'Inside the Whale and Outside Context Problems'

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Iain M. Banks's Culture series has achieved immense popularity with readers around the world and in the eyes of many science fiction critics was part of a broader renewal of the possibilities of space opera, an often disregarded and devalued area of contemporary literature and perhaps even of scholarship on sf. Along the way this collection of works has raised both fascinating political questions and the standard of what readers might expect of the genre, combining as it does imaginative energy, linguistic exuberance and a good deal of humour along with the galaxy-spanning adventures. The non-linear series was also notable for its capacity to generate compelling new stories while simultaneously deepening its engagement with the complexities of the Culture as a civilisation. The contention of this article is that Banks's 1996 novel *Excession* marks a key stage in the literary development of the Culture as a fictional social formation, one that demonstrates the newly-expanded possibilities of space opera to explore and extend fundamental aspects of sf. This entails a re-examination of the novel's complex handling of spatiality and inside/outside and political dimensions of Banks's writing.

There are a number of reasons why *Excession* might merit particular attention in scholarly approaches to Banks's sf: the novel was something of a return to the Culture after sf novels *Against a Dark Background* (published in 1993, although reworked from a version written in the 1970s) and *Feersum Enjinn* (1994) the winner of the British Science Fiction Association Award. Another reason is that Culture novels generally stage encounters in which the Culture is markedly more powerful than the groups it meets; as Patricia Kerslake puts it in her book *Science Fiction and Empire* (2007) "In almost all cases these other societies are less technologically advanced..." (176). This oeuvre context has meant that *Excession* has been a significant reference point in a number of debates, such as those set out by Chris Brown (2001) and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and James Heilman (2008), around how far the Culture as a totality might be regarded politically, especially in its actions

towards other species and societies. Even the fearsome Idirans in the first published Culture novel *Consider Phlebas* (1987) soon discover they cannot match the Culture's military power. In *Excession* however the Culture encounters an entity, the Excession, capable of manipulating space-time in ways far beyond the comprehension of the stunned ships who witness it.

So *Excession* arguably inaugurates a movement within the Culture novels toward the Culture being revealed as a smaller, younger and less powerful civilisation than hitherto suspected either by the Culture's humanoid and AI members or, just as significantly, by the books' readers. My purpose here is to consider how we might read this 'turn' in terms of genre and politics, and to situate it within the wider contexts of both the Culture as a fictional project and Banks's relation to his political and historical milieu. While other Culture novels have inspired productive political readings connecting Banks's work to his historical situation, including the Gulf War (Duggan, 2007), 9/11 (Stephenson) or the West Bank (Duggan, 2013), *Excession* offers us a very detailed picture of how we might understand the Culture by placing it in a unfamilair context of relative scientific ignorance. The kind of reading I am proposing draws on the sensitive spatial analysis of sf conducted in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) and builds on the work of James Kneale (2013) who draws attention to the "geographical imagination" (45) evident in Banks's fiction. In the light of these insights, I will examine how *Excession* handles the distinction between inside and outside, how it returns to the idea of being enfolded within something, and the philosophical, political and somatic qualities of such enfolding.

Excession was published not long after the appearance of 'A Few Notes on the Culture' (1994a), Banks's comprehensive essay on the Culture's workings and systems that is such a useful resource to his readers, and I think we can trace important continuities between the novel and the essay, so that we might read *Excession* as staging in a dramatic, literary way many of the significant points made about the Culture in 'A Few Notes'. This novel may be the literary expression of the Culture that is closest to the descriptive one outlined in 'A Few Notes', therefore offering a mature reflection on what the Culture had grown into as a creative project spanning many years of writing. This sense that *Excession* might express the core of

what the Culture is and does also figures in Farah Mendlesohn's perceptive evaluation of *Excession* in *A Companion to Science Fiction* (2005), where she makes a claim for the novel's centrality to Banks's oeuvre:

> While there are other novels that compete for the title of best Culture novel (*Use of Weapons* may be the most politically sophisticated, and its structure the most impressive), *Excession* epitomizes much of what I have outlined above. It is the most *classic*, the most archetypal in its revisioning of space opera; the most ambitious in its portrayal of a complex political society; and the most successful in its linguistic display and reconfiguration of the space opera baroque and in the immersive techniques of extrapolative fiction. (Mendlesohn 2005: 557-8)

