual space.) After his latest SC mission is completed, Vatueil/Zakalwe is yet again revented into physical space. In this manner, Banks's eternal mercenary, through a complex pattern of birth, life-extension, death, and reincarnation (both in corporeal and virtual realms), has experienced almost every variation of existence that the Culture universe has to offer. Zakalwe's life, with its cycle of 'death' and resurrection, implies that it would be theoretically possible for this process to continue endlessly: as long as the individual's soul were to be backed up regularly, and their soul or Soulkeeper was not damaged, then the individual could live a form of immortal existence, either through revention into fresh, young bodies, or a Virtual existence. But this concept is problematic: does existence in a virtual, non-physical environment really constitute living? Would one still be the same person, after just one resurrection, let alone after an endless cycle of them?

Ultimately, Banks's (and the Culture's) stance seems to be anti-immortality, stating that, 'In the Culture you can live forever, if you want to, but do you really want to live for ever? Living forever you take up a lot of real estate – people end for ecological reasons.'[50]

Conclusion:

As Teresa Mangum states, 'one finds it more rather than less difficult at the turn of this last century to draw clear distinctions among bioethics, social policy proposals, and science *fiction.*'[51] The Twenty-First century could prove to be a crucial pivot point for our understanding of the human ageing process. Advances in science and technology move us slowly but steadily closer to making the worlds of SF feasible. The gap between speculation and reality is closing. According to SF scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, JR, already 'the world has grown into sf.'[52]

Whether our world could ever grow into something like that of the Culture is debatable; whether we would want it to, equally so. The conclusions we can draw from Banks' Culture novels about the merits and disadvantages of extended life and immortality ultimately reveal just as much about attitudes and developments that exist currently, in the Twenty-First century, as they do about possible futures. Banks' novels foreground the benefits of technological advancement but also raise some ethical concerns. If science and technology in our world continue progressing at such speed, then these ethical, moral and philosophical issues raised by Banks will no longer belong solely in the speculative realms of futuristic SF, but will need to be acknowledged and addressed in the real world, and soon. While the very nature of the Culture is predicated on a humanistic system of scientific progress and technological development, the results of which are shown to dramatically increase the quality of life for many people (as well as the length of life), the novels also highlight the ways in which technology can be detrimental for society. Banks extrapolates these developments that are an inevitable, and perhaps essential, part of our society, showing that if used carefully, these advancements may well enhance the lives of many people in various ways; but that the prospects for exploitation and manipulation are just as real.

Endnotes

[1] *The Academy of Medical Sciences: Rejuvenating Ageing Research.* September 2009. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/iha/events/AMS_report (Accessed 07/01/2011). 23.

[2] Harry R. Moody. *Aging: Concepts and Controversies.* California: Pine Forge Press, 2010. 16.

[3] See 'New Space Opera' in Roger Luckhurst, *Science Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005. Pp.222-230.

[4] Quote obtained from the back cover of HarperCollins paperback edition, 2009.
[5] George Slusser, Gary Westfahl, Eric S. Rabkin, ed. *Immortal Engines: Life Extension and Immortality in Science Fiction and Fantasy.* (University of Georgia Press: Georgia, 1996) viii.
[6] Moody. 19.
[7] Ibid. 16.
[8] Banks, *'A few notes on the Culture',* 1994. This essay, published only online, has never contained page numbers. http://www.vavatch.co.uk/books/banks/cultnote.htm (accessed 02/06/12).
[9] Ibid. 'There are thousands of alterations to that human-basic inheritance - blister-free callusing and a clot-filter protecting the brain are two of the less important ones mentioned in the stories.'
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid. 'The major changes the standard Culture person would expect to be born with would include an optimized immune system and enhanced senses, freedom from inheritable diseases or defects, the ability to control their autonomic processes and nervous system (pain can, in effect, be switched off), and to survive and fully recover from wounds which would either kill or permanently mutilate without such genetic tinkering.'
[12] Moody. 85.
[13] Banks, *'A few notes…'*
[14] Ibid.
[15] Iain M. Banks. *The Player of Games*. London: MacMillan, 1989. 11.
[16] Moody. 17.
[17] 'Can we live forever?: the social and biological challenges of ageing'. DVD. Brunel University. 2010.
[18] Ibid.
[19] *The Academy of Medical Sciences: Rejuvenating Ageing Research.* 25.
[20] Ibid. 25. Addition my own.
[21] *The Academy of Medical Sciences: Rejuvenating Ageing Research.* 31.
[22] Iain M. Banks, *Use of Weapons.* 114. Abbreviated to *UoW* henceforth.
[23] Ibid. 30.
[24] Ibid. 30.
[25] Ibid. 83.
[26] Ibid.129; 26-29.
[27] Ibid. 27.
[28] Ibid. 26-27.
[29] Ibid. 26.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid. 21.
[32] Ibid. 216.
[33] Ibid. 217.
[34] Ibid. 248.
[35] Arthur C. Clarke. *Childhood's End* (1953). http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/utopias.
[36] 'Iain M. Banks and Kim Stanley Robinson in conversation'; Saturday 9th July 2012, British Library event.
[37] Farah Mendlesohn. 'The Dialectic of Decadence and Utopia in Iain M. Bank's Culture Novels.' *Foundation: The International Journal of Science Fiction*, 2005; 93 (4?); Vol:34; no.1. pp. 116- 124. 116.
[38] Iain M. Banks, guestion and answer session. The Roundhouse, London. Wednesday 06/10/12.
[39] Banks, *A few notes.*
[40] Banks. *The State of the Art*. 129; 136.
[41] Ibid. 196.
[42] Slusser, Westfahl, Rabkin. viii
[43] Banks, *Look to Windward*. 166.
[44] *Surface Detail.* 109.
[45] *Surface Detail.* 111.
[46] *Surface Detail.* 78.
[47] LTW. 351.
[48] Ibid. 166.

[49] Although the fact that, in the final scene of the novel, Zakalwe is awaiting the arrival of a poet friend, and that, whilst waiting, he ponders the poetic qualities of some of his thoughts, strongly implies that he is Cheradenine and not Elethiomel. 626-627.
[50] Ibid. The Roundhouse. 06/10/12.
[51] *Longing for Life Extension: Science Fiction and Later Life*. Teresa Mangum. Journal of Aging and Identity, vol 7, No.2, June 2002, 2002. 80.
[52] 171; Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, JR, *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan University Press: Middletown, 2008. 1.