Excession thus forms an archetype of what Banks's brand of reengineered space opera will offer, and its ambition on several fronts is palpable. Mendlesohn conveys the substantial nature of the book as a literary achievement and in her outline of the novel quoted above there are a number of points that might be elaborated on at greater length. The first of these is her use of the term '*classic*', which she goes on to develop in relation to a faith in humanity's future among the stars that she identifies in Banks's work and that has been a longstanding feature of space opera. *Excession* however may be 'classic' in other ways too, and Fredric Jameson's discussion of Vonda McIntyre's 1975 post-apocalyptic novel *The Exile in Waiting* offers one such avenue of inquiry. In a chapter entitled 'Science fiction as a spatial genre', Jameson conducts a meticulous examination of McIntyre's use of space in the novel and how the varying manipulations of spatiality in the narrative may point to a fundamental quality of all sf:

> If, as I believe, all SF of the more "classical" type is "about" containment, closure, the dialectic of inside and outside, then the generic distinction between those texts and others that have come to be called "fantasy"[...] will also be a spatial one, in which these last are seen as open-air meadow texts of various kinds. (Jameson 2005: 312)

Jameson's argument that classic sf proceeds from a profound preoccupation with containment and inside/outside is particularly pertinent to *Excession*'s treatment of the limits of the Culture's collective power and knowledge, and the attempts of its Minds to think outside their habitual terms of reference. Delight in the expansion and decline of galactic empires has a been staple of space opera for decades, and as Ken McLeod has noted, the parabolic quality of such fictional empires offers food for thought when reflecting on the transformation of polities.[i] Which is to say that a corollary to *Excession*'s classic-ness may be its sustained engagement and self-conscious play with inside/outside as a constitutive element of its generic identity.

Excession

  Excession's Prologue introduces the reader to Dajeil Gelian, a woman in the fortieth year of her pregnancy who lives aboard a ship which we learn is the enigmatic Culture vessel *Sleeper Service*. The narrative will by instalments reveal the motivation behind the delaying of her child's birth, and her relationship with Byr Genar-Hofoen, a Culture ambassador among the sadistically-inclined species the Affront. Chapter One however switches focus from this human-scale story to the appearance of a strange object in a little visited part of the galaxy, that having come to the attention of the Elencher spaceship *Peace Makes Plenty* now seems to be destroying it with astonishing speed. By the time a group of Culture ships have decided to investigate this unusual appearance, the Elencher craft has disappeared and their quarry has taken a motionless, uncommunicative position that only increases the mystery. This entity or machine has connections to the energy grid that the Culture has never seen before and had long considered impossible, and so becomes an object of intense fascination. The artefact becomes the focus of a secret plot to foment war between the Culture and the Affront, a generally cruel species and one of Banks's more consistently repellent groups, and the novel devotes a lot of space to communication between ship Minds, as opposed to humans and droids. The obscure object of scientific interest is what the culture calls an excession:

> Excession; that was what the Culture called such things. It had become a
> pejorative term and so the Elench didn't use it normally, except sometimes
> informally, amongst themselves. Excession; something excessive. Excessively

aggressive, excessively powerful, excessively expansionist; whatever. (Banks 1996:93)

The excessive qualities described here are quite negative ones, and the term itself is explicitly identified as 'pejorative', suggesting a clear normative social order threatened by (antisocial) excess of different kinds, by something external to that order. This fairly simple initial definition of an excession however, with its emphasis on aggression, power and expansionism, will give way to an experience that is far more challenging for the Culture and that leads to critical self-analysis and a re-examination of the Culture's sense of itself and its place in the universe.

The Excession, through its excessive relation to the Culture's model of the universe, is therefore an Outside Context Problem, as the novel explains:

An Outside Context Problem was the sort of thing most civilisations encountered just once, and which they tended to encounter rather in the same way a sentence encountered a full stop. The usual example given to illustrate an Outside Context Problem was imagining you were a tribe on a largish, fertile island; you'd tamed the land, invented the wheel or writing or whatever, the neighbours were cooperative or enslaved but at any rate peaceful and you were busy raising temples to yourself with all the excess productive capacity you had, you were in a position of near-absolute power and control which your hallowed ancestors could hardly have dreamed of and the whole situation was just running along nicely like a canoe on wet grass... when suddenly this bristling lump of iron appears sailless and trailing steam in the bay and these guys carrying long funny-looking sticks come ashore and announce you've just been discovered, you're all subjects of the Emperor now, he's keen on presents called tax and these bright-eyed holy men would like a word with your priests.(Banks 1996: 71-2) [ellipsis in original]

Having brought the full-stop to the reader's attention as a marker of destructive closure and potential extinction at the beginning of the section, Banks then playfully extends the following sentence far beyond his typical length. The colonial analogy used is surprisingly terrestrial and is based on a significant technological gap, but

perhaps more importantly hints at the problem of the outside context itself; the sudden awareness that an outside context about which one knows nothing *even exists at all* is part of the shock of the disorientating encounter. The specifically territorial aspect of this archetypal imperial encounter (which perhaps owes a little to Banks's experience of Sid Meir's computer game *Civilization[ii]*), is crucial, and part of a broader pattern of spatial argument and metaphor within the novel. The moment of colonial encounter centres on geographical exploration coupled with political domination and economic exploitation and includes the 'civilising mission' of challenging 'native' ways of life. The charge of cannibalism was historically a useful plank in the rhetorical justification of the 'pacification' of resisting groups. However, as Marina Warner argues:

> That imagery of forbidden ingestion masked other powerful longings and fears – about mingling and hybridity, about losing definition, about swallowing and being swallowed – fears about a future loss of identity, about the changes that history itself brings. (Warner 1994: np)

Warner here draws attention to the potential pleasures and desires, as well as the anxieties, around ingestion and incorporation. Indeed the long discourse around cannibalism during the nineteenth century can be seen as an almost perverse reversal of the forced incorporation of independent territories and peoples into a European imperial context. More recently, the South African-set sf film *District 9* (Blomkamp 2009) deploys the motif of cannibalism, most blatantly in the figure of the Nigerian gangster boss in the aliens' camp who threatens to eat the protagonist to gain his power. However the film also requires the viewer to ask how far the South African authorities, with their keen interest in the protagonist's physical metamophosis and his consequent ability to use alien technology, are different to the gangster boss in their desire to 'incoporate' alien weapons and power into their military-industrial complex. As I will go on to show, *Excession* has a sustained focus on the experience of entities at the borders of (in)corporality.

The potential reversability of host/invader, civilised/savage roles was apparent early on in the Culture series and is at its most prominent in *The Player of Games*

(1989, first published 1988) in which the Culture protagonist Gurgeh seeks to win the game of Azad and end the regime's hegemony:

> Empires had fallen to barbarians before, and no doubt would again. Gurgeh knew all this from his childhood. Culture children were taught such things. The barbarians invade, and are taken over. Not always; some empires dissolve and cease, but many absorb; many take the barbarians in and end up conquering them. They make them live like the people they set out to take over. The architecture of the system channels them, beguiles them, seduces and transforms them, demanding from them what they could not before have given but slowly grow to offer. The empire survives, the barbarians survive, but the empire is no more and the barbarians are nowhere to be found.
> (Banks 1999: 276)

This narrative of mutual transformation is placed in opposition to a conventional one of victory in colonial conquest or defeat at the hand of invaders, and offers a more complex account of historical change. Whereas the Culture (and its readers) has been accustomed to it occupying the position, if not exactly performing the role, of the powerful imperium, in *Excession* it is placed, perhaps for the first time, in the position of the ignorant barbarian. The colonial aspect to the encounter with the Excession is developed throughout the novel and is reinforced further near the end when the Culture ship *Fate Amenable to Change* contemplates its new status:

> Unbelievable. I'm in a fucking Outside Context situation, the ship thought, and suddenly felt as stupid and dumb-struck as any muddy savage confronted with explosives or electricity. (Banks 1996: 386)

Banks, who has in interview described the Minds when faced with the Excession as responding like 'barbarian kings presented with the promise of gold in the hills' (Brown 2001: 633), here presents the emotional shock technological gaps can inflict and the reader is invited to marvel at the humbling of something so advanced accomplished through moving it outside its comfort zone.

Mendlesohn's praise for the 'immersive techniques' deployed in *Excession* quoted above may be another aspect of the novel that suggests further questions. If immersion in the texture and colour of the lives of the characters is something at which Banks has excelled, then it might also be the case that immersion/emersion can have a broader thematic significance within Banks's novels in general and *Excession* in particular. Jameson's claim for the importance of spatiality for sf points to the significant political dimensions that accompany 'classic' sf's handling and coding of interior and exterior space(s), and as I discuss below, *Excession* can be read as a rich contemporary example of the intellectual fecundity of space-opera manipulations of inside/outside. To follow the novel's recurrent meditations on immersion and its metaphoric power is also to place it within a political discourse on the relationship between the writer and their political context, and the sometimes contradictory work of a British critic and writer whose own foray into science fiction is commonly regarded as deeply implicated in the politics of his time.

Inside the Whale

'Inside the Whale' is the title of a long essay by George Orwell that appeared in 1940, and that for most of its length is a commentary on the work of the American novelist Henry Miller whom Orwell met in Paris on his way to Spain to fight in the Civil War. Orwell discusses Miller's use of the image of being inside the whale, and adapts it to a description of finding oneself at a particular point in history inside a mass social formation that one is powerless to control. Responding to existence 'inside the whale', some writers will abandon themselves to the whale's motion and to the impersonal force of historical change and instead focus on the self in isolation from its environment. Miller is just such a writer for Orwell but perhaps surprisingly for someone with his political credentials, Orwell regards Miller's apparently quietist position as a comprehensible and in fact predictable reaction to Europe's seemingly unstoppable descent into war. Raymond Williams in his book on Orwell (1971) has grappled with the apparent contraction in Orwell's thought about the writer's role in relation to their political milieu, and connects 'Inside the Whale' to the apparent pessimism of his dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> There is a clear line, certainly from 'Inside the Whale' and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to an orthodox North Atlantic mood in which all humane and positive

beliefs, especially a belief in radical change, were recognised in advance either as the projection of some personal or social maladjustment, or as an inexperienced, naïve, adolescent idealism[…] (Williams 1971: 86)

Williams comes to the conclusion that antagonistic tendencies to promote change on the one hand and to give up on the possibility of change on the other, in "generalised swearing" (Williams 1971: 89), can be found throughout the different phases of Orwell's writing career. It is interesting to speculate how far such contradictions might be at work in the quite specific swearing about contemporary politics found in mainstream works by Banks such as *Dead Air* and *The Quarry*, however that lies outside the scope of this article. Orwell in the essay makes clear the upside to living inside the whale, not caring about what goes outside:

For the fact is that being inside a whale is a very comfortable, cosy, homelike thought. The historical Jonah, if he can be so called, was glad enough to escape, but in imagination, in day-dream, countless people have envied him. It is, of course, quite obvious why. The whale's belly is simply a womb big enough for an adult. There you are, in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens. (Orwell 2000: 107)

There is a seductive quality about being inside the whale, about being held, powerless, but perhaps protected, inside a larger structure away from the chaos outside. Being incorporated into the whale is a return to the womb and a transition into a comfortable cradling free from responsibilities.

The Culture novels have long been sensitive to the different aspects of cradling and security provided to Culture citizens by the Minds in particular and advanced technology, from the management of defence forces, energy sources and Orbitals to the personal protection offered by soulsavers and knife missiles. Banks's books also frequently focus on what we might term the somatic experience of being enfolded, giving readers quite precise descriptions of what it feels like for a human-type character to be encased inside a protective suit, or submerged in a liquid

environment inside a fast-moving ship, to be covered or shielded by a machine, or getting used to an living inside an unfamiliar body. The narratives often complement the sense of protection with one of powerlessness, with human characters sometimes experiencing what are in the context irrational but instinctive fears of suffocation or of being crushed. The nefarious Colonel Agansu in the final Culture novel *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012) has a number of such experiences including connecting himself to the digitized command centre of a spaceship while his body lies immobile, and uploading a copy of his consciousness into a combat arbite (a kind of military robot). The converse disorienting sensation of floating in a volume without structure, as experienced by humans spending time living in a gas giant planet, is described as "swim" in *The Algebraist* (2004) (see Kneale 2013: 59).

Upon finding themselves inside the huge whale, some people will abandon themselves to this powerful vector, lie back, stop worrying and enjoy the ride. Others will seek to understand their position inside the whale, and are interested in what lies beyond its borders. If we are inclined to read the Culture as having potential to be a comfortable leviathan of this kind, it is also important to notice how often the novels focus on those at the fringes of the Culture, including Special Circumstances, Eccentrics both organic and inorganic, exiles of different kinds, the Ulterior, etc. Going back *Consider Phlebas*, the first of the Culture books to be published (although by no means the first to be written, as meticulous research by David Haddock, editor of *The Banksonian* has shown) it seems apparent that as readers we actually started 'outside' the Culture, following the travails of a character we only gradually realise is working for the wrong side. This playful misdirection shows how far the Culture is presented to readers not as a permanently infallible good but as something to be contested and argued over, something evinced by *Excession*'s presentation of the various protracted discussions between the Minds over how to respond to the excession and to the Affront.

Outside the box

In her investigation of *Excession*, Mendlesohn contrasts Banks's Culture novels to the capitalist frameworks of both earlier forms of space opera and Cyberpunk:

Banks refused to accept the inevitability of capitalism posited by Cyberpunk and earlier space opera [...] SF mostly reflects the social and economic mores of the contemporary world – it is actually very difficult to think outside the box – but in this one area, Banks simply disposed of the box. His space operas take place in a postscarcity society which, while currently unavailable to us, is perhaps the one vision that is still within our grasp [...] (Mendlesohn 2005: 556-7)

Mendlesohn's comments suggest that Banks has bypassed the tricky matter of how a capitalist society like ours might develop into something like the Culture, and gone straight to the postscarcity civilisation where money no longer exists. Her use of the term 'to think outside the box' is however replete with significance in relation to *Excession* as the novel is preoccupied with attempts 'to think outside the box' both at the level of characters' experiences of their own frames of reference being challenged and the novel's repeated recourse to spatiality and metaphors of containment to explain how transformation occurs. The encounter with a powerful Other that is beyond comprehension has been a key feature of sf for generations but *Excession* is remarkable for the spatial quality of the action and its metaphoric dimensions. This is evident in the book's description of the impact of the discovery of higher mathematics or 'metamatics' on civilisations:

It was like living half your life in a tiny, stuffy, warm grey box, and being moderately happy in there because you knew no better and then discovering a little hole in one corner of the box, a tiny opening which you could get a finger into, and tease and pull at, so that eventually you created a tear, which led to a greater tear, which led to the box falling apart around you so that you stepped out of the tiny box's confines into startlingly cool, clear fresh air and found yourself on top of a mountain, surrounded by deep valleys, sighing forests, soaring peaks, glittering lakes, sparkling snowfields and a stunning, breathtakingly blue sky. And that, of course, wasn't even the start of the real story, that was more like the breath that is drawn in before the first syllable of the first word of the first paragraph of the first chapter of the first book of the first volume of the story. (Banks 1996: 138-9)

Like the colonial definition of an Outside Context Problem quoted above, Banks again uses a long lyrical sentence, delaying the full stop but the mood is almost the complete reverse of the previous painful disorientation experienced through contact with the outside. Here, scientific pursuit of 'higher forms' of knowledge is unmistakably coded as positive, conveying liberation, enlightenment and possibility. The revelation of the world beyond the spatial dimensions of our immediate perception is, as the novel's plotting confirms, the beginning of a new story.

Spatial enfolding has a particular history in science fiction and the genre's interest in dimensions and space. Edwin A. Abbott's 1884 novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (2010) is famous for introducing the concept of higher dimensions. Its narrator, Square, is a two-dimensional entity living in a society of 2D shapes who is visited in a dream by an entity called Sphere and told of another dimension (Spaceland) in which 3D objects exist. *Excession*'s detailed description of hyperspace initially follows the template set out in *Flatland*:

> The usual way to explain it was by analogy; this was how the idea was introduced to you as a child. Imagine you were travelling through space and you came to this planet which was very big and almost perfectly smooth and on which there lived creatures who were composed of one layer of atoms; in effect, two-dimensional. These creatures would be born, live and die like us and they might well possess genuine intelligence. They would, initially, have no idea or grasp of the third dimension, but they would be able to live perfectly well in their two dimensions. To them, a line would be like a wall across their world (or, from the end, it would look like a point). An unbroken circle would be like a locked room. (Banks 1996: 269)

Thus far Banks follows Abbott's scenario, but then Banks reworks Flatland's plot development so that instead of Abbott's narrative having Flatland's inhabitants visited by 'higher powers' and inspired to think of a higher dimension, Banks's hypothetical 2D beings *work out for themselves* that they live in a 3D universe:

> Perhaps, if they were able to build machines which allowed them to journey at great speed along the surface of their planet – which to them would be their

universe – they would go right round the planet and come back to where they had started from. More likely, they would be able to work this out from theory. Either way, they would realise that their universe was both closed, and curved, and that there was, in fact, a third dimension, even if they had no practical access to it. Being familiar with the idea of circles, they would probably christen the shape of their universe a 'hypercircle' rather than inventing a new word. The three-dimensional people would, of course, call it a sphere. (Banks 1996: 269)

Excession's endorsement of this hopeful idea of life-forms being able through science to look beyond their own order of things, to theorise and speculate about the outside context, is of course complicated by the fact that the visit of the Excession, while uncommunicative, does share certain features with the angelic qualities of Abbott's Sphere.[iii] Abbott's series of different dimensions sequentially enclosing one other (Spaceland, Flatland, Lineland, Pointland) may also be an ancestor of Banks's description in 'A Few Notes on the Culture' of how our understanding of spatiality forms the basis for the Culture stories' use of higher dimensions:

> We accept that the three dimensions of space we live in are curved, that space-time describes a hypersphere, just as the two dimensions of length and width on the surface of a totally smooth planet curve in a third dimension to produce a three-dimensional sphere. In the Culture stories, the idea is that – when you imagine the hypersphere which is our expanding universe – rather than thinking of a growing hollow sphere (like an inflating beach-ball, for example), think of an onion. (Banks 1994a, np)

This beguiling onion-model image of a series of higher dimensions folded inside one another anticipates both the shellworld of *Matter*, with its concentric strata and literalised 'spheres of influence' and the multiverse of *Transition* (2009) through which its characters travel (and which of course has its own horizons).

Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox's *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction* (2008) begins with a Preface entitled 'Inside and Out' in which the editors reflect on their experience of airport security and control as an index of the political

conditions of their historical moment. *Excession*'s sustained exploration of inside and out partakes of the politics of its moment and can be viewed in the light of Jameson's analysis of how sf novels can manipulate

> our sense of the dialectic of inside and outside, reducing this dialectic (which might also have meant warmth and shelter, say, or miniature comforts after the terror of infinite spaces) to an asphyxiated condition from which one must escape at all costs. I would argue that the function of this kind of episode is precisely to inflect our reading of space, and to program us (or cue us) to the desired system of responses (in this case, emergence into the open is positive, while the logic of the closed or the interior entails [psychological] shrinkage, contraction and constraint). I am assuming then that there are no 'natural' responses to or evaluations of space; that it is not nature, but culture and history, which determine the reading of the inside/outside dialectic at any given moment (but this is why, in a complex and sedimented historical culture like our own, the writer has to have a formal freedom to nudge us this way rather than that) (Jameson 2005: 309-10)

The dynamic, or in Jameson's terms the dialectic, between inside/outside, becomes in *Excession* a complex series of higher dimensions folded into one another, so that a civilisation may solve one set of problems but another outside context will appear, setting off a new cycle of self-evaluation and waiting to be explored. This spatial arrangement means that the Culture novels collectively avoid closure, which Jameson sees as a recurrent problem in utopian sf, and instead Banks keeps "the great galactic civilisational game" (Banks 1996: 87) on the road, avoiding the full stop. Space (and spatiality) provide new outside contexts to be amazed by and Banks's use of the expanding onion might be a useful image of how the different Culture novels work collectively, that is not as a strictly linear sequence but as journeys into new contexts and new problems, so that the most recent (and very sadly, the final) novel in the series *The Hydrogen Sonata* is also about the beginnings of the Culture. *Excession* does not stage an outside as a resource to be enjoyed as liberation, put rather posits it as a horizon of possibility that may help us to understand our position inside the whale a little better, to make its confines a little clearer and to imagine a different future.

If *Excession*, to follow Jameson's model, tends through its complex use of space and manipulation of sentence lengths to cue its readers to respond to exteriority and openness in positive ways, it also important to acknowledge that to read the Culture novels is not quite to encounter the preaching of a higher dimension of truth, as happens in Abbott's *Flatland*. Instead the people of the Culture, including ship Minds, themselves become of aware their limited horizons, and the limitations of life inside *their* whale. The failure of the Culture to persuade this emissary to have any more do with it is significant, as the coda shows some Minds are correct in thinking that the Excession believes the social orders it has observed are too undeveloped and unstable to be directly communicated with. What is perhaps more significant is that at least some Culture minds already suspect this inadequacy and are aware but not necessarily complacent about how the encounter with the Excession has highlighted their own imperfection.

If the earlier two quotes from *Excession* about higher dimensions are remarkable for their sentence length, then Banks's strategy of stretching sentences beyond the usual dimensions reaches its culmination in the novel's Epilogue. This final unnumbered page of lower-case text appears to be a report by the Excession itself, accounting for its actions and claiming that the events set in motion by its appearance show 'a fundamental unreadiness' on the part of the Culture and its peers to contact entities from higher dimensions. The sometimes cryptic stream-of-consciousness text, redolent of modernist experimentation but also of *Feersum Endjinn*'s creative idiom, leaves commas and full stops behind completely and comes up with its own aporia in its repeated use of '[no translation]', hinting at things beyond the capacity of (this) language to represent. Banks's novel persistently stimulates his readers to think about possibilities of higher dimensions, and to dream of life outside the whale.

What is so typical of Banks's talent for space opera is his capacity to weave together stories that take place at the level of a few individuals with narratives that span the galaxy and encompass whole civilisations, and that talent to bridge different scales is very much in evidence in *Excession*. It is a quintessentially Banksian move for the civilisation-wide reflections on inside/outside and the potential dangers of

remaining content 'within the whale' that I have discussed above to be counterpointed in the novel by a narrative of prolonged pregnancy culminating in that most challenging and historically dangerous transition to an outside context, the birth of a child. The journey from stasis, both in-utero and in the suspended animation tableaux created by the *Sleeper Service*, to exploration in space and time is thus coded as a positive development and rendered part of a human's rediscovery of hope for and confidence in a future beyond the confines of the known. The full stops that signal the end of a sentence, having been strategically delayed at key moments in the novel, are in the Epilogue dispensed with entirely as the novel ends with rejection of, almost amounting to a disbelief in, closure and finitude. The sadness we feel at Banks's early death and the premature end of the Culture series is testament to how much we have enjoyed an extraordinary sequence of sf works that arrived it seemed, already formed, already in a main sequence, but that grew and evolved in such fascinating ways written by an author who brought an acute political perspective and stylistic brio to so much he did. We may all be inside the whale but some of us are looking at the stars.

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[i] 'A dialectical trope of sf is the notion of imperial expansion as the vehicle of escape: if empire begins by extending the reach of oppression, it ends by undermining it. A galactic empire has been a staple of sf since Asimov's Foundation trilogy, and his Roman original and its parabolic trajectory has provided the template for many a tale of decline and fall, and of post-imperial diversity analogous to the rise of feudalism and capitalism in Europe.' (McLeod 2003: 236-7)

[ii] see *SFX Magazine*: 'Excession: A Conversation with Iain Banks'

[iii] Banks's "The Spheres" (2010) that was originally part of *Transition* (2009) plays with the idea of excession-like spheres visiting a society of Neanderthals.

